



## Mutual Ministry Review

### Report to Bishop Lane and the Standing Committee

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## Process

Two previous Mutual Ministry Reviews (MMRs) have been conducted in the Diocese of Maine since The Rt. Rev. Stephen Lane was elected as your ninth bishop in 2008. The first was completed in March 2010 and the second in June 2012. The Rev. Canon Thad Bennett of Vermont served as the diocesan consultant for both previous MMRs.

I read the reports from those two previous MMRs before agreeing to embark on this one. The first came at the beginning of Bishop Lane's episcopate. There were some important insights gained about what was, at the time, a *new* relationship between Bishop Lane and the Diocese of Maine. Not surprisingly, Canon Bennett highlighted concerns about negotiating expectations and norms. He noted one example of an important insight into systemic issues the diocese was facing as follows:

*The bishop thought he had inherited a norm of meeting only at the request of the Standing Committee and only at a time-certain and length-of-time decided by the Standing Committee. He wished for more time and a more collaborative arrangement. The Standing Committee thought the bishop's schedule was such that he could only meet for a set time and they wished for more time together.<sup>i</sup>*

In a sense that opening set the tone for the whole report, which helped Bishop Lane and diocesan leadership begin to address and renegotiate expectations and norms early on, not unlike the negotiating that happens in congregations with new clergy or in a marriage.

The final report for the 2012 MMR was entitled, *"How is it going? Perception and Reality."* By that time things had settled in a bit. The "new" bishop was not so new. Three broad areas were addressed:

- A. Checking perception versus reality.
- B. Level of understanding of the complex ministry of the Episcopate.
- C. Supporting the ministry of the bishop.<sup>ii</sup>

One of the key learnings included a desire to develop a communication strategy. There was also a tension explored between a leadership style that "*manages change*" and one that "*leads change*." The bishop might be asked, for example, "Are you going to close this church?" The consultant proposed that the bishop might respond, "I do not want to, and I am not going to do so, but the budget and financial realities mean that by this date you will have to sustain yourselves and decide how to make that work..." And then this important comment: *"People's anxiety is heightened by 'not knowing' so LEADERSHIP has to help them know what the reality is.*<sup>iii</sup>

Another issue raised in that second MMR was about the staff at Loring House, including a request that they respond in a timely manner to phone and email messages and about using

staff meeting time in ways that might help all the staff to better see “the big picture” and avoid “the silo affect.”

So that was then, almost five years ago. As this MMR is undertaken there are some “hints and guesses” about the end of Bishop Lane’s ministry as bishop. In his 2016 Convention, he put it this way:

*I want to conclude this report by saying that I have no plans to leave you soon. To paraphrase Mark Twain, the rumors of my retirement have been greatly exaggerated. I am 67 years old, and mandatory retirement is 72. So, there is a time frame. The 2017 Diocesan Budget is beginning to fund a reserve for the next episcopal election and transition process. Gretchen and I will be attending a conference for bishops and spouses next month that helps frame the transition process and educates us about the things to be considered in planning for an orderly transition for the diocese and for us. So I am gathering information. But I have no plan now to retire. That plan will be developed in the usual manner, with the Standing Committee, and will be announced with a call for an election. I also want to be clear - and Gretchen wants me to say this - that the timing of any transition plan will be determined by the needs of the diocese and by my sense of my capacity to serve as bishop, not by Gretchen’s illness. I’m happy to say that Gretchen is doing quite well, and we are eternally grateful for the innumerable prayers and support that have come our way.*<sup>iv</sup>

While any Mutual Ministry Review asks “where we have been, where we are, and where God might be calling us next,” there is an awareness that came through this time around that this is clearly not the beginning of a new ministry. Nor is it even like 2012, when the report focused on ways of improving understanding somewhere “in the middle” of this episcopate.

Rather, this MMR comes nearer to the end of Bishop Lane’s ministry. Much has been accomplished. While that good work continues, beginning to plan for the episcopal transition that lies in the not-too-distant future seems timely. This work (as both Bishop Lane and Gretchen concur) is rightly focused on “the needs of the diocese and [Bishop Lane’s] sense of his capacity to serve as bishop.” Setting the timeline is beyond the scope or authority of this report. But it does seem to be important for the mutual ministry of the diocese to acknowledge this reality, and then begin to explore this part of the work that lies ahead in the life of the diocese.

