

Diocesan Convention Address
Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts
The Rt. Rev. Julia Whitworth
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Burlington, MA
As prepared

Good morning, Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts!

It has been an incredible first year as your bishop—
a veritable whirlwind of faces, places, names, and notions.

When I think back on this time last year, I can hardly believe I was audacious enough to say anything to you at all. I was so very new.

I still feel new in many ways, but over the past year, together we have accomplished a great deal. And I have learned so much.

Moreover, WE are learning about how strong we can be when we work together to listen for God's call for our Church. In this national moment beset by division, pain, and fear, it is *exhausting* to go it alone. We are more courageous, more joyful, and more effective when we follow Jesus Christ, together.

What have we done together?

This year, through the movement of the Holy Spirit, we have ordained six new priests and six new deacons, and admitted nine new postulants for holy orders. We have gathered as a clericus in powerful ways—in record numbers at renewal of vows, clergy conference, and clergy day. And lay and clergy together—we have advocated for justice and liberty through countless marches, demonstrations, and prayer vigils.

We also made a strong impact at LGBTQ+ Pride celebrations throughout the diocese, especially at Boston Pride, where hundreds of us proclaimed God's love for ALL of God's children. I am so grateful for the Rev'd Liz Steinhauser and her amazing organizing team for making that public witness happen for us all.

Additionally, throughout the diocese I have been blessed to confirm and receive hundreds of new Episcopalians in both parish and regional celebrations, to install 13 new rectors (and 4 new canons!), to share Holy Eucharist at more than 60 altars, with 35 official Sunday visitations. Additionally, our Congregational Canons have made nearly 200 Sunday visits to 98 congregations. Please join me in thanking my amazing team for their tireless work.

Likely the most important work of this past year has been getting to know you—and, I must say, falling in love with you. It's a task made far easier by the generosity and spirit of this diocese. We are well on our way, but it is a large diocese! It will take a while to get to you all on Sundays. I hope you will continue to invite me to other gatherings, special

services, and outreach and justice efforts.

DIOCESAN VISION

A major piece of work we have undertaken together is our **diocesan visioning process**. What began years ago—through several iterations of surveys, listening sessions, and task forces—culminated this year in a visioning summit with over 60 diocesan leaders. With input from more than 800 diocesan stakeholders at various points along the way, our consultants guided us in a process to clarify our values, mission, and strategic priorities.

Our visioning process, led by your new Canon to the Ordinary, the Rev. Chris Wendell, seeks to clarify who we are, what we value, what we are called to do—and how we will approach it strategically. This vision has been reviewed, refined, and affirmed by the Standing Committee and Diocesan Council, and was shared with the whole Diocese in August. I'm excited to review it with you today, along with our first steps toward implementation. I hope that, at the conclusion of this address, you too will affirm this vision – a vision which, at its heart, comes from you all.

So, who are we? What are our values?

The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts is 170 worshipping communities—parishes, missions, chaplaincies, schools, intentional and monastic communities, and camps—who live by these core values: **Welcome, Courage, Justice, and Joy... all in the service of Love.**

And our **Mission**?

Guided by these values, and trusting in the Holy Spirit, we are called to:

- Provide an abundant welcome to a life in Christ
- Form disciples for missional lives
- Foster diverse, inclusive, and sustainable worshipping communities
- Proclaim God's justice to a broken and hurting world

All of this points toward one goal:

to become the Church of the Future together.

Our Strategic Priorities

To make this vision real, we are organizing our work around four strategic priorities, which will guide the diocese in the coming years:

1. Strengthening our Worshipping Communities
2. Advancing Formation, Discipleship, and Leadership Development

3. Reframing Communication, Evangelism, and Prophetic Witness
4. Improving Diocesan Stewardship and Asset Management

In this address, and in our common life as a diocese, each priority will provide a framework to celebrate what we are already doing, to announce new initiatives, and to imagine where God is calling us next.

1. Strengthening Worshipping Communities

The first priority of our diocesan structure is to **support our congregations for thriving and growth**. You began that good work years ago with the establishment of the Regional Canon system, which provides more regular access and care from the Office of the Bishop for your clergy and lay leaders, especially—but not exclusively—during times of transition and stress.

