THE BISHOP'S ADDRESS

125th Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts
The Rt. Rev. Miguelina Howell | November 7, 2026 | Amherst, Massachusetts

"Sean gratos los dichos de mi boca y la meditación de nuestros corazones delante de ti, Señor, roca nuestra y redentor nuestro."

Good morning, Saints!

Three hundred fifty-seven days ago, this body gathered to elect your next chief pastor. On that day, the Holy Spirit began something new among you, within me, and, as I have come to understand more deeply, among all of us together. I arrived in Western Massachusetts carrying both gratitude and a healthy sense of the magnitude of this call. You welcomed me with generosity, candor, curiosity, and prayer. And today, at my first diocesan convention as your bishop, I want us to remember where this chapter began.

[SHOW ELECTION VIDEO]

Before I say anything about budgets, buildings, programs, staffing, or the work ahead, I want us to do what the Church must always do first: **Pray**. If you are comfortable, I invite you to stand and, where appropriate, join hands with those beside you. If you prefer, simply remain as you are. Let us give thanks for the journey that began in prayer and ask for grace to continue in prayer.

Let us pray:

Living God, you have called us by name and gathered us into one body in Jesus Christ. We thank you for those who have gone before us, for those who serve among us now, and for the neighbors you are calling us to love. Forgive us when fear narrows our imagination or when we confuse the preservation of what we know with faithfulness to your mission. Give us listening hearts, courageous minds, generous hands, and the humility to seek your will together.

Bless our congregations, clergy, lay leaders, staff, and all whose lives are touched by our ministries. Root our decisions in prayer, our relationships in love, and our witness in the hope of the resurrection. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Please be seated.

Prayer is not a preface to mission

I am holding two things close to my heart this morning. The first is the passage from the Acts of the Apostles that we heard earlier and that the Rev. Jenny Gregg will help us engage through lectio divina later today. It is the very passage I chose for a presentation during the discernment retreat with your bishop search committee. I chose it then because it described the kind of Church I hoped to serve, and I return to it now because it describes the kind of Church I believe God is calling us to become.

Those first followers of Jesus devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. They shared what they had. They attended to those in need. Their common life was not a distraction from mission. It was the place where they were formed for mission. Before they could be sent, they needed to be nurtured, taught, equipped, and sustained by the presence of God and one another.

The second is counsel I received recently from someone I love and deeply admire: it matters to be a bishop who prays; it matters that the people know their bishop prays; and it matters to bring God into every room. I am paraphrasing, and I am certain he said it more eloquently! Prayer is not something we do to bless a decision we have already made. Prayer changes the way we listen, the questions we ask, the people we notice, and sometimes the decisions we thought were obvious.

My fervent prayer is that in all we do, pastorally, administratively, and publicly, we remain grounded in our why. We belong to God. We are beloved children of God. The Church does not exist to maintain itself. The Church exists to participate in God's mission of reconciliation, healing, justice, and love. That is the foundation beneath our diocesan theme: "Growing in God's Mission: We Are in This TOGETHER!"

Building relationships, learning to listen

I have spent much of these first months getting to know you. Our Bishop on the Go, or BOGO, weekends have been an important part of that work. In the Berkshires, Worcester Corridor, and in the Connecticut River Valley, I have sat one-on-one with clergy, shared meals with wardens, enjoyed evenings, and fun games, with clergy and their spouses, worshiped with congregations, and listened to the stories that do not always make it into annual reports.

I have encountered honest concerns, thoughtful questions, laughter, fatigue, resilience, and extraordinary love for the communities you serve.

These gatherings are not a bishop's tour of appearances. They are an investment in trust. Relationships give us the capacity to speak truthfully to one another, to disagree without withdrawing from one another, and to discern together when a beloved ministry needs to change. They also remind us that the diocese is not an office at 37 Chestnut Street. The diocese is all of us, gathered and sent in the places where God has planted us.

