

# THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN MAINE

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Address by the Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane, Ninth Bishop of Maine

*God is here. Right here. Right now.*

“You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us than when we became believers: the night is far gone, the day is near.”

Repeat after me: God is here, right here, right now. God is here, right here, right now.

I think as I grow older, my faith becomes simpler. Or perhaps, it is more accurate to say that with the passage of time, the essence of faith has become clearer to me. As we in the diocese have worked over these past few years at discovering God in our neighborhoods, it has become self-evident that God is always with us, right here, and right now. And that finding God is not so much a matter of searching as it is opening ourselves to God’s presence. For God is always with us.

And for God, the time is always now. Right now. Now is the moment that God is with us. Now is the time when we are invited to join God in the neighborhood. Now is the time for salvation, for transformation, for renewal. For God, the time is eternally now.

I first really learned this when I was in the discernment process for the election of the ninth Bishop of Maine. My spiritual struggle was to stay open to the Spirit, to fight the temptation to shut down and turn off; to fight the urge to say that I didn’t need the struggle, didn’t need the headaches of remaining open to the presence of God’s Spirit. Why would I want to go to Maine? I already had enough years of service to retire. By God’s grace, I didn’t shut down, and God met me here.

I suspect that the spiritual struggle to turn toward God, to keep one’s face and one’s faith open to the presence of God, is a fundamental struggle for all of us. Because joining God means to share in God’s work of transformation and renewal: to face the pain of the world, the losses and the deaths, and to seek resurrection and new life. So

much easier to withdraw into the comfort and security of all we know and love, and let God - and someone else - take care of the rest.

I think that's part of what we're learning in *Living Local: Joining God*. To remain open to God, right here and right now, requires all the support we can give one another. And it requires a willingness to hear and to learn and to set aside doing until we're doing with others. It requires what the Buddhists' call, a beginner's mind and what Jesus called "being like little children": letting go of our assurance that we already know what God is up to and, instead, asking to find out.

It seems that we're now in a time of disasters, perhaps we're entering an age of disasters. Climate change has produced the most fearsome season of hurricanes in recorded history, five striking the North American continent, one striking Europe. In addition, this is the costliest fire season on record in the western US. 8,000 buildings destroyed in just two counties. Oh, and then there's Las Vegas... More than we can process, almost more than we can comprehend. And how do we respond? And yet God is in the midst, right there, right here, right now, inviting us to join in. The need for compassion, the cries for justice, have seldom been clearer than they are right now, and we're being asked to show up, offering our prayers, making donations, preparing to volunteer, engaging in public discourse.

We're about to finish our first year of *Living Local: Joining God*, and we'll soon be entering our second. We have eight parish teams working at discerning God's presence in their communities, thinking about new ways to connect with God. The point people and coaches are working steadily with Canons Michael Ambler and Jane Hartwell to keep the teams on task and to keep their spirits up.

A clergy team is working together on learnings from their local teams. And a diocesan team is gleaning learnings from both. Immediately after this Convention, Michael and I will go to Richmond, Virginia, to share with four other dioceses what we're learning here.

It's too early to draw strong conclusions - adaptive challenges emerge slowly - but it's already clear that we will need to develop a more clearly relational, more lay-centric model of church life, if we are to be effective in reaching our communities. And we will need to do more work with the formation of adult Christians, particularly work on plumbing the depths of scripture, *Dwelling in the Word*, and connecting our stories with the witness of the Bible.

I'm excited about what we're learning and look forward to what will happen in the coming year. I think it holds great promise for the future of the diocese.

The recent meeting of the Transition Ministry Conference demonstrated that we are now in a time in The Episcopal Church when clergy retirements are outnumbering ordinations at the rate of about two to one. We are expecting a number of retirements of long standing priests and deacons of this diocese in the New Year. At the same time, many of our congregations have shrunk in size and income and are less able to attract and compensate clergy. Our expectation is that these new realities will create both a crisis of priestly leadership and an opportunity for new patterns of parish leadership. We will not have great numbers of candidates to choose from in our searches for parish priests, and, in some cases, we may not find any priests in the old way. We will have to discover new ways of connecting priests to congregations and new ways for lay people to offer leadership in congregations.

This new reality is both scary and exciting. We will have to break out of our habit of going it alone in our congregations, and will need to seek support from one another. In this regard I want to commend the work of St. Peter's, Rockland, which is actively seeking community partners to become a "church-in-relationship" with its community. Their work involves new ideas for describing the ministry of the church, partnerships with schools and other agencies, and new thoughts about funding the church. A brave, bold venture without a guaranteed outcome... but the kind of work we all need to be doing.

Another place where we are beginning to break new ground is in the ministry to children and youth in many of our congregations. Most of our Sunday schools are dealing with low numbers of kids and new attendance patterns, in which attending every-other-week is the new normal. Christian formation leaders, clergy and teachers are networking with one another to share experiments and find new ways of passing on our faith. Our diocesan youth ministry serves as a resource for middle and high schoolers, and has been affected by both the reduced number of young people in our churches and the cultural changes in teen life, which now involves schedules packed with sports and school activities. Just like our churches, our diocesan youth ministries are trying to find new ways and new occasions to minister with young people, both at the diocesan and parish level, and we will be running experiments to see what is most helpful for the youth.

