



# Episcopal Diocese of Rochester

*The Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane*

*Bishop's Address*

*Diocesan Convention 92*

*October 28, 2023*

Jesus said to his disciples, "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

It's been quite the year, hasn't it? So much has happened, so much **change**, that it's hard to know where to begin. Yet I do want to say a word about the several events and circumstances that have changed our life together.

I begin by giving **thanks** for the Standing Committee, the Discernment and Nominating Committee and the Transition Committee. After a **year** spent **questioning** if we could or should seek a new bishop, the Standing Committee began immediately following the 91st Convention to dig into the process. Working with our consultant, the Rev. Gary Butterworth, the Standing Committee developed a **plan** for seeking the Ninth Bishop of Rochester. **Listening** sessions were held across the diocese. Two **Committees** were appointed, and both have been outstanding, bonding well, working hard, and laying out a schedule and a process for the election of our next bishop. I want to **thank** outgoing SC President **Ken Pepin** for his work in energizing and organizing the process, and our Committee chairs, **Julie Cicora**, **Keisha Stokes** and **Don Schranz**, for their work in leading the Committees. We will hear a **report** from them later in this Convention and, in just a few weeks, the D&NC will present their **nominees** to the Standing Committee and the Diocese.

I really wasn't sure a year ago that we would reach this place. I am deeply **gratified** for the energy that has developed and the skill of our leaders. We received many more **nominations** from across the church than anyone expected, and I believe we will be presented with a solid slate of nominees. It now seems self-evident that we will hold our Electing Convention in February of next year and will consecrate the Ninth Bishop in July.

Part of our struggle with readiness for calling a bishop has been coming to terms with the **episcopate** of the Eighth Bishop of Rochester, Prince Singh. Since February of this year, we have been part of an unfolding process involving numerous complaints against Bishop Singh. The Disciplinary Board for Bishops has recently appointed an **investigator** to dig into the allegations that have been made. This investigation will take time and, following the investigation, the

matter will still need to be adjudicated. We don't know now what the final **outcome** of the disciplinary process will be, but we do know that the allegations against Bishop Singh are important and that the church is proceeding deliberately and with great seriousness.

At this Convention, we are addressing the **status** of three parishes. **St Stephen's**, Rochester, and **Trinity**, Canaseraga, are **ending** their lives as parishes of the diocese, and **St John's**, Sodus, is becoming a **mission** of the diocese. That's an unusually large number of changes for any diocese. We will take the time at this Convention to **honor** and **give thanks** for the lives of these churches.

We are now a **small** diocese – after this Convention, just 42 churches – and the changes in status represent the **pressures** we are all feeling. The cultural and demographic pressures which are expressed in lowered **attendance** and participation are **unrelenting**. We are fortunate to have the **financial** resources of our invested funds. These funds make us a **viable** diocese, providing over **half** the income for our diocesan budget, and giving us the **resources** to support our congregations and to serve the mission of God. For that **largesse**, we can only give thanks. However, we struggle to find enough **people** to fill essential leadership slots. The good news is that the Episcopal Election process has shown us that we have **strong leaders** among us. Yet we're asking them to wear too many hats. I have asked the Diocesan Council to study the Diocesan **District** structure and to consider a more **compact** model with a smaller Diocesan Council. I think it's time for us to look at the size of the **infrastructure** required to run our diocese.

I think it's also time for us to begin right sizing our **staff**. We are currently about 9.5 FTEs when we consider all the full time and part time employees. That's too many staff for a diocese of our size. 6 or 7 FTEs is more like it. The budget for 2024 makes it clear that a number of **staff changes** are coming as long-time staff members make decisions about **retirement**. And I have begun to make decisions about **reducing** the number of part time employees. The good news in this is that these changes provide financial **flexibility** for the next bishop to shape the staff as he or she deems best, without having to **dismiss** existing staff. The hard news is that we will lose a good bit of institutional **knowledge** in a very short time. Although it's too early for farewells, I want to **thank** Todd, Kristy, Steve, Virginia, Sarah, Donna and Kathy for their faithfulness and hard work. They have hung in during this time of **transition** and have continued to keep the diocese going. This is, in many ways, the **best** staff I've had the privilege of working with. I'm grateful for their support of me and for continuing to work hard in this time of transition – a time of uncertainty for employees. I also want to thank our District **Deans** and the several folks who have served in **part time** positions. Each makes important contributions to our common life.

Another staffing change in the budget is the addition of a half time **Regional Priest-in-Charge** to support churches that are unable to call a priest. We are ministering now in a very changed environment. Clergy are **retiring** at **twice** the rate they are being **ordained**. Currently there is about one priest available for every ten openings. Parishes seeking a part time priest are having a particularly difficult struggle. We have been fortunate in our ability to attract clergy over the

past year. We now have five clergy in new positions in the last six months. But we still have congregations seeking new clergy. And we know there are a number of clergy retirements on the horizon. So this Regional Priest-in-Charge is a way to **adapt** to our new reality. We don't know how well this will work. It is an experiment, a work in progress, but it offers us **hope** for sustaining the work of our congregations as we continue to seek longer term solutions.

