



THE RT. REV. DEON K. JOHNSON

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Thank you!

Thank you for being the beloved people of God in the eastern half of Missouri. Thank you for the many gifts you share and for embodying Christ in the diverse and vibrant communities that make up our Diocese. Thank you for answering God's call to serve with joy, compassion, mercy, and love. Thank you for showing forth the deep, abiding love of Jesus.

I continue to be profoundly grateful for each one of you and for the honor of serving Christ alongside you. You motivate and inspire me in countless ways — through the hope you embody, the joy you express, and the stories of God's presence you share. I am humbled by the many ways you show up and show forth the love of God with creativity, courage, and grace. I especially give thanks to the AMAZING staff for their compassion and commitment to ensuring that things continued to go smoothly during my time away. I have the absolute best staff!

As I reflect on this past year, I am especially grateful for the gift of sabbatical you granted me this summer. To be given the time for rest, renewal, and refreshment means more than words can express. Over the last five years, we have truly done all the things together — and I could not be more thankful. You have demonstrated a Spirit-filled creativity and a resilient faith for such a time as this. You continue to challenge me to bring my best self to the ministry of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus. You inspire me daily.

I love that we get to pray together and play together. I love that we can struggle honestly and bear one another's burdens in love. I love that we are showing this old Episcopal Church what new life looks like — what deep faith looks like — what unconditional love looks like.

At this moment in our common life, we are showing the world once again what it means to be woven together. We are threads of God's love, intertwined in a tapestry of mercy, hope, and justice.

We are showing up with our siblings in Christ who find themselves in detention centers. We are strengthening our food banks and food programs to feed those who have lost access to daily bread. We are showing up with our young people, reminding them that they are deeply and unconditionally loved. We are showing up — again and again — as a people woven together in God’s dream for the world.

This Church — our Church — is woven together across our diversity of contexts, cultures, and communities, bound by our baptismal promise “to seek and serve Christ in all persons.” The world needs the witness of such a Church now more than ever, when so much feels fragile and uncertain.

We are called to demonstrate to a weary and wounded world that, in God’s dream, we can be one. In God’s dream, we can “walk in love as Christ loved us.” In God’s dream we can dream, dare, and do big things with grace and small things with courage. In God’s dream, we can be a glimpse of the prophetic vision foretold by the Prophet Micah — a world where justice rolls down, kindness abounds, and we walk humbly with our God.

As we continue to be woven together, we discover the beauty of cooperation, companionship, and shared mission. Together, we are living more deeply into God’s dream — a tapestry of beloved community where every thread matters and every person has a place.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus reminds us that when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and visit those in prison, we are ministering to him. Across this Diocese, we are doing just that — feeding, clothing, visiting, and welcoming Christ in all the ways we serve our communities.

This past year, I have witnessed a deepening of cooperation, a strengthening of companionship, and a renewal of community — not only among our Episcopal siblings, but also through partnerships across denominations, faith traditions, and community organizations. Together, we are seeking the common good and the common flourishing of all God’s people.

I have been a witness to the transformative power of deepening relationships with each other as cohorts have come together as part of the Requiem or Renaissance. We are grateful for all the congregations who took part in one of the three cohorts of Requiem or Renaissance, as well as the Shepherds who supported them. So many lay leaders and clergy across the diocese were willing to take a risk to explore what God is up to in the midst of the life, death, and resurrection of our church in this time and place. Although Requiem or Renaissance is going on sabbatical for a season, we will

carry forward the lessons learned as we give thanks for the new life God has awakened in our parishes and the communities outside their doors through this common work.

We are living more deeply into the dream of One Church in many locations, loving and serving together!

In May, as the devastating tornado touched down in St. Louis, we saw St. Peter's, Ladue, St. Timothy, Creve Coeur, Trinity, Central West End, Emmanuel Webster Groves, and the Cathedral step up to offer the people of the Church of St. Michael and St. George pastoral care and places to worship. We even hosted confirmation CSMSG's confirmation at St. Peter's. And we did not stop there. We responded with compassion and generosity to the many neighbors who were devastated by the deadly tornado. Through financial contributions, food donations, offering a kind word, and even rolling up sleeves with a chainsaw, we have demonstrated that the love of Jesus is real, especially when things fall apart.

And we continue to build on that deep connectedness. Through caring for our neighbors, and saving countless lives by providing free Narcan in over 17 congregations; through shared music and worship at the Cathedral, where choirs from across the Diocese lift their voices as one; through a shared youth group and joint pilgrimages in the Washington Convocation.

