



Dear friends, I am absolutely delighted to address you at this, my second Diocesan Convention as your bishop. This past year has been a year of being Drenched in the Spirit, and now we are Dancing on the Water.

A year ago I introduced three priorities for our work together as a diocese: Strengthening Congregations, Supporting Clergy and Lay Leadership, and Deepening our Connection to God. We have spent the last year focused on these priorities, and, as a diocese, we are stronger because of it. Collectively, we have been learning some new habits and taking some risks, trying some new things and learning from experiments.

Within the priority of Strengthening Congregations, some of our congregations have been working with the churchwide opportunity Genesis II, learning new habits and ways they might move outside the walls of their buildings and learn more about what God is already up to in their neighborhoods.

Also, at almost every visitation I make, I present a workshop from the College for Congregational Development called "The Purpose and Work of Any Congregation." Each time, we have the opportunity to look at the congregation through a new lens, and consider how they are going about the essential work of Gathering the people who God is calling to join them, offering opportunities for the Holy Spirit to Transform the lives of those who gather, and prepare them to be Sent out to be Christ's body in the world. Those are the three movements: Gather-Transform-Send.

The College for Congregational Development and its work was also the focus of our 2023 Clergy Conference. Together, the clergy learned, and thought about how to apply their learning to their own congregational contexts. I want to take this opportunity to tell you that the clergy of this diocese are an absolutely remarkable group of people, and it is a joy and a privilege for me to work with them. Please join me in showing your appreciation for the amazing clergy of the Diocese of Iowa.

Within the priority of Supporting Clergy and Lay leadership, we began this year with an opportunity for many clergy to be trained as coaches. Some of those who attended have been continuing the coaching relationships they developed at that time, and it is my hope to offer more training in the year to come.

Some of the best support for leaders comes when they gather together and share their experiences. I know that there are many groups in this diocese that gather regularly to share support, including the Small Church zoom call on Monday mornings, the clergy Text Study zoom call on Thursdays, and the Companions in Ministry group for clergy who are newly ordained or new to their positions. If you don't have a group of leader colleagues to gather with, please create one—you will find that it enriches your ministry and expands your capacity to do the work that God is calling you to do. If you need the support of the diocesan office in creating your group, please reach out.

A year ago I created the positions of Canon to the Ordinary and Archdeacon, and Canon Meg Wagner and the Venerable Judith Crossett have been continuing their work supporting clergy and lay leadership throughout the diocese in many ways. Please join me in thanking them for their hard work and support throughout the year.

Within the priority of Deepening our Connection to God, we have had the wonderful opportunity this past year to work closely with Br. James Dowd, prior of Incarnation Monastery and The Benedictine Way in Omaha. You may remember Br. James from last year's convention, when he gave the keynote address. In the past year, Br. James has offered four contemplative prayer workshops throughout the diocese, and just last month he led our 2023 Clergy Retreat. I look forward to continuing to work with Br. James in the future as we continue with this priority of Deepening our Connection to God.

Of course, at its best, *everything* that we do as congregations and as a diocese has some role in deepening our connection to God. That is, after all, what church is all about. So it is appropriate to remember that *everything* we do as a diocese takes place set within the cycle of the liturgical year, as we move from Advent's preparation to the celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany, through the penitential and reflective season of Lent to the great celebration of Easter and its fifty days, with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and then the long green season leading back to Advent. Worshiping together, moving through these seasons and celebrations as a community, helps all of us deepen our connection to God.

In addition to work on our priorities, there are a few more things from this past year that I want to mention. As we have moved through the liturgical seasons and celebrations, I have continued on my first round of formal visitations. As of today, the Episcopal Diocese of Iowa has 54 active congregations. I have been physically present with all but six, whether for a visitation or for some other occasion. Of those last six, I will visit three still in this calendar year, and the remaining three soon in the new year. So if you haven't seen me at your church yet, you will soon!

One of the congregations that I visited in this past year was All Saints in Indianola, which later made the decision to close. I also had the opportunity to visit The Way Station, a Diocesan Ministry, in Spencer, which has also made the decision to close. Both All Saints and The Way Station had wonderful times of ministry and sharing the gospel, and each of their legacies will live on in the lives of the people they impacted. We are a resurrection people, and death, even death of a beloved church or ministry, never has the last word.

