

REPORT OF THE MISSION STRATEGY COMMITTEE CRAFTING A STRATEGY TO MEET THIS UNIQUE MOMENT

An Invitation to Reflect

At the beginning of January 2021, the Mission Strategy Committee provided a short set of questions to congregations, deaneries and other groups. The invitation included three questions that were designed to anchor a 20-minute conversation at a congregation's annual meeting:

- 1) The last many months of COVID-19 have forced us as worshipping communities to distill what the essence of our church is for us—what it means to be a particular congregation or community following in the way of Jesus. What essential elements have emerged in your faith community?*
- 2) What about your worshipping community are you most proud of? Why?*
- 3) What one thing do you wish our diocesan leadership knew about your congregation or faith community? Why is this important to you?*

A second version for a longer leadership gathering or retreat invited communities to reflect on their unique identities and on their experience with the nine goals of the current Mission Strategy adopted in 2016. Congregations were asked to submit notes from their conversations by March 19, 2021.

Members of the Mission Strategy Committee read every response and coded it for key themes, noting both signs of progress to celebrate and areas where more support is needed. The responses ranged from reflections on the congregation experience to detailed requests for additions and updates to the Mission Strategy goals. In mid-June, the Mission Strategy Committee sent a report to clergy and congregational leaders along with a survey requesting further input. In total, 42 congregations and 20 organizations, affinity groups and deaneries provided feedback to the committee through letters, meeting notes and survey responses. These messages from people across our diocese informed our report on the current Mission Strategy, and provided the core themes for the new Mission Strategy proposed to Diocesan Convention this year.

Looking Back: The 2016 Mission Strategy and Embracing Brave Change

The Mission Strategy Committee reflected together on the Mission Strategy adopted in 2016 to discern whether its goals have been incorporated into our diocesan life. The committee asked: Are these still the goals we should be working on, or are we ready to bring a new focus to our work?

Diocesan Actions and Achievements

Since 2016 when our Diocesan Convention approved the current Mission Strategy, our diocesan leadership and bishops have made significant efforts to align their work with the three planks: ***Reimagining Our Congregations, Building Our Relationships, and Engaging Our World.***

Reimagining Our Congregations

In response to the Mission Strategy, we reimagined our diocesan structure and staff, adding, eliminating and changing positions to better meet our goals. In 2018, we created the new position of **Missioner for Networking and Formation** to strengthen our formation programs, gather resources, connect congregations and help cultivate the skills of evangelism. This missioner helps coordinate clergy days, ministry fairs, workshops, book groups and trainings available to all congregations. This position has expanded the opportunities for lay and clergy leaders to connect with one another and build their skills in spiritual formation, pastoral care, sound governance, financial stewardship and building use.

The “Wicked Good Idea” **Microgrants** also provided seed money for creative approaches to doing Christ’s work in local contexts. Congregations, networks and organizations were invited to apply for up to \$2,000 to try something new in support of the diocesan mission strategy. In 2020, a total of \$43,461 was granted to launch 24 projects, most of them focused on the technology needed to support online worship.

Building Our Relationships

We created three **Regional Canon** positions to build stronger connections between the diocesan staff and the congregations, bringing resources and attention to every corner of our diocese. Each regional canon regularly visits and communicates with the clergy and congregations in four deaneries, grouped into the Northern and Western, Central, and Southern regions. The **Collaborative Ministries Working Group** was also created after the 2020 Diocesan Convention. This group supports existing collaborations, invites teams to expand or reimagine their work and brings together partners for new initiatives.

In our current mission strategy, we commit to fulfilling the Gospel command to love one another, particularly across difference. In order to celebrate and support the diversity of our diocese, we created the position of **Canon for Immigration and Multicultural Ministries**. This canon organizes workshops and learning events focused on the needs of refugees, the experiences of immigrants, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and other policies, voter turnout efforts and skills for public advocacy; provides limited immigration legal services; supports multicultural celebrations and commemorations; and acts as a liaison for cultural groups including our historically Black churches and our Hispanic, African and Asian ministries.

We also pledge to enter into a large-scale, authentic and committed conversation about racism and other forms of oppression. Our reconfigured **Racial Justice Commission** was announced at the November 2020 Diocesan Convention. Its mission is to help our diocese take the next steps in the essential work of racial justice and reconciliation.

The mission strategy adopted in 2016 expressed our commitment to initiate new relationships across our diocese, inviting us to develop “opportunities for teams from congregations to visit other congregations, sharing worship and learning about one another.” In 2018, the **Indaba** working group of Diocesan Council designed an opportunity for congregations to engage this goal of deepening relationships in 2019. Six congregations participated in this effort. A second cohort was planned, but was cut short by the pandemic in March 2020.

