

**Mission Leadership Review
Episcopal Diocese of Vermont**

**Report
October 9, 2023**

Prepared for The Rt. Rev. Dr. Shannon MacVean-Brown

**by Pebble Hill Consulting LLC
The Rev. Gay C. Jennings**

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light:
Look favorably on your whole Church,
that wonderful and sacred mystery;
by the effectual working of your providence,
carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation;
let the whole world see and know that things
which were cast down are being raised up,
and things which had grown old are being made new,
and that all things are being brought to their perfection
by him through whom all things were made,
your Son Jesus Christ our Lord;
who lives and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Book of Common Prayer

Section I. Background

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Shannon MacVean-Brown was elected bishop of the Diocese of Vermont on May 18, 2019, and ordained and consecrated September 28, 2019.

The *Covenant of Understanding* (Letter of Agreement) between the new bishop and the diocese's Standing Committee called for a Mutual Ministry Review (Mission Leadership Review) to be conducted, although the timing was left open.

In July 2023, Bishop MacVean-Brown contracted with the Rev. Gay C. Jennings of Pebble Hill Consulting LLC to conduct a Mission Leadership Review. This is the first review since the bishop was ordained and consecrated.

The *Covenant of Understanding*, signed by the bishop and the president of the Standing Committee at the time, states:

“The Bishop and Standing Committee will devise a plan to review the mutual ministry of leadership exercised by the bishop and other diocesan leadership and components of this agreement, in order to:

- ❖ assess how well the Bishop, Standing Committee, Diocesan Council, and other diocesan leadership are fulfilling their responsibilities to each other and the ministry they share.
- ❖ establish goals for the work of the diocese for the future. (These goals will serve as the basis for each subsequent ministry review.)
- ❖ identify areas of conflict or disappointment that may be adversely affecting mutual ministry.
- ❖ clarify expectations of all parties and, in particular, make sure that all parties continue to understand this agreement and the position description of the Bishop in the same way.”

Section II. Mission Leadership Review Process

In August 2023, the interview questions and list of people to be interviewed was compiled by the consultant and reviewed by the bishop and the Standing Committee.

The same questions were used in each individual and group interview.

General Questions

- ❖ How would you describe the culture of the Diocese of Vermont?
- ❖ What is going well in the diocese?
- ❖ What do you wish would be going better? What needs attention?
- ❖ What are the opportunities for the diocese?

The Episcopacy

- ❖ How do you experience Bishop Shannon and what has been the impact of her ministry so far?
- ❖ What does Bishop Shannon do best?
- ❖ What could Bishop Shannon do better?

Structure and Resources

- ❖ What is most helpful and life-giving about the way the diocese is structured?
- ❖ What is least helpful and undermines or threatens mission?
- ❖ If you could change one thing, what would it be?
- ❖ What is the one thing you would protect from being changed?
- ❖ As a leader, what do you need to serve faithfully and effectively?
- ❖ What else do I need to know?

Interviews were conducted beginning August 17. All interviews were completed by September 14. A total of 27 interviews were conducted by the consultant with 48 people interviewed. All interviews were held via Zoom.

Individual Interviews (22 people)

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|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1) Bishop Diocesan | The Rt. Rev. Dr. Shannon MacVean-Brown |
| 2) Executive Assistant to the Bishop | Ms. Kathy Torrisi |
| 3) CTO for Cultural Transformation | The Rev. Canon Walter Brownridge |
| 4) Canon for Mission Vitality | The Rev. Canon Susan Ohlidal |
| 5) Transition Ministry Consultant | The Rev. Canon Linda Grenz |
| 6) Communications Consultants | Canticle Communications:
Rebecca Wilson & the Rev. Kathleen Moore |
| 7) Interim Chief Financial Officer | Mr. Michael Shapiro |
| 8) Financial Administrator | Mr. Rick Sagui |
| 9) Bookkeeper/Administrative Asst | Ms. Sam Sellers |
| 10) Diocesan Treasurer | Mr. Paul Horn |
| 11) Chancellor | Mr. Thomas A. Little |
| 12) President, Trustees of the Diocese | Ms. Sarah Cowan |
| 13) Member, Trustees of the Diocese | Dr. Ann Guillot |