Speaking of words, there are a lot of words in the Iowa State Legislature, and I spent some time this year adding to them. I joined other Episcopalians on several occasions at the Capitol to lobby legislators on proposed legislation that impacted some of our deepest held beliefs as Christians. Jesus calls us to love God and to love our neighbor, and in our baptismal covenant we promise to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. Love of neighbor, justice, and the dignity of every human being were all at risk in the Iowa legislature this year, and I felt called as a Christian leader in Iowa to take my part in the legislative process. I personally spoke with legislators about proposed legislation affecting the LGBTQ+ community, reproductive healthcare, and the death penalty. You have heard from me already about some of these issues, and I expect this work will continue next year.

I also want to share with you some of the deep joys of the past summer. I spent almost twenty-four hours at EPIC camp, our diocesan summer camp. I also attended the Episcopal Youth Event in Maryland, along with our diocesan delegation. After EYE was the Episcopal Church revival, and to cap off my summer I joined the Companion Dioceses Young Adult Pilgrimage with young people from the dioceses of Eswatini, Brechin, and Iowa. I want to tell you very clearly: the Episcopal Church is very much alive, here in the Diocese of Iowa and in the broader national and international Episcopal Anglican community. The young people I was with this summer are today's church, and it was energizing and exhilarating to be with them.

Another joy of this past year is the work of the new Leadership Council and the group that we have been calling the Expanded Leadership Council. The Leadership Council consists of the Bishop, the Canon to the Ordinary, the President of the Standing Committee, and the Vice President of the Board of Directors: myself, Meg Wagner, Elizabeth Duff Popplewell, and Paula Sanchini. This group has been gathering on Zoom about once a month since the beginning of this year, considering questions of discernment, vision, and strategy for the diocese, and how we might design a process for the entire diocese to be involved in listening for God's call to us at this time.

The members of the Leadership Council decided to expand our circle. This group has been asking questions about who we are and where God is calling us as a

diocese, the purpose of church and the purpose of a diocese, and how we might open up these conversations further. Some of the work of the Expanded Leadership Council is reflected in the agenda of today's Convention, and I hope you will enjoy the opportunity to join these conversations. This work is ongoing, and you will hear more about it in the year to come.

Of course, everything that we do as Christians is grounded in the call to ministry that each one of us has as a baptized member of Christ's body. This call is rooted in our Baptismal Covenant—baptismal ministry is everything that you are called to do because you are a Christian, whether that is serving in your local congregation or on a diocesan body, or the way you do your work in the world, or your prayer life: all of it is your baptismal ministry. Part of the job of the church is to support each person in their baptismal ministry.

The joy of baptismal ministry, joy in following God's call, joy in living together as Christ's body, in God's love made manifest in the person of Jesus, that joy is part of this year's theme, *Dancing on the Water*. Throughout this year, we will be listening for Jesus' call to us to step out of the boat onto the water, trusting in him to keep us safe as we follow his call.

Now, stepping out of a perfectly good boat feels like a big risk. We have never walked on the water before, let alone danced on it. Why take this risk?

Well, it turns out that maybe the boat isn't quite as watertight as it used to be. Our world is changing rapidly. Five years ago, we could not have predicted what today's world looks like. We cannot predict the world five years from now: we only know that it will be different from today. The church needs to learn to be flexible and agile, to respond to the changes in our world as they come, to structure ourselves for the church that is emerging, not the church of the past. All of this will be part of the diocesan-wide discernment process as we look for God's vision for us and listen for God's call to us.

It also turns out that our existing structures are telling us that it is time for change. As you may have heard earlier this year if you have been part of the Joint Chapter Meetings, or if you attended one of the Pre-Convention Budget Hearings, the budget that will be presented to you today is unprecedented. It reflects where we find ourselves as a diocese, that is, in a time of transition and discernment. We are learning what it means to take the risk of stepping out of the boat to follow the call of Jesus. You will hear more about the budget later in this convention, and I urge you to vote to pass it when the time comes.

As we reflect on change and on the passage of time, it is natural to feel a sense of grief. We may grieve our own personal losses. We may grieve lost abilities as we age

and our bodies change with time. We may grieve for the state of the world and of all creation, as we seem to be moving farther and farther from God's vision.

We may grieve for the changes in our communities and churches, as our congregations shrink and our average age rises, as we remember fuller pews and more young people in church, and as we find ourselves needing to let go of some of the ministries that served our communities and God's people. As things change, grief is natural.

And so I invite you in a moment to turn to someone near you, maybe someone you haven't spent much time with yet today, and share some of your grief with that person. Part of what we do as Christians is to bear one another's burdens. Share the grief that is in your heart, whatever that is. Each person will have one and a half minutes to share, and we have a timer on the screens. Go ahead and share your grief.

