



The Bishop's Address
The 120th Diocesan Convention
November 6, 2021

Repairing, Rebuilding, Reimagining - our Convention theme as we are slowly coming out of the Pandemic. It is a 2021 theme. It was also a theme 2000 years ago at the start of the Jesus Movement.

Many of you know my favorite Bible story is the Feeding of the 5000. So if you have heard me preach about this before, bear with me. And listen for the new context.

5000 people follow Jesus to a deserted place. After hours of preaching and healing and forgiving, the apostles recognize the people are hungry. They tell Jesus to send them away so “they might go onto the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” Jesus tells the apostles, “You give them something to eat.” The apostles say we do not have enough. Only 5 loaves and 2 fish. Jesus takes the loaves and fish. Thanks God for it. Breaks it and gives it away. God multiples the gift and all are filled with 12 baskets of broken pieces left over.

In 2021, in an “almost but not quite out of the pandemic church”, many are saying what the apostles said “we don’t have enough.” We don’t have enough people coming back. We hardly have a Sunday school left. We lack the volunteers for so much that we did before. Trust me. I get it.

Now skip ahead in the story of Jesus. It is after his death on the cross. There aren’t 5000 followers any more. There are only the 11 disciples and the faithful women. They are frightened and despairing. On Sunday morning, all Mary Magdalene wants is the body returned. They are a people who “had hoped”. Hope in the past tense. But this little group stays together. They stay together. Then God did a new thing and raised Jesus from the dead. Even that good news is met with terror and amazement. The early followers of Jesus needed to Repair, Rebuild, Reimagine.

Followers of Jesus have done this over and over again in 2000 years. The oh-so popular St. Francis heard Jesus calling him to rebuild a crumbling church building in San

Damiano. He started a capital campaign and got the building restored. A good thing. Later he went deeper and realized Jesus was calling him to repair, rebuild and reimagine what the Church was all about.

And so here we are. In confusing and challenging times. Unsure exactly what the Jesus Movement will look like. But can we learn from the apostles' mistake at the feeding of the 5000. Can we say "this is enough" and trust in God's amazing grace? In our "terror and amazement" can we trust the Risen Christ to Repair, Rebuild and Reimagine his mission of mercy, compassion and hope?

Let's explore what that might look like. And I'll do it by using one of our many thriving ministries as a metaphor for this exploration.

The ministry I'm thinking of is our Chaplains to the Appalachian Trail. It is a simple concept. It is a big tent set up right by the Trail in Sheffield. In the tent is food, water, chairs and battery packs so hikers can power up their iPhones. The ministry is organized by our Episcopal/Lutheran Church in Sheffield -Christ/Trinity and the UCC Church. Volunteers come from many churches. As we talk with the hikers and hear their experiences on the Trail, we ask a simple question: "Why are you walking the Trail?" Knowing that some hikers are walking for just a day, but many are walking the whole Trail - from Georgia to Maine. People come from around the world to hike the AT. You know to come all this way, they are searching for something. Often it is young people going on an adventure and trying to make decisions about their future. Sometimes there are older people who will tell us "I had cancer a few years ago and I recovered. I'm walking the AT because I can." Or "in gratitude to God."

Let's unpack this and see what it teaches us about being followers of Jesus in our time.

"Why are you walking the Trail?" A big part of this ministry is listening. Do you know in the four gospels, Jesus asks 307 questions? And people ask Jesus questions 183 times. And Jesus only answers three of those 183 questions directly. Most often he answers the question with another question.

We all know we live in a deeply divided nation. In this atmosphere people don't ask questions anymore. They make demands. What if the Church could model a different way of being? What if the Church could be curious? What if the Church was a place where we can ask the question "what are you searching for?" And then, like Jesus, invite ourselves into real spiritual depth. Michael Curry says evangelism happens when followers of Jesus go deeper into their own faith.

An example in our diocese is the Loving the Questions program. In most years 7-10 people join this in-depth spiritual search. In 2020 we had 28. Thank you to Jenny Greg and Craig Hammond and others who have made Loving the Questions such a gift to us. Here's a big audacious idea: what would happen if we had versions of Loving the Questions in all our parishes?

And isn't asking questions and listening a big part of our desire for racial justice? Racial injustice has been a tragic dimension of our country for 400 years. It is time, way beyond time, to question our history and white privilege and may that questioning produce action that we might become The Beloved Community Jesus intends us to be.