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 14) President, Standing Committee | The Rev. Lisa Ransom |
| 15) Chair, Commission on Finance & Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral | The Very Rev. Greta Getlein |
| 16) Chair, Committee on Congregational Development & Formation | The Rev. Earl Kooperkamp |
| 17) Executive Director, Rock Point Commons | Ms. Kelly Kimball |
| 18) Head of School, Rock Point School | Mr. C.J. Spirito |
| 19) Executive Director, Brookhaven Treatment & Learning Center | Mr. Rocky Spino |
| 20) Chair, Resolutions Committee | Ms. Anne C. Brown |
| 21) The Rev. Jane Butterfield Presler | Retired Priest |
| 22) The Rev. Janet Brown | Retired Priest |

Group Interviews (26 people)

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|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 23) Core Standing Committee (7) | The Rev. Stannard Baker, The Rev. Sarah Ginolfi, Ms. Jennifer Knowles, The Rev. Paul Olsson, The Rev. Lisa Ransom, Mr. Tom Rees, Ms. Maggie Thompson |
| 24) Deacons (9) | The Revs. Stannard Baker, Jim Ballard, Catherine Cook, Dave Ganter, Lars Hunter, Peggy Mathauer, Jonathan Ross, Mary Taggart, Geoff Smith |
| 25) New Clergy Group (6) | The Revs. Melanie Combs, Bram Kranichfeld, adwoa Lewis-Wilson, Jeremy Means-Koss Darcey Mercier, Linda Moore |
| 26) Chairs, Committee on Ministry (2) | Dr. Lisa Schnell & The Rev. Dr. Titus Presler |
| 27) Chaplains to Retired Clergy (2) | The Revs. John Morris & Carole Wageman |

Notes taken during the interviews were transcribed, thematically coded and organized in order to surface patterns, trends, common experiences and opinions as well as divergent experiences and opinions.

Based on the interview results, a SWOT Matrix was built to capture a summary of the data leading to the formulation of recommendations. A SWOT Matrix is an analytic tool used to understand the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in an organization.

Description of SWOT Matrix Quadrants

Strengths generally include what is done well and builds up the diocese. Strengths are an indicator of the faithful and robust ways in which people in the diocese and the diocese as an entity are participating in God's mission. Strengths highlight processes and systems that are strong and identifies assets, people, experience, knowledge, programs, structures, and initiatives that benefit the diocese and advance its call to serve.

Weaknesses generally include what is not going well and what needs attention in the diocese. This quadrant highlights processes and systems that are not functioning at full capacity, and identifies assets, resources, structures, groups, services, attitudes, and relationships that are perceived as insufficient or inadequate.

Opportunities are compelling mission possibilities within and beyond the diocese. Emerging internal and external opportunities are future focused, aspirational, and hopeful.

Threats are the obstacles facing the diocese that can have damaging impact. Threats can be internal or external. Internal threats may include how we live in community, how we do our work and ministry, and current organizational culture. External threats may include societal, political, environmental, demographic, or technological realities or impending changes that are harmful to the diocese and its participation in the mission of God in its context.

The SWOT Matrix can be used to establish goals for the work of the diocese for the future as noted in the *Covenant of Understanding*, with the goals serving as the basis for subsequent mission leadership reviews. Using data from the SWOT, leaders can formulate strategic options that build upon strengths, identify and possibly eliminate weaknesses, capitalize on opportunities, and recognize and possibly manage threats. Goals should be measurable, attainable, clear, and transparent.

The SWOT Matrix for the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont is included with this report.

Section III. Context and Culture

When undertaking a mission leadership review, it is critical to understand the context in which people live and serve. The Collect for Guidance in the Book of Common Prayer sets forth the essential context for participating in God’s mission, saying that in God “we live and move and have our being.”

In other words, we believe in the living God of history – our history. In that same collect, we ask God “to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight.” This is the fundamental context of our lives as the beloved People of God.

This context for mission and the Christian life is also shaped by our social, political, cultural, religious, economic, and geographic contexts. In the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont, people describe these realities, which shape and influence the diocese’s work and ministry, in forceful ways.

In the Mission Leadership Review interviews, the people of the diocese were described as faithful, creative, hardy, warm, compassionate, strong-willed, loyal, stalwart, independent, progressive, prone to exceptionalism, ready to lend a hand, and Vermont strong.

People noted the culture is not cohesive across the diocese; a reality that reflects the state’s culture. A significant number of people interviewed spoke about the diocese’s culture as independent, resistant to authority, preferably decentralized, progressive, affirming and inclusive, siloed, collaborative, participatory, disorganized, and containing anxiety in the system due to finances, shrinking size, and conflict.

Some people are acutely aware of the tenuous state of the church in Vermont, which has forty-two parishes; five full-time priests in traditional congregations; and three full-time priests in constellations.

