

# **Re-Imagining the Church Task Force Report to Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri**

## **Introduction**

Any time a diocese calls a new bishop, they consider the nature of their call and vocation as a household of God. Little did we anticipate when we called Bishop Deon that we would soon find ourselves in an unprecedented time of COVID-19, economic downturn, and a renewed call for racial justice in our country. Words like “lockdown” and “quarantine” became part of our everyday vocabulary.

As our churches began to cancel in-person worship, we faced the reality of having to delay our new bishop’s consecration. Then we looked down the barrel of being on lockdown for Holy Week and Easter. As March and April wore away into May and June, we entered our “new normal” of Zoom meetings, e-learning, and essential workers braving risks while the rest of us scrounged for toilet paper.

In a remarkable display of resilience, the Church pivoted to online worship and distanced pastoral care with record speed. We asked ourselves what really mattered the most about church and found ways to make it happen. And as lay leaders and clergy found our way through these new ways of being church, it started to dawn on us that the old ways of church were gone forever. We will be blessed to return to some of our treasured traditions as time goes on, but every day we are building new ways of recognizing and celebrating Christ’s presence among us and in the world around us.

Even as we continue to navigate the everyday challenges of our new world, we realize that we are at a hinge point in history. How can we move from reacting to this disruption to responding to it? We as the church made ten years of technological progress in two months. How can we match that seismic shift with equally forward-thinking ministry and spiritual innovation?

Bishop Deon convened the Re-Imagining the Church Task Force to grapple with those questions.

## **Methodology**

Beginning in June, clergy and lay leaders of the Diocese began generating questions that were arising within them about the future of the Church. There were many resources available and conversations happening already about the nuts and bolts of church life in pandemic. What we lacked was the time and space to step back and really think about the big picture and the long term. How could we think bigger about God’s call to us? How could we truly innovate as Christian community in Eastern Missouri?

We intentionally confined our first meetings to generating questions. We knew the Holy Spirit works best when given room to move in an atmosphere of curiosity and inquiry rather than the pressure to find answers. We asked things like:

- How do we use this moment to evangelize?
- What does planting new communities look like in this era?
- What role will our buildings need to play?
- What are the things we can't live without in ministry?
- What characteristics do we need in leadership now?
- What structures of the church get in the way of our next normal?
- How do we bring together our traditions alongside our innovation?
- How do we lament our losses with our people while maintaining our presence in the world?
- How do we show and share that sacred space is not just in our worship spaces but in our homes and in our world?
- Do our previous dreams look different now that we know how we can be church outside of our buildings?
- Could this experience be an opportunity to really and truly make some changes? Could this be a time for rebirth? And how do we show pastoral sensitivity to those who aren't interested in that change and for whom the "normal" is really comforting?
- How do we prepare for the next normal when we don't know what that is? Can we instead focus on helping our people build skills for flexibility and adaptability?
- What are we learning about who Jesus is, with us, here and now?

## **Ideas Generated**

Our dwelling in prayer with these questions led us to start to gather ideas in a series of ministry areas: Evangelism & Justice, Worship & Formation, Pastoral Care & Stewardship, Communications, and Missional Values and Structure.

Here are just a few of the innovative ideas for ministry the Task Force brainstormed:

### **Evangelism & Justice**

- Found a new monastic community in a high poverty neighborhood
- Plant a congregation centered on immigrant communities.
- Plant 10 new congregations served by a clergy-lay team of Justice Missioners
- Incorporate faith based community organizing and church planting training into seminary training for priests & deacons
- Partner with gun violence prevention initiatives around the state
- Get into the "criminal justice" system to work with incarcerated image-bearers
- Host national conference on the intersection of Evangelism & Justice

- Better empower rural congregations to be beacons of welcome for LGBTQIA+ people in conservative areas of the state, and invite them to be leaders in those communities

### **Worship & Formation**

- Host Requiem for Covid victims
- Partner with a high-poverty school district to host a summer music/arts camp for children/youth
- Establish networks of “house churches” in every congregation
- Work toward one yearly major youth event in the diocese that youth really want to invest in and lead, rather than smaller, predominantly recreational activities, and include justice work as part of it
- Pulpit exchanges! Get clergy and lay preachers cross pollinating across the diocese instead of siloed, especially across the rural/urban divide
- Create centers for evangelism - not necessarily a church building - for small groups to gather
- Work toward non-English worship services being driven by local non-English speaking communities across the diocese, supported by the whole

### **Pastoral Care & Stewardship (Finances, building, clergy etc.)**

- Use larger church buildings as shared regional centers for various small congregations
- Fund and staff a diocesan wide recovery center to aid substance use and behavioral disorders. This would include a 24 call-in or chat feature manned by trained volunteers, both clergy and lay.
- Abandon albatross buildings that eat budgets and sell or repurpose and redevelop them to:
  - Plant Spanish-language ministries and worship services
  - Provide transitional places for the homeless.
  - Wellness/fitness centers
  - Affordable living spaces for low-income families
  - Training center for youth and young adults.
  - Community center for families and children.
  - Vacant lots: community gardens or neighborhood safe play areas
  - Peace and justice centers that are sanctuary and planning space for racial justice activists

### **Communication**

- Create a video podcast series where the bishop interviews local civic leaders for partnership in ministry
- Start a podcast with our companion dioceses
- Partner with community organizations making internet access available for children and families during Covid
- Diocesan prayer and communications app

### **Missional Values & Structure**

- Seed non-sacramental Christian communities that don't need a priest
- Start an Experimental Ministries Lab to collaborate on beginning missional communities (or transforming current communities to be missional)
- Ditch the way we measure church "success" -- average Sunday attendance, pledge dollars, number of members in good standing. Use a completely different set of metrics -- perhaps, the percentage of the congregation involved in missional work, the number of visitors (virtual or in-person).
- Invite other faith groups - outside our tradition - to share what has worked for them.
- More equitable distribution of wealth and sharing of common resources between all the churches in the diocese

### **Call to Strategic Planning**

Building on the work of the Re-Imagining the Church Task Force, Bishop Deon will be calling the Diocese to a process of Strategic Planning.

Respectfully submitted by  
The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice  
Canon for Evangelism & Discipleship Development