We are centering the gifts of children in places like Trinity, Kirksville, and St. Francis, Eureka, as we build This Young Church. We are engaging in our past and seeking to better understand our Spiritual DNA in Pike County, with St. John's, Eolia and Calvary, Louisiana. We care for the good earth and lay the foundations for future generations in the tiny forest at All Saints', Farmington, supported by many hands.

Jesus often ate his way across the Holy Land and so are we! We are feeding people — nourishing bodies, minds, and spirits. In every corner of this Diocese, we are rediscovering the holy practice of hospitality, responding to the needs of our siblings beyond our doors who hunger and thirst for community and belonging. We have seen an increase in our neighbors showing up, longing to be fed, longing for community, longing for belonging.

This past year, we have also seen young people — many who have been hurt by the Church or who have never known a faith community — discover their place in the household of Christ. At Happening STL, young adults are finding creative space for faith through music, art, spoken word, dance, and fellowship. We are strengthening our outreach to international students during a challenging time in our nation,

renewing our commitment to campus ministry. The Light to the Nations Ministry continues to grow at St. Louis University, serving Indian and African diaspora students with joy and hospitality. We are weaving hope and justice with our young people at the University of Missouri (Mizzou) in partnership with the ELCA campus ministry. I had the honor of baptizing a young lady at Calvary, Columbia earlier this year, who discovered and discerned a call to follow Jesus after finding community as part of the joint Episcopal Lutheran Campus Ministry.

Last year I challenged us a church to live more fully into being a church that is lay led and clergy supported. We continue to make strides towards the realization of the vision. We have continued to deepen the bonds of affection between the clergy by leaning into continued formation, community building, and shared vision and values. Our clergy gather twice a year, in the Spring and in the Fall, for intentional times of rest and retreat. We gather bi-monthly for opportunities to grow and learn with the continuation of Clergy Chats. We gather as convocation clergy for everything from bible study and conversation to lunch and exploration of the Botanical gardens. Clergy are moving away from competition and increasingly into cooperation.

This year we gave thanks for ministries of the Rev. Erin Pickersgill, the Rev. Aaron Rogers, and Canon Sue Rehkopf, who ended their time on Diocesan staff. As we pivot towards the future, we will continue to realign the staff to better serve the needs of the diocese and the vision for our future.

We continue to welcome new clergy into the Diocese who bring new experiences, different perspectives, and fresh expressions that broaden our horizons and widen our vision. Just this week we announced the call of a new rector at Holy Communion, University City. For those new to the Diocese and in new calls, they build relationships in Cultivate, a program of forming, learning, and strengthening for those new to their call.

This year we saw the training of our first cohort of Lay Associate Ministers. Our LAM's are drawn from those in the ordination process, assigned to serve congregations in the Diocese while they are being formed for ordained ministry. This new model of placing postulants into ministry settings, with the support and guidance of seasoned clergy, allows them to have the experience of a curacy they otherwise would not have.

The stories of how we are building God's dream one person at a time, one story at a time, one community at a time is awe inspiring. We are walking the walk and talking the talk of being followers of Jesus!

As a diocese, we continue to meet the many challenges before us by forging and finding new, creative ways to serve Christ — especially among those most affected by the loss of federal funding and the reduction of essential programs. Yet we do not face these hardships alone. We engage these demanding times with deep hope and Spirit-led faithfulness, trusting that “we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.”

That does not mean we are without challenges, or that we do not feel the weight of grief and loss. We continue to struggle with the financial challenges in the aftermath of the pandemic. Several of our communities of faith have begun a process of discerning if God is calling them to a holy ending in this season of their lives. They remind us that holy endings are not failures but faithful. As the Book of Common Prayer reminds us, “to your faithful people O God, life is changed not ended.” Even in the difficulty of discerning holy endings and faithful transitions there is deep love and longing, knowing that with God what we declare as ending, God is able to call forth a new beginning. We know change can be difficult, but we do not face it with fear or resistance. Instead, we face these new realities together — as a community woven through with faith, love, and resilience.

My grandmother often said, “I may not know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future.” That wisdom still rings true. As a diocese, we are learning more and more that Christ holds our future — and that our future is woven together: a tapestry of grace and courage, made beautiful by our diversity, strengthened by our shared faith, and centered always in the love of Christ.

As we look at the future, as we build on the foundation of those who have gone before, as we take our turn to tend the seeds and the sprouts and the saplings that have been planted over the years, I invite us as a household of God to embrace three things as we continue to be woven more and more into the image of Jesus.

