

Why We Are Pursuing Reunion

The Rt. Rev. Matthew Gunter

Bishop of Fond du Lac/Bishop Provisional of Eau Claire

The world is changing. The world has already changed. The world will continue to change. Perhaps it has always been thus, but in the 21st century change has accelerated. Some of those changes are big, some are small; some are obvious, some more subtle; some are good, some not so good; some are mixed, and with some it is still unclear. But one way or another, change is upon us. And we as a church are not prepared or structured to engage that change.

Big Picture Change

Some of the changes we face are larger kinds of change.

- **Democracy**, here at home and in parts of the world, seems more and more fragile. Deep societal divisions increasingly cause many to be concerned about its continued existence.
- The **global order**, such as it has been for the last 70 years or so, is also looking more fragile. That has the potential to lead to more instability and more conflict. The invasion of Ukraine is an indication or portent of this.
- The global **economy** also seems more fragile. The Great Recession of 2007-2009 was a shock to the system and there is little reason to suppose that something similar or worse cannot happen again.
- Overshadowing all of this is **climate change** which haunts us even as we find ourselves unable to wrap our minds around it or address it. We in Wisconsin might be less susceptible to the immediate effects of climate change, but other parts of the country, and certainly other parts of the world, are already experiencing its effect. There is little doubt that in the coming decades there will be climate refugees as people become desperate for water and arable land. This will also lead to instability, violence, and hunger.

Because the world is interconnected, one way or another each of these will impact us. They will certainly shape the world in which we live. I believe we are looking at some hard decades ahead. We as a church or as believers are not prepared for this future.

Social, Cultural, Economic Change

More directly, we are experiencing significant and disruptive social, cultural, economic change. More could be said about each of these and it is probably not a complete list.

- **Secularism** – Our society is increasingly secular. That is obvious enough on the surface. More subtle are the ways a secular mindset shapes the imagination of people, even believers, making it harder and harder to hold in our hearts a sense of a transcendent reality beyond our day-to-day mundane reality and what we can see, weigh, or measure. It is harder to “imagine” and live as though we believe God is really and truly active in our world and in our lives.
- **Individualism** – We are becoming more and more individualistic. There has been a decided turn toward the self, what has been termed a move from an “age of association” to an “age of authenticity” in which each self is the measure of truth and obliged to find their own way of being. This leads to a wariness of belonging and suspicion of any suggestion that something outside our own sense of things should reorient our way of thinking or being.

- **Polarization** – Though mentioned above, this affects our families, communities, and churches leading to an anxious factionalism and divisiveness.
- **Pluralism** – Beyond a celebration of plurality and diversity, a hyper-pluralism shapes the imagination toward a radical relativism that suggests that all claims as to what is true or good are more or less equal and just a matter of choice. This makes people suspicious of any specific system of belief. And it makes it hard to find shared understanding more generally.
- **Economy** – Over the last few decades our economy has evolved such that people work harder and more hours to make ends meet. On top of that, with email and cell phones, there is a sense of always being “on”. For many it has simply become harder to even make ends meet in this economy structure. We are only beginning to see how covid has reshaped the workplace and how people engage with work. Even for those who might be inclined to participate, this makes it hard to find the time or energy to be involved in church as we have come to understand involvement.
- **Social Media & the Internet** – In all kinds of ways our hyper-connectivity is reshaping the way we live and move and have our being in the world. The ultimate ramifications remain to be seen. But, for all the good of being able to connect with people anywhere, any time, it is clear that social media exacerbates factionalism and there is increasing evidence that it has negative psychological effects, at least on some. Still, the internet is here to stay. Churches have begun experimenting with ways to use it to engage members and others.
- **Disillusion with and Distrust of Institutions** has become endemic. This has ramifications for society generally but it certainly affects how people who are not members (and sometimes members) think about the church. And, scandalously, some of that is our own doing.
- Taken together, all of this has led to a sense of **disorientation, anxiety, anger, isolation, loneliness, exhaustion, and despondency**. Not everyone feels all of that all of the time. But any kind of change is stressful and there is an underlying dis-ease.