- ❖ *The culture is in some flux driven by various factors including membership drop off and resulting financial constraints leading to fewer clergy who are spread too thin. All this goes back a long time but the diocese is now at a tipping point.*
- ❖ *The diocese is struggling to find a way forward through societal change, lower membership, the clergy shortage, crumbling buildings, and diminished resources - there is a sense of loss and diminishment in the diocese and the business of the church.*

Added to this mix is a bishop who is highly valued by most and disregarded by a few.

- ❖ *I love the bishop and her vision for the diocese (finances, COVID response, Constellations, THRIVE); like Jesus inviting Peter to get out of the boat, she has invited us to get out of the boat and it is good to have a bishop like her leading us through the storm.*

- ❖ *She is best at casting a vision and strategic thinking.*
- ❖ *She is best at being herself; her integrity of self is impressive.*
- ❖ *Necessary changes have led to a bit of chaos; there could have been more grace and skill in the changes made.*
- ❖ *She could listen more attentively to people with different ideas.*
- ❖ *She could have more resilience when dealing with conflict, which is hard because much of the conflict is fueled by institutional and cultural racism.*
- ❖ *There are some on the diocese who want a bishop who doesn't cause trouble and doesn't make us do anything.*
- ❖ *The culture of the diocese is resistant to the agent of change they elected and we have not helped her with that.*

Section IV. Interview Responses with the Four Quadrants of SWOT

This section of the report focuses on the four quadrants of the SWOT Matrix, described above in Section II, using responses from interviews.

A) Strengths

1) Efforts to restructure governance, mission, and finances through THRIVE; current efforts to fine tune provisions of THRIVE

There is wide appreciation and interest in THRIVE and the impact it has had and will have in the future in the areas of governance, finance, and mission. Leaders in the diocese view the THRIVE process as healthy and bringing good thinkers together. There is recognition that the current efforts to fine-tune some of the provisions of THRIVE will have a positive impact.

- ❖ *The new structures for diocesan life have potential.*
- ❖ *We've had in this diocese a structure that got old and crusty and the bishop has swept a lot of that away; we are now in the beginning of a more streamlined approach.*
- ❖ *It is still a work in progress – a multi-year process.*
- ❖ *The bishop initiated THRIVE which was a good idea.*

As it has recently been said, given the realities and impact of the pandemic, every organization can be considered a startup. The leaders of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont have taken this sentiment to heart as they look at how the diocese's structures can best advance mission.

2) Development of new models of congregational ministry and leadership; Constellations; lay leader formation and training; willingness to experiment; Green Mountain Online Abbey; new younger clergy bringing energy and enthusiasm

Support for trying new things and taking risks is evident, while at the same time, people acknowledge that change, while necessary, is hard.

- ❖ *There is energy for trying new things and taking risks.*
- ❖ *Vermont is ahead of the curve and there is an opportunity to address what David Brooks calls "living in an impoverished age."*

Constellations were described as hard to initiate and yet going well. People noted that new models of congregational ministry and leadership that include formation and training of lay leaders have positive long-term implications for the viability and sustainability of congregational life.

- ❖ *Some constellations are going really well and provide long-term hope.*

- ❖ *Support from the diocese and the bishop allowing flexibility is helping constellations.*
- ❖ *There has been a good effort in leadership formation and training.*

There is broad support for the vision of bringing new and younger clergy to the diocese and providing full-time positions through new models of congregational ministry. Just economic agreements that provide a living wage for clergy are seen as a positive way to attract and retain clergy, which benefits congregations. People experience the diocese's new clergy as committed, energetic, and enthusiastic.

- ❖ *People who have not considered ordained ministry as a priest can now consider it because there will be a living wage; we are no longer a sending diocese.*

The Green Mountain Online Abbey is held in high regard for expanding the capacity of people to worship, as well as providing unity and connection during and after the pandemic. Churches in transition now have easy access to formation on a continual basis. The Abbey serves as an example of an adaptive response to how to be the church in a new way.

- ❖ *The bishop stepped into the unknown with daily prayers during the pandemic and it was a thing of beauty.*
- ❖ *Green Mountain Abbey as a dedicated ministry is carefully overseen, receives attention from the bishop, and is functioning well.*

3) Financial transparency and ongoing work to clarify financial situation of the diocese; the CFO

There is significant appreciation for the work being done to create a responsible fiscal structure and improvements in financial management. The bishop is credited with calling the diocese to this work, and the interim Chief Financial Officer is credited with improved financial management and transparency.

