

**Keynote Address for Gather, Listen, Connect**  
**The Diocese of Easton**  
**November 15, 2025**

I begin my address with a reflection from Teilhard de Chardin titled *Patient Trust*. De Chardin was a French, Jesuit Catholic priest who lived from 1881-1955. Greg Harbaugh shared it with us during worship at one of our early meetings. It is good spiritual food for today.

*Above all, trust in the slow work of God.*  
*We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.*  
*We should like to skip the intermediate stages.*  
*We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.*  
*And yet, it is the law of all progress that it is made*  
*By passing through some stages of instability –*  
*And that it may take a very long time.*  
*And so I think it is with you;*  
*Your ideas mature gradually – let them grow,*  
*Let them shape themselves, without undue haste.*  
*Don't try to force them on,*  
*As though you could be today what time*  
*(that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will)*  
*Will make of you tomorrow.*  
*Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be.*  
*Give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you,*  
*And accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.*

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We are here today because the Diocese of Easton is in an in-between place, brought about not only by a transition in episcopal leadership, but also conflict that has been in the diocese, with Bishop Marray, for some time. Bishop Marray has now completed his tenure as Bishop of this diocese, and I understand you have had a

good and loving farewell. The Standing Committee is the Ecclesiastical Authority now and Bishop Shand is here as a bishop of the church to be a pastoral presence to you.

The Episcopal Church values all four orders of ministry – laity, deacons, priests and bishops. When one order is not represented in the customary way, we feel its vacancy. We are designed with full representation in mind and we function best when all four orders are working together in a balanced way.

Transitions are times when the balance shifts, and we are given the gift of imbalance. It can feel awkward, but it is an opportunity to gain insights that can help shape the future. “Let it be unpolished and messy and true”, as the saying goes! So, friends, this time of transition is an opportunity to explore how we live this baptismal life in our Episcopal way, at this particular time in history, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

This season of transition calls for a gathering like this; conflict calls for a gathering like this. Transitions bring conflict, that is just a fact. If we feel resistant to that aspect of transition, let us remember that even when transitions are welcome, the shifts will involve some level of conflict. Think of having a baby. It is happy and good – and turns your life upside down! Major decisions are being made constantly, conflict will arise on how to change a diaper or hold a bottle – or the baby for that matter. It is a time of tension and maybe dissension.

In addition to an episcopal transition, conflict has been in the Diocese of Easton for some members of this body for quite some time now. Some of you may have little awareness of it, but it is a very real source of tension and dissension that is painful and not going away on its own. It is conflict that has involved your bishop, the use of authority and how relationships functioned between the episcopate and other orders of ministry.

The leadership of this diocese has named that there is conflict here, that there is pain here, and that there is relational breakdown here. They have also said, ‘we want – we must – do something about this - here.’

While conversations and other processes have been engaged, which you will hear more about from Rebecca Wilson, today, as I said earlier, the diocese as a body begins a process of formation that will allow you to sort through the various conflicts and resolve what is possible to resolve. We will use spiritual practices and relational skills that will support communication and reconciliation. The intent is to clear the conflicts to the extent we are able, heal from the pain and move forward together in our Christian life and ministry.

So, a few words about conflict. First of all, most of us do not particularly enjoy it. Our mission statement as a church, however, assumes its presence. On page 855 of the Book of Common Prayer it states:

*What is the mission of the church?*

*The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.*

“Restoration” assumes separation. Separation can happen for many reasons. We can presume conflict is in the mix.

Conflict can take time to acknowledge and even longer to embrace. Conflict demands our best efforts. We all have an inner response to conflict. “Fright, flight or fight” is a quick summary. Right now, at this very moment, we are all having feelings.

While we may try to avoid it, we live with conflict on a daily basis. We see it writ large in our world, but we really only have to go as far as our families or our neighbors to be intimately impacted by it. We will often avoid it until it becomes chronic and must be dealt with for the sake of something we value. Sometimes we just can’t be in a situation or with a particular person – we are not ready – or it simply may never be safe to engage.