*(the people spent time sharing)*

Thank you. As we share our grief, as we bear one another's burdens, our own burdens ease and we may feel lighter. In the middle of even the darkest grief, we may also find moments of joy. After all, we are resurrection people, and we know that resurrection always follows death.

Earlier in this address I shared some of my recent joys with you. It is a joy to work alongside of the remarkable clergy of this diocese. It was a joy this past summer to spend time with young people from this diocese, from across the Episcopal Church, and from our companion dioceses in the Anglican Communion. It is a joy to worship together with you in your own congregations, as I make my visitations throughout the diocese. I know that you hold many joys in your hearts, and as you have just shared grief with someone near you, I invite you to turn to that same person and share joy. Again, each person will have one and a half minutes to share.

*(the people spent time sharing)*

Thank you, and if you will indulge me just a little longer, I want to share one more joy with you. This is *your* diocesan staff, on Star Wars Day this year. It is an absolute joy for me to work with these outstanding human beings: Anne Wagner, Traci Ruhland Petty, Julianne Allaway, Tina Austin, Amy Mellies, Meg Wagner, John Doherty, and Elizabeth Adams. They are an incredible team, and they work very very hard on behalf of this diocese. Please join me in thanking them for all they do.

We are moving forward into the future with joy, dancing on the water, even as we acknowledge our grief and recognize the risks we are taking in stepping out of the boat to follow Jesus. The thing about the risk, though, is that the real risk is in

refusing to follow Jesus' call to step out of the boat. The real risk is in staying a boat that is not suited to the conditions that we are facing in this changing world. The boat we are in might be sinking slowly, but it is sinking, and even though it feels scary, stepping out of the boat and following Jesus' call to walk on the water is the safest thing we can do now.

In the coming year, we will continue with our three diocesan priorities, Strengthening Congregations, Supporting Clergy and Lay Leadership, and Deepening Our Connection to God. As we do, we will also be discerning, as a diocese, God's call to us. This discernment will lead to a renewed vision for the diocese, and will inform our future strategy and structure. Through all of this we will be developing new habits as a diocese, that will support us as we move into the future.

You see, the changes we are facing in the church are not the same as problems that can be solved so we can go back to the way we were before. The church is never going to return to some golden age, no matter what techniques or solutions we use. It's not like we broke our wrist and need a splint until the bone heals and we can get back to normal.

Instead, what the church is facing is a new chronic condition. As with a chronic health condition, the church's condition can be managed for the greatest health and vitality by learning new habits, new behaviors, and by adjusting our expectations. We will never return to the past, but our future can be bright and exciting.

In the future, we as a church will need the habit of prioritizing our spiritual life, our connection to God, both as individuals and as congregations. There is no reason for a church to exist if it is not rooted firmly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and in the praise and worship of the Trinity.

In the future, we as a church will need the habit of meeting our neighbors, so that we are more able to love them, as Jesus commanded us to do.

In the future, we as a church will need the habit of developing smaller new Christian communities, supported by clergy but led primarily by lay leaders. We will need many of these small—even tiny—communities, that may gather on days other than Sunday and in places other than churches, to worship together and to do the work that God calls them to do. We as a church will need the habit of supporting these new communities, and they in turn will need habits of their own in prioritizing their spiritual life, reaching out to their neighbors, and supporting other new Christian communities.

In the future, we as a church will need the habit of taking measured risks and doing experiments that might make us feel uncomfortable. We will need the habit of learning from those experiments and continuing to try new things as we reach for the Kingdom of God.

In the future, we as a church will need the habit of listening, deep, deep listening, to each other, to the community around us, and to God, as we continue to discern what God is calling us to do.

Finally, in the future, we as a church will need the habit of courage, courage to step out of the boat and into the future that God calls us to, confident that if Jesus is really calling, we can not only walk on the water but we can dance.

We are the Episcopal Diocese of Iowa: one church, one body, united in Christ's love, dancing on the water.

Please stand in body or in spirit and join me in prayer. Joining our voices together we pray:

Holy God of abundance and life, we thank you for the gift of the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Iowa in which we live out your call. Stretch our minds and the capacity of our hearts as we learn and grow into the community of disciples that you dream of. Send your Holy Spirit to guide us as we seek your plan for the future of this diocese. Enliven our faith as we learn to take risks in following Jesus.

Strengthen us as one church, one diocese, united in Christ's love, and bring us in joy to the day when we step out of the boat and dance on the water, in the name of Jesus who calls us. Amen.

Thank you.

The Rt. Rev. Betsey Monnot  
Bishop of The Episcopal Diocese of Iowa