Your **Regional Canons** serve as transition ministers and work in conflict mediation, clergy care, and lay leadership development, as well as guides and helpmates for complex conversations about the futures of our more precarious congregations. That's a lot for three people!

In future years, we will implement additional models, tools, staff support, and resources to enhance congregational development! We will explore and expand new models and courageous conversations about collaboration, resource sharing, and structural change. Regional Canon Marissa Rohrbach offered a workshop on some of these models yesterday – I hope it piqued your curiosity and sense of possibility.

As part of our broader support for congregational vitality, we have made the complete **Invite, Welcome, Connect** program available to every congregation, equipping communities to focus intentionally on evangelism and newcomer incorporation. Canon Kelly O'Connell offered a workshop on IWC yesterday—please reach out to her if you want a larger introduction at your parish. Additionally, she, Canon Rohrbach, and Canon Greg Perez, are working to clarify and, where appropriate streamline, our diocesan rector transition process.

Our 2026 budget includes dedicated staff support for our growing Hispanic/Latino ministries, including the calling of a new **Hispanic Missioner**. This part-time position will help nurture vibrant ministries for our Latino/a communities across the diocese, especially in our Northern Region and in the new Oscar Romero Community being planted at Allston Abbey.

We have also heard your requests for **practical support**—such as centralized payroll and property management assistance. The strategic vision and next year's budget include increased resources for real estate stewardship and development, to help congregations care for their assets wisely and creatively. We are also exploring additional ways to centralize more services for you in the future.

The intentional formation of new priests is one of the most important long-term investments we can make as a diocese. So, I am very excited to announce that we are expanding our **Strategic Curacies** Program, a key part of our diocesan commitment to strengthening congregations and developing leaders. As diocesan employees, Strategic Curates will serve in congregations where strong mentoring is available, nurturing new priests during their first two years of ministry and building up both clergy and the communities they serve. The presence of a Strategic Curate in a congregation can be a vital spark, helping the community stretch, grow, and embrace new possibilities.

2. Discipleship Formation and Leadership Development

Our second priority is to enhance the formation of disciples and the development of leaders—both ordained and lay.

Each baptism, confirmation, newly received member, ordination, or installed rector in our diocese signifies that the Holy Spirit is still calling people—of every age and background—to lives of faithful leadership and service, lay and ordained.

But leadership begins in discipleship. Before we can lead others to Christ, we must be formed and nurtured in Christ ourselves. That's why the diocese is investing deeply in formation and discipleship at every stage of life.

Our strategic plan includes staffing up a **Formation Team**—including a diocesan **Canon for Formation** and **Missioners dedicated specifically for children, youth, and young adults**—whose work will be to resource congregations and individuals with the formation opportunities they need. These positions, included in the budget before the Convention today, will strengthen our capacity to offer spiritual formation, leadership training, and vocational discernment across the diocese.

In addition to staff changes, I hope to relaunch diocesan pilgrimages, a speaker series, and more opportunities to learn together in the new year. Stay tuned!

Speaking of which, we owe a deep debt of gratitude to the **Indigenous Allyship Working Group** for creating a remarkable opportunity to learn about and repent of the violence perpetrated against Native peoples during King Philip's War 300 years ago. The sacred journey to Deer Island was a holy privilege. Thank you to all the organizers, especially Deacon H. Mark Smith.

I am also grateful for the regional learning cohorts and other opportunities offered through the **St. Paul's Center for Theology**, led by Dean Amy McCreath, the Rev. Dr. Jarred Mercer, and the Rev. Joseph Mumita. Very soon we hope to launch new programs for training and credentialing lay preachers in the diocese as well.

I am also deeply excited about our **revitalized programs for youth and young adults**, led by Acting Missioner Shannon Kelly. She has collaborated with the Youth Council and the wonderful team at the Barbara C. Harris Camp and Conference Center, whom you will hear from later today. She has also been engaging our college and

university chaplains and supporting the task force imagining the next iteration of **Young Adult Ministry** in our diocese—creative, faithful, and grounded in the conviction that young adults are not only the Church of tomorrow, but the Church of *today*.