This time around, I initially met with Bishop Lane and the Standing Committee on October 5, 2016. We outlined a process for gathering information that would include the following:

1. I agreed to meet with the Diocesan Council as part of their annual retreat weekend for a guided conversation/interview to ask (1) What is going well? (2) What are the challenges? And (3) Where might God be leading next? *We did this on Saturday, December 3, 2016.*

2. Similarly, I agreed to meet with the Standing Committee and to ask the same questions. *We did this on Wednesday, December 7, 2016.*
3. Bishop Lane and the staff at Loring House were NOT part of these discussions above. We wanted both groups to be able to “speak freely.” But of course we also wanted to hear from Bishop Lane and his team as well. One-on-one interviews were conducted with each of them, addressing the same questions. *We did this on Tuesday, December 6 and Wednesday, December 7, 2016.*
4. In addition, a “Survey Monkey” questionnaire went out to members of the diocese, both ordained and lay. The decision was made to repeat the same questions from the last MMR so we might compare apples to apples and note any significant changes from last time. (A few minor edits were made to reflect a desire to focus more on the *mutual* work of the diocese as a whole rather than on the role of the bishop.)

I come to this work as a relative outsider to the Diocese of Maine. I count Canon Ambler as a colleague and I have appreciated Bishop Lane’s ministry from a distance. But other than the fact that my wife graduated from Colby College in 1985, I arrived in Portland not knowing very much about Maine, the state or the diocese. *This allowed me to offer the gift of listening and learning and of being genuinely curious.* I offer this gift, I hope, without any need to control the outcome or, I hope, prejudge it. I was also free to recognize that the truth is often polyvalent; that is to say, there were some “minority reports” along the way that I did not feel compelled to fit neatly into some overarching narrative. People experience and see the work of the bishop and the diocese differently. I was able to stand in a place where I could simply find this interesting.

That said, however, in another sense I do have opinions about diocesan work. I serve as Canon to the Ordinary in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts. I know what it is like to work in a bishop’s office and much of what happens at 37 Chestnut Street in Springfield, MA (upstairs from Christ Church Cathedral) is not so different from what happens at Loring House (next door to St. Luke’s Cathedral) in Portland. As Province I dioceses, we are facing many of the same challenges and there were echoes of my own joys and concerns in the stories I heard told in Maine.

I share this because, like Canon Bennett before me, I come to this work with my own perspectives on diocesan work. I hope that this perspective was helpful and did not “get in the way.” I would note that I’m still relatively new to diocesan work (since June 2013) and was previously shaped by almost two decades as a parish priest and prior to that with four years as an ecumenical campus minister. This isn’t about my own biography, but my hope is that my own experience helped me to better listen to all of your stories about this work that we share in the name of the Risen Christ.

I hope that this document is less of a final report than it is a conversation starter. My final duties in this work will be to meet with Bishop Lane and Standing Committee on February 1 to

discuss this report. For me, that conversation will be the real final report, especially if further conversation is sparked. I hope you will recognize yourselves here. But if in some parts I've missed the mark, or simply gotten it wrong, my hope is that these can also be opportunities for clarification that allow you to move forward in the work God has given you to do in this time and place.

I have been very grateful to be invited to share this work with you, and you are all in my prayers as you navigate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in your diocese. The collect for this day, the Feast of the Epiphany, asks the same God who once led the magi by a star to the Christ-child, to "lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face..."

May it be so for all of you.

Faithfully,

The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson  
Consultant

## **MUTUAL MINISTRY REPORT TO THE BISHOP AND STANDING COMMITTEE**

*“Don’t resist feedback from others. We often don’t know what we don’t know. We all have blind spots. We all unconsciously behave in undignified ways. We need to overcome our self-protective instincts and accept constructive criticism. Feedback gives us an opportunity to grow.”*

(Donna Hicks, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*, Yale Univ. Press, 2011.)

### **Executive Summary**

- The Diocese appears to be in a strong place, in the midst of challenging times. We are living in a season of the Church’s life when we need to “grade on a curve” – because the challenges we face are big ones that require big changes. Even so, systems are in place, there is a high level of trust, and much is going well. This reality should not be glossed over or taken for granted: it is not the case everywhere in the Episcopal Church! In fact, I would suggest that because of what is going well, and because there is “safe space” for the ministries of bishop, priests, deacons and layperson to be validated and affirmed. there is a willingness to name and face the very real challenges and even to see them as opportunities.
- The number one challenge the diocese faces is communication. This is not about a better newsletter or technical changes – many of which have been positively implemented even since the last MMR. This is about the larger, more adaptive challenge of speaking “good news” in a culture when we are inundated with information. This is perhaps more about the continuing challenge to build community and keep lines of communication open in all directions, and to share this work in even “flatter” ways across the Diocese.
- Throughout this process there was a deep awareness about the next steps for the Diocese after Bishop Lane’s retirement. There was very little anxiety about this, or eagerness for it to happen. Rather, there was an awareness that the season ahead will continue to be a time to do the work that God has given the Diocese of Maine to do in this chapter of your life together in Christ, when the time comes to say “thank you” to Steve and Gretchen, and to prepare for the next challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

## I. What is going well?

I want to report on what I *heard* from you. But before I do that, I want to share some of what I *saw* as an outsider on the day I came to join the Diocesan Council retreat and then when I shared a meal with the staff at Loring House on a “normal” work day. My initial observation was that both groups were extremely engaged and seemed to share a sense of common purpose. This was also my experience with the Standing Committee; I just didn’t get to share a meal with them! In all three contexts there seems to be “space” for a real exchange of ideas and opinions. It’s respectful, but it’s also authentic, and in no way felt “scripted” by the Bishop or his staff. I have a pretty good intuitive sense when things are tense or secretive or conflicted. My first impressions were of a sense of health and well-being and of people who feel cared for and who care for each other.

