(The address was offered as an informal talk on Saturday morning, October 27, 2018 at the 234th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut meeting at the Mystic Marriott Hotel in Mystic, CT. The “talk” will be found as a YouTube video linked on the ECCT Annual Convention website www.episcopalct.org. Parish clergy are invited to read and/or make available this text to congregations on Sunday, October 28.)

“To another Jesus said: ‘Follow me.’”
(Luke 9:59)

In my talk to our 233rd Annual Convention of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut last year in Greenwich, I suggested that we are in a “new missional age;” an age in which we are called to follow God in Jesus Christ and to be about God’s mission in the world right here, and right now. You might want to ask, then, what does it look like to follow Jesus in a new missional age? Here’s a story from our South Central Region Missionary, Rachel Field giving a glimpse into the new missional age:
“On August 30th five people from five different Episcopal churches across the South Central Region gathered under a pop-up tent on the banks of the Housatonic River. We set up tables, and posters that read “Free Blessings” and offered prayers for people participating in the BH Cares 5k race for Opioid Addiction. That afternoon we held hands, we cried, and we prayed with people we had never met before, but who were looking for some moment of connection while battling the death-dealing realities of addiction. We heard the stories of family members and those in recovery at a candlelight vigil following the race; and we prayed together for deliverance from the disease of addiction. It was a small thing, to be together under a pop up tent in the August heat. But on that day, in that moment, God broke through in the faces we saw and in the hands we held – all of us broken and healing, together.”

You see, God does break through in the midst of the struggles of our everyday existence, calling us out of our pain, suffering, and sinfulness; calling us to join in something bigger than ourselves namely: the movement of God in the world. Our Presiding Bishop describes this as “The Jesus Movement” where we are called to join the loving, liberating, life-giving God turning the nightmares of sexual abuse and harassment, racism and white supremacy, and global climate change into God’s dream for the future. Jesus is indeed calling us to turn from our sinful ways to walk the way of love proclaiming the kingdom of God.
In this **new missional age** the focus for our lives as Christians is shifting from a primary preoccupation of church as an institution to a new engagement of what the living God in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit is up to in our daily lives and in the wider world. We are being called to move from an ecclesiocentric preoccupation with the church to a **missiocentric** focus on God’s action, God’s mission, in our neighborhoods. The old industrial age is giving way to a new **digital age** where information access and electronic communication order our lives. In the industrial age, an economy of scarcity reigned and the accumulation of goods and resources was the primary goal. In today’s economy of abundance, where transportation, housing, and manifold other goods and services are shared through social media platforms – think Uber, Lyft, and Airbnb - people are more likely to seek personal **transformation** over the accumulation of goods. This new age is fundamentally **relational** rather than transactional, and values **connection** over growth.

Now you might be asking yourself: How do we follow Jesus in this new missional age? What’s the plan? Well the bad news/good news is that there is no single initiative, strategic plan, or road map that will get us to the kingdom of God in this new missional age because what we are talking about is a
fundamental spiritual transformation of individuals and communities. Such transformation requires deep and sustained spiritual practices to bring about metanoia - a change of heart, mind and soul.

With the encouragement and direction of the missiologist Alan Roxburgh, a handful of parishes across our diocese have been engaging in ancient and new spiritual practices in our Living Local, Joining God experiment. These practices include: listening to God by dwelling in God’s Word, and listening to God as we encounter God’s action in the Holy Spirit in our neighborhoods in which we live, move, and have our being. Discerning - having listened to God in Holy Scripture and by prayerfully walking and discovering God in our neighborhoods, we then come together as the Body of Christ and ask ourselves: What do we perceive God might be up to in our midst? Where do we discern a call to join in the restoring and reconciling work of God in the world? Discerning where God might be active in our lives and in our neighborhoods, we then experiment; trying on new ways of being and acting, and frankly, where failures provide positive and constructive learning opportunities. Having tried on such experiments we then come back together as the Body of Christ reflecting on what we have discovered God is up to in our lives and in our neighborhood.
This reflection leads us to a fifth practices of **deciding**. How do we want to live differently in order to follow Jesus more faithfully in a new missional age proclaiming the Kingdom of God? It is important to emphasize that these practices are not static, formulaic, or limited by time and scope. We are invited to embody continually the five spiritual practices of listening, discerning, trying on, reflecting, deciding - like an ongoing wheel of life (a rule of life?) following Jesus in this new missional age wherever our feet shall take us.