In the church, we find it especially distressing since we are *commanded* to love God, neighbor, and self. And when we don’t – when we can’t - we can feel shame and hopelessness, rage and blame, righteousness and vindication. Certainly, we can be wounded and we can wound. We might feel we have failed at our mission. Thank God for Jesus Christ in whom we know the infinite mercy and forgiveness of God.

Today, in this time of beginning, I invite you to consider that conflict, with all its trouble, is a holy opportunity for transformation. It is a valuable pathway to change, growth and fruitfulness. It is the pathway through which our baptismal covenant offers us new life – a recurring process that serves us throughout our whole lives.

I would like to introduce into your vocabulary the phrase “Conflict Transformation”. Some of the words we have used to convey what we hope to do here in the Diocese of Easton - conflict resolution, healing, and reconciliation - are components of conflict transformation.

The term, coined by John Paul Lederach, of the Mennonite Peacebuilding Movement, came about in the 1990’s when people who work in this field realized that much conflict was among people who needed or desired to have an ongoing relationship. For the church, of course, we have an imperative to ‘love God and love one another’ and our mission *is* reconciliation. We signed up for that - or our parents

brought us to it - at baptism! There is no question for Christians, that having the relationship go forward is of the utmost importance.

What we are doing here is not the more familiar legal mediation where we make a deal, avoid litigation and never see one another again. This is about healing what is ruptured and finding new life together; returning to love one another over and over again. And yes, agreements and change are involved.

Conflict transformation is a comprehensive approach to transforming the personal, relational, structural, and cultural aspects embedded in the conflict. In conflict, you may start with a presenting problem or an issue, but when you look at the arc of the conflict, or its life, if you will, you can discover the deeper issues, what is its essence, and strategically support the transformation over time. Conflict is very much a living thing. It is dynamic and we have a relationship with it. Through it we can learn what really matters, what the deeper issues are in our community, what we need, what we long for – and - what we are called, willing and able to do for the sake of the gospel and the body of Christ.

Just as conflict is dynamic, so is reconciliation. It too has a life and we have a relationship with it. It may start slowly, we may make a few steps forward, then take a few steps backwards. It too, is unpolished, messy, and true. When we work together to solve our problems with genuine love for one another – we are personally and communally transformed. What can emerge is a very powerful and prophetic sort of community.

Lederach notes, “a conflict transformation platform must be short-term responsive and long-term strategic.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, you must deal with the acute, high conflict, which is often personal and relational, and you must work on the chronic, longer-term issues, which are often structural and cultural. I observe that the leadership of the Diocese of Easton is trying to manage forward movement by attending to the short and long term matters at all four levels: cultural, relational, structural and personal. And it takes time.

As I have pondered Lederach’s theory, I note that as Christian Episcopalians we have a transformation process too. It is called the Baptismal Covenant. And, like conflict transformation, the baptismal covenant is only a theory – a vision – until you activate it.

All covenants, vows, visions, strategic plans, the most creative ideas - all remain theoretical until they are activated.

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<sup>1</sup> John Lederach introduced the theory in an article published in October, 2003. Resources may be found on <https://www.beyondintractability.org>.

In your packet, there is a parallel that has the Baptismal Covenant and Practices of Conflict Transformation alongside one another. I am going to talk about it, so if you want to pull it out, please do so.

Baptismal Covenant	Practices of Conflict Transformation
Will you continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship and in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?	Intentional gathering of the body of Christ after a breach in fellowship, trust, and communication that has resulted in hurt and injury, including not being able to be in the same room together.
Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?	Create safe space for individuals and groups to hear, acknowledge and accept the harm and hurt experienced, making room for the 'mystery of Christ' to be known between members of the body of Christ.
Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?	Enact agreed upon systemic change and inter-personal behaviors aligned with gospel values such as: respectful communication norms, attentive listening, respectful speech, transparency, and participation in processes that support healing, reconciliation and conflict prevention.
Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?	Individuals and groups seeking reconciliation with those whom they may have harmed, or by whom they may have been harmed, in order to renew the relationship to the furthest extent possible.
Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?	Amend institutional policies, practices and protocols that increase safety, equity, love and respect for all persons.