- ❖ *The financial picture is clearer and appropriate measures are being put in place.*
- ❖ *Getting the financial house in order is going well and has required a lot of hard work from lay leaders, Commission on Finance, the Treasurer, and staff.*

4) Visionary and transformative leadership exercised by the bishop as an agent of change; appreciation for her pastoral care, warmth, creativity, faith, preaching and presiding, love of the church

There is wide recognition and gratitude for Bishop MacVean-Brown as a visionary and transformative leader who is clear in her vision as a bishop and her vision of what the church in Vermont can be.

In this vein, she is described as proactive, courageous, transparent, candid, objective, realistic, a bold thinker, a truth teller and a moving force calling the diocese to transformation.

- ❖ *She has encouraged people to be more brave and step out to do new things.*
- ❖ *She has a pulse on Vermont and has helped the diocese wrestle with the need to be a different kind of church.*
- ❖ *It is now more culturally acceptable for leadership (THRIVE leaders and the bishop) to say things have to change and cannot stay the same and there have to be new models and a new way of being church.*
- ❖ *She is insightful about the struggles having to do with allocation of resources and property; she is wonderfully jarring in terms of looking at financial realities saying it is better to know than to not know.*

People noted that as a result of her creativity, creativity is bubbling in the diocese.

- ❖ *It feels like she is aerating the diocese – the soil is still being fertilized and we are waiting for the seeds to sprout.*

People also noted there is disruption and a lot of discomfort with thoughtful comments about the dynamics of change.

- ❖ *There is disruption in every sense and a lot of discomfort, I have a fear that people will see the disruption as solely dysfunction and won't move toward re-orientation.*
- ❖ *The disruptions and discomfort are not just about color and cultural difference but include subtle forces that challenge our assumptions about how church should be.*
- ❖ *We have an opportunity here but we don't know how to respond to the disruption and resulting discomfort beyond being accusatory or defensive; brings to light things that need to change and for some that is being a bearer of bad news – we are a better diocese for that.*

People gave many examples of their appreciation for the bishop's personal characteristics such as warmth, creativity, and supportiveness; leadership style; pastoral care of clergy; spirituality and faith; artistry; preaching and presiding; leadership in racial matters; attention to diocesan institutions; working relationships; leadership during the pandemic including establishing Green Mountain Online Abbey.

5) Consultants and some diocesan staff are responsive and helpful

Numerous responses described staff and consultants as accessible, helpful, gifted, faithful, and working well together, and cited their responsiveness. The interim CFO, the canons, and the consultants were specifically mentioned as being particularly skilled and experienced.

B) Weaknesses

1) Lack of sufficient role clarity for staff, structures, and leaders: authority, supervision, accountability, polity and governance roles, training and development, policies and procedures

Diocesan leaders and staff identified the need for role clarity for people, processes, and structures. Comments about role clarity are sprinkled throughout the interview responses.

Role clarity is the degree to which positions and jobs – volunteer and compensated – have clear tasks, responsibilities, authority, and accountability. The same is true for diocesan governing bodies, commissions, and committees.

Role clarity is enhanced when there are current and updated position descriptions, letters of agreement, covenants, supervision, and performance reviews. Diocesan and General Convention Constitution and Canons, by-laws, and other means of defining roles and responsibilities are also relevant and important. Training and ongoing development is essential for staff and leaders. Evaluation is critical for accountability in structures and roles.

Responses regarding staff:

- ❖ *There is a lack of role clarity in the staff.*
- ❖ *The authority of different individuals is not clear and I don't know what is within the scope of my job.*
- ❖ *Lack of clarity in operational roles.*
- ❖ *Lack of clarity in reporting (supervisory) structure.*
- ❖ *Lack of clarity about how to get something approved.*
- ❖ *More clarity is needed – responsibilities and boundaries are all over the place.*

Responses regarding diocesan structures:

- ❖ *Need more policies, procedures, and processes.*
- ❖ *Committees don't publish agenda or minutes.*

- ❖ *Lack of role clarity and actually doing what your role requires.*
- ❖ *Having clear responsibilities and communicating that.*

Lack of role clarity can be a source of stress, confusion, anger, resentment, and tension. When role clarity is weak, questions about authority commonly surface, and competition for authority ensues.