A process like this *can* feel like an intrusion. I’ve done many of these at the parish level and they are all different. In your diocese, it appeared to me that no one was “checking out.” No one was looking at their cell phones. Even the quieter members were leaning in and engaged.

I don’t mean to suggest there aren’t conflicts or real challenges; I hope there are because whenever two or three are gathered together, there will be! But what I mean to say is that the *culture* seems incredibly healthy and that should not be taken for granted. In fact, *culture* is one of those adaptive challenges, rather than a technical one, I think. It may be that this work is further along than people may realize on a day-to-day basis. It is definitely worth celebrating because a healthy, engaged, partnered approach to leadership that includes Bishop, diocesan staff, priests and deacons and lay leaders all focused on the same sense of purpose is both a gift and an opportunity.

The last comment of the day at the Council retreat came from a new member who had not previously spoken, but was clearly engaged. I asked if anyone who had not yet spoken wanted to say anything. She said that she was still “taking in” the whole weekend but that she had been a part of many meetings in many different contexts, inside and outside of Church, where people are either bored or “holding court,” and that this group had clearly done a lot of work to get to a place where such a high level of conversation could occur, and further, that she looked forward to being a part of this group. I think her comment as a newbie and my observations as an outsider are merit your attention and thanksgiving.

*One of the consistent messages I heard is that the “management” side of things in the diocese is going well.* Space has been created for congregations to explore new relationships and possibilities – to try new things. There is a high level of trust. One person noted that “from Bishop Lane’s first convention address to the present, there has been a vision and style that have been both fiscally responsible and missional.”

To this point, the budget process is flatter and more humane now. While staff reductions were painful, this was navigated as well as it could be and while it may sometimes feel inside of

Loring House like more work is being done by fewer people (and that one extra position would be helpful) across the diocese there is a sense that the work is getting done. There is gratitude for the staff that this is so. There is an appreciation for the Bishop and his staff who are perceived as accessible: of those surveyed, 17% said extremely so, 41% said very accessible and 29% said moderately so. In a diocese as large as Maine, this is impressive.

There is a clear sense of the enormity of the challenges ahead. Yet, “all things considered, the diocese is strong.” Members of the staff, Diocesan Council, and Standing Committee, all feel heard as real councils of advice. The Bishop’s leadership style is relational and the relationships are authentic; they’ve also deepened over time. This seems to allow the Bishop and these councils of advice to be “managing change in a healthy-enough way.” In addition, it was further noted that “the Bishop has good boundaries and does not infect the system with his own fear or anxiety.” Others described the Bishop as the “head cheerleader” who encourages clergy and lay leaders to take risks at the local level. While not without a few critics of the stands taken, the vast majority of persons are extremely grateful to the Bishop for setting the tone, speaking out about social justice concerns, and for challenging the Church to live the values we profess to believe in the Baptismal Covenant by respecting the dignity of all persons, and striving for justice and peace among all people. No exceptions.

One might argue in language that is now familiar, that much of the above work is about taking care of *technical* challenges. Yet I would simply observe that in so doing, space has been created for the even more difficult work. In a relational, non-anxious system, space has opened up to address the adaptive challenges. As one person said, “even when the metrics are hard, we keep asking, ‘what does it mean to be the faithful community?’”

Several people made points like this one: “*The bishop’s greatest strength and gift to us has been in creating safe spaces where it’s ok to disagree with him and not fear repercussions.*” There is broad consensus that he has a genuine sense of humility and therefore doesn’t bring ready-made plans that seek a rubber stamp to either Diocesan Council or Standing Committee – or for that matter, I think, to staff meetings. The leadership style that has emerged has allowed ideas to be presented and worked on together. Input and even critique is valued and normative along the way. This came up again and again at every level of the system. One member of the staff noted: “Steve is a very patient person and not an authoritarian leader. He articulates challenges and listens, and stays with it.” Another person observed that his legacy to the diocese will be that “he has asked questions fearlessly even when he doesn’t have easy answers, or when there is no easy answer.”