I want to put together for you the vows of our baptismal covenant, conflict transformation practices and what we are doing here today. The practices of conflict transformation have deeper meaning when we understand them to be in service to the vows we take as the baptized. We do not intend to spiritualize the practices because that might feel good, but rather to make a deeper connection with Christ and one another that binds us together and grounds our work in the sacred.

So, *today*, we are ‘continuing in the apostles’ teaching, and fellowship and in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers’ by gathering. I have always thought this first vow was a bit obvious but after becoming a mediator and working in this area of conflict transformation, I realize that this step requires great courage and is not as simple as just going to church every week; and let’s admit it – maybe even coming late and leaving early in order to avoid someone. Let us not take for granted that we are in this room together. It has taken courage to come today.

*Today*, in what we hope is safe space for honest conversation, we are resisting evil, repenting and returning to the Lord by disciplining ourselves in processes that help us speak and listen respectfully. Fully present, deep listening is strong resistance to evil. This sort of listening has the outcome of lessening resentment and judgment and allowing forgiveness to emerge as we hear the stories of others. We are allowing room for “the mystery of Christ”, as Paul mentions in the close of his letter to the Colossians.

*Today*, we are proclaiming in word and example the good news by coming together in Christ’s name. For the sake of the gospel we are agreeing to behave in ways that promote holy honoring of one another and our experiences. Gathering today is a sign of our hope and trust in the saving work of Christ.

*Today* we are seeking Christ and serving the reconciliation that is his gift to the world. No matter the action, small or large, anytime we seek and serve Christ in other persons, we are enacting reconciliation, drawing God and humanity together.

*Today*, we seek justice by gathering and speaking publicly. The institution of the church, the body of Christ in this place has said, ‘we need to change, to grow, to be reconciled’, and this will keep us moving in the direction of justice, peace, respect and dignity.

Take a moment and reflect on one or more of the vows and its particular transformational practice. Perhaps you can resonate with one of the vows at this time in your personal life or in the life of the diocese.

These vows and practices are relevant to every aspect of our lives. In both conflict transformation and our baptismal covenant, these vows, these milestones, are both circular and linear. You work on one thing here, and another there. Over

time, the Spirit weaves them together and you have a unified energy of love and purpose, grounded in Christ, that gets you where you are praying to be.

I offer this framework today with the hope that you can make holy sense of your experiences and stories and take courage to engage the work that lies ahead for you and the diocese in this transition time.

One of the greatest gifts of conflict transformation is that it teaches us conflict prevention. When we regularly employ practices and skills that deepen our relationships and love for one another, conflict does not usually become so destructive. Conflict at lower levels is often a gift. We might pray that we can see conflict as our teacher rather than something to avoid, and then, never come back to this place again. Simply, you won't need to go so far down this road.

So, where do we go from today? Today is a public, diocesan-wide beginning. There is more to do and discover during this time of transition. We hope the Bible study, the presentations, and the table conversations will stimulate thoughts and ideas about what you think the next steps might look like in terms of the reconciliation work and how it relates to the work of the Discernment and Standing Committees. You will have an opportunity to write thoughts and ideas on the newsprint, displaying them on the walls to be recorded and reviewed by the steering committee, and eventually shared with the whole diocese. That information, in addition to the data from the listening sessions from your convention last spring, will be used to continue the work that best supports conflict transformation in the diocese. Your presence and participation today and in the months ahead are necessary to this process.

As I close, I do so with the prayer for the newly baptized:

*Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon us your servants the forgiveness of sin, and raised us to the new life of grace. Sustain us, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give us, inquiring and discerning hearts, the courage to will and to persevere, and a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy in all your works. **Amen.***

As delivered by The Right Reverend Mary Gray-Reeves, 15 November 2025