Responses regarding authority:

- ❖ *There is a need for clear lines of authority.*
- ❖ *There is confusion about what the bishop decides and what others (i.e. canons or committees) have authority to decide.*
- ❖ *The bishop convened the Diocesan Council when it was a separate entity because the Council was about mission – now that has been subsumed into the Standing Committee eliminating the appropriate role of the bishop.*
- ❖ *The bishop is not running anything of substance regarding the budget and operations.*
- ❖ *(if I could change one thing)...Combining the Standing Committee and the Diocesan Council has fueled the current conflict; we need clarity about roles and procedures including the bishop's role and authority, the Standing Committee's role and authority.*
- ❖ *I wish there was a clergy handbook that includes what I am allowed to do and what I am not allowed to do.*

2) Lack of capacity: filling leadership roles and having staff with appropriate skill sets

People noted that there is a strong core of clergy and lay leadership in various areas who are caring and competent. It was noted by a lay leader that strong lay leadership is the heart and soul of our governance.

And still, leaders are concerned about having enough people to fill both diocesan and congregational leadership roles.

- ❖ *We need more people on committees which has been an historic problem.*
- ❖ *There needs to be more focus on raising up lay and clergy leaders.*
- ❖ *We have structures but we don't have enough people to fill necessary roles.*
- ❖ *There are fewer people for leadership due to aging out, the pandemic, death, or resistance to change.*
- ❖ *People in leadership stay in leadership, and the system works hard to keep them.*

There is concern that the skill sets of existing staff are not adequate for the work that needs to be accomplished.

- ❖ *Missed opportunities to work on the structure of the diocesan office to make it function and work better; operational structures are broken.*
- ❖ *Lack of staying on top of projects; follow through.*
- ❖ *Frustrating that support from administrative staff and legal staff is lacking in some specific areas.*
- ❖ *The bishop needs appropriate staffing and for that to be acknowledged as a reality; it can't be done on a shoestring.*
- ❖ *THRIVE didn't get to staffing and administration and that needs to happen.*

3) Tension between the core Standing Committee and the bishop

Note: This section of the report discusses concerns about tension between the bishop and the Standing Committee that served in 2023. Since the report was issued in October 2023, new members have been elected by Diocesan Convention to serve on the Standing Committee, a new president has been elected, and the work of repair and reconciliation recommended by this report is well underway.

There is tension between the bishop and the Standing Committee that has caused conflict and a lack of trust on the part of both parties. The relationship is damaged and in need of repair.

The Standing Committee is concerned about the leadership and accountability of the bishop, and in early 2023, the president contacted the Presiding Bishop's Office of Pastoral Development for assistance. There had been no previous meaningful discussion of the Standing Committee's concerns with the bishop, and this intervention happened without her knowledge and before she was fully aware of the issues at hand.

Some members of the Standing Committee perceive their concerns to be shared widely in the diocese. This perception was not corroborated by the interviews. The vast majority of responses about the bishop were positive and constructive.

In every Mission Leadership Review, people describe shortcomings of the bishop and things they believe and wish the bishop could do better. In this review, all comments (unattributed to specific people) were provided to Bishop MacVean-Brown and were discussed as part of the consultant's feedback process.

Negative responses about the bishop, including discussion of her personal characteristics, leadership style, interactions, and relationships, were diffuse and scattered. This means that most responses, when thematically coded, were from no more than four people, and most commonly from one or two. The most negative comments were predominantly made by members of the Standing Committee.

The tension and conflict with the Standing Committee has exacted a toll on the bishop, members of the Standing Committee, and some members of the bishop's staff. It is beginning to take a toll on the diocese. There is confusion and speculation about the root cause of the tension and conflict.

- ❖ *Church politics - name it and address it for the health of the whole community.*
- ❖ *There are hurting people and people need to be less charged with being right than with building the relationship.*
- ❖ *I know about the conflict but I know almost nothing about what has caused conflict or with whom.*
- ❖ *I had no inkling there was conflict and I think I would have heard a rumble of dissatisfaction but I have heard nothing.*
- ❖ *I have heard competing narratives about the sources of difficulty in the diocese; the narratives feel like smoke and mirrors and are held hard by both sides; it's hard to let go of them and be curious about what could be next.*
- ❖ *There are so many people who don't have a clue about this conflict, and I don't know the specifics.*
- ❖ *The current conflict does not involve a huge number of people rather a few people in influential positions.*
- ❖ *I was shocked that the conflict reached such intensity without addressing it at an earlier stage; surprised by how the Standing Committee has approached issues of conflict and the process has been a disgrace; the Standing Committee solicited negative feedback from the staff, made accusations without details, refused a process of reconciliation, and called for the resignation of the bishop; the president of the Standing Committee went to the presiding bishop's office before talking to the bishop, which is problematic.*
- ❖ *This conflict has taken a toll on the bishop and it didn't have to be that way.*
- ❖ *There is a culture of people being bullies and people sit and watch people misbehave and act like nothing happened; this is hard on people and limits people's willingness to step up and lead.*
- ❖ *People need to speak for themselves when complaining; anonymous lists of "they" are not helpful.*

4) Need for the strategic vision to be communicated widely in the diocese inspiring commitment and action

The Episcopal Diocese of Vermont is in a season of immense change. Everything from episcopal leadership, to diocesan structures, to the deployment of clergy, to the configuration of congregations, is in flux. There is a strategic vision, but it may not have been communicated in a systematic way to the diocese as a whole.

