Convention Address

235th Annual Convention
The Episcopal Church in Connecticut

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Bishop Diocesan

(The address will be offered as a talk on Saturday afternoon, October 26, 2019 at the 235th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut meeting at the Hartford Convention Center. The talk will be found as a YouTube video linked on the ECCT Annual Convention website www.episcopalct.org.)

In my last two Annual Convention addresses, I have emphasized that this time after Christendom in which we are presently living can best be understood as a New Missional Age – a time when we are called to join Jesus in his loving, liberating and life-giving mission in the world (as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preaches). I believe this New Missional Age is characterized by two profound and unavoidable realities: 1) change, and 2) opportunity. And change and opportunity can result in feelings of excitement and fear, joy and anxiety. Let’s pause then and look at our life together as the Episcopal Church in Connecticut over the last year through these two lenses: change and opportunity.

Our 234th Annual Convention last year in Mystic invited all of us in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut to be about change as we confront the realities of racism and white supremacy in our nation, our church, and individual lives. In a workshop, World Café conversation, and in a resolution that followed, we were called to metanoia – a change in our life resulting from penitence and spiritual conversion. Over the past year, Episcopalians across Connecticut have begun to embrace the call to metanoia in our Season of Racial Healing Justice and Reconciliation that was called for by last year’s Convention.
Fulfilling Convention mandates, the Episcopal Church in Connecticut has hired a part-time Racial Justice Resource Coordinator, and each search for ECCT staff has included at least one person of color as a finalist. (I will say more about the positive results of these efforts in a bit.) As directed by Convention resolution, parishes across our diocese dedicated the second Sunday in February to begin conversations about the sin of racism in our lives. With the leadership of the newly organized Racial Healing, Justice and Reconciliation Ministry Network, multiple broad-based initiatives have been undertaken across our diocese to help dismantle the realities of racism and white supremacy in our midst, including but not limited to: regular learning opportunities in our Leadership Gatherings (joint quarterly meeting of the Mission Council, Standing Committee, Commission on Ministry, and Donations and Bequests); the development of a Speakers Bureau; monthly bulletin inserts; a one-day workshop with Dean Kelly Brown Douglas cohosted by our Cathedral; a pilgrimage from Brooklyn, CT to Providence, RI tracing our church’s complicity in slavery; and other pilgrimages planned to the National Museum of African American History in Washington DC next month and to Montgomery and Birmingham, AL next year. In addition numerous events and conversations have been held across our six Regions facilitated by our Region Missionaries. Here I commend to you the comprehensive Report from the Racial Healing, Justice, and Reconciliation Ministry Network found on our Convention app and website.

As we enter this second year of our Season of Racial Healing, Justice and Reconciliation, I invite you, in your individual lives, in our parishes, and across our Regions and our diocese to lean in and work to confront the realities of racism and white supremacy that continue to infect our lives. We still have specific work to do as called for by our Convention last year such as reporting on our annual parochial reports how parishes are living into the Season of Racial Healing, Justice and Reconciliation, and the need to recruit and support lay and ordained leaders of color across our diocese. But there is so much more we need to do and can do. So, embrace the opportunity our church is offering us to dismantle racism and white supremacy in our lives.

Another area where there has been significant change in our life as the Episcopal Church in Connecticut is in our staff. Over the last year we have seen almost one third of our staff turnover because of planned retirements and departures related to
changing life circumstances. Amongst our Region Missionaries, Carlos de la Torre, Rachel Field, and Eliza Marth completed their two-year contracts and moved out of Connecticut to pursue new ministerial and family opportunities. Joining our ongoing Region Missionaries of Maggie Breen, Erin Flinn, and Rachel Thomas are: George Black for the South Central Region, Erendira Jimenez for our Southwest Region, and Dylan Mello for the Northwest Region. Welcome George, Erendira and Dylan! Because of the good work of our missionaries and consistent with the findings of the Region Needs Assessment, we moved the Region Missionaries from ¾ time to full-time, beginning in the summer of 2019. This is reflected in an increased cost in our 2020 budget coming before this Convention.

Among the staff at the Commons, Karin Hamilton, Bonni McKinney, and Louis Fuertes all retired as had been planned. Together our three faithful, talented, and beloved colleagues have dedicated more than 63 years of service to the Episcopal Church in Connecticut! Also departing the Commons this year was Molly James, our Dean for Formation moving on to become our missionary to the General Convention Office; and Don Dupont, Property Manager and Chrissy Shingler, Assistant to Bishop Ahrens. In their stead we were blessed to welcome Jasree Peralta, our new Canon for Mission Communications and Media, Rosanna Rosado, our new Canon for Mission Finance and Operations, Marcus Halley, our new Dean of Formation, and Pam Sola as Bishop Laura’s new Assistant. Fulfilling our Convention commitment to hire a Racial Justice Resource Coordinator, Kelli Gibson joined the ECCT staff in the spring. And Alli Gannett increased her responsibilities from Digital Associate to full time Interim Digital Storyteller bolstering our digital communications platform in new and exciting ways. If you have not signed on to ECCT’s Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Podcast “Coffee Hour at the Commons,” I invite you to check them out.