There are good and less good aspects of some of this change. We need to carefully understand them from a Christian perspective, affirming where we can and challenging where necessary. But these changes are shaping the way we and our neighbors live, move, and have our being in the world. And the way we have been doing church is not set up to dealing with them or engaging our neighbors given that context.

Powers and Principalities

People still yearn for belonging and meaning. But because of the above we are more susceptible to what we might call powers and principalities. These promises belonging and meaning but are not ultimately life-giving and do not lead to peace – neither personal serenity nor interpersonal harmony.

- Nationalism
- Consumerism
- Idolatry of ideology
- Addiction of various sorts
- Spiritual powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God

Each of these has its own message of salvation and seeks to woo us from allegiance to Jesus Christ and his way of life and love and peace. But resisting their attraction and influence is not easy, especially in anxious times and if we are on our own without a community which has its own counter-narrative.

Unprepared

Our churches are not prepared to engage these realities. And our dioceses are not currently structured to do so. It's not that we are simply failing. There is life and goodness in our congregation and in each diocese. We are not built for the change that is upon us.

We need

- Communities of worship and practice, communities of prayer and discipleship
- Communities where the Fruit of the Spirit are cultivated
- Communities where the double law of Love, Love of God and Love of Neighbor as Jesus demonstrated is practiced.
- Communities where people learn to rejoice in the Lord always and dare to let their gentleness be known to all
- Communities of God's mercy and delight
- Communities prepared to engage the tragic and to acknowledge their own failures, confessing and lamenting as necessary
- Communities of truth-telling and truth-living, forgiving and reconciling
- Communities where we are formed and encourage one another to take up the cross, deny ourselves, and follow Jesus in his way of love and peace and joy, righteousness, and justice.
- Communities committed to restoring all people to unity with God and each other in Christ

Opportunity

Challenging as all of this is, it also presents us with an opportunity. There is with every crisis, opportunity. The good news of Jesus Christ is still good news. People are hungry. They might not always be sure just what they are hungry for or where to have that hunger satisfied. It is not obvious to them that the church is the place. God help us, we have not always been good at offering something that looked all that appetizing. But people are hungry; people are yearning, for belonging, meaning, purpose, and hope. We who have tasted and seen that the Lord is good have something to offer. We have good news to share. The Holy Spirit is active in the world and in our lives. And the Anglican tradition as we have it in the Episcopal Church has particular gifts in the way we express that good news. We need to take a good look at where things might need to change as we carry that heritage forward.

Pursuing reunion into one diocese offers us an opportunity to engage a changing world and become more the church God is calling us to be. The idea is not to simply recreate a diocese that looks more or less like a larger version of what we already are. It is an opportunity to

- reconfigure ourselves into a diocese organized to engage the changed and changing world in which we find ourselves
- combine our financial and human resources in a diocese organized for mission, evangelism, and public witness
- organize ourselves to better support each of our existing congregations
- encourage, cultivate, and nurture new communities of worship and discipleship, some of which might look like conventional congregations, others which might not

- form disciples prepared to live faithfully in these times
- find ways to faithfully and responsibly use new media to reach people we might not otherwise
- encourage and train lay leadership
- become more catholic, not in the sense of our worship and piety, important as they are, but by becoming a church that includes all people regardless of class, income, education level, age, race or ethnicity, political party, sexuality, etc., so we mirror all of Wisconsin.
- become a church where all are welcome, all are encouraged, all are challenged, all are transformed by the Holy Spirit
- draw on our heritage going back to Jackson Kemper, the first missionary bishop of the Episcopal Church, and organize ourselves to be a missionary diocese for the 21st and 22nd centuries

The world is changing and changing significantly. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. But we need to adapt, not just to continue existing, but to be about the good news we know in Jesus Christ. That is good news the world needs desperately. We can become a church that confidently lives and bears witness to that good news even as, with due humility, we listen to and learn from our neighbors. Together, in ways we can do as well separately, we can become a missionary diocese organized to engage the changes, challenges, and opportunities before us.