Articulating and communicating widely the vision of the diocese can provide a shared understanding of compelling purpose, meaning, and identity, which can inspire and motivate people to particular service and witness. As the symbol of unity in a diocese, the bishop is the appropriate messenger of the shared vision.

- ❖ *Communicating the vision more widely is missing.*

5) Congregationalism; resistance to authority; use of undefined terms (partnership, participatory, collaborative) causing confusion

Congregationalism is a system whereby individual churches are largely self-governing. Congregationalism is the dominant polity throughout much of New England's religious life, and the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont is not exempt. Congregationalism was identified by respondents as alive and functioning in the diocese. The independence inherent in congregationalism is coupled with resistance to authority and a dislike of hierarchical structures. The town hall culture of Vermont means people expect to have a say on anything and expect to be involved in all decision-making.

- ❖ *Vermonters do not like hierarchical structures.*
- ❖ *Vermont has an independent nature with a leave-me-alone attitude; highly independent people and congregations.*
- ❖ *The culture of the diocese is resistant to the agent of change they elected and we have not helped her with that.*
- ❖ *We don't like being told what to do; this is our side of the mountain.*
- ❖ *We want quick decisions but want to be involved in the decision making which is a tension.*
- ❖ *Congregations are independent in their mindset and their determination to set their own course.*
- ❖ *Congregations are independent and don't want to do what the bishop says.*

Acknowledging congregationalism should not be construed as a value judgment. Congregationalism is not bad in and of itself. Rather, some aspects of congregationalism are in tension with some aspects of the polity of the Episcopal Church. Our polity distributes authority among lay people, clergy, and bishops through the *Constitution and Canons of the General Convention*, which orders our common life. While executive

authority is distributed and governance is shared, there are things that are not decided solely by congregations.

The tension in these cultural and ecclesiastical landscapes has resulted in the use of language that may or may not be understood by everyone. and can be in conflict with the polity of the Episcopal Church. Words like participatory, collaborative, and partnership were used by some of the people interviewed, and their precise meaning is not shared by everyone. An example is the phrase Bishop-in-Partnership, which was used in the *Covenant of Understanding* signed by Bishop MacVean-Brown and the Standing Committee at the time of her election and ordination as bishop of Vermont. No such designation of a bishop is used on a churchwide basis and there is not an agreed-upon definition of the term. Any designation of this kind would need to be determined by General Convention.

C) Opportunities

1) Continue to strengthen and develop structures and congregations by articulating broadly the strategic vision and plan to manage decline, leverage areas of promise and growth, build capacity, and determine best and most strategic allocation of resources

*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
plans for your welfare and not for harm,
to give you a future with hope.
Jeremiah 29:11*

*One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision,
"Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent...
Acts 18:9*

The bishop is seen as a visionary and transformative leader, and the people of the diocese are eager for her to articulate that vision theologically in ways that provide a shared understanding of compelling purpose and mission; deepen identity and vocation; and inspire and motivate people to service and witness.

While the bishop, who is the symbol of unity in a diocese, is the appropriate messenger of the diocese's shared vision, she does not create the vision alone, but rather listens to and consults with people throughout the diocese.

2) Strengthen and build relationships and partnerships of all sorts:

- ❖ **among clergy**
- ❖ **among congregations**
- ❖ **among bishop/staff and clergy**
- ❖ **among bishop/staff and congregations**
- ❖ **among staff**
- ❖ **with diocesan institutions**
- ❖ **with communities**
- ❖ **with other dioceses**

It was evident throughout the interviews that people care deeply about the church in Vermont, about each other, about their congregations, about the diocese, about their bishop, and about the mission God has entrusted to them. It became clear over the course of the interviews that because people care so much about the church in Vermont and the people of the diocese, they want deep and real relationships with each other and the people they serve alongside.

Clergy and lay people are hungry for relationships, belonging, and community. This longing is likely heightened after the pandemic, during which there was protracted isolation. Because the bishop is the focus of unity in an ecclesiological sense, people in the diocese want their bishop to be present with them, especially in congregations.