Meanwhile, our **Commission on Ministry**, supported by Canon Edie Dolnikowski, is doing vital work, including expanding Discernment Days to include conversations about lay leadership and leadership for monastic ministries, as well as lengthening the parish discernment timeline so it can be both more capacious and more flexible, allowing the Spirit's movement to shape new forms of vocation and service in our common life. They have also been working with the **Racial Justice Commission** on a Cross-Cultural Formation program for new postulants, in order to provide a foundation that will equip our clergy to serve well in the diverse settings of this diocese.

I am also delighted to share that our **Diaconal Formation Program** has become part of the Province I School for Deacons, while remaining under the thoughtful oversight of Archdeacon Pat Zifcak. This partnership will give our future deacons access to wider resources and peer learning, while maintaining the pastoral and local formation that have always been hallmarks of our program.

I am convinced that all of this—spiritual formation, discipleship opportunities, leadership development—is how we build up the Body of Christ to live boldly, faithfully, and joyfully into God's mission. The primary locus of this work is at the parish level, of course, but I aim to support it mightily through the opportunities we can pursue together.

3. Enhancing Communications, Evangelism, and Prophetic Witness

A strong diocese is a visible diocese.

Our **Communications, Witness, and Engagement** team, now led by **Canon Clayton McCleskey**, is already working to make us more visible, viable, and identifiable as a Church. Ten days into his role, he is well on his way to developing new strategies that will strengthen our growth, visibility, and impact.

This weekend, in fact, the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts has entered Instagram! Hooray! So, follow us!

Advised by a strategic implementation team and supported by a Communications Specialist (currently being hired), Canon McCleskey will lead a website and internal communications redesign, bringing his considerable strategic communications experience to bear for us. He will also be focusing on building communications, advocacy, and development resources for all of our worshipping communities to use.

This year, as a diocese, we have engaged in several moments of powerful public witness—from Pride events to marches, vigils, and public advocacy. Soon we will be

equipping congregations to tell their stories, amplify their ministries, and engage their communities even more meaningfully.

Justice is not an abstract idea for us—it is lived, faithful action.

Just last month, hundreds of you came together to support one of our own—a parishioner at risk of deportation at the ICE center in Burlington. This work was beautifully organized by the Rev. Nathan Ives of St. Peter's/San Pedro in Salem, in collaboration with partners at the Essex County Community Organization, the clergy and lay folks involved in our Ministry for Immigrants Partnership and our Canon for Immigration and Multicultural Ministry Jean Baptiste Ntagengwa, as well as our critical justice partners at the **Episcopal City Mission**. As part of their work to reduce the racial wealth gap and address gross injustice against our immigrant neighbors, ECM continues to organize regular vigils in Burlington for anyone interested in standing with the vulnerable. I am so proud that many of you have been participating in this work regularly. I commend you all to learn from Canon Ntagengwa and ECM more about how each of us create brave and save space for the immigrants in our midst.

I am excited to announce that soon I will be calling a part-time **Missioner for Justice and Advocacy** to our diocesan staff, to coordinate with partners like ECM, the Massachusetts Council of Churches, and the wider Church and Commonwealth—amplifying our collective voice and support for justice initiatives. I know that our public witness for justice does even more than advocate for the vulnerable—it is also important tool for evangelism and growth. My dream is that, as the old song reminds us, *“They will know we are Christians by our love.”* And by our justice.

One more thing on the topic: last week, I announced the launch of an **Immigrant Legal Emergency Fund**, to help congregational clergy respond quickly to the emergent needs of immigrant parishioners and neighbors who have unanticipated legal expenses or whose ability to make money is significantly impacted by changes in public policy. I seeded the fund with \$25,000 from the Bishop's Discretionary Fund and challenged the diocese to raise an additional \$25,000.

I'm thrilled to announce that **Trinity Church in Boston** has matched my match, so that every dollar raised will be matched two-to-one. Moreover, thanks to the generosity of an anonymous donor and the Episcopal City Mission, we are already \$15,000 toward our goal.

So... if we raise \$10,000 today at Convention, we will reach \$100,000 in the fund – ready to support parish clergy to help our immigrant neighbors.

Do you think we can do it? I do!

There is a QR code on every table guiding you to a link where you can give or pledge your future support. If you are watching at home and want to help us, you can find a way to do so on our home page.