Engaging Our World

In order to strengthen our efforts in engaging our world, two deacons were appointed as the leaders of our diocesan **Global Mission Initiative**. As global missionaries, they have been available to assist with workshops and informational meetings with vestries and outreach committees, sermons and volunteers willing to witness to their global mission experience, congregational discernment for mission, recommendations of global partners, churches looking to collaborate, solutions for small churches, grant preparation and trip preparation, and reflections during and after trips. They also oversee the Sustainable Development and Mission Tithe Relationship grant programs.

Our diocese continues to partner with **Episcopal City Mission** to help congregations engage with their local communities. In 2020 alone, ECM's Justice Network brought together 121 individuals from 38 Episcopal communities for conversation about essential themes in our work of seeking justice. ECM trained congregational teams in the practices of faith-rooted justice; mobilized local action teams for advocacy around immigrants' rights, Black and Indigenous rights, and access to housing; and distributed over a million dollars in grants to parish partners and grassroots community efforts.

In response to the climate crisis our world faces, our Creation Care Committee was reconfigured as the **Creation Care Justice Network**. The network is made up of clergy and lay people working together to help churches and communities care for creation through embracing sustainable practices and providing support and ideas for reducing the church's carbon footprint, experiencing the outdoors and preaching about interconnectedness with the natural world. In early 2021, our diocese contracted with a **Creation Care Advisor** to provide consultation and teaching, and to better connect us with other advocates for creation care in the Commonwealth.

Congregational Actions & Achievements

Our congregations have grown in mission over the past five years, answering the call to "Embrace Brave Change" in countless ways as we seek and serve Christ in our local contexts. The reflections received by the Mission Strategy Committee included many examples of faith communities reimagining their shared life, building relationships with new partners and engaging the world.

The pandemic accelerated our efforts to **Reimagine Our Congregations**. Across our diocese, congregational teams worked hard to provide creative online or outdoor worship. Some have collaborated with other congregations or with ecumenical groups. Many have continued children's ministries in new forms. One church school met online twice a week; another connected a church parent group with parents in the public school for mutual support; and one parish offered its hall and WIFI for students to have a place for online learning. Every congregation that responded to the Mission Strategy Committee reported enhanced pastoral care efforts via phone trees, extra mailings, tech support and prayer partners. One congregation expedited discretionary fund giving and disbursement by creating a Venmo account.

Congregations have been **Building Relationships** in new ways through learning, service and worship. Many have engaged in the Sacred Ground dialogue series on race and faith, some with multiple congregations in small groups together. Parish administrators, children's ministry leaders, clergy and wardens have all found new support through regular online

meetings. Some congregations participated in the Mutual Aid Network led by Episcopal City Mission to get available supplies to the places hit hardest by COVID-19. The Cathedral Church of St. Paul has shared online worship and fellowship with Grace Church, Vineyard Haven through much of the pandemic. Trinity Church, Rockland listed its online worship with the Episcopal Conference of the Deaf, and has people from around the country tuning in.

Many congregations have practiced **Engaging Our World** by ratcheting up food ministries during the pandemic, extending hours, space and expanding services. Several have continued to cultivate international relationships with ministries in Cuba, Haiti, Honduras, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and other countries and the South American Mission Society. Some have participated in refugee care and support of those threatened by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. One congregation has become involved with an interfaith group through the Central Massachusetts Connections in Faith.

While we celebrate these successes, we also acknowledge the challenges we still face. While some congregations are growing in numbers, many others have become smaller. As we move toward more online ministry opportunities, many people still have no internet access, and some are not interested in online gatherings. Children and elders who benefit especially from in-person contact often feel left behind. Several reflections noted that we still have a lot of relationships to build. We do not always know our neighbors, and we don't always tap into the wealth of diverse experiences within our communities. For example, one response lifted up our clergy and lay people from Africa and the Caribbean as under-used resources who could connect more people with local cultures and ministries abroad. Our response to COVID is still ongoing, and we still have much to learn together.

Looking Ahead: What We Heard from Our Diocese

Overall, the Mission Strategy Committee discerned that our diocese has made good progress towards the goals of the Mission Strategy we adopted in 2016. While the work will never be complete, we have incorporated the call to be more creative, collaborative and engaged into both the culture of our diocese and into the concrete ways that we work together. This sense of progress creates space to imagine something new. How can we be bold in following Jesus and responding to the needs of this unique time and place?

