Bishop's Address
189th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana, October 23–24, 2026

Slide 1: The Next Faithful Step

I want to begin by saying thank you. Thank you for your faithful work in this diocese, for the love of Jesus you share, and for your joy and commitment to sharing the Good News of the Gospel. It is my profound and humble joy to serve as your bishop. Thank you to my incredible staff. Your dedication and hard work is contagious and inspiring. And thank you to my family, Jimmy, Nicholas, Tucker, and my mom, who walk this path with me every step of the way.

As I wrote in my letter inviting you to convention, this is the year of Truth in our three-year walk together, The Next Faithful Step. As I begin my 5th year as your bishop, my team and I felt like it was an important time for us to share in more depth the truths of where we are as a diocese…on so many fronts.

So let me say at the start what I believe about it. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." He did not say the truth will make you comfortable. Jesus said it will make you free.

This morning I want to tell you the truth about where we stand. Then I want to do something that may seem backwards. I want to take you ten years into the future and walk back from there…because I have come to believe that hope is not what is left over after the numbers are read. Hope is where we start.

Slide 2: Start from the future

Last month the House of Bishops gathered at Camp Allen in Texas. 118 of us! We spent part of that week with a futurist named Bob Johansen, of the Institute for the Future, who has spent decades helping leaders think about what is coming. He realized that most of us plan in the same order: **now, then next, then, if there is time, the future.**

We start with today's worries and push them forward. The trouble is that we never get very far. The present is relentless. There is always the next issue…the next problem in front of us. What happens if we change our perspective? What if we move from a place of faithfulness, rather than a place of reaction?

Johansen says: change the order. Now, future, next. Stand in the present honestly. Then go out ten years and look around. Then come back and ask what is next. He calls it thinking future-back.

The Church has an older name for it. We call it hope. We are a people who have already been told how the story ends: "See, I am making all things new." Christians have always lived from the forward, back. So that is the order I will follow today.

Now. Future. Next.

So, where do we stand?

Slide 3: The truth about the wider Church

At that same meeting, the House of Bishops received the newest picture of The Episcopal Church. I want you to see what we saw.

On an average Sunday in 2025, 407,001 people worshiped in person in our congregations. Ten years earlier, it was 607,642. That is a third of us gone in a decade. And after climbing back from the pandemic, the 2025 number slipped again, by about six thousand.

The median Episcopal congregation has 37 people in it on a Sunday, in a room built to seat 165. The median Episcopalian is 60 years old. Last year the Church baptized about 19,000 people and buried about 23,000.

Here is the number that stopped me. A third of the people in our pews joined their congregation in the last five years, which sounds like good news. But of those newcomers, 77 percent came from another protestant congregation. Only 3 percent had never been part of a church before. We are very good at welcoming people who already know the way in. What does that say to us?

Slide 4: The truth at home

Now, our own house. Our parochial reports show 3,304 of us in worship on an average Sunday in 2025, down from 4,417 in 2015. Now, we are regaining some traction after COVID, but we aren't there yet. That is a quarter of us. Forty-seven congregations, and 12,927 members. More than one in five Louisianans now claims no religious affiliation at all.

And our neighbors are changing too. Louisiana lost about one percent of its people over the last decade while the nation grew by six percent. Metro New Orleans lost a net 36,000 residents in five years. In those same five years, the greater New Orleans area has gained over 21,000 new Latino-Hispanic neighbors.

22% claim no religious affiliation

Slide 5: Louisiana beside the wider Church

But set our numbers beside the wider Church's, and you see something. While the Church slipped last year, we held: 3,303 one year, 3,304 the next. I would like to meet that one person! Our online worship grew by a quarter while the Church's shrank. Easter attendance here has risen three years running. Our median congregation has 54 people in it on a Sunday; the Church's has 37.

And here is the one I want you to remember. Across the Episcopal Church last year, burials outnumbered baptisms, 23,000 to 19,000. In Louisiana, we baptized 189 and buried 186.

Slide 6: The neighbors around our churches

Look closer at those neighbors. The General Convention office has mapped the neighborhoods around every one of our churches, and three things stand out. Across most of this diocese, poverty runs at or above the national average, and it is deepest in New Orleans. Spanish is spoken in many homes. And in Baton Rouge, our neighbors are younger than the nation, while the median age in our pews is 59.

In many places, the people around our churches are younger, are less resourced, and more diverse than the people inside them.

Slide 7: Strong, and under pressure

Your congregations have told their own story in five years of parochial report narratives, and two things are true at once.

We are stronger than most. Our congregations received $23.9 million last year and spent $20.4 million. Our congregational endowments total $123 million.

And we are under pressure. Only half of our congregations have an endowment, and those that do draw 5% a year, more than the Church at large. Half of our congregations are led by a full-time priest; a third depend on part-time, supply clergy or lay leaders. Many of you have waited a long time for a priest. Many of you are tired, because the same faithful few are doing most of the work. And one word dominates those narratives: insurance. Property as well as health insurance. Churches that are otherwise healthy call it a threat to their existence.

There is one more truth, and it is older than any of these numbers. In my letter to you, I said that truth-telling may also mean revisiting old assumptions about what shaped our traditions: who built our churches, who was welcomed in them, and who was not. Later in this Convention, Chaplain Epperson and I will talk about how Sewanee has faced its own history through the Roberson Project. When we learn something new about our past, the faithful response is not to hurry back to how things were. It is to uphold our Baptismal Covenant in light of it.