*Living Local/Joining Together* (LLJT) was mentioned in every context again and again as a place of hope in doing this more adaptive work. LLJT seems to be providing a framework for implementing this “fiscally responsible missional vision” in the diocese. The new Initiative Grants Program is also going well, as is the Maine Episcopal Network for Justice. These three were mentioned in every context (Diocesan Council, Standing Committee, Loring House, and the Survey Monkey) as things that are going well. Together they seem to be examples of the more adaptive change to the “faithful community” that is well underway.

So, a lot is going well. And it would be easy to take that for granted. I would suggest, however, that it provides a firm place to stand when asking the next question: where is there room for growth and improvement? Always there is room for improvement and the Diocese of Maine is not exempt from this reality. But as one member of Diocesan Council put it:

*I think we need to keep perspective here and perhaps we should be grading 'on a curve'; or, as in gymnastics, at least acknowledging the 'degree of difficulty.' This is an extraordinarily difficult time to be the Church and our grading needs to take account of this. We need to face the challenges that are before us honestly and courageously, but we also need to recognize just how difficult this work is, compared to earlier times in the mid-twentieth century, for example.*

Indeed. Nevertheless, as with what is going well, there was generally broad consensus about some of the challenges, to which we now turn.

## II. Where is there room for improvement?

*The first challenge seemed to be in the area of communication.* But it needs to be understood that this work seems to be focused more on *adaptive* work rather than *technical* work. In other words (and perhaps in contrast to what came up in 2012) this need is not about a better newsletter or using technology better or focused on the work of the Canon Missioner for Communication. Rather, what came up gets closer to the Latin root for this word – what is the work that needs to be *shared*?

*“What needs to be communicated back?”* One member of Diocesan Council raised this question, quoting a former Council member who used to always ask this question at each meeting. It had become a kind of refrain and maybe even a little bit annoying. With that voice no longer at the table, this member is now wanting to claim this as a norm going forward. “All communications does not and should not come from Loring House,” she said. “So asking ‘what needs to be communicated, and to whom?’ could be an important and helpful recovery of the “tradition” at this time in the life of the diocese.”

Closely related to this issue was an exploration of how decisions are made, and by whom, and then how that information is then shared with others. Several examples came up that are worth paying attention to.

- (1) Two challenges were linked together in a conversation that unfolded with Diocesan Council: how to continue to support ministry to teens and young adults and the ministry of deacons in the face of fiscal challenges and differing changes and potential changes in how these ministries are funded? Recognizing fiscal limitations, the question was raised about how these important ministries might be done in new and creative ways in a new time and place.
- (2) There was some confusion about “canon missioner roles” and “away and home teams.” At both Diocesan Council and Standing Committee a small minority of each group knew that this plan had been abandoned. The debate was not about whether or not this was a good idea *but about the lag in information beyond Loring House that this had happened.* Clergy in particular felt they were still sharing this information with their congregations as “the new way we do business” only to learn in this MMR that it has not been the way we do business for some time now.
- (3) Similarly, what one person called “the bombshell” at Convention about Diocesan Council and Standing Committee combining in some new way. In spite of feeling that they truly are a “council of advice,” some members felt blindsided by this and have questions about what it would look like, and who would do what, and why this seems like a way forward.

These examples point to questions that don’t have simple answers. They touch on authority questions (who decides?) but even more than that they seem to be examples of some things

falling through the cracks in what is otherwise (as noted above) a pretty collaborative system. Therefore they feel like communication issues – in that larger sense of asking “what is shared?” As one person noted, “information not shared raises anxiety.” That anxiety was palpable in otherwise really energetic discussions when these issues were raised.

I would add (not as a defense, but simply in recognizing the challenges of complex systems) that this is notoriously challenging work. It’s hard enough to communicate in our families or even in our congregations, let alone across a geographically large and diverse diocese. This doesn’t mean it isn’t important to address these, but it is helpful to remember this is not an easy fix. *The way forward, I think, will be discovered in continuing to utilize the strengths/charisms identified earlier of deepening relationships and gaining clarity about who does what in the system. It’s about, as my own bishop likes to put it, running “ten yards past the finish line.”*

*Another big challenge is demographics.* This came up consistently and there seems to be little disagreement about what these very real challenges are. First, Maine is an aging state. There are lots of people over the age of sixty and a fair number under sixteen; not so many in between. If one challenge is to learn how to “let go of being a Baby Boomer Church” this is particularly challenging in a Baby Boomer state!

In addition to an aging populace, everyone I spoke with had language for talking about the “two Maines.” Some identified this as District 1 (blue) and District 2 (red), using political boundaries and categories. Others spoke of coastal and interior Maine. But the key point was pretty clear: *there are cultural, political, religious, socio-economic differences not created by the Church, but that need to be addressed by the Church.* This is simply part of the context; a given. How it plays out for the Episcopal Diocese of Maine is an issue to be addressed, including the perceptions each has of the other.