These staff changes provide us a wonderful opportunity to effect greater diversity in our ECCT staff as called for by last year’s Annual Convention. In total, of our nine new hires, six are people of color and seven are under the age of thirty-five. I give thanks to God for how our staff now reflects more fully the breath of God’s people and particularly want to thank Kayla Tubolino, our Human Resource Manager, for bringing such a rich and diverse pool of candidates to these positions.
Speaking of change and opportunity, I now want to turn our attention to our parishes. In 2011, one year after I became your Bishop Diocesan, the then Connecticut Episcopal Clergy Association conducted a survey of the status of clergy serving in our diocese. The findings concluded: of the 169 Rectors and Priests-in-Charge leading parishes in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, 107 were full time and 62 were part time; which translates: 63% of our parishes had full time clergy and 37% had part-time clergy. Today, a short eight years later, of the now 157 parishes in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, 60 are served by full-time clergy and 97 by part-time clergy. By percentage: 38% of our parishes have full-time clergy and 62% have part-time. This is almost a complete inverse of what we knew eight years ago! Further, of our current 157 parishes, 21 have no clergy serving regularly and 6 have interim Priests-in-Charge. In other words, 18% of our parishes are looking for settled clergy of some kind.

These numbers are not unique to the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. Let’s take a closer look. Each year, diocesan staff responsible for clergy placements in approximately 40 dioceses across The Episcopal Church in New England, the Midwest, the Upper Midwest, and the Mid-Atlantic gather to share information so as to facilitate clergy placement across these dioceses. In 2019, the transition ministers collated their data on the state of clergy in their dioceses and found that of the 32 dioceses present, 57 clergy were looking for new positions. Yet, in total, the number of clergy openings in the 32 dioceses were 381, of which 64 were full-time, and 317 part-time, (that’s 16% full-time and 83% part-time). Imagine that: 57 clergy for 381 positions of which only 64 were full-time!

Clearly the model of one full-time priest for one parish, dominant in the 20th Century, is broken. The majority of parishes in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, and well beyond our borders, can no longer afford full-time clergy, and there are not enough clergy to serve the parishes we have, both full and part-time. Frankly, it is no longer business as usual in The Episcopal Church. Parishes and clergy models either have to change, seizing the opportunity to do something different, or they will die. And Canon Lee Ann Tolzmann, our Canon for Mission Leadership is already hard at work imagining new ways by which our parishes can be served by clergy.

The urgency to do something different is also felt across our parishes. Since I became your Bishop Diocesan in 2010, 11 parishes in Connecticut (from 168 parishes) have
either closed or merged with another parish. And 4 of these 11 have occurred in the last year. The parishes of St. Phillip’s - Putnam and St. Alban’s – Danielson after considerable prayer, courage, and discernment have faithfully voted to close their doors. And the parishes of Grace Church - Broad Brook and the Church of Our Savior -Plainville will merge with Grace - Windsor and St. John’s - Bristol, respectively, if we pass such resolutions this afternoon.

The rapid increase in parish closings and mergers, however, is not unique to The Episcopal Church. In 2017 the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Hartford closed 26 parishes and merged 144 reducing their overall number of parishes from 212 to 127 in just one year; and in 2018 the three Conferences of the United Church of Christ located in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island merged into one conference in order to become more sustainable.

So, one might ask, Is it all gloom and doom out there? Is there no future for the Church? I firmly believe that there is a future for the Church! As I often say: God has had, since Jesus and the first Pentecost, and God will always have, the Body of Christ (the Church) that God needs to be about God’s mission in the world. God will have the Church that God needs to be about God’s mission. Being about the work of Jesus in the world thus requires us to change and embrace the new opportunities God is giving us, that we may more fully participate in God’s mission.

Thanks be to God, parishes in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut continue to embrace change and new opportunities to serve God’s mission in their neighborhoods and beyond. Last year, at our Annual Convention, I issued a wide-open invitation to any and all parishes in ECCT to participate in pilot project called: Joining Jesus in a New Missional Age. This pilot project was designed as a “try-on” to assist our parishes in developing spiritual and/or financial resources in order to participate more faithfully in God’s mission in their neighborhoods and across our diocese.