Responding to Where We Are Now

The committee began by listening carefully to the reflections it received from around the diocese. The themes that the committee identified are:

Connection to God in Prayer and Worship: We are joyful in how we have been able to find innovative ways to worship and deepen our connection to God through the pandemic as we seek to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Adaptation to New Technology: We are proud that we were able to pivot to technology-enabled worship through the pandemic and, while deeply looking forward to being together in person again, we hope to continue to use technology to remove barriers to participation and share the Gospel.

Community and Collaboration: We affirm the importance of community. Through the pandemic, use of Zoom and other platforms enhanced congregational life and engagement in

coffee hours and Bible/book study. Technology-enabled collaborations were widespread, some local and some beyond. We hope to continue to build our communities and collaborations now that we can be together in person again.

Connection to our Diocese: We are thankful for the regional canons and other diocesan efforts to build relationships, and we continue to hope to be better seen and known. Lay people want to be called on to serve and lead, and also need to be equipped and invited.

Concern for Children and Young Families: We are concerned that young families who were primarily away during COVID due to child (and parent) “Zoom fatigue” will not return once the pandemic ends, and we are eager to find ways to connect and engage these families.

Concern for Youth: We are grateful for the youth formation that occurred during the pandemic. We also share awareness of the toll on the mental and emotional health of youth from the pandemic, and a general need for greater support for this group.

Outreach and Service to the Community: We are grateful that we have been able to do God’s work during the pandemic, through efforts like food banks and collaborations with other organizations to serve those most in need. We now hope to build on this momentum.

Racial Justice: We deeply desire a more just world for all people and we are eager to engage in this critical work, examining our history, our systems, our finances and ourselves.

Creation Care: We cannot live in a just world without justice for creation. We must address the urgent needs of our planet. We recognize that all injustice is interconnected: the climate crisis affects low-income communities and communities of color first and hardest.

Clarifying Our Vision and Our Roles

Through prayer and conversation, the Mission Strategy Committee connected the hopes and needs it heard with three statements of our identity as a people of God: disciples of Christ, seekers of justice and protectors of creation. The committee heard a call to be bold, decisive and concise—to give a clear focus to our work rather than trying to be all things to all people.

The committee also met with key partners in creating a vision for our church, including: our bishops; Diocesan Council members; representatives of Asian, Hispanic, African, and historically Black congregations; and leaders of Episcopal City Mission, Global Mission, the Racial Justice Commission and the Creation Care Justice Network.

Alongside the nine themes, committee members noticed a lot of variation in how engaged people felt by the Mission Strategy adopted in 2016. Some individuals and congregations reported that they felt the strategy belonged to diocesan leaders. For example, one person wrote to the committee that they had seen “little to no tangible or exciting common project... to garner a decent percentage of support and excitement from the 180 parishes of the diocese,” and therefore that there was little support for the mission strategy goals among parish members.

To invite greater engagement with the new proposed Mission Strategy, the committee divided the actions under each goal between next steps for individuals and congregations, and next steps for bishops and Diocesan Council. Everyone has a gift to contribute to our shared work.

OUR MISSION STRATEGY

As Proposed to the 236th Annual Diocesan Convention (November 2021)

The People We Long To Be

In tumultuous times, the center can be hard to find. We continue to be shaken by a global pandemic, a climate emergency and a new reckoning with racial and economic inequalities. These challenges add to the experiences many of us already have of disruption and decline in our church communities. As people of hope, we come together to find a way forward. Renewing our diocesan Mission Strategy at this crucial moment is one small part of a larger movement of individual Christians and congregations to reclaim our identities and our purpose.

From our own hearts to our shared altars and outward into our diocesan community, we are called to place God's love at the center of our lives. Because Jesus first loves us, we are able to love ourselves, our neighbors and all of creation. Through this transforming grace, we are becoming the people God created us to be:

Disciples of Jesus.

We gather to break bread in Jesus' name, praying to become the Body of Christ in the world. We come together across all ages—children, youth, adults and elders—to teach one another about Jesus' redemptive way. We invite our neighbors to know Jesus, proclaiming the Good News by what we say and how we live.

Seekers of justice.

We recognize the dignity and inherent worth of every person, and we work to build communities where all people find fairness, compassion and the freedom to live fully. We persevere in resisting evil, not just our own sins but the deep, structural sins of racism and oppression perpetuated in our name. We turn to the Lord for the grace to create honest dialogue, lasting transformation and true reconciliation.

Protectors of creation.