I found it fascinating that both sides seem to feel the other “gets more attention,” almost like two very different children in the same family. Some “District 1” folks feel like a lot of the bishop’s attention and energy gets focused on struggling, smaller, poorer congregations and they are left a bit to fend for themselves. Some “District 2” folks feel like everything revolves around Portland and the coastal “big” churches, and they are being unfavorably compared. This is important: it’s not like there was consensus here. It depends on where one stands as to how one sees it. Everyone is a little bit unhappy that the others get all the attention!

Most of this was descriptive. We danced around what this might mean for the diocese and this is where I’d invite further reflection and conversation. In a deeply divided nation, I could not help but to notice that this blue-red divide might be an opportunity. If the work of the Church is to be ambassadors of reconciliation, then how might Maine offer opportunities for real dialogue and learning from one another?

I just finished reading *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. I realize that Maine is not rural Kentucky where the writer, J.D. Vance, comes from. I found the book personally enlightening and helpful. One of the writer’s main points is that while many of those

old manufacturing jobs are not coming back to rural America, the larger issue is those who have been displaced often feel invisible and unheard. I found myself wondering: *what might it look like in the Diocese of Maine to provide even more intentional ways for people to share their stories and their faith with each other? What might it look like for the Church to not merely replicate deep cultural divisions, but to work toward transforming those relationships so that, in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile – not “us” and “them” but only us?*

This might provide a way toward focusing on the “why?” As one member of the Standing Committee rather passionately put it:

*Why does the Church exist in this time and place? As the role of the Church institutionally changes, it is harder and harder to raise up and train and recruit and pay full-time seminary trained clergy. What does it look like to raise up and train and recruit more lay people not only to serve on vestries or diocesan committees, but to “build up the church?”*

Those who raised these questions seemed to have a deep awareness that this work is hard and that they must be part of the solution. In various ways this “why” question was raised throughout this process, however. Perhaps the challenge/opportunity of the cultural divisions in Maine might allow for the light of the Gospel to bring healing and reconciliation in new and creative ways.

Here are two smaller and more technical (but no less important) challenges that were identified.

- (1) There were mixed reviews on staff response times to phone messages and emails. As mentioned above, this was identified as a challenge in the last MMR. While there has been some improvement since then, there have also been staff cuts and the reality of fewer people doing mostly the same amount of work. Nevertheless, while there seems to be an overall sensitivity to this challenge (both from staff and from outside of Loring House) there were some who still feel pretty strongly that there are least some staff members who are not as good at this as they need to be, and that when emails receive no response at all, this is a source of frustration.
- (2) This is specific to Standing Committee: the ordination process (including deacon formation) has been deconstructed but not yet reconstructed. There is a lack of clarity about who now does what, and when. “As the structures change, there are important questions to ask as new forms take root,” said one member of the Standing Committee.

### **III. What are the specific challenges and hopes as you look toward an episcopal transition?**

One member of Diocesan Council noted, “we all know the bishop’s retirement is coming sooner rather than later...” There were a lot of nods around the table. No one seems very eager for this to happen; it just seems like a reality that people want to face together, when that time comes. As one member of Diocesan Council stated, “we want to be able to have a good goodbye...this needs to be even better than Big Papi’s goodbye tour was!”

The context in which these issues were discussed revealed a real sense of care for Bishop Lane and Gretchen personally. I did not sense much anxiety or pressure to push this faster than the Bishop wants to go. In my work in Western Massachusetts, I primarily focus on working with congregations that are going through clergy transitions. Sometimes the anxiety is high; I know what that looks like. This is not that! Rather, there is lots of gratitude.

There was also a sense that this is work that lies ahead, and how that work is conducted will matter. What kind of metaphor helps in thinking about this work, whenever it comes? One member of the staff expressed well something others also tried to get a handle on. She put it this way:

*A bishop retiring is not a race to some finish line. This bishop is wonderful, but bishops do come and go, and the life of a diocese continues. We need to say a good goodbye and we'll need to keep focusing on the mission because nothing is finished. Bishop Lane should pass on “a ton of things in process” to his successor!*

Someone else noted that if one is racing to a finish line (or even crawling toward one!) there is a temptation to try to reap a pre-mature harvest. What I heard very consistently was encouragement to stay on message, to keep on doing the work, which includes continuing to plant seeds for a harvest another may reap.

The single “programmatic” piece of work that came up again and again toward this end was Living Local/Joining God (LLJG.) Some see this as a kind of “capstone” to Bishop Lane’s episcopate. Most see it as a tool for continuing to do the adaptive work that has been happening already. Several mentioned that it is no magic bullet. As one person noted, “while it seems to be a good thing to do, it’s not the answer to all that ails us!” A few worry that perhaps too much “faith” is being put into this. This latter word of caution was offered, it seemed, as a sweet concern and affection for the bishop: whether or not this “works” (or meets expectations), it should not be the single lens through which Bishop Lane’s tenure should be evaluated.