Early in 2019, parishes were invited to gather at The Commons to learn about five “spiritual practices” of listening, discerning, trying on, reflecting and deciding as developed by Alan J. Roxburgh and The Missional Network. We gathered 130 lay and ordained leaders from 29 parishes to learn more. From these, 10 parishes from across our diocese and the congregations of Christ Church Cathedral are journeying together
in a four-module/15 month process to learn how to be open to what God is up to in their neighborhoods and thus more faithfully join Jesus in their communities. Our participating parishes include: Trinity - Brooklyn, St. Peter’s – Cheshire, Christ Church – Easton, St. John’s – Essex, Grace - Hartford, St. Monica’s - Hartford, St. Mark’s - New Britain, L’Eglise de L’Epiphanie – Stamford, Trinity - Torrington, St. John’s - Vernon, and the congregations of Christ Church Cathedral. I am immensely grateful to these parishes and congregations, and the approximately 100 lay and ordained leaders within these parishes, for taking on this grand experiment to develop new spiritual resources for this new missional age.

On the other side of the ledger, with funding provided by the Missionary Society of ECCT, we have partnered with Tiffany Read of CCS Consulting to develop new financial resources for parishes and diocesan-wide projects. Last winter Tiffany met with the clergy and lay leaders of more than 70 of our parishes to share key details about fundraising possibilities through the Joining Jesus in a New Missional Age pilot project. From those meetings, 15 parishes agreed to conduct rapid studies to assess the capacity and inclination of the parish to conduct a fundraising effort. Of those fifteen – the five parishes of Christ Church – Bethany, Trinity – Brooklyn, St. James’ – Glastonbury, St. Monica’s – Hartford, Emmanuel – Weston, and the congregations of Christ Church Cathedral signed on to engage in a parish based fundraising effort with assistance from CCS. The parishes all identified their particular financial needs to participate more fully in God’s mission including, but not limited to: reconfiguring worship space, new ventures with youth and young adults, meeting communications needs, and endowment growth. In total 55 lay volunteers joined the six clergy of these parishes to solicit nearly 250 households, committing a combined total gifts received or pledged of $2,117,860 to date! It is important to note here that all five parishes and our Cathedral congregations are all small- to medium-sized Christian communities in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut that might not otherwise have had the resources to undertake such fundraising initiatives.

Recognizing that these successful local fundraising initiatives were assisted by the financial resources of the Missionary Society of ECCT, the parishes and Cathedral congregations agreed to contribute a percentage of all funds raised at the parish level to one or more of four diocesan-wide projects of their choice. These four projects were identified as a result of our 2018 Region Needs Assessment, and include: an
entrepreneurial fund to resource new undertakings in each of our six Missionary Regions; support for new intentional Christian communities such as college chaplaincies and young adult service corps; the transformation of our Cathedral into a flexible, multi-purpose space to serve ECCT and the wider community (Please take a close look at the plans and model for our Cathedral’s redevelopment on the display table in the hall and at our Cathedral’s Centennial Celebration tonight); and expanding Camp Washington’s capacity to serve as a resource for Christian formation for all ages.

Adding to the funds contributed to these four projects from the participating parishes are gifts and pledges of more $885,000 from 11 individual donors who believe in and want to support the future of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. In total, combining the parish based fundraising initiatives and the gifts from individual donors, Episcopalians in Connecticut since we last gathered for Convention have given or pledged more than 3 million new dollars to support ventures to join Jesus in this new missional age. How wonderful!

Reflecting on both the spiritual and financial resource development engendered by the Joining Jesus in a New Missional Age pilot project, Ginny Denslow of Trinity Church in Brooklyn has said: “The Joining Jesus campaign has brought changes to our church community. We are made stronger by our new and deepening friendships and commitment, which make us all feel closer to God. And we are now equipped with the resources needed to ensure our future, and are eager to step out together in faith to take the good news of Jesus Christ into the world. Thanks be to God.” Thanks be to God indeed!

Giving thanks to God, I want to ask any and all in the Convention Center Hall who have been involved in the Joining Jesus in a New Missional Age pilot project (both the spiritual and financial resources development) please to stand so that we can recognize you and give thanks to God for your faithfulness.

And so, my dear companions in Christ, what I have shared here really is all about change and opportunity as we move forward together and participate in God’s mission. In these time of change God is giving us the opportunity for new life by joining Jesus. I now call on additional parishes in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut to seize the moment and embrace the opportunity to participate in a second phase of
Joining Jesus in a New Missional Age. I draw your attention to the last page of the report on our pilot project on your tables which describes how you and/or your parish can get involved.

Let us not fear the future – after all, the future is in God’s hands. God will have the Church that God needs to be about God’s mission. Let’s join together. Let’s join Jesus in this new missional age. Let’s joyfully be about the work God has given us to do. Thank you.