Pastoral visitations have been equally formative. I have listened to vestries name what is life-giving and what is becoming difficult to sustain. I have met people preparing for confirmation and reception who spoke with moving clarity about the moments in which they encountered God. My first question to candidates is " Please share one important God-moment in your life". I have witnessed congregations collaborating across familiar boundaries, and I have heard a consistent desire for the diocese to be a companion rather than simply an authority to whom one submits paperwork. We are learning one another's stories, and that matters.

Our resources must follow God's mission

At our budget hearing, and in conversations with Diocesan Council and the Finance Committee, I have said that budgets are theological documents. They tell a story about what we value. Money follows mission, and mission must inform how we steward money. Our proposed 2027 budget is an effort to make that conviction visible. It is not a claim that every need has been met, nor does it free us from difficult financial choices. It is a statement of direction.

We are sustaining important commitments already entrusted to this diocese. Building Bridges has accompanied veterans and helped create communities of belonging and support. Today's Eucharistic offering will be directed to that ministry. I invite you to give generously, not because a program needs to survive for its own sake, but because the people served by that ministry matter deeply to God and to us. Our commitment to veterans will continue as the ministry enters its next chapter.

Cathedral of the Beloved is another powerful expression of the Church meeting people where they are, particularly neighbors who experience housing and food insecurity. As an ecumenical ministry, it reminds us that God's mission is larger than any one denomination or congregation. Our continued partnership is important, even as we clarify the shape of our diocesan staff's participation in that shared work.

You will also see a stronger investment in discipleship and vocations. Formation is not a luxury for congregations that happen to have spare time or money. It is essential to the Church's life. We need to equip lay and ordained leaders to pray deeply, interpret Scripture faithfully, navigate conflict, practice Christian stewardship, proclaim the Gospel, and recognize the gifts of the Spirit in themselves and others. We need opportunities for clergy to be renewed, for wardens and vestries to lead with confidence, and for every baptized person to discern how God is calling them into service. We cannot ask people to lead faithfully and then leave them without the tools or companionship to do so.

This includes the work of discernment for ordained ministry. Together with the Commission on Ministry, the Standing Committee, the chair of the Board of Examining Chaplains, and leaders of Loving the Questions and Communities of Discernment, we are reviewing our processes so that expectations, responsibilities, and decisions are clearer, more transparent, and more pastoral. Discernment should be rigorous without being bewildering, and supportive without promising an outcome. I look forward to welcoming Canon Amy Bradley, who begins on December 1, as our Canon for Discipleship and Vocations. Her leadership will help connect formation, spirituality, and vocational discernment across our diocese.

Congregational vitality and the courage to change

Another priority is congregational vitality and revitalization. Our diocesan staff and governing bodies are preparing for attentive, proactive conversations with congregations about what a sustainable and life-giving future might look like. Financial sustainability matters, but it is not the whole measure of vitality. We must also ask: Whom are we called to serve? Who is missing from our tables? What gifts do we have to offer? Where is God already at work in our neighborhoods, and what might we need to release in order to join that work?

For generations, many congregations have understood their ministries primarily through what happens within their own buildings and under their own leadership. At times, we have behaved as though God's mission depended upon our ability to maintain our particular institutions. Yet the mission has always belonged to God. The Church exists to participate in that mission, not to possess it.

We have engaged Stewardship Realty to help congregations think creatively about the use of their properties. Four churches have been in conversation with the organization and received reports that can inform next steps. These are invitations to discernment, not predetermined instructions to sell, rent, or redevelop. Buildings can be gifts for mission, but they are not the mission itself. When their use changes, we must ask how the resources entrusted to us can continue to serve God's people.

Some of our congregations are navigating transitions, partnerships, mergers, and difficult questions about viability. I want to say something plainly to those communities: the value of your ministry cannot be reduced to the number of people in the pews or the balance in an account. And neither does love require us to preserve every familiar structure indefinitely. Christian hope is not the conviction that we will always be able to preserve the things we love. It is the conviction that the God who raised Jesus from the dead remains faithful through every season, including those moments when something familiar must come to an end. Our calling is to accompany one another through those decisions with truthfulness, tenderness, and courage.

