



Episcopal Diocese of Rochester

What We Heard

This is a narrative form of what we heard. It attempts to capture and summarize what the Standing Committee members heard in the Listening Sessions, both the emotional content as well as some explicit comments. We hope that if you attended one or more of the Listening Sessions, you would hear your session reflected in this narrative. If you didn't attend one, we hope that this will be a window into where your experience with the diocese fits with those of others.

Also please note, when we listened, we encountered a deep well of hurt, mistrust, and anger within the relationship of individuals and congregations with the diocese, as well as profound appreciation and genuine gratitude. In particular, this broad spectrum of feelings was associated with the previous bishop. We have not attempted to evaluate or analyze the sources or causes of these comments and feelings, though we assume they are varied and complex. Rather, it was the task of this process to listen and report what we heard.

What we asked

Anonymously: Your hopes and Concerns

In Small Groups

Past-tense: Tell us about your experience with the Diocese, Standing Committee, Bishop... From your experiences, what have you learned about the church?

Present tense: What is your relationship with the Diocese now? With your congregation now?

Past/Present: What was it like for you and your congregation as you navigated the shut-down and pandemic, and how did it change what you do now?

Future-tense: Do you have time and energy to give the Diocese? If so, what form? What are your hope and dreams for the Diocese as we move forward? What are your hopes and dreams for your congregation?

What we heard: A Breach and Profound Gratitude

The predominant and most urgent voices we heard, whether a majority or minority we did not measure, felt alienated, distant, and mistrustful from and toward the diocese. Yet, rising up through the passion of those voices we also heard a sincere desire for something different, and a hope that it can be realized. Many people, especially clergy and those who worked directly with the previous bishop, spent most of the time talking about that relationship -- which, for most of them, was fraught. In most Listening Sessions there were people who had difficult experiences with the bishop, or who had heard about other people's struggles with the bishop.

When asked about their experience with the diocese, many participants used it as a category to talk about their hurts from the past and hopes for the future. Clearly there has been a breach in the relationship between the office of bishop and many congregations, their clergy, and lay leadership. The opportunity to speak out loud with others about this experience, seemed to be cathartic and offered a glimpse of hope and confidence for the bishop search process.

However, those were not the only voices we heard. We heard some participants speak in almost hushed tones of reverence for how authentic they felt the previous bishop was, and how deeply spiritual they experienced him to be. There were those who felt grateful for his participation in their rector search process, his speaking out on public issues of racial and economic justice, and the inspirational nature of his preaching. Many of these participants had heard of the anger and hurt of others and they wondered if this was an example of implicit bias and a lack of understanding of cultural differences that may have existed. Whatever the sources, these participants also recognized the need for the diocese to engage in healing as we go forward.

We noted a pattern of smaller and/or rural congregations that wanted to share how much their parishes mean to them and their hopes that the diocese will help them continue. More than one participant said they had fallen in love with their congregation and as a result, The Episcopal Church.

The pervasive and deep gratitude enthusiastically expressed to Standing Committee members for coming to them from Rochester for a Listening Session, indicates an element of the breach in the diocesan relationship. They have been used to making the drive to Rochester and feeling at the margins of the diocese rather than an intimate partner. Many if not most of these smaller churches also wanted to share their pride and self-sufficiency in how they managed the COVID shutdown and life without regularly accessible clergy.

Likewise, their intense desire to be included in the bishop search process indicated both the grief embedded in the breach, and the desire to heal and be connected. It was not lost on us though, that while the larger and/or more urban and suburban congregations felt more included and as if they are influencers in diocesan decision-making, overall, these congregations echoed the rural ones in talking about a need for much greater transparency, better communications from the diocese, and in some cases far more support.

The accessibility of the Listening Sessions seems to be affirmed by the wide array of participation in Diocesan activities from those who participated, which covered the spectrum of none to occupying elected or appointed positions. Ironically, “What is the purpose of the diocese” was asked by more than one person, and even by at least one person who currently serves on a diocesan committee yet who has no clarity about diocesan purpose or mission.

Mistrust: suspicion, resentment, and hurt that echo a broken relationship was prevalent in descriptions of past experiences with the diocese. The belief that decisions were made prior to meetings to discuss them and being asked to perform a task only to discover it was already done by someone else, were mentioned as leading to mistrust. A sense of top-down decision making and not being listened to also contributed to mistrust. A lack of transparency was also named as a source of mistrust and warned that the bishop search process needs to evince transparency for trust to be restored.

Competency: there was also a sense that the Diocesan leadership and perhaps structure, the previous bishop in particular, has lacked managerial competency and this led to frustration and a lack of will to participate. Often an on-going lack of “communication” was voiced as a leading indicator of mismanagement.

Distance: A near universal sense of distance, disconnection, or abandonment came from rural congregations. What, if anything, the Diocese could do or mean to many of these congregations was an earnest question when there seemed little effort to bridge that physical distance.

