

134 ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE DIOCESE OF SOUTHERN VIRGINIA
PRAYER, SERVICE, COMMUNITY – A VISION FOR LOVE | FEBRUARY 7, 2026

We want to see Jesus. WE WANT TO SEE JESUS! The world is clamoring to see Jesus. In its place of darkness, the world is groaning and longing to see light. We as followers of Jesus here in this corner of God's Kingdom have been given a faith that will move mountains...a faith that will transform the world. We have been given the light that the world longs to see. And yet, it seems as if all we want to do is hide it. The Gospel of Matthew proclaims, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one, after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

How do we discern the presence of God? How do we discern that light and shine it out to the world? The Prophet Isaiah speaks to a people who believe that they can discern God's presence through fasting from food and from all sorts of comfort. They have Levitical laws on how to do that, and they pride themselves on their strict observance of those laws. But apparently their prideful observance of these laws makes God sick. *"Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose a day to humble oneself. Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?"*

Instead, here is what God wants: He wants us to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. And specifically, this means three things:

- 1) To share bread with the hungry.
- 2) To cover the naked.
- 3) Not to hide from your kin.

We have expressed our concern, especially over these last months, of how to share bread with the hungry...devoting many efforts to food pantries and other feeding programs. We have attempted to cover the naked, literally, with clothing closets, but also with finding other ways to “clothe” figuratively those who are vulnerable and fragile. The church understands its mission to stand with the marginalized and to provide for their needs. But what about this business of not hiding from our kin? **ARE** we hiding from our kin, and if so, **HOW?** How are we failing to show ourselves transparently to those with whom God has put us in relationship? Are we in fact turning our backs on those with whom God has connected us? And exactly to whom are we connected?

The theme of this Annual Convention is “Prayer, Service and Community – a Vision for Love.” As a diocese, we want to be faithful to our Baptismal Covenant so that we can answer God’s call to share bread with the hungry, cover the naked and not hide from our kin. In so doing we accept Isaiah’s promise that light shall break forth like the dawn, healing shall spring up quickly, the Lord will be our Vindicator and rear God, proclaiming for us

“HERE I AM.” We will step into the role and title of “Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to Live In.”

What is the Vision that will empower us to do this? When I was consecrated as your bishop in 2020, I established 5 initiatives for us to live into in our shared ministry:

- Rule of Life
- Creation Care
- Becoming Beloved Community
- Evangelism
- Congregational Vitality

When I addressed you all a year ago, I asked us all to focus our mission on Prayer, Service and Community, incorporating the 5 initiatives. I also indicated we would be developing a strategic plan to guide our diocese in this mission. Our mission is this: **“We ARE One Body, engaging in Prayer, Service and Community, connected and equipped to proclaim the Gospel.”** But we need more than a mission statement to frame our work, which is where a strategic plan comes into place.

I felt it was important to gain input from all of you before we drafted a strategic plan. Therefore, this last summer I invited the entire diocese to participate in a survey that asked:

- What do you feel God is calling us to do in the areas of Prayer, Service and Community?

- What would strengthen you and your congregation / organization in the areas of Prayer, Service and Community?
- How might the diocese support individuals and organizations in these areas?

We received responses from more than a third of our congregations and organizations, spanning all 9 convocations in our diocese. That input was the launching point for our new strategic plan.

An effective, strong strategic plan is a living document that continues to be honed and refined over time. During our time together, we have been constantly refining our strategies, and the strategic plan I am sharing with you today further outlines my priorities for the remainder of my episcopate.

Prayer, Service and Community are the cornerstones of our shared life together. In the 10th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus articulates the Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” If we embrace these cornerstones as core values, which I am inviting you to do through these five initiatives, then we can say that “We are Loving God and Loving Neighbor through Prayer, Service and Community.”

To that end, we’ve renamed our core values, the building blocks, as active verbs:

- Engage
- Tend
- Embrace

- Proclaim
- Thrive

Rule of Life becomes Engage. **Engage** in a process of spiritual growth, becoming more like Jesus.

Creation Care becomes Tend. **Tend** to all God has created within ourselves, others, and all creation, as we act as stewards of God's gifts.

Beloved Community becomes Embrace. **Embrace** all humanity, celebrating our diversity, and loving one another sacrificially.

Evangelism becomes Proclaim. **Proclaim** the Good News of Jesus' love and freedom through word and action.

Congregational Vitality becomes Thrive. **Thrive** in becoming healthy expressions of Jesus' love to the world.

Many of you have already engaged in building upon these five core values in various ways – through diocesan programs, in work in your own parish, and responding to your community. Others may have been more focused on local concerns. My purpose of framing the 5 core values under the banner of **Prayer, Service and Community**, is to help make our shared ministry of proclaiming Christ one that engages every congregation and organization within the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia.