A hint about what might work for us is found in the great success of Summer Finale Camp at Bishopswood this past August. A planning team working with Camp Director Mike Douglass put together a flexible and varied program for people of all ages. We had families, older adults, teens and children. I had hoped that we might get 50 for the week. We actually had 50 for the first half of the week and nearly 80 for the second half. And we learned a lot: about how to be together, how to accommodate our differences, how to provide programming that meets the very different needs of different age groups. Did you know that folks in their later years are often up early? By the second half of the week there was coffee and conversation on the porch at 6 a.m.

A further hint about a way forward is the success of our voluntary networks, networks drawn from people who are invested in the work of the network. In particular, I think of the energy and good work done by the Maine Episcopal Network for Justice, which has become a model for the whole church, and the previously mentioned Christian formation network. I have every hope that the creativity released by these networks and in the planning of Summer Finale Camp will energize our planning for mission and ministry as we go forward.

Another place we will be opening ourselves to the Spirit of God is in the Episcopal Transition process that officially begins with this Convention. As you know, I have called for the election of a bishop diocesan to be the Tenth Bishop of Maine. (I was elected as a bishop co-adjutor. A bishop diocesan is one who becomes THE Bishop upon consecration.) The Presiding Bishop has set June 22, 2019, as the date for the consecration for the Tenth Bishop, and I will retire on that date. (I submit my letter of resignation to the House of Bishops and will not do so until early 2019.)

Current plans call for the election to be held in February of 2019, and for a short period of overlap beginning in late April or early May. I'm confident that that will be sufficient time to provide the bishop-elect with the basic information and experience needed to begin an episcopate.

Much has changed since my election, and the transition process has changed a good bit. We're a smaller diocese now, with fewer parishes and fewer full time clergy. So our capacity to address an election has changed. At the same time, according to the best practices laid out by the Presiding Bishop's Office of Pastoral Development, the expected Discernment and Transition Committees are smaller now, with an emphasis on efficiency and cost effectiveness. Gone are the days of flying large groups of people around the country to interview candidates. Now the process is almost totally electronic with early interviews done by video conference, and the finalists brought to the diocese for a retreat with the Discernment Committee. In addition, nearly all the documents

required, including the diocesan profile, are published online. There is no expensive, glossy book to print. In addition, within the bounds of confidentiality, we plan to use existing diocesan staff and services, including our communications office and our financial office and other staff as appropriate to support the Transition process.

What has not changed is the need for all of us to seek together what God wants for this diocese. We will all want to participate fully in the process, perhaps by offering ourselves to serve on a Committee or by nominating someone else to serve, and certainly by participating in conversations about who we are and where we're going as the Jesus Movement in the Episcopal tradition in Maine. We are an increasingly diverse state and diocese, with growing populations of new Mainers. We are a diocese of increasing contrasts, north and south, inland and on the coast. Like the rest of the Episcopal Church, we are a diocese in which most of the churches are small, but in which most of the people go to larger churches. And we're a diocese on the move, a diocese trying to discover how to be a new church for a new age. We'll be asking God for someone who can help us with all of that. It will be good for us to remember that God is here, right here, right now.

The Standing Committee has been working with the Office of Pastoral Development since I informed them of my decision to call for the election of the tenth bishop back in April. The Standing Committee has done extensive work over the spring and summer to get ready for the work which will commence with the closing gavel of this Convention. I believe they have done very good work, and I want to commend them and particularly the President, Maria Hoecker, and the President pro tem, Brenda Hamilton, who led the Standing Committee during Maria's recent sabbatical, for good work. We have a solid plan and plenty of time to do the work of discerning and electing the next bishop. I also want to offer a word of thanks to my staff, all of them, who have worked behind the scene to help prepare for the Transition Process. Our staff regularly produces more work than I, or we, have any right to expect - and they have my undying gratitude and respect.

I want you to know that I remain deeply thankful for the opportunity to serve as your bishop. There is nothing I would rather be doing, and there is ample work to do during the years ahead. *Living Local* continues. General Convention meets next summer. There are parishes to visit and much work to be done wrestling with finding leadership for our faith communities. I continue to meet God in your midst and will be fully engaged until I pass the crozier to my successor.

God's presence with us is both personal and corporate. God is present to the church, and God is present to you. God is here for you, right here, right now. I have great confidence in our ability to meet God in all that is coming. I have been quite pleased with the equanimity, the calmness, with which all of you have greeted my call to election. It is a sign of our basic good health and our trust in God. I have no doubt that we will do what we need to together to discern a good bishop for our future. Our work begins with trust in God's presence. We have all we need right here. For God is with us, with you, right here, right now. May we find grace to respond to God's invitation and join God in the work that lies before us.