Good governance is pastoral care

You may have heard the phrase "Clarity is kindness or Clear is Kind."

You may have heard also that "good governance is pastoral care, and good administration can be pastoral care". When responsibilities are unclear, when communication falters, or when processes depend on who happens to know whom, people suffer and mission is delayed. Clarity and accountability are not the opposite of grace. Properly practiced, they make room for grace.

We have held a governance retreat and are investing in ongoing formation for diocesan leaders and staff. We are clarifying roles, decision rights, policies, and workflows. I have appointed a task force to work with our Chancellor and consultant Sally Johnson on a review of our diocesan constitution and canons, with the intention of bringing proposed revisions to next year's convention. We are also planning a Vestry School with a governance track. And yes, your bishop intends to make a few cameo appearances as a teacher. Teaching is part of my calling, and I enjoy it!

None of these technical improvements is the end goal. We do not exist to perfect forms and flowcharts. We improve them so that less energy is lost in confusion and more energy can be given to the work that matters: proclaiming the Gospel, caring for our neighbors, and sharing God's love.

What happened at 37 Chestnut Street?

I know that some of you have wondered, "What on earth happened at 37?" Someone asked us a few weeks ago, "Did all hell break loose at 37?" Before and after my consecration, several senior colleagues discerned that it was time to retire or answer new calls. Some departures were anticipated; others surprised us. The overlapping work of saying goodbye, recruiting, welcoming, and learning new roles created real challenges, particularly in communication and follow-through. I know some of you felt those challenges. I want to acknowledge them, and I thank you for your patience.

But I also want to tell you what I see now:

- Joy at 37.
- Laughter at 37.
- Collaboration at 37.

- Prayer at 37.
- And a team with a deep desire to follow Jesus and serve our congregations and clergy. So perhaps the better description is that **heaven broke loose at 37**! For that, dear Saints, I give thanks.

First, I thank God for Canon Heather Blais, our Canon to the Ordinary and Chief of Staff. Heather brings faith, wisdom, kindness, and an unmistakable love for the clergy and congregations of this diocese. She has been a trusted companion in this work, and I am grateful for the generous spirit with which she approaches her ministry. Heather, thank you.

Canon Amy will join us on December 1st and I can't wait to see how God will use her gifts and creativity to lead us in deepening our discipleship and our spiritual lives.

I am also grateful for Kristina Cincotta, now serving as Canon for Finance and Administration, and for Melanie Stone and Lydia Rosado, who have stepped into new responsibilities with care and professionalism. Delphine Williams continues to contribute her knowledge and faithful service. We also welcomed Nico Anzelc-Tolian as our Communications Intern.

We welcomed Angelica Duque as my Executive Assistant and Aaron McMurphy as Assistant to Canons. They are a dynamic duo!

Our missioners, the Rev. Ignacio Solano for Latino Ministry and the Rev. Jenny Gregg for Servant Leadership, now join us at Diocesan House on Wednesdays for prayer and staff meeting. That simple rhythm is already strengthening our sense of shared ministry.

Reverend Jenny's portfolio is evolving as her work with Cathedral of the Beloved becomes more clearly that of an Episcopal liaison and partner in an ecumenical ministry. She will also help congregations explore outdoor communities of faith and ministry alongside neighbors facing housing and food insecurity, while supporting diocesan formation and spiritual practice.

Beginning in 2027, Building Bridges will become part of Jenny's portfolio. I want to express profound gratitude to the Rev. Chris Carlyle for his leadership of that ministry and for his willingness to accompany Jenny during the transition from January through June. Chris, your ministry among veterans has been a gift. And Jenny, our beloved

"Queen of Questions," will continue to help lead Loving the Questions as we deepen our culture of discernment.