The Appalachian Trail ministry is a clear example of a phrase that is popular in church circles in recent years. "Finding God in the neighborhood." Have you heard that phrase? We get discouraged about declining church attendance. And we do need to pay attention to that. But the Spirit is not confined to the Church. God is still out there being God. We ask "where are the young people?" I know where they are. They are on the Appalachian Trail. And they are in schools. So many of our churches have helped out at schools by addressing food insecurity needs there. St. Mark's in Worcester has reached out to their challenged neighborhood by bringing in Marie's Mission - a ministry of St. Michael's on the Heights in Worcester -to give away diapers to families in need. And they are starting a tutoring program with students from Clark University as the tutors. Our Cathedral and several churches are engaged in tutoring. And of course, our Walking Together Ministry in Worcester is all about finding God in the neighborhood.

So many of you addressed the needs of your neighborhood by getting vaccines out there. We could add to the Matthew 25 passage that goes, when I was hungry you gave me food, when I was in prison you visited me. We could add "when I could not figure out how I could get an appointment for a vaccine on my computer, you navigated it for me."

Another example of joining God's work in the neighborhood is our every growing Veterans Ministry. We are up to 12 locations now.

And our outdoor church communities are an inspiration. There are plans to add others to those that already thrive in Pittsfield, Springfield and Northampton.

Joining God in the neighborhood looks like our Latino congregations in Springfield, Worcester and now Holyoke.

Of course, the AT Ministry reminds us of the beauty of God's creation. I was so aware this summer, when I was in the midst of that beauty that hundreds of thousands of acres of God's creation to our west were on fire. Last spring, the Bishops of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, with wisdom from Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, published a document concerning the crisis of climate change. I invite you to read it and commit to pray, learn, act and advocate.

The AT Ministry is a fine example of collaboration. Episcopalians, Lutherans and Congregationalists all working together. And then inviting in other churches. You have heard me say this before - whenever you think of starting a new ministry, ask the question "who can we work with?" There are so many examples in the pandemic of churches working with other churches and social service agencies. The willingness to collaborate has become the new normal in WMA. And we are doing that as a diocese with the diocese to our east. The Exploring Common Mission Task Force is doing holy work and you will hear a lot more about that later today.

Yes, these are difficult times. But look at what we have - what I have mentioned in this address and so much more that I don't have time to include. Could it be that the work of Repairing, Rebuilding, Reimagining was happening even before the pandemic and we are called to thank God for it and let God multiply the Grace in ways we cannot see yet? In our terror and amazement can we look for more than getting the old body back and follow where the Risen Jesus leads?

Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest who has worked for 40 years with gangs in Los Angeles says "St. Paul tells us to put on Christ. Putting on Christ is the easy part. Never taking him off - that's the challenge."

Can we keep Christ on? Even now? Especially now? Our world needs Jesus Mission of Mercy, Compassion and Hope more than ever. Our world needs prayer more than ever.

We will conclude by going back to the AT. In the southwest corner of Massachusetts. It is not at the beginning of the trail in Georgia or the end of the trail in Maine. It is on the way. As we are.

This poem/prayer by Lona Fowler is one I have turned to many times in my journey. It is my prayer for us now.

The Middle Time

BY LONA M. FOWLER

Between the exhilaration of Beginning
and the satisfaction of Concluding
is the Middle Time
of enduring, changing, trying,
despairing, continuing, becoming.

Jesus Christ was the man of God's Middle Time
between Creation and . . . Accomplishment.
Through him God said of Creation,
"Without mistake."
And of Accomplishment,
"Without doubt."

And we, in our Middle Times
of wondering, waiting, hurrying,
hesitating, regretting, revising;
We who have begun many things—
and seen but few completed;
We who are becoming more— and less;
through the evidence of God's Middle Time
have a stabilizing hint
that we are not mistakes,
that we are irreplaceable,
that our Being is of interest
and our Doing is of purpose,
that our Being and our Doing
are surrounded by AMEN.

Jesus Christ is the Completer
of unfinished people
with unfinished work
in unfinished times.

May he keep us from sinking, ceasing,
wasting, solidifying—
that we may be for him
experimenters, enablers, encouragers,
and associates in Accomplishment.

Thus ends the prayer. But maybe we should end this address by saying “That we may be for him Repairers, Rebuilders, Reimaginers.
Amen.

*The Rt. Reverend Douglas J. Fisher
IX Bishop, Western Massachusetts*