Standouts and Shout-outs: The accessibility of Kristy Estey. Congregational grants that have been received. The College of Congregational Development. Bishop Singh was personable when he visited. Bishop Singh was authentic and inspirational. The sense that the Diocese and The Episcopal Church are open and inclusive. Bishop Lane’s presence and leadership in this time. The Standing Committee coming to us and asking us about our experience.

What we learned: Navigating the Pandemic

Navigating the pandemic was an energetic discussion in each group. The conversations flowed from the memory of sorrows and frustrations to excited discoveries that had changed or emboldened the congregations -- including a sense of pride about it all. In short, there was both grief and expectancy shared about the shut-down and the trajectory of congregational activities and efforts since.

Grief: Members died, became absent, never returned. Once vital programs had to end, and some have not yet returned. Masking and social distancing caused conflict, and there remains awkwardness and confusion around the common cup and hygiene protocols. Some congregational budgets were hit hard and there remains a sense of doom about ongoing diminishment of ASA.

Strength: We made it! Many congregations -- including several of the smaller, rural ones -- came through the shut-down and pandemic with few or no scars and having learned some new skills and abilities. For these congregations, there were few members lost and most have now returned. Zoom was a hit and proved very useful at continuing some programs and a sense of community. Creativity reigned as vestries devised methods of routine phone contact with members, especially those shut-in, and ways to continue food or clothing ministries at arm’s length. More than a few members of congregations voiced the feeling that their sense of community and congregational vitality was actually stronger now as a result of what they had been through.

Technology -- The shut-down was a gift, in retrospect, for some congregations that learned to zoom, create hybrid worship, utilize Facebook, and YouTube, and reach people beyond their locality. It was sudden, frustrating, and difficult but then the opportunities and problem-solving with the technology provided, began to emerge. Even so, there were also mixed feelings about zoom, live-streaming, and the future. Some see it as a positive when it comes to diocesan meetings and convention, others long for in-person contact to return in spite of the distances.

Exhaustion: Many, from all sizes and localities of congregations, feel exhausted from the pandemic, and also the long and steady decline of church membership. Negativity about the former bishop (with some exceptions) and diocesan communications have added to this sense of being overwhelmed.

What we see: Healing and Moving Forward

Hopes and dreams for the diocese, the next bishop, and our congregations resound even in the aftermath of the pandemic and an episcopacy that left many discouraged. Collected anonymously on note cards and shared in summary from small groups, the hopes and dreams came easily and energetically.

Healing: active and retired clergy need to heal from conflicts with the former bishop, including those who didn't have any – they carry the grief and anger of their colleagues. Everyone needs to heal from the pandemic and how it changed our churches, which had already been changed by a steady decline. We sense that many still carry the physical memories of being alone in the shut-down because we witnessed what happened when people came together in these small group sessions: the bubbling up of healing from a sense of community. More than one group expressed the desire to come together just for fun and community, tasting what that was like from simply gathering for the Listening Sessions. We sense an opportunity for an intentional healing process as well as renewal through enhanced connectedness.

Congregation-centered: the discernment and calling of a new bishop is an opportunity to reshape the focus of our diocesan staff and resources so that they are measured by the outcomes in our congregations.

A Fresh Start: we heard hopes for the return of diaconal ministries, funding of seminarians to address our current clergy shortage, and a mentorship model to support new clergy. We heard persistent calls for stronger youth ministry from the diocese, as well as more than a few calls for conversation with CNY, thoughtful long-range planning, Gospel and Christ centered life together, and the urging of a name change to represent the diocese as a whole (the Diocese of the Fingers Lakes, was one example). Additionally, we heard a loud and clear call for increased transparency and enhanced communication. It is clear that people will be watching the transparency of the bishop search process for a sign of whether things are changing or not. Improved communications are a critical element in that sense of transparency.

What we take away: Elements of a pathway forward

- ❖ Address the clear charge to make the discernment, search, and decision process for a new bishop clear and transparent.
- ❖ Engage in an intentional healing process throughout the diocese, devising a process to engender trust while strengthening the relationship between congregations and the new bishop.
- ❖ A need to facilitate a broad effort to discern and embrace a collective mission and purpose as a diocese, including a response to the expressed desire for being more missional.
- ❖ Begin a change toward a more congregation-centered diocesan focus.
- ❖ Rebuild diocesan leadership with broad participation.
- ❖ Create fellowship and community-building efforts, not merely diocesan business meetings.

Thank you

The members of the Standing Committee are deeply grateful to the participants in the Listening Sessions. The hospitality we were shown, and the local leadership at the sites where we held our sessions, both facilitated and strengthened the overall experience. It was our privilege to ask the questions and listen while gathering what was shared. We are pleased now to share what you told us. Thank you.

The 2022-2023 Standing Committee

The Very Rev. Ken Pepin, President
The Very Rev. Ruth Ferguson, Secretary
Mr. Michael Davis
Mr. Floyd Bayley
The Rev. Nita Byrd
Sen. Jeremy Cooney
Mrs. Liz Salamone
The Rev. Cameron Miller

A special thank you to The Very Rev. Leslie Burkardt who, as a member of the 2021-2022 Standing Committee was instrumental in the planning and implementation of the Listening Sessions process.