In his second address to Diocesan Convention, Bishop Lane offered a powerful refrain, stating that “you haven’t failed, the world has changed.” This reality has been heard, and has helped to clarify the work that has already been done and is being done: *the missional work of responding*

*to this changed (and still changing) world.* One of the comments made on the Survey Monkey was that the bishop has been a visionary process-oriented leader. *This is his legacy.*

LLJG was only one of several things that were identified as needing some continued nurturing, as they “take root” and hopefully become part of the diocesan culture beyond Bishop Lane’s tenure. Again, the Maine Episcopal Justice Network and the Initiative Grants were mentioned. The hope was expressed that these things will not be “plucked up” or “torn down” by a new bishop with a different agenda; that they will be identified as part of the fabric of the Diocese and not simply with Bishop Lane.

It was also noted that it would be helpful to gain greater clarity about what “Episcopal presence” looks like in places where buildings have been closed, as well as the relationship between “the diocese” and congregations that no longer meet the canonical requirements of congregations. If Maine is a bit ahead of other parts of the larger Church (in terms of a changing landscape) might there be an opportunity to “lead the way” here? I didn’t hear people asking for new canons necessarily; but rather, how can the system begin to respond to this reality so there are at least some guidelines and norms that seem fair and reasonable and that honor those continuing Episcopal presences?

There is one thing more: several people noted with some appreciation how hard it is to articulate “the narrative” of what it means to be Church today. It is not all about decline. It is not all about hospice care. There are in fact places of growth across the diocese and much that can be learned from them. There are new and exciting opportunities and there is a sense of hope about the future in the Diocese of Maine. To say it again, three out of four persons who responded to the Survey Monkey are in fact hopeful, or very hopeful about the future of their parishes and the diocese. While part of the role of leadership is telling the truth about how the world has changed (and to articulate the challenges) it is also helpful to articulate reasons for this sense of hopefulness. Otherwise it might be mistaken for “denial.”

I have thought a lot about this input. I think what was being articulated is that it is sometimes tempting for those who are closest to dealing with church closures to sound like they are saying that the Church is dying and the ship is going down, rather than proclaiming the Paschal Mystery in new ways. This is not a challenge unique to the Diocese of Maine! The danger in being truthful about grief and loss is that one might miss those places of joy and celebration, of evangelism and growth, of lively worship that also need to be celebrated.

*Both realities are part of our current reality.* It’s not an either/or. Twenty-first century followers of Jesus need to find God in the neighborhood. *And*, healthy and strong congregations where the Word is preached and the Sacraments are duly administered and received can be places where God’s people are encouraged and equipped to go out in the mission field to love their neighbor. God is definitely at work in the world, but that doesn’t (necessarily) mean that God has left the building.

The message, as I heard it, that needs to be shared as Good News is not that “the Church is dying and God is (only) in the neighborhood” but rather that *God is doing a new thing and forming a community of faith that is always being sent into God’s world*. Taking the long view, I want to paraphrase here something that is not a single quote from one speaker. Nor is it a complete fiction on my part either. If this were a novel rather than a MMR report, having heard several speakers in various contexts said something like this, I’d put it on the lips of one of my characters by way of summary:

*When Chilton came it was very clear we needed a pastor. We had a lot of healing we needed to do. When Steve came we began to move from a more introspective, pastoral time toward something we might now call “Living Local.” That seems to be a good metaphor for what this episcopate has been all about. We’ve made a lot of progress, but the next challenge will be to get even more clarity on the work that lies ahead, in a world that has most definitely changed. We have not failed, but how are we now called to serve? We’ll need to keep asking big questions like “what does it even mean to have bishops in a culture that trusts authority less and less?” What is the purpose of a diocese? What is the role of the laity in this emerging Church? This adaptive work won’t be completed during Steve’s tenure, but he has pointed us in the right direction, toward work that will continue with our next bishop.*

Or, as someone on the Standing Committee did in fact say it:

Bishop Lane has been really, really good at creating safe spaces for big conversations. While there are some ‘loops to be closed’ before the Bishop retires, this ‘space’ is really his legacy and his gift to whoever comes next in this work.

## IV. Key Learnings from the Survey Monkey Responses

As mentioned above, the survey questions were not new. It was essentially a repeat of the survey from 2010. Some feedback was received that these questions were challenging and I don't doubt that. Most people "in the pews" have little contact with the bishop and diocesan staff outside of the bishop's visitations unless there is a need to close, or a clergy transition, or a conflict that needs oversight and support. Most Episcopalians are connected to "the Jesus Movement" through their local congregation, not the diocese. Retired clergy also get a little less connected to the day-to-day work of the bishop and these comments were also received back.