- ❖ *Relationship repair and relationship building needs attention – some of this is due to COVID, it was a rough start for all of us; those relationships didn't get built in the usual way, or at all.*
- ❖ *It was unfortunate the bishop began her ministry five months before the pandemic struck and she is catching up getting to know people and congregations.*

A significant number of people are interested in partnership with other dioceses, especially Maine and New Hampshire. Each of the three bishops in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine are now assisting bishops in the other dioceses. Visitations across diocesan lines have begun. Some congregations have begun to explore or have begun ministries with congregations across state lines. There are still many possibilities to explore.

Relationships are at the heart of the Gospel and at the heart of ministry. Building relationships brings people closer to one another and the heart of God. Building relationships is its own reward, and continuing to build relationships will strengthen the witness and ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont.

3) Expand the circle of parish and diocesan leaders; actively recruit new leaders

A balance of seasoned and new leaders, clergy and lay, brings continuity, historical reference, fresh perspective, and new ideas to the task of leadership.

- ❖ *I do see a lot of potential because there are a lot of people who haven't had a chance or space for ministry and leadership.*

4) Redouble efforts to become Beloved Community; build understanding among diocesan leaders about the challenges the bishop faces as a Black leader as she navigates white leadership norms, bias, and anti-Black racism

The challenging and complex work of becoming Beloved Community is foundational for Christian discipleship and requires long-term commitment, tenacity, and courage. The Episcopal Diocese of Vermont is uniquely situated, and hopefully motivated, to embrace this opportunity given the demographics of the State of Vermont (the state with the

second-highest percentage of white residents in the United States) and the first-ballot election of a Black woman to serve as bishop.

- ❖ *We have a bishop who is brilliant and creative and who is Black; this gives us an opportunity to say to people in Vermont that this is who we are and who we can become; we are thinking about what it means to be white and struggling.*

A cautionary note: There is clear evidence of “America’s contemporary ambivalence about women and leadership¹.” Ely and Rhode assert that “women leaders clearly navigate a different societal and organizational terrain from their male counterparts, a terrain deeply rooted in cultural ambivalence.” (op. cit., p. 379)

In an article published by the British Journal of Management in 2005, Michelle K. Ryan and S. Alexander Haslam used the term “glass cliff” to describe when women are promoted to leadership roles during times of crisis or downturn and are, therefore, more likely to experience conflict or failure.

These dynamics are intensified when the leader is a woman of color. The author of a doctoral dissertation² at the University of Vermont observed:

Black women leaders in this study collectively highlighted the issues that arise from the treatment they receive as Black women in PWIs [predominantly white institutions]. They face harsher criticisms for the work they do than their white colleagues and have experienced a lack of recognition for the work that they have achieved. (op. cit., p.120)

Awareness of the intersection of gender and race in leadership and how those dynamics may come into play in the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont will be essential for the leaders navigating its future.

D) Threats

1) Unavoidable consequences of decline of mainline Protestantism and religious affiliation and practice in the State of Vermont

Mainline Protestantism continues to decline. The trends facing every mainline Protestant denomination are sobering. The people of God in the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont serve and minister in a world where, according to the Pew Research Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study³:

¹ Robin J. Ely and Deborah L. Rhode, “Women and Leadership: Defining the Challenges.” Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice, edited by Nitin Nohria and Rakesh Khurana, Harvard Business Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 2010.

² Nadia Mitchell, “The Triple Burden: Black Women Leaders in Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Education.” University of Vermont, 2021

³ [Adults in Vermont - Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics | Pew Research Center](#)

- ❖ Only 19% of residents of Vermont identify as Mainline Protestants and only 2% identify as Episcopalians.
- ❖ 37% of residents of Vermont are unaffiliated (Religious “nones”)
- ❖ 47% of adults seldom or rarely attend religious services.
- ❖ 78% of adults in Vermont seldom or never participate in prayer, scripture study, or religious education groups although 33% pray daily.

Nationally,

- ❖ 10% of younger millennials, 10% of older millennials, 25% of Generation X, 36% of Baby Boomers, and 17% of the Silent Generation identify as Mainline Protestants
- ❖ only 26% of parents with children under age 18 are Mainline Protestants

While the Pew Religious Landscape Study was conducted in 2014, there is little data to conclude these trends have been reversed in the intervening years. The study presents detailed research data on religious affiliation, beliefs and practices, and social and political views. The full study may be accessed at this link: [Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics | Pew Research Center \(pewforum.org\)](https://www.pewforum.org/2014/08/05/religion-in-america-u-s-religious-data-demographics-and-statistics/)

2) Nostalgia for the way things used to be and change viewed as loss

Kenneth McFayden, professor of ministry and leadership development at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, wrote compellingly⁴ about congregations in crisis and Christian leadership against a backdrop of what people experience as loss in the church—loss of members, loss of pastors and staff members, loss of structural supports, loss of stability, and loss of confidence, among others. McFayden’s catalog of loss was written in 2012, but today these losses continue, like the trends identified in the Pew Religious Landscape Study, and are exacerbated by the pandemic.