We are not only a people of Welcome, Courage, Justice and Joy – we are also a people called to be generous. Now is a terrific time to show that generosity, and hospitality, to immigrants among us and around us.”

4. Improving Stewardship and Asset Management

Wise stewardship ensures that the resources God has entrusted to us are used effectively to support the mission and ministry to which we are called.

For nearly all of our worshipping communities, this involves **stewardship of the buildings** and grounds entrusted to us -- so that they can serve our missional purposes rather than drain our resources. In the years ahead, we will build capacity as a diocese to be far more strategic, with options, your congregations’ property. Additionally our strategic vision prioritizes **managing all of resources wisely** – our properties, our money, and the volunteer labor required to do the work of the Church. With Diocesan Council, I hope to look carefully at our governance and deanery structures and ask key questions about efficiency and effectiveness in light of smaller numbers of worshippers across our parishes.

Moreover, we will shore up basic tools for **connection and advancement**, like a diocesan database, more strategic fundraising through donor development and grant opportunities. We already have an incredible Budget and Finance Team, headed by Treasurer Ted T’so and Canon for Finance Deb Thomas. Overall, we are building a culture of greater transparency, responsiveness, and administrative support for clergy and congregations—to make systems simpler and, God willing, more effective.

Assisting Bishops and Wellness Initiatives

Although I have organized this address around our strategic priorities, there are some additional topics for which I wish to ask your support, and your prayers.

Additional Episcopal Support

As you know, in recent years the Diocese of Massachusetts has been served by two or even three full-time bishops. Since beginning as your diocesan bishop, I have been in close conversation with the Standing Committee about how to fulfill our future episcopal needs healthfully.

Last year, you voted to support the possibility of my calling an Assistant Bishop. Since then, my focus has been primarily on learning the diocese and shaping our strategic vision. Given that I have not yet identified a single bishop who would cohere with the strategy we have developed together and the spirit of collaboration we are building, I am now asking your support to appoint one or more retired bishops to assist me on a very part-time, year-to-year basis. These assisting bishops will help with visitations, pastoral

care, and special projects, extending my episcopal presence across the diocese while I, with the Standing Committee's counsel, continue discerning a best long-term path.

Wellness Initiatives

Last year, I spoke of my deep concern for clergy wellness in this diocese. I remain concerned, especially as I hear about, and experience, the deep drain that practicing ministry in this challenging time places on us all. In addition to shoring up a spirit of collaboration, creativity, courage and hope across the diocese, I wish to examine questions of equity and sustainability in clergy calls—especially in part-time and collaborative contexts, and given the very high housing costs in our region.

Guided by the excellent work of last year's Task Force for Women Clergy, we will also engage in the critical work of repairing past harms and examining systems that continue to perpetuate inequities for clergy who are women, queer, or people of color.

We are all—clergy and lay alike—navigating stressful times within a continuing mental health crisis. For this reason, I am especially grateful that the people of St. John the Evangelist in Duxbury have launched Snug Harbor Wellness, expanding opportunities for well-being not only for their own community, but for our whole diocese.

Through their efforts, in the weeks ahead clergy and every lay person in the Diocese will have access to excellent referral tools and resources with which to secure mental health care providers—something that can be so difficult to navigate. I am grateful and excited to partner with them in this initiative. You can find more information on flyers outside.

CONCLUSION

All that we do as a diocese—from welcoming newcomers to forming new leaders, from advocating for justice to caring for one another—flows from a single calling: to be the Body of Christ fully alive in the world, a community of joy and courage, bearing witness to the resurrection in all we do.

Even in this moment, when division cruelty and suffering seem to be on the rise, we are called to hope, through God's abundant love. We not only experience the love of Jesus Christ, but we **MUST** share it, with one another and our communities around us, if we are to survive these times we find ourselves in.

This is the hope to which we are called.

Together, we will continue to build a diocese that is authentically hospitable, courageously just, joyfully engaged, and deeply committed to God's mission.

I am grateful for your faith, your dedication, and your love.

Your perseverance. Your imagination. Your passion.

I am honored to be your bishop.

And I am excited to see all that God will do through us in the coming year.

May we go forward together, guided by the Spirit, living our values, and building the Church of the Future.

Thanks be to God!