I am delighted to report that parishes and Regions in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut are actively engaged in these spiritual practices and God is blessing us with new life and new possibility. Such ventures include but are not limited to: three parishes meeting regularly in Henry’s Diner in Putnam to engage with and pray for those whom God brings into their midst; five clergy from across the Northeast wrestling deeply with our legacy of slavery here in Connecticut including a visit to one of our colonial churches where slaves were kept separate from white worshippers; making connections across our parishes in the Southeast through the Shoreline Basic Needs Task Force so that housing insecure families can find warm places to live this winter; the aforementioned South Central blessing tent, offering prayer for those suffering from opioid
addictions; four parishes in the Southwest Region collaborating in Laundry Love, where they join with neighbors who live at the margins of our society by sharing food, hospitality and laundry services; a dozen lay leaders from three parishes in the Northwest participating in a lay preaching class and, in doing so, find new life and meaning in Holy Scripture; and parishes from the North Central and Northeast Regions joining in a Boot Party at Hartford City Hall where warm boots and personal care packages were distributed to the city’s homeless and disenfranchised residents. Jesus is indeed here in all these glorious experiments and God is up to glorious and new things in our midst! Thanks be to God – literally.

The five spiritual practices of this new missional age are not only transforming our parishes and Regions, but are also transforming our diocesan life as a whole. Today in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut we begin most of our diocesan meetings and gatherings by Dwelling in the Word, as we have just done here at this Annual Convention. The Task Force on Reimagining the Episcopal Church in Connecticut (TREC-CT), having listed extensively across our diocese, actively discerned how God might be calling us forward in this new missional age. And then at our Annual Convention of 2015, in response to the
work of TREC-CT, we decided to try on changes to our common life and diocesan structures. The Regions, Region Missionaries, Mission Council, and Ministry Networks are all grand experiments in God’s mission. And the recently completed Region Needs Assessment, called for by last year’s Annual Convention, provided an opportunity for over 350 Episcopalians in Connecticut from 65 parishes, 26 focus groups and four Region Convocations, along with over 500 respondents to an online e-survey, to reflect deeply on what God is up to in our midst and where we might go next in this new missional age.

Here I commend to you the overview of the Region Needs Assessment Final Report entitled “Following Jesus in a New Missional Age” found in your Convention packets and online at our ECCT website. After reflecting together in the Region Needs Assessment, four key areas of action were identified for our common life in the Episcopal; Church in Connecticut. They are:

1. **Connecting**: To facilitate greater communication among Episcopalians in Connecticut.

2. **Collaborating**: To nurture cooperation among people, parishes, and initiatives within and across Regions.

3. **Forming**: To provide training and experiential opportunities to form disciples and apostles in this new missional age, and
4. **Transforming**: To support parishes that are becoming more engaged in God’s mission.

So having done this listening, discerning, trying on, and reflecting, we, as the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, have now arrived at a place of deciding. The question before us is: Do we want to continue to follow Jesus in this new missional age? Do we want to venture forth, together, in the mission of God trusting that God will bless us in proclaiming the kingdom of God? I believe that there is no going back. “Jesus said to another: ‘Follow me.’ But he said: ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him. ‘Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.’” (Luke 9: 59-60.)

There is indeed no going back. And so my imagination runs wild as to how we in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut might go forward in following Jesus in this new missional age. I can imagine many new and exciting ventures that God might be calling us to do:

- I can imagine parishes across Connecticut living even more deeply into the spiritual practices of listening, discerning, trying on, reflecting, and deciding and
then, with support from the wider diocese, securing new financial resources to engage in God’s mission in their local neighborhoods.

- I can imagine Regions being resourced by full-time missionaries, working with an expanded communication to share stories in God’s mission in new ways across our diocese and beyond.

- I can imagine Region leadership having access to an entrepreneurial fund so that new collaborative experiments in God’s mission might be undertaken unhindered by financial constraints.

- I can imagine the development of new intentional Christian communities in each of our Regions including: Episcopal Service Corps communities, new initiatives on college and university campuses, and intentional, intergenerational Christian shared housing.

- I can imagine our space in Morris, currently known as Camp Washington, becoming the primary resource for Christian formation in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut.
• I can imagine our Cathedral transformed into a **flexible and collaborative space** supporting all of us in our call to be apostles in God’s mission.

      Over the next year, I would like to work with a handful of willing parishes, small and big; urban, suburban, and rural; rich and poor; and walk with these parishes to raise new funds so that they might more faithfully participate in God’s mission in their neighborhoods. And, over the next year, I hope to engage individual Episcopalians in the possibility of joining with me and the wider Episcopal Church in Connecticut in helping to make these imaginings come true.

      One of my mentors and professors in Divinity School, theologian Harvey Cox, is credited with coining the phrase: “Not to decide is to decide.” “Not to decide is to decide.” I pray that that we in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut will not become fearful nor complacent about what God is doing in our midst. I pray that we will decide to continue to follow Jesus in a new missional age; and together, with courage and joy, proclaim the kingdom of God. Thank you.