

Summary of *Crossing the Water: Asking Why Before How*

In September 2022, the Wisconsin Trialogue Task Force on Structure released a six-page white paper to address the overarching questions in its charge: What is the purpose of congregations within a diocese, and how do they relate to each other? What is the purpose of bishops and what infrastructure best supports our work and life together? And, what are the structures needed for the church in the 21st century?

The task force illustrated the structure visioning process this way:

Imagine a person who was asked what structure was needed to cross a large body of water. The structure could be a boat, but it might also be a bridge. It could even be a helicopter. All three “structures” will convey a person over the water, but the reason for the water crossing will determine which structure is best for the purpose. A person traveling cross country by car will want a bridge. A person hoping to spend a pleasant afternoon might elect to paddle a canoe, and a person in urgent need of medical care will be grateful for a life flight.

Likewise, envisioning a diocesan structure requires not only a structure that fulfills the legal requirements of The Episcopal Church, which is analogous to crossing the water, but also some assumption about the reason for crossing. Our task force took this latter consideration as the most important piece of discernment.

In discussing a unified diocesan structure, the task force agreed that the purpose of a diocese is “to support local ministries and to unite them into a fuller version of the body of Christ than is possible in a single congregation.” Function, therefore, determines structure. A diocesan community exists to encourage and assist congregations in developing local Christian ministry and community.

The task force identified three foundational characteristics of healthy congregations and dioceses:

Incarnational - showing forth God’s love for people and creation through the person and work of Jesus Christ

Discipleship oriented - helping people live into spiritual journeys and the loving relationships of God’s kingdom

Apostolic - sending people to love and serve God and other people in the world

In imagining the diocesan structure that would best support healthy congregations, the task force arrived at three guiding concepts of Anglican identity: *via media* (embracing a middle way approach to social, political, theological and ecclesiastical matters); *martyrdom* (Spirit-empowered witness to the Christian truth in all aspects of life); and *Benedictine spirituality* (which subscribes to a balanced life of prayer, worship, service and community, within a framework of obedience, stability, and conversion of life).

Given these guiding principles, the task force identified the chief function of a bishop as serving as the chief spiritual officer and not as the chief executive officer. To that end, a bishop’s primary role is as a teacher, pastor, and theologian, and who, in relationship with clergy, serves them as a trusted advisor and authority.

To better guide their discernment of the structure necessary to serve this vision, the task force has shaped their collective work around questions organized by the three categories of Benedictine spirituality:

Obedience:

1. How do we model being truly open-minded – that is really willing to listen?
2. How does obedience impact the relationship of clergy to the diocesan structure?
3. How does the polarized nature of many topics make obedience difficult?
4. What would obedience look like if taken seriously?

Stability:

1. Does stability also suggest something about priorities of the bishop?
2. How long do we expect a bishop to serve if stability is a goal—long enough to improve the pension fund highest average compensation for a bishop, or a good long while?
3. How should stability help all clergy, but especially bishops, balance their time away from the local community and interaction with the larger church?
4. What does stability look like for lay people?

Conversion of Life:

1. How can congregations and the people who are in them engage in conversion of life?
2. Can we teach guiding practices, explain where they came from, discuss the acceptance of wide beliefs and tie them into examples as Anglican experience?
3. How does conversion of life impact a Christian's role as martyr or witness?