Hear me carefully. These numbers set us in time in Louisiana. You cannot take a next step, faithful or otherwise, until you know where your feet are.

Slide 8: The ground beneath us is shifting

In Louisiana, where our feet are is not a figure of speech.

This map gathers the best current projections of where Americans will move by 2050 because of heat, storms, and rising water. Look at our state. It is shaded extreme risk, the darkest color on the map. The arrows leave New Orleans, Houston, and Mobile and run north, toward the Great Lakes and New England. New Orleans ranks second in the world for projected coastal flood loss as a share of its economy. Our coasts can expect another ten to twelve inches of sea-level rise by mid-century.

So that is our Now.

Slide 9: Flipping the storm

So let us leave the present for a few minutes and take two of Johansen's ideas with us.

The first is about the weather we are living in. In the 1990s, the Army War College gave it a name: VUCA. Volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous

Johansen's insight is that leaders can't stop the storms, but they can answer them letter for letter. Volatility yields to vision. Uncertainty yields to understanding. Complexity yields to clarity. Ambiguity yields to agility.

Listen to those four words again as church words. Vision, Understanding, Clarity, and Agility.

Vision: Where is no vision, there is no growth

Understanding: Listen

Clarity: We know whose we are!!

Agility: Carry the light together

Get out of survival mode!

Slide 10: Clarity, not certainty

The second idea is the one I most want you to carry home. Johansen says the future will reward clarity…not certainty

Certainty says: we know exactly how this must be done, because it is how we have always done it. Certainty is brittle. It breaks the first time the water rises.

Clarity is different. Clarity means being very clear about where we are going and very flexible about how we get there.

We are clear about this: We are going toward Jesus, and we are taking our neighbors with us. We will keep the promises of our Baptismal Covenant. We will gather at the table and make room for it. On these things we will not bend.

And then we must also be flexible: What time the service is. Which building we are in. Whether the congregation has one priest or shares three. Whether the liturgy is in English, or Spanish, or both. Whether the next leader of your congregation is ordained at all. On these things, the future will ask us to hold our conventions with open hands.

Slide 11: Signals of hope

Futurists look for signals: small things happening now that could be big in ten years. Johansen warns against sorting everything into boxes, and the Church loves two boxes in particular: growing and dying. Look across the whole spectrum instead, and the same reports that gave us the hard numbers give us these.

Easter 2025 drew 973,068 people into Episcopal churches, up 13 percent from the year before. The appetite for resurrection is not shrinking.

Among the people already in our pews, 84 percent say their congregation is spiritually vital and alive. Seventy percent say it is willing to change to meet new challenges. And among those under 35, the ones we are always told have given up on us, 89 percent say they are excited about the future of their congregation. They are more hopeful than we are.

When congregations across the Church were asked to name the one thing that represents their hope, the most common answer was children, youth, and families. The second was outreach to people in need. The third was partnership with the community around them. Not one of the top answers was about the building.

And here at home: 21,000 new Hispanic neighbors in metro New Orleans. More than one in five Louisianans have no church home. And later today you will hear our own young people speak for themselves. You will hear of the work of the Gaudet Umbrella Ministries. You will hear about how this church is making a difference in the lives of our neighbors in south Louisiana.

Slide 12: Signals of hope in Louisiana

Your own reports say so. The strongest thing about this diocese is that we serve our neighbors: food for children, families without homes, faith shared at home, ministry to those in prison. Our schools and campus ministries put us beside young people every day. Congregations are trying new things. How do we reach that 30% that has yet to be introduced to the church?

And the congregations with the most life in them share four marks: strong community partnerships, real engagement with youth and families, a diverse and welcoming culture, and a clear mission beyond Sunday morning.

Week after week I see what is already flourishing all around me, from one congregation to another. Yes, some things among us feel dormant. But dormant is a gardener's word. It does not mean dead. It means waiting for the season.

Those are not the signals of an ending. Those are the signals of a field ready for harvest, and a shortage only of laborers.

Read Slides

Slide 13: What 2036 will thank us for starting.

So come with me. It is October of 2036, and we are gathered for the 199th Convention of this diocese. Look around the room.

The water is higher than it was.

There are fewer congregations than there were in 2026. Yet, the ministries thrive. We still are setting an example across the Episcopal church.

There are people here who had never belonged to any church before they belonged to us. We have reached those who previously felt left out by the church.

And when a storm comes, the first call our neighbors make is to the Episcopal church. We are strong and resilient. Resources, like those through ERD, are sent to us to reach those in the most need. We have established an endowment for these days. Nobody taught us that from a book. This diocese learned it in 2005, and in every season since.

That is not a forecast. It is a picture of faithfulness, and I offer it for you to argue with and improve. That's the legacy that I pray to leave with you as bishop.

Nothing in that room in 2036 requires us to be bigger. It requires us to be clear...to stand in Truth.

The Archbishop of Canterbury was with the bishops at Camp Allen, and she urged us to move from fear to hope. The bishops' letter puts the call this way: to live now as an embodied sign of God's future. That room in 2036 is not something we wait for. It is something we are asked to begin being.

Now we walk home. From that room in 2036, back to this one. And the question changes. It is no longer "How do we stop the decline?" It is "What would that church thank us for having started this year?"

I believe it would thank us for three things, and they are the groundwork we will lay together.

First, strengthen connections across ministries. A church that will share priests, share buildings, connect with one another, long before the storm. Connection is not a nicety. It is the infrastructure of hope.