

September 16, 11 am

Changing Context and Biblical Perspectives: What is the New invitation?

(This and each learning/work session will include a sharing of contextual realities in various dioceses and how Scripture informs our understanding of God's mission in each changing contexts.)

- **Emergent Church -What is God up to? To which the Church needs to be responding?**

God is up to creating a new thing. We are 50+ congregations spread across 8 counties in Western NY. Our vision is to practice generous hospitality, engage our spirituality passionately, and dare to be creative in mission. Let me articulate a few forms of the new invitation in our changing contexts in the diocese of Rochester.

First, I invite you to consider Leadership as empowerment instead of as facilitation/management when it comes to ministry and mission

Jesus gives us (all the Church) the Great Commission: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 28: 16-20

As leaders who have been endowed with this authority. We are to empower those in our care. We are to lead by making disciples, not just baptizing those who are giving birth to disciples. This means we cannot be bystanders who just welcome those who come to us. We are to lead by running out to those who are seeking to be embraced, especially the forgotten, the invisible, ALL our neighbors.

In our context in Rochester, NY, I have observed a propensity in our system to be bystanders often observing what's happening in our midst with some intellectual curiosity, but little else. Being bystanders often leads us to play that interesting "blame the diocese" or "blame the culture" game and sometimes even causes us to indulge in some academic paralysis by analysis. I believe we need to

wean away from this culture of being passive bystanders. We need to say ENOUGH to our declining membership; the 26% decline in our average Sunday attendance over the past decade has to stop. We need to say ENOUGH to equating our membership decline to the economic decline of our communities; we are not Kodak, we are not selling film or even digital imaging! We are about reclaiming the lost image of God within each of us! For us to truly lead in making disciples we would need to say ENOUGH to watching congregations hemorrhage and slowly trickle out their life; either because they rely too heavily on their endowments to buy them some "hospice time" or because they were too tired or too Episcopalian to re-tool and re-vision into the future.

Further, for us to truly lead by making disciples for Christ we would want to say ENOUGH to watching our inner city schools fail our young people who drop out of high school at a 50% rate and contribute to 70% of the crimes in our beloved city. For us to truly be leaders who make disciples for Christ, we would want to say ENOUGH to the fatalistic resignation that our rural mission fields are barren and hence only deserve a handout approach to maintain an Episcopal presence. For us to truly lead by making disciples for Christ we would want to say ENOUGH to anxiety and embody our identity as Easter people. John tells us in his Gospel narrative that Andrew brought Peter to see Jesus. Our new invitation is to consider leading people who don't yet know they are Episcopalians to the Christ we adore.

Second, I invite you to consider focusing on discipleship that builds a community of companions within the diocese

In Acts chapter 11, Luke tells us about a severe famine that affected Jerusalem significantly. The disciples in Antioch determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; ³⁰this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

We must consider Companionship whether within the diocese or across the Anglican Communion as a new way to build our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ. The root word for companionship is *panis*, which means bread. We are bread-fellows breaking one-bread and can make our sharing more organic, more relational, more synergistic, and more like the triune God we adore.

Allegany County Episcopal Ministries in New York is probably the oldest cluster in the Episcopal Church. Formed in 1927, it has survived to stay afloat all these years going through several iterations of cluster formations. After a year and a half of discernment as to what God was calling them to be, they (lay leaders with the support of the locally ordained clergy) invited the vestries and rector of their neighboring cluster to a dialogue. They have decided that they would bring both clusters together as an experimental conglomerate for a year. Because of the pooling of resources they have now been able to call a fulltime associate to enable them to have a shot at new life and some new possibilities. For the moment, this looks promising.

A little congregation averaging 40 people on a Sunday in Avon, NY recently converted their rectory into a shelter for Veteran women who are homeless. In collaboration with the American Legion, and several other stake holders they have found and brought mission to their own backyard. Zion House is an excellent model of what we already are, and intentionally strive to be as church: agents of healing and transformation.

So, the new invitation is to consider building companionships within the diocese and across the diversity within; everyone wins and God is glorified.

Third, I invite you to consider appropriating the fruits of resurrection (especially JOY) instead of cultural malaise

In his letter to the Philippians, (Chapter 4:4) the writer encourages them to rejoice in the Lord always! We have to reclaim our first love for God, in whatever form of passion or meaningful engagement we cherish! We are an inclusive community. The news in general is full of things that often paralyze our psyche and our spirit. While we need to engage these issues in meaningful ways we do not want to be consumed by them because the resurrection of Christ gives us the necessary reason to disallow the powers of death to have the last say. Let us consider making JOY the singular experiential reality of our worship, mission and ministry. This is the third new invitation! Rejoice!