As we continue to be built together into a unified household of hope across this Diocese, we must look to the future, building on the foundation of the saints who have gone before us. As I look out across this church, I am convinced that we are showing not just the Episcopal Church, but the whole Church, what it means to be people of faith for this time.

We have learned what it means to be woven together — to live as one body in many places, bound by the threads of Christ’s love. Now we are called to move beyond our walls, beyond our familiar patches of paradise, and to invest in a changing world with a changing Church. The fabric of our common life must be flexible enough to stretch,

strong enough to hold, and open enough to welcome what God is doing next among us.

I invite you to join me over the next five years as we live into three vision areas flowing from our diocesan strategic plan:

- Deepening the formation of the laity
- Planting new missional communities
- Engaging with dismantling injustice and responding to Christian nationalism

## DEEPENING THE FORMATION OF THE LAITY

As we deepen the formation of the laity, I am delighted to announce that in 2026 we will pilot a new lay program of study designed to form faithful disciples and strengthen lay leadership across the Diocese. The Bishop's Certificate in Discipleship will launch by Fall 2026, alongside expanded opportunities for intentional Licensed Lay Ministries.

This initiative will help us grow into the vision of a lay-led, clergy-supported Church — a Church where every baptized person is equipped and empowered to proclaim the gospel in daily life. Formation is not only about learning; it is about becoming — being woven ever more deeply into the life of Christ for the sake of the world.

## PLANTING NEW MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES

We will also rekindle the missionary spirit of Bishop Jackson Kemper, our first Missionary Bishop, who saw possibility where others saw wilderness. By 2030, we will plant ten new missional communities across the Diocese.

This work has already begun with the seeding of St. Monica's Missional Community at Trinity, St. Charles. Future communities will emerge through prayerful discernment with each Convocation and in partnership with the wider Episcopal Church. These new communities will not simply replicate existing models of parish life — they will reflect the diverse contexts, languages, and needs of the people among whom we serve.

Missional communities are where we experiment with the Spirit, listen to the cries of our neighborhoods, and reimagine what it means to be Church in this moment.

## ENGAGING WITH DISMANTLING INJUSTICE AND RESPONDING TO CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Finally, we are called to engage courageously in dismantling injustice and to respond faithfully to the rise of Christian nationalism — a distortion of faith that seeks to merge political power with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christian nationalism is not the way of Jesus. It replaces the self-giving love of Christ with the idolatry of domination. It confuses the cross with the flag and mistakes coercion for conversion. As followers of Jesus, we must offer a different vision — one rooted not in fear or control, but in beloved community, justice, and the reconciling power of God's love.

Our call is to proclaim a faith that liberates, not subjugates; a faith that unites rather than divides; a faith that serves rather than seeks to rule. In this, we join the long Christian witness that has always resisted the misuse of religion for political gain — standing instead with those on the margins, as Jesus did.

We will equip congregations to have courageous conversations about faith, justice, and democracy. We will provide resources for civic engagement grounded in prayer and respect for human dignity. And we will work in partnership with other denominations, faith traditions, and community organizations to witness together to the gospel truth that every person is created in the image of God.

We forget sometimes that Jesus did not inhabit the center of power, but its margins. His ministry was not performed from a throne, but from a basin and towel. He washed the feet of his friends — and even of his betrayer. The Church is at its best when we, too, are kneeling in service, when we are washing our neighbors' feet, when we are choosing love over fear and humility over control.

This is the kind of Church we are becoming: woven together in love, stretched by the Spirit, and sent out in hope to be God's living presence in the world.

Friends in Christ, we are indeed woven together — by grace, by love, and by the Holy Spirit who makes all things new. Each strand of our common life strengthens the whole. Each act of kindness, each prayer, each song, each moment of courage adds to the beauty of this sacred tapestry God is weaving through us.

Thank you for being part of this holy work. Thank you for the love you embody, the faith you share, and the hope you carry into the world. I am honored and blessed to walk this road with you.

May we live and pray as one, woven together in love and grace. May our hearts be joined, our hands entwined, and our lives shine with the light of Christ.

May our prayer ever be;

*Bind us together, Lord*  
*Bind us together*  
*With cords that cannot be broken*  
*Bind us together, Lord*  
*Bind us together*  
*Bind us together in Love<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Gillman, Bob. *Bind Us Together*. © 1977 Thankyou Music (PRS). CCLI No. 1228.