We cherish the wondrous works of God and strive to protect the beauty and integrity of all living beings. We recognize that our greed and thoughtless consumption has placed us at odds with the needs of our created world. We respond to the crisis of our climate, using resources rightly and advocating for the restoration of a healthy planet.

When we follow Jesus intentionally, creating justice in our communities and living wisely on our earth, then we find joy and meaning in our lives. Our churches grow strong, with deep and mutual relationships among our members and our neighbors near and far. Our shared mission comes alive, as a bold witness to God's love for this broken and beautiful world.

Our Mission

Our yearnings to be disciples of Jesus, seekers of justice and protectors of creation provide the foundation for us to do our shared work together. We will only reach these goals by becoming more completely the people Jesus calls us to be through the power of the Spirit.

First, last and always, we pray. We ask for God's abiding presence with us and we allow the love of Jesus to transform us. From this place of unconditional grace, mercy and love, we can trust in God's abundance, knowing we will have everything we need. We receive the courage to be agents of reconciliation and justice.

Devotion to the way of love demands vigilance, as the evil powers working to destroy the creatures of God remain unyielding in their attempts to distract us from our relationship to the Almighty. We must address the history and persistent reality of injustice in our church with honesty and humility. We must pray, learn, act and advocate for the world we want to create.

We must be bold. We must be hopeful. We are committed to the tasks being given us by the Spirit. We trust that God is with us in the joys and challenges of this moment. We dedicate ourselves once again as the Body of Christ in this place and time to work for the glorious reign of Jesus.

Our Goals and Actions

1) Invite robust Christian formation at all points of life.

Discipleship is the work of a lifetime. As we learn about our faith, we grow in our connection to God. Our communities nurture new believers and help all of us turn again and again towards God.

Commitments for individuals and congregations:

- 1a. Grow as disciples of Jesus through prayer, study and spiritual practice.
- 1b. Make formation a priority in our congregations, focusing on the areas that are most relevant for each community.
- 1c. Invite vestry members to engage in ongoing formation as spiritual leaders of our congregations.
- 1d. Initiate joint offerings with other congregations and explore creative ways to engage all of our members.

Commitments for Bishops and Diocesan Council:

- 1e. Engage in ongoing formation as spiritual leaders of our diocese.
- 1f. Provide ample funding for formation and networking programs.
- 1g. Prioritize the needs of children, youth and young adults.

2) Nurture healthy communities where we can care for ourselves and each other.

In Christ, we discover our own belovedness. We find healing for our souls and freedom from the fears that silence us. We speak honestly and with compassion, learning from the times that we come into conflict. We respond to the unique challenges of this moment with generosity and patience.

Commitments for individuals and congregations:

- 2a. Ensure that our congregations follow Safe Church best practices to protect children and vulnerable adults.
- 2b. Foster mutually supportive relationships between clergy and lay leaders.
- 2c. Hold honest conversations about our expectations of one another, the sustainability of our ministries and appropriate boundaries.
- 2d. Encourage all members and leaders of our congregations to attend to their own and others' mental health.

Commitments for Bishops and Diocesan Council:

- 2e. Provide coaching to support the wellbeing and effectiveness of clergy and lay leaders.
- 2f. Make training in mental health support available to all clergy and lay leaders.
- 2g. Clearly articulate roles, points of contact and designated staff time to respond to mental health concerns in congregations.

3) Share the Good News.

We confidently share the story of Jesus and his message of love. We listen well to the stories of others as we invite them into Christian community.

Commitments for individuals and congregations:

- 3a. Tell our faith stories authentically and invite new people into our Christian communities, being brave and embracing our discomforts.
- 3b. Create time and space for lay leaders to share their faith journeys at vestry meetings and other opportunities.
- 3c. Be intentional about listening to the experiences of others, especially across difference.

Commitments for Bishops and Diocesan Council:

- 3d. Promote and fund the use of Invite, Welcome, Connect or similar evangelism training tools.
- 3e. Encourage Council members and other diocesan leaders to share their faith journeys at meetings and other opportunities.
- 3f. Invest in technology and staff support to enable the sharing of stories through digital media.

4) Seek greater unity as members one of another.

When we come together with other congregations, we discover new ways that God is present with us. When we deepen our relationships with our neighbors near and far, we better understand the strengths and challenges of our local communities and our global mission partners, learning how to work side-by-side for a more just and peaceful world.

Commitments for individuals and congregations:

- 4a. Work together as congregations and deaneries, creating new teams, strengthening existing collaborations and initiating new partnerships with other Episcopal congregations, ecumenical and multifaith partners, community organizations and global missions.
- 4b. Cross boundaries to seek out diverse partners who will broaden our understanding of God's mission in the world.

