A Word from our Bishop
Sermon preached on November 22, 2026
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Dr. Nina R. Pooley

(Excerpted from Bishop Miguelina Howell's Address to the 125th Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts, Nov 7, 2026, full text here.)

On my first day back from sabbatical, our wardens and I had the requisite: "what did I miss, and how do we proceed" conversation. In that discussion we realized it would be important to share with you some of Bishop Howell's address at Diocesan Convention. The full text is longer than we have time for this morning, so I'm going to share just a few portions.

The Bishop began her address by inviting people to 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**."**

Bishop Howell continued: 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. [...] 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."

Bishop Howell went on to talk about the Diocesan Budget: 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 [Diocesan] 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. …

In addition Bishop Howell described an effort to firm up clarity around process, canons and governance - as an act of pastoral care. Then she described another primary priority:
[One] 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.

Later in her address, Bishop Miguelina discussed the many staff changes at the Diocesan Center. Noting that the diocesan office: 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 Bishop ended this section by noting what gives her hope, saying: I have seen signs of this Gospel in action across Western Massachusetts. *She shared specific parish examples, and added:* 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.

Our Bishop continued: 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.

"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.

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.