Let me highlight a few examples of how our vision is already being made manifest and where we plan to focus on new initiatives to move us forward in the areas of Prayer, Service and Community.

In Prayer

- Developing a new Diocesan Prayer Cycle for Sundays with input from UBE, ECW, EYC, College ministry, Cursillo, DOK, Chanco, Mission of the

HS, Dos Santos, Boys Home, Chatham Hall. Already invitations have been sent to a representative from each of these groups.

- Intentionally recruit a diversity of people for lay and ordained ministries, eliminating historic barriers in the discernment process.
- Explore new models of ministry especially in congregations without clergy.

In Service

- Develop intentional “Circles of Care” where resourced churches and under-resourced churches partner together for mission.
- Support and grow the Vocational Diaconate to serve our congregations and the communities surrounding them.

In Community

- Through our Thrive! Congregational Development program, we are building a dynamic learning community and getting to know the gifts of both laity and clergy across the diocese who can serve the wider church.
- Encourage our congregations and organizations to partner with and become involved in local justice and advocacy work.
- Connecting our congregations within convocations for greater missional impact and for effective ministry partnerships.
- Embracing the changing church culture and exploring different methods and models of evangelism and sustainability.

I’m excited about the future.... And about our diocese truly partnering together to hold each other up. It’s less about siloed churches and more about connected communities engaged in the work of the Gospel. It’s a Vision for Love: Loving God and Loving Neighbor through Prayer, Service and Community.

God wants to be in relationship with us. Through our Gospel lesson today He cautions us to stay in relationship with each other so that we don’t become diluted or compromised by the influences of the world and thereby lose our saltiness. We are exhorted not to hide the gifts that He has given us but to be

transparent and ready to share them with others...particularly those with whom he has placed us in relationship.

I want to circle back to the three exhortations that were mentioned in our text from Isaiah...hallmarks of the kind of fast and sacrifice that God desires. We are to feed the hungry. We are to clothe the naked. Many of us can point excitedly to how we are feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. But Isaiah exhorts us to do a third thing, or rather NOT to do a third thing: Isaiah exhorts us not to hide from our kin. What does that mean? Who are our kin? How do we hide from our kin? How can we make ourselves available to our kin? How can we show ourselves to our kin?

When I came through the Bishop search process here in Southern Virginia over six years ago, the theme I heard over and over again is “We want to be connected.” We want to be connected to each other, and we want to be connected to our bishop. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are given to each other in this diocese to be connected to each other. We cannot hide from each other. We are a people of community. If we are a well-resourced church who is vibrant and growing, we cannot say that we have no need for diocesan connection or connection to other Episcopalians who are in smaller, less thriving churches. If we are in smaller churches, we cannot shun our diocesan connection in order to turn inward and focus on our own survival. We cannot

hide from each other. We are kin. We cannot nor should we hide from our own kin.

Our Gospel lesson reminds us that no one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel basket. We do not hide our light. We do not hide from our kin. If we have resources – financial, spiritual, formational, or otherwise, we show them to our kin, make them available to our kin, and do not hide from our kin. In at least three convocations in our diocese, larger churches with more financial and personnel resources are reaching out to smaller, struggling congregations to provide occasional Eucharistic support, pastoral care support, administrative support, and prayer support. Other churches are licensing lay preachers that they are willing (with the bishop's permission) to deploy to congregations that are lay led. This is putting the lamp on the lampstand. This is showing ourselves to our kin and not hiding from them. Are there more ways that we can consider the resources we have and put them on the lampstand for all to see and for all to enjoy? Are there ways that we can rally around each other?

Your bishop desires this connection with you as well. Whether you are a well-resourced church who does not need diocesan assistance or support or whether you are struggling, your bishop wants to be connected to you...to be walking with you and to be working with you. Your bishop does not want to hide from you and deeply desires that you not hide from her. After lunch, we

are going to hear from J. Davey Gerhard, Director of The Episcopal Network for Stewardship; and yes, of course, the focus is going to be stewardship. I am hoping that he will challenge us to consider how we have gifts to give but occasionally hide them under bushel baskets or hide them from our kin. In our diocese, our stewardship is based on a request that parishes give 10% of their annual plate and pledge receipts. On average, just slightly above a third of our parishes meet that request. Most people would be surprised to learn that it is not necessarily the larger, more well-resourced, thriving parishes that give 10% (although some do). Instead, it is the smaller, struggling parishes who give this 10% sacrificially – they are literally giving the widow’s mite. They are demonstrating what it means to be connected – to not hide from one’s kin – to be in community.

In 1 John 3:17-18, this question is asked: “But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, **how does God's love abide in him?**” If we have what the world needs, and THROUGH PRAYER, SERVICE AND COMMUNITY, do not show it to our kin, how are we effective? Are we not hiding from our kin? Are we salt that has lost our taste?