The proposed budget also includes a new diocesan property and facilities position, intended to offer practical support to congregations navigating building projects, grants, energy assessments, and property-related decisions. This is another way to make diocesan partnership concrete. Our staff exists not to be the center of diocesan life, but to equip and accompany the people who carry out God's mission in every community.

Our public witness in a divided nation

We cannot speak of God's mission without speaking of the world in which we are called to serve. We live in a nation marked by deep polarization, fear, and a troubling readiness to treat neighbors as enemies. Immigration debates too often speak about people as problems rather than as human beings with names, families, histories, and hopes. The language of contempt has become common. For Christians, this is not merely a matter of political preference. It is a question of how we honor the image of God in every person and how we live the promises of our Baptismal Covenant.

The Church is not called to be an extension of a political party. Neither is it called to be silent when human dignity is threatened. We can engage public questions with conviction and humility, resist dehumanization, protect vulnerable neighbors, and refuse the false choice between speaking truth and loving those with whom we disagree. Our witness must be rooted in the Gospel, not in outrage for its own sake.

I have invited the Rev. Steven Wilco, who served us faithfully as Interim Canon to the Ordinary, to consult with our Social Justice Commission and its conveners as they discern a more coherent framework for diocesan engagement. I have encouraged a threefold approach:

- Advocacy
- Formation, and
- Witness.

Advocacy helps us respond to policies and systems that affect our neighbors. Formation helps us ground our responses in Scripture, theology, and the Church's teaching. Witness helps us embody publicly the love and justice we proclaim. My hope

is that this work will lead toward a thoughtful strategic plan, shaped with the participation of the diocese, rather than a collection of disconnected reactions.

Signs of God's mission already among us

And here is what gives me hope: I have seen signs of this Gospel in action across Western Massachusetts. At the Church of the Good Shepherd in Clinton, I heard about the decision to let go of a diaper pantry so that the ministry could continue in a different way. Think about the freedom in that choice.

The congregation was not so attached to owning a program that it forgot the families the program was meant to serve. That is a community remembering its why.

At St. John's in Ashfield, I have been struck by the commitment to keep the church's doors open, welcoming people beyond the hours of Sunday worship. It is a reminder that hospitality is not merely an announcement on a sign. It is a posture toward the community, expressed in real decisions about how we use our space.

At Christ Church Cathedral in Springfield, I have learned of neighbors welcomed through the drop-in ministry, of barber students offering haircuts, of people helping others register to vote, and of coats, tents, and other essentials shared with those who need them. These are not abstract examples of outreach. They are encounters in which human dignity is recognized and practical love becomes visible.

I think also of the remarkable witness of St. John's Episcopal Church in Northampton, which opened its doors last winter to provide shelter and warmth to neighbors experiencing homelessness during dangerously cold weather. When the temperatures dropped and the need for a safe place became urgent, this congregation responded with compassion and hospitality. Their church building became more than a place of worship. It became a place of refuge, a tangible expression of God's love and care for the most vulnerable among us.

What moves me about this ministry is that St. John's recognized that the sacredness of their building is not found simply in its architecture, its history, or even in the beauty of its worship, but also in its capacity to serve God's people. They understood something essential about our calling as followers of Jesus: sometimes the most faithful thing we can do is simply open the doors.

I have witnessed congregations exploring closer partnerships, including the unfolding relationship between St. Luke's in Worcester and Christ Church in Rochdale which will come before this convention for a merger to become Hope Episcopal Church. The name is a gift and a story to share with us all.

I have seen congregations gather across parish lines for worship and confirmation, as St. Mark's in East Longmeadow and Atonement in Westfield did during our Connecticut River Valley BOGO weekend.

I have seen Clergy in large parishes supporting pastorally congregations without clergy. Thank you, Father Eddie. Father Jim!