Even so, and noting these real limitations, we felt it was important as we embarked on this process to at least ask these questions. Otherwise the process would have been limited to input exclusively from the Bishop and his staff at Loring House, Diocesan Council and Standing Committee; all pretty close to decision-making. While these latter two groups do represent the congregations from around the diocese, we felt going into this work that the survey was also a key component.

In 2012, 472 persons responded to the survey. This time around 121 did. That seems like a significant drop that I don't necessarily understand. It may be worth some conversation and others may have insights into this drop, but I don't think it is worth worrying about too much, especially since the responses (percentage-wise) were amazingly similar in comparison.

I suspect that several factors may have contributed to this. First, the mailing went out during the holiday season. Also, when a Bishop is still relatively new, people may be paying extra attention and may have a stronger desire to shape the future and to be heard. Third, I think we are more and more inundated with emails as a society than we were as recently as four years ago and many of are weary, unless we are really invested, of being asked "what we think."

I may be wrong about these reasons for the lower number, but as I said, it is important to notice that the changes from 2012 to 2016 were almost non-existent. *The responses confirm, rather than challenge, what I heard in the interviews I conducted in person.*

I want to thank Canon Heidi Shott who made the Monkey Survey happen and stayed in contact with me about the responses, and for her patience with me. Here are some of the key learnings from that data.

- Almost three out of four respondents are extremely satisfied (33%) or moderately satisfied (40%) with their experiences with the diocesan office. This is up slightly from 2012, when a total of 68% were either extremely or moderately satisfied.

- An even higher percentage of respondents do not feel that they or the diocesan mission have been adversely affected by diocesan staff cuts (75.89%). (This question was not asked in 2012 since it hadn't yet happened.)
- 82% of those who responded feel supported by the Bishop and staff in addressing changes in their own context.
- Only five of the 121 responses under the age of 50. Again, this was not that surprising given the aging demographic and what I heard in the interviews.
- As to the pace of change: 58% say "about right" – but less than 5% say too fast. The remaining 37% say either too slow or imperceptible. (This is roughly the same as what people said in 2012.)
- Almost three of four persons (72%) say they are either very hopeful or hopeful about the future of their faith community.
- In terms of the well-being of the diocese, almost seventy percent say that the diocese is in an excellent place (4.9%), very good (28%) or good (36%) as compared with 59% in 2012. Those who responded that the diocese is in poor shape were 9.2% in 2012 and 4.9% in 2016.

Of these learnings, the first four were not surprising to me based on the interviews I conducted. These responses actually confirm my experience of the culture of the diocese as open and honest and healthy. I cannot say what the culture was before Bishop Lane's tenure, but this far into it, it is clearly not the episcopal version of "father knows best." There is a sense of collaboration and authenticity that, as I see it, is worth celebrating. I believe this is part of the fruit of the adaptive work you have been tackling. While those who work at Loring House may feel stretched thin and perhaps "one staff member short" – at least those who responded to the survey feel like the Bishop and staff continue to do their jobs well, in spite of those cuts.

Two insights from above that I think are worth reflecting on a bit further: First, *this issue about the pace of change*. My own sense of serving on a Bishop's staff is that gauging the readiness for change is hard work. We are built, I think, to worry that things may be going "too fast." We want to give everyone a chance to get on board. The responses to this question, however, suggest that people may in fact be ready (and even eager?) for change. A fairly large minority wonder, "are things moving too slowly?" If there are further adaptive changes ahead that need to be embraced, *I wonder if permission (or encouragement) is being given here to "just do it."*

The theological issue worth talking about is that in some ways is rooted in the demographic realities that are being faced is about what the future looks like. There was, in the interviews I conducted, a great sense of hope and yet also an awareness of the realities about the real challenges that the Episcopal Church in general faces in this time and place, especially in Province I and especially in Maine. There are numerous challenges beyond anyone's control:

financial, the aging population, a post- Christendom context. Only five persons under the age of fifty completed the survey.

And yet, three out of four people “on the ground” are hopeful (or even *very* hopeful) about the future. This could mean one of two things: either that the old adage is true, that denial is not just a river in Egypt. Or it might mean that in spite of the very real challenges, people rightly see signs of the Reign of God in their midst, at both the local and diocesan levels.

I don’t have easy answers to these two questions, but I think they merit further discussion at Council and Standing Committee meetings in the future. If the dominant mood is hopeful and not fearful and if people are not saying that change is coming too fast, then it may well be a ripe time to boldly move forward. Always with God’s help.

## V. What else?

I asked those interviewed (and the Survey Monkey questions also gave an opportunity) to share further thoughts either not covered above or as a matter of emphasis. Below are some of the responses that may be helpful.