Another way the environment has changed is in our **recovery** from **Covid**. I think we are very much in recovery. **Attendance** and participation are rising across the diocese. A few parishes are at or above pre-pandemic levels. Others are struggling at 75% or less. We are making accommodations to living with Covid in our midst. There seems to be a healthy tolerance for people wearing **masks**. And we are adapting our practices of sharing the **Communion** cup. Some congregations have returned to the common cup, while others are using a pouring chalice and small individual cups. I affirm both these practices. It's my sense that only about **50%** of folks are actually partaking of the wine at communion.

The pandemic seems to have permanently impacted **youth** ministry. Two events the diocese attempted this year failed for lack of registrants. And parishes are reporting that traditional style youth ministry is not effective. Parents seem **reluctant** to require their children to attend church, perhaps feeling their children are busy enough... In any case, there are fewer middle and high school kids in church, and we are having to think of new ways to connect with that group. We **are** seeing, in some places, a **new** cohort of infants and toddlers, so perhaps we're in a long term rebuilding process. I am encouraging congregations to be **creative** and to try experiments. They may not all be successful, but clearly that's no worse than continuing to try what we've always done.

Looking ahead, it seems to me that at this time next year, you will be addressed by the **Ninth** Bishop of Rochester. Again, it's too early for farewells, but I want to say that I am very grateful for the opportunity to serve you and to be part of your life at such a critical time. I did not imagine that I would share in this ministry with you, but I will always be grateful that I did.

I want to say something about the **orientation** of a **new bishop** that will begin next spring. The ministry of a bishop is a distinct ministry, distinct from the ministry in even the largest parish. There is only one bishop diocesan in any diocese and peers are always some distance away. An episcopal ministry has large elements of **administration** and **management**, and every diocese is different. The bishop is **pastor** to a diverse flock of clergy and lay people who have very different needs and expectations. The **learning** curve for a bishop is **steep**, and many have likened it to drinking from a fire **hose**. There really is no way to prepare. TEC offers the College for Bishops, and new bishops spend two full years being educated about the Office of Bishop. But truly... the only way to **learn** to be the Bishop of Rochester is by **being** the Bishop of Rochester.

Every new bishop is **excited** about being a bishop and desirous of making his or her **mark**. Inevitably every new bishop tries to do too much too soon, and **mistakes** happen. In my case in Maine, I heard that **communication** with the bishop's office was poor, and no one knew whom

to call for what. I therefore went about the process of creating a diocesan staff **liaison** for every parish, only to discover that, by the time I'd put it in place, reductions in the **number** of diocesan staff and **improved** efforts at **communication** had made the whole effort unnecessary. The liaison structure fell **flat** and was never used. So... a little bruised and a lot wiser, I learned to listen more deeply and to respond more reflectively.

I would like to suggest that the most **helpful** thing you can do for a new bishop is to tell your **truth** in love and, when mistakes are made, to move **closer** in support. **Mistakes** are the way we truly get to **know** one another, uncover our assumptions and misunderstandings, and make course corrections. Moving closer in love, rather than **away** in anger, is the way to create long term trust and respect. I believe this will be a particular **challenge** for us in the Diocese of Rochester, where we may be **primed** to look for errors and to distrust decisions. The next bishop will be **neither** Bishop Singh nor Bishop Lane, but someone who needs to **learn** about you in order to **serve** you, and someone whom you need to see as a **unique** person with a different personality and different skills. It will be important to check our automatic responses and try to really see the person and the situation.

And all the while the **world** around us continues to change. The demographic and economic changes which so challenge our church will continue. News of wars and rumors of war will continue to burden our world. The impact of climate change will continue to be experienced. We may be tempted to throw up our hands in **hopelessness**. All of these things make our work as **God's Beloved** people very **challenging**.

The current **conflict** between Israel and Hamas is a case in point. Many of the clergy report facing difficult comments in church about taking a **position** or **not** taking a position. Clergy have been challenged for what they have said or for not saying anything at all. And in some places, work we have done for years has suddenly been critiqued as political.

I would remind us all that while the world changes, the **Gospel** remains the same. Our job is to love God and to love our neighbors as Jesus has loved us. The church, the Body of Christ, stands with the **least**, as we always have. And we stand with the least whether or not they are conveniently labeled as "friends." Jesus doesn't **check** our ID's before loving us, and the church doesn't either. It is not politically correct politics to love Israelis **and** Palestinians. It is actually, simply, the **Gospel** of Christ.

So I invite you to hold fast in the **good work** you are doing. My deep **thanks** to all the clergy and lay leaders of the diocese for remaining steadfast. You are **symbols** of light and hope in this time. God is **faithful** and God will continue to walk with us as we seek to respond to God's call. This is a time for **fundamentals**: to worship God, to love God and our neighbor as Jesus has loved us. The church is simply an **instrument** of our attempt to be faithful. As our Presiding Bishop would say, "Love God. Love your neighbor. **Keep the faith.**"

May God **bles**s us abundantly in this time of transition and may we find **grace** and **courage** to follow Jesus in our places. *May it be so.*