Commitments for Bishops and Diocesan Council:

- 4c. Broaden the diversity of leadership for all diocesan project teams and governing bodies.
- 4d. Seek and support opportunities to work ecumenically and with other dioceses both around the corner and around the world.
- 4e. Continue to schedule time to build relationships at all diocesan events.
- 4f. Create and maintain online resources, websites and directories that help members of our diocese to connect effectively.

5) Commit to our own growth as people who live in right relationship with one another.

We hold ourselves and one another accountable to our vision of a just community. We are willing to do the hard work of addressing the sins of racism and oppression in our midst. We pray for God's grace to transform our diocese.

Commitments for individuals and congregations:

5a. Engage in racial justice work with energy and intention, committing resources and time to learning from the Episcopal Church's Racial Justice Audit, educational programs like Sacred Ground, and trainings like those offered by Episcopal City Mission.

5b. Cultivate mutual relationships with people of other faiths, cultures, classes and racial backgrounds, while building awareness of the differences in power that shape these connections.

Commitments for Bishops and Diocesan Council:

5d. Participate in racial justice training and dialogue as a leadership team.

5e. Promote and fund resources for racial justice work, ensuring that all congregations are aware of the opportunities and can readily access them at a reasonable cost.

5f. Equip diocesan and congregational leaders to retain and call clergy of color, so that our diocese may benefit from a wealth of diverse talents and experiences.

5g. Help to sustain networks for Episcopalians of color to connect with and support one another.

5h. Incorporate the findings and recommendations of our Racial Justice Commission into all levels of diocesan life.

6) Work together against the climate crisis.

The forces affecting our planet can feel huge and far beyond our control, and yet each one of us has a role to play in choosing a better future for ourselves, future generations and all living beings. As communities of faith, we can inspire one another's individual choices, take shared actions and speak publicly about God's call to protect creation.

Commitments for individuals and congregations:

6a. Support one another in working against the sins of overconsumption, pollution and complacency.

6b. Choose a specific area of climate response for action and study as a congregation, and partner with other congregations through the Creation Care Justice Network.

6c. Participate in an energy audit to assess and improve the sustainability of our church buildings.

6d. Address the direct impact of climate change on low-income communities and people of color by engaging in local initiatives and worldwide advocacy efforts.

Commitments for Bishops and Diocesan Council:

6d. Promote and fund resources for climate justice work, ensuring that all congregations are aware of the opportunities and can readily access them at a reasonable cost.

6e. Invest in grant programs to support more sustainable church buildings.

7) Influence public policy by advocating for justice for all people and for the creation.

As our own lives and communities are transformed, we hope to shine with the light of Christ, bringing love and justice to every part of our life together in this nation and in the whole human family. We have an important witness to offer to our leaders at every level of government as we stand up for the integrity of creation and the dignity of every human being.

Commitments for individuals and congregations:

7a. Participate in civic life through community meetings, messages to government leaders and educational campaigns.

7b. Continue to draw on the wisdom of the Racial Justice Commission, Episcopal City Mission, the Creation Care Justice Network and our diocesan Office of Immigration and Multicultural Ministries to speak and act boldly for justice.

Commitments for Bishops and Diocesan Council:

7c. Promote participation in faith-based advocacy networks.

7d. Model engagement in civic life, inviting our diocese into conversation about the ethical questions of our time.

8) Communicate our progress regularly and transparently.

True transformation of ourselves and our world will take long years of faithful effort. At the same time, the kingdom of God is very near. We will regularly take stock of the signs of the Holy Spirit's work among us, celebrating our progress and owning the ways that we still need to grow. In particular, we ask our leaders on the Diocesan Council to watch over this work and encourage and challenge us towards our goals.

Commitments for individuals and congregations:

8a. Share stories and videos of our congregations' efforts in formation, health, evangelism, collaboration, racial justice, climate response and public advocacy.

8b. Assess our communities' progress on our strategic goals as a regular part of vestry meetings, annual meetings and deanery gatherings.

Commitments for Bishops and Diocesan Council:

8c. Gather information on our diocese's efforts towards the goals stated in the Mission Strategy and develop tools to convey our progress.

8d. Review recent resolutions adopted by Diocesan Convention on formation, health, evangelism, collaboration, racial justice, climate response and public advocacy, and report on the work remaining to fully implement them.

8e. Empower an implementation team to lead the effort to meet our strategic goals.