

Kate Wesch - Diocese of Olympia - Essay Responses

1. What does Becoming Beloved Community mean to you? What experiences do you have walking with people on the road toward racial reconciliation, healing, and justice? How have you engaged ministries of reconciliation in your own vocation and career. What are the most important things you've learned along the way?

As a leader in the Episcopal Church, Becoming Beloved Community means meeting people where they are with compassion and grace and inviting them to more. In the context in which I currently serve, a 233-year-old church in New England, it has meant telling our story in a new way. Through participation in the *Witness Stones Project*, we have uncovered our founding church members complicity with slavery as well as their involvement with the early abolitionist movement. We have learned that an enslaved young woman named, Violet, was baptized at our church in the 1790s alongside the family who owned her. In leading our small town into truth-telling, our efforts have focused on restoring the history and honoring the humanity of the enslaved individuals who helped build our community, including Violet. The parish has also benefited tremendously from a diocesan grant enabling us to share this work with other parishes and communities in our region of the diocese. This project has compelled people in new ways to examine their own racial biases and work towards racial reconciliation in our current day.

When I served as Associate Rector and then Rector of churches in the Seattle metro area, this work looked quite different. In those contexts, Becoming Beloved Community involved participation in the *Sacred Ground* curriculum through The Episcopal Church, studying the indigenous peoples upon whose land our churches occupy, budgeting to pay rent to the Duwamish people for the use of unceded land, and calling people to action in efforts to dismantle systems of oppression.

In my work with Interim Bodies of General Convention, I have learned so much about the experiences of Episcopal communities that are not English speaking, culturally diverse, and often under-resourced. In the current triennium, I serve as Chair of the Task Force to Revise the Parochial Report Finance Page. Our efforts have focused on simplifying this report and making it more accessible to churches outside of the United States and especially Spanish speaking congregations. These experiences have opened my eyes to the wide range of Episcopal congregations and the unique needs of culturally and financially diverse institutions.

The most important thing that I have learned along the way is the necessity of obedient listening to God and one another. In an effort to decentralize the dominant narratives and experiences, I continually seek out voices that differ from my own and let the act of prayerful listening continue to transform me.

2. Why this Diocese? Why now? Explain what excites you about the Diocese of Olympia. What do you find daunting/challenging and why?

The Diocese of Olympia was home for many years, from the time I finished seminary in 2006 until 2021. My first job was working the receptionist desk at Diocesan House during my time as

a transitional deacon. In my 15 years of ordained ministry in the diocese, I served three very different congregations and learned a tremendous amount about the various needs of churches both large and small.

When I read the Diocesan Profile, I see familiar faces and places. I know many of the stories behind the stories. And yet, after several years of ministry on the East Coast, I have a fresh perspective.

The timing is terrible and yet, I have found the calling of the Holy Spirit to happen on God's time, not ours. I love parish ministry and find my current position deeply fulfilling with many years of work ahead. If this is not to be, I will happily continue in my role as rector of St. John's, Essex for years to come.

At the same time, it would be irresponsible to ignore the prompting of the Holy Spirit and the invitations from God's people to enter into discernment with the Diocese of Olympia.

The Diocese of Olympia excites me in its commitment to developing disciples of Jesus across a diverse range of communities. The long-term commitment to congregational development in places of all sizes and locations has improved the health and vitality of Episcopal congregations and provided an environment in which the transformation of all people is prioritized. This is critical for our future in the Episcopal Church and as people of God living out our faith in the world.

The focus on multicultural ministries and inclusion of the LGBTQIA++ community demonstrates a willingness and desire to embrace our baptismal vows as people who respect the dignity of every human being with God's help. As our country and our world moves increasingly towards polarization and division, the Diocese of Olympia states unequivocally that the church in the Pacific Northwest remains a place of inclusion and affirmation. Western Washington and the Seattle area in particular will continue to see geographic relocation of people seeking safety and acceptance, especially among the transgender community and those who face persecution and oppression in other areas of our country. The Diocese of Olympia is perfectly poised to receive these communities with open arms and I find this to be tremendously exciting.

The Episcopal Church is in decline, especially when looking at attendance numbers and the sustainability of our smaller congregations and missions. The trends in Olympia reflect wider trends in our church and this is challenging. It is time for a broad conversation about the future of our churches, especially in places of steep decline. We cannot continue to do things the way we have always done them and must face the necessity of merging, and even closing congregations. It is time to right-size our resources to meet the needs of the Episcopal Church in the 21st century.

3. Why do you think that there are declining numbers in the Episcopal Church and what is your vision for supporting Episcopal communities to find new vitality? What are some examples of how you have addressed this in other settings?

Church attendance is declining across the board in all denominations. The Episcopal Church is not alone in this. When I wonder about this decline, I am reminded of the wisdom of St. Benedict; *God is not elsewhere*. God is very present in our daily lives, in our communities, and in our churches even when they don't look and feel the same as they did decades ago.

The church I currently serve is experiencing a sustained burst of energy, vitality, and attendance. We aren't doing anything radical, but we are focusing on three things; loving God, loving our neighbor, and deepening our faith through the practice of spiritual disciplines. We are focusing primarily on worship. We are studying scripture by reading the entire Bible cover to cover as a community, and we are actively discussing how we connect our faith to our lives.

Three years ago, I could count those attending Bible Study on one hand. Now, we have three weekly Bible Studies and robust participation in each as people yearn to understand the stories of our faith. This, in turn, is increasing Sunday worship attendance as people are experiencing transformation in new and profound ways.

I believe Episcopal communities can find new vitality through authenticity and focus on Jesus Christ through the study of Holy Scripture. People are hungry for this in a tumultuous world and crave ritual, comfort, and honest conversation about living a modern life of faith.

Also, it is time to take a prayerful and critical look at our administrative structures. Where can we partner better with one another? What are our redundancies? When does being a good steward of our resources mean consolidating, closing, or merging congregations?

Over the past year, I co-facilitated a diocesan group of clergy's monthly meetings for support and formation. Most of those clergy are engaged in part-time church work and they are tired. There are opportunities here for creative and adaptive solutions which will enhance and strengthen the body of Christ, not diminish it. As the Bishop in Olympia, I would welcome these difficult conversations as a means for moving ahead with transformation and grace.

4. We are a geographically large and diverse Diocese (some congregations are ferry access only or 3+ hours drive away from the diocesan office). How will you engage in relationship building and getting to know the Diocese?

The Diocese of Olympia encompasses the most beautiful land in our country from Westport to Blaine to Battle Ground and Darrington. In the 15 years I spent living in the Seattle area, I visited almost every corner of the diocese whether it was a diocesan event, a camping trip, or a family outing. As we learned during the pandemic, technology allows us to be connected in new ways that are more economical as well as being more environmentally friendly. We also learned that there is no substitution for gathering together in-person.

In recent years, the diocese has gathered in new ways, having a spring get together for clergy and parish leaders and this past fall a Saturday event with workshops and worship. In addition to the ongoing College for Congregational Development gatherings, these are essential for continued development of relationships. St. Mark's Cathedral has also played a pivotal role in gathering the diocese for Cathedral Day, ordinations, and other events.

In the Kingdom of God, relationship is primary and I believe the bishop's presence, support, and encouragement of these types of gatherings is paramount.

Getting to know the diocese will require intentionality and presence. As a parish priest, I have always focused the majority of my time on the parish. While involvement and participation in the wider church is important for clergy and bishops, it is critical that the leader be intentional about spending most of their time in the diocese developing these important relationships.