I have heard the hopes of small congregations and the wisdom of people who have served faithfully for decades. Again and again, you have shown me that the Spirit is not waiting for us to invent God's mission. God is already at work, and we are being invited to notice and join in.

Not every story is uncomplicated. Not every ministry is flourishing. There is grief in some of our congregations, and there are hard choices ahead. But there is also extraordinary faithfulness. Our task is to tell the truth about both, without allowing anxiety to have the final word.

Trust that God is with us.

During the fall meeting of the House of Bishops, a group of us gathered for contemplative prayer. The person guiding our time together read, several times, a passage from Meister Eckhart's Book of Darkness and Light. Those words are now somewhat engraved in my heart. They offered me courage and hope, both personally and as I reflected on the life of the Church and the uncertainties we face.

I would like to share that passage with you today, trusting that it may offer you some of the same encouragement it offered me.

"Who You Are: This is simple and not simple: give your everything to God: God will do with it, and with you what is perfect and true. But you cannot, should not, worry yourself about outcomes. God will do what God will with the nothing-ness of your all. Trust this; the rest will follow".

For even as we navigate uncertainty, we can hold fast to the assurance that we are in this together and, more importantly, that God is with us, accompanying us, sustaining us, and inviting us to trust in God's presence and faithfulness.

A gift of gratitude

Before I conclude, I want to make a presentation. This may not become an annual convention tradition, but there are moments when gratitude deserves a tangible sign.

The cross is a sign of God's love, and this diocese has experienced that love through the faithful leadership of the Rev. Rich Simpson, who served as Canon to the Ordinary during the episcopate of our beloved Bishop Doug Fisher.

Rich, or "Uncle Rich," as one priest with particularly memorable glasses once called him, has offered years of care, wisdom, presence, and faithful leadership to our clergy and congregations. He knows this diocese deeply. And I must confess that he is also the person who sent me the diocesan profile and invited me to pray about this call. So, Rich, you bear at least some responsibility for my being here today!

More seriously, Rich promised to remain available as a companion during this transition, and he kept that promise. In recent months he has consulted with my office and, together with Canon Heather, helped lead the Onboarding Task Force. As that task force concludes its work at this convention, I am grateful for the honesty, insight, and care it has offered. Its work has helped us understand our diocesan culture more clearly, including the things we cherish and the things we need to address. Rich's consulting engagement is concluding, but the friendship and the shared ministry continue. Worcester is not so far away, after all.

Rich, would you please come forward? On behalf of this diocese, and with my personal gratitude, I offer you this cross as a sign of our affection and thanksgiving for your ministry among us. May it remind you that the love you have shared here continues to bear fruit.

Growing in God's mission, together

Dear Saints, when I look back on these months, I see a bishop who has been welcomed into a remarkable community and entrusted with the sacred work of listening, praying,

teaching, leading, and loving. I have learned from your faithfulness. I have been moved by your generosity. I have also heard your concerns, and I know that trust is built through what we do, not simply through what we say.

I love this diocese. I love the people I have met in our churches, in parish halls, around tables, and in conversations that have sometimes been joyful and sometimes difficult. I love the seriousness with which so many of you take your baptismal promises. And I am deeply grateful that God has called us into this ministry together.

The next chapter will ask much of us. It will ask us to pray before we plan, to listen before we assume, to be truthful about our resources, to form leaders with intention, to care for our neighbors with courage, and to hold our beloved institutions with open hands. It will ask us to trust that God's mission is larger than any one congregation, any one bishop, any one committee, or any one generation.

So let us return to the early Church in Acts: devoted to teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers; attentive to need; generous in spirit; alive to the presence of God. Let us be a people who bring God into every room, who remember whose we are, and who ask again and again not simply, "How do we keep doing what we have done?" but "What is God inviting us to do now?"

Thank you for your trust, your prayers, your patience, your humor, and your love. It is an honor to be your bishop. And by the grace of God, we will keep growing in God's mission. We are in this TOGETHER! **Amen.**