- The past six years or so have focused on adaptive change and most of this has been very well done and very necessary. But at times there is a shadow to this hard work. It can sometimes feel like “changing the rules” in the middle of the game. *Adaptive work must not become an excuse to become inconsistent.* (This comment looped back to issues around New Initiative Grants and the balance between finding guidelines that help everyone play well together while remaining “flexible.”)
- Several long time members of the staff at Loring House noted this is a staff that works well together and perhaps it’s “as healthy as it’s ever been....we are all adults and most days we act like it.” Annual reviews are honest and open.
- This came up at both Diocesan Council and Standing Committee: folks are very proud of Bishop Lane’s work for the wider church and totally get it that like priests, bishops are called to share in the “Councils of the Church.” The perception, though, is that as a longer serving and very capable bishop, Bishop Lane has been called on a lot; there has been “an awful lot of time spent outside of the diocese.” While understanding why this is so, and proud to share him with the wider Church, the comments offered in the context were, I think, intended as encouragement to be more intentional about “staying home” whenever possible in the time leading toward an episcopal transition.

## VI. Some Final Thoughts

I pray that I have been a faithful scribe in listening and hearing what has been shared with me along the way. More than that I hope that I have been able to synthesize in some meaningful way what I heard, and to try to get underneath it to the meaning and values that undergird this helpful feedback.

While it doesn't really come up directly in this report, in several ways the tenure of Bishop Chalfont is still present and was alluded to (especially within Loring House.) One person told me that his picture is still not on the wall at the Cathedral: "too soon," they noted. My intent here is not to drop this in at the end, but simply note that this experience of that episcopate led to the tenure of Bishop Knudson, which is perceived as a time of healing. *That* came up again and again. There was a lot of clarity about the fact that what the Diocese of Maine needed then was a pastor. I didn't sense any nostalgia for those "good old days" but rather a healthy and abiding sense of appreciation for Bishop Knudsen's ministry in challenging times.

While there is gratitude for her ministry, but also there was a sense when she called for a coadjutor, people were ready to move ahead and to move outward: to find God in the neighborhood and to adapt to the challenges of being the Church in the twenty-first century, to "live local and join God," one might even say.

There is a real sense that this adaptive work has been happening and that it has happened because of the hard work and visionary leadership of Bishop Lane. He, too, is a pastor but the pastoral role has been different because the challenges have been different. There has been a sense of purpose and a sense of gratitude that is palpable and the healing has continued. As has been noted, the folks who work at Loring House are glad to be there and the place is "as healthy as it's ever been." There is a space, especially in Standing Committee and at Diocesan Council, where lay and ordained persons can speak up and share their own version of the truth toward the shared goal of finding better ways to move forward.

No one, including and especially Bishop Lane wants to coast at this point. There is a desire to be intentional and to keep everyone's eyes on the prize. Things will not be tied up with a nice bow, nor should they be because this kind of work is never really "finished." While LLJG seems to be one good way to stay focused on this work, even as a kind of capstone, even if it were to fall flat it will not undo the good work that has been done.

There is a desire among the Standing Committee and Diocesan Council to begin to make plans for the next episcopal transition by claiming and celebrating this good work that has been done and will be done. Then, when the time comes, to say a "good goodbye" and continue to be the Church in the Diocese of Maine. No one seems to be in a rush for that to happen, but when it does they will want to say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," and then build on the good work that has been done by "strengthening communities of faith for God's mission in congregations across Maine."

On February 1, 2017, I met with Bishop Lane and Standing Committee to present this report. As part of our conversation, it was noted that this MMR doesn't give concrete specific recommendations of next steps. That work lies with you, the reader. This report ends, perhaps, a bit like how the scholars say that Mark's Gospel originally ended: the work that continues is to be taken up by all of you, so that this report does not gather dust.

As you reach this page I invite you to reflect as we did together on the following: (a) what is most important to you in this report; (b) are there any surprises; (c) what specific work – both adaptive and technical – might arise from this report? What, in other words, are the next steps? And what are you called to do?

These may be different for Bishop Lane himself, for the Standing Committee, for Diocesan Council, for members of the bishop's staff – for the person in the pew. It is my hope that it will at the very least generate further conversation that will equip you to continue the good work you have been engaged in.

You will all be in my prayers as this all unfolds, always with God's help.

Faithfully,

RMS+

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<sup>i</sup> Mutual Ministry Review, the Rev. Canon Thad Bennett, March 4, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Mutual Ministry Review, the Rev. Canon Thad Bennett, June 29, 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> Mutual Ministry Review, June 29, 2012, page 27.

<sup>iv</sup> Bishop Lane's Ninth Convention Address, October 22, 2016,

<http://www.episcopalmaine.org/images/diocese/documents/2016/Addressv10212016.pdf>