

I want to begin with speaking about the mission of the Church, and in particular, the mission of our diocese. The mission of the Church is given to us by Jesus in the final chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, which we used for our celebration this morning. We are sent to go out into all nations to proclaim the good news of the Gospel, to baptize, and to make disciples of all people. This is the core purpose of churches: to proclaim the Gospel, to baptize, and to add people to the community of God's kingdom, and to disciple them so they can take their part in this mission.

This God-given mission should guide everything we do. Every decision, choice, and plan we make as a community, congregation, and diocese must be directed towards this mission. This work is not just for today but for future generations—our children, grandchildren, and beyond. The message that God has reconciled us through the death and resurrection of Jesus is life-changing and has been entrusted to us for all generations, including our own.

We often feel the pressure to save something, to save the Church or to save our country. But we don't need to save ourselves and especially we don't have to save the Church.

We have a Messiah, a Savior. Jesus is at work in our lives, transforming us and bringing us into God's kingdom. What we need to do is to live lives worthy of what has already happened to us. Remembering this can help alleviate the anxiety we feel about changes in church attendance, demographics, and societal shifts. We are not required to save the Episcopal Church or our parishes; we are required to serve them. Conversion is a sovereign act of God alone.

Real conversions, the ones that last, are the work of the Holy Spirit. These conversions can happen through complex plans or spontaneously—through a voice, music, a poem, or nature.

Last week, I attended the consecration of the 17th Bishop of Boston, Julia Whitworth, at Trinity Church in Copley Square. During the liturgy, amidst a crowd of 1200 people, I felt God's presence profoundly. A bishop next to me whispered, "Thank you God for doing this good thing," and I was convinced that God was truly there.

Looking out the window, I saw people going about their daily lives, unaware of the extraordinary event happening inside. This is often the case: the kingdom of God is in our midst, but many do not perceive it. Churches, soup kitchens, family tables—these are outposts of the kingdom, like yeast in bread, making everything rise. As we participate in Jesus' mission, we live into our kingdom duty.

Churches are tools, structures, or technologies if you will, for proclaiming the Gospel. Our diverse communities across the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island share the good news in various ways. We have congregations filled with young people and others that are primarily elderly, there are small and large gatherings, congregations that use traditional and contemporary music and worship — and all of them are connecting with people differently. God uses these diverse methods to reach people.

Ultimately though, we proclaim the kingdom of God most effectively, by living recognizably Christian lives. In the early church, this was enough to change everything. The patient ferment of the early church, Christians living Christian lives in a non-Christian society, led to many conversions and eventually transformed the Roman Empire.

While mega churches impress with their large congregations and grand services, their worship style often feels shallow. True success lies in living a recognizably Christian life, not in the size of the congregation or the grandeur of the services.

*Our* way is to live a life that is recognizably Christian in small communities. Like yeast in bread, we change the community rather than just attracting it. This, I believe, is what God has asked us to do. As we grow as the Episcopal Church, our communities enlarge, and people come into a new relationship with God. They are transformed. This transformation happens in other traditions as well, but I have seen it particularly in the Episcopal Church in Rhode Island over the past few years. More and more people are being confirmed, including adults, and there are increasing numbers of teenagers and adults being baptized—something I hadn't seen before. This change is not just transforming us as individuals but also the entire community around us.

So, what do I want us to be as Episcopalians in the coming year as part of our work to transform the world? Above all, I ask us to be kind. Please, be kind to each other. If you can't love one another, at least be civil. I want us to be known as a community characterized by kindness because this will be our most effective evangelism tool. If our mission is to proclaim the Gospel, the best way to do that is by living a recognizably Christian life, which means being kind and loving to one another. This is obvious but also very hard. Sometimes it feels like there is something working against us, trying to keep us from being kind and loving.

If we can be kind and loving to one another, word of mouth about our community will surpass any TV ad or newspaper coverage. People will notice something different about our community. They will come into our buildings and experience something otherworldly, just as I did last week at Trinity Church in Copley Square. This is how we live into our mission and become the people of God. If you're worried about our country, state, or community, the best thing to do is to be Christian to one another and let that love spread.

A few words about where we are as a body as 2024 draws to a close:

The state of our diocese is strong and healthy. Yes, there are areas for improvement and places where we wish we had more resources, but compared to other dioceses and denominations, we are doing well. This is due to the hard work, generosity, and focus of so many of you. Ironically, these will be the “good old days” for future generations. I want to thank everyone who has served at the statewide level to achieve what we have as a diocese.

I also want to thank the folks at ECC, our principal camp and conference center. It’s astounding that our camp sessions sell out within an hour of opening registration. Other places may have only seven or ten campers per session, but we don’t have enough space for everyone who wants to come. Sixty percent of the campers are not Episcopalians and may not have any church structure. ECC is our best evangelism tool, not because we teach the creed or require memorization, but because we teach people to have right relationships with one another. We don’t have horses, archery ranges, or big programs. What we have, according to Sarah, the camp director, is relationships. That’s what people want, and that’s why ECC is packed. This is worth paying attention to.

I want to thank everyone who has worked so hard on getting our buildings to where they are today. Sure, there are still problems, but in the 12 years I have served, and now starting my 13th year, I have seen such focused work on repairing buildings and preparing them for the next century. We are truly equipped to take our ministry into the next hundred years. It hasn’t been easy or cheap, and yes, there’s still more to do, but let’s celebrate how far we’ve come.

I want to thank the clergy for their incredible work. We’ve been through a pandemic, political turmoil, and racial strife—challenges we weren’t necessarily trained for in seminary. Yet, we’ve managed to hold our communities together, often at significant personal cost. I recognize and appreciate what it has cost you, and I am grateful for your dedication.

I also want to thank those who have been generous to Episcopal Charities. Your support, especially for small feeding ministries that wouldn’t otherwise receive it, has been invaluable. When we talk to young people around the state about what we’re doing with Episcopal Charities, their eyes light up. This is the kind of church they want to be part of.

Thank you to everyone working on the Cathedral Block project. We’re figuring out how to use this incredible resource in downtown Providence for future missions. Thanks to the Diocesan Block Working Group, the Program Work Group, and others looking at our resources to determine what comes next. It’s an incredible time to be involved in this work. We’ve started and failed, started and failed again, but we haven’t given up.

Years ago, I called on us to fail—fail early, fail often, and fail cheaply. We’ve done this, and I’m proud of our failures because they mean we’ve tried to do things. Trying and not succeeding means we learn what doesn’t work, bringing us closer to what does. Sometimes, we don’t even recognize when failures lead to profound successes. I asked you to celebrate failures, and I think we need to formalize this celebration.

People today worry about money and attendance, but I’ve read the minutes of past Diocesan Conventions and memoirs of previous bishops. They worried about the same things in the 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s. It seems to be the natural state of the church to worry about such things. If you enjoy worrying, go ahead, but don’t let it distract you from recognizing and celebrating what’s going right.

Each week, new people are finding us. Yes, we are losing beloved long-time members, but new people are coming through our doors. They find something they’ve been looking for and are

grateful to have found a welcoming church like ours. We need to keep doing this work. It is our mission imperative from the Gospel to share the good news, love one another, love our neighbors, feed the hungry, stay calm, and recognize that God is in our midst. Sometimes we see it, sometimes we don't, but we must have faith and trust that it is true. If something is lacking, I believe God will supply it. So don't lose heart. What we need, we will have.