- ❖ *(if I could change one thing)...I would have one big funeral and mourn what we’ve lost followed by a rebirth and embrace of what is with a clearer vision for the future without so much baggage.*
- ❖ *(if I could protect one thing from being changed)...nothing, everything has to be up for grabs; nothing because we are holding on too tight to the way things used to be.*

3) Lack of resources coupled with congregationalism and resistance to new models of ministry

Like many dioceses, Vermont is facing a triple threat of lack of resources; the independence inherent in congregationalism; and resistance to new ways of being the church and new models of for ministry. When combined with nostalgia for the past and change experienced as loss, the threat is particularly formidable, and can result in significant restraining forces that work against change and transformation.

⁴ [Alban at Duke Divinity School. “A Backdrop of Loss,” March 26, 2012](#)

4) Refusal of the core Standing Committee to engage in a process of reconciliation with the bishop

Note: This section of the report discusses the 2023 Standing Committee's refusal to enter into a reconciliation process with the bishop. Since this report was prepared in October 2023, new members have been elected by Diocesan Convention to serve on the Standing Committee, a new president has been elected, and the work of repair and reconciliation recommended by this report is well underway.

The Standing Committee's refusal to enter into a reconciliation process with Bishop MacVean-Brown is deeply problematic. When the bishop and three members of the Standing Committee had conversations (facilitated by two consultants from VISIONS, Inc.) about their respective concerns, the bishop expressed a desire to pursue reconciliation. Only one of the three members of the Standing Committee present expressed a desire for reconciliation, while the other two expressed a desire for the bishop to resign. The Standing Committee members who were present for these conversations represented the Standing Committee as a whole, and, as a result, no reconciliation process has been pursued.

The *Outline of the Faith* in the *Book of Common Prayer* states that the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. The Standing Committee, as members of the church, are obligated to seek reconciliation above all else. The failure to do so threatens the welfare of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont.

5) Significant levels of institutional and individual racism in the diocese and the state; damage to relationships and diocesan systems brought about by longstanding reluctance to discuss race and racism

- ❖ *There has been a catastrophic failure to talk about race which is not the bishop's fault.*

Like every state and every diocese in the Episcopal Church, there exists in Vermont significant levels of systemic racism and interpersonal racism, acknowledged and unacknowledged.

- ❖ *The culture of the diocese is white, very white.*
- ❖ *There is a belief that racism directed at Black and Indigenous people is not our problem here.*
- ❖ *We feel so good about ourselves in terms of being progressive yet the shadow side means we see no need for self-reflection, self-examination, or looking at gaps.*

Some responses were explicitly or implicitly about Bishop MacVean-Brown, who is the diocese's first Black bishop.

- ❖ *I am not sure people understand what it is like to be the bishop in the whitest state.*

- ❖ *People are overlooking the intensity of being Black in Vermont and we cannot leave her out there on her own.*
- ❖ *People have said to me that she doesn't like white people and she objects to ideas when it comes from a white man – this kind of blatant racism exists here.*
- ❖ *She doesn't really understand the culture of Vermont and our commitment to partnership; we're not Detroit.*
- ❖ *The bishop is much more comfortable with and dedicated to Black people.*

The diocese elected Bishop MacVean-Brown on the first ballot. She has bound herself to you, and you have bound yourselves to her. Your bishop needs a reasonable sense of physical security and psychological safety. In talking with the bishop and other leaders in the diocese, I have become aware this is not always the case. The bishop has experienced people speaking to her and about her in ways that are inappropriate – she is the bishop, but more importantly, she is a beloved child of God. It has to be safer for her as a Black woman. Experiencing a home intrusion; installing security cameras for physical safety; needing two restraining orders; needing to be accompanied on visitations; being verbally assaulted by a few people in the diocese – all this consultant can say is, Lord, have mercy—and, I am pretty sure this would not be happening if she were white.

6) Implicit difficulty changing organizational culture which comprises interconnected beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, values, goals, processes, and communication practices

Changing the culture of any institution, faith-based or secular, is challenging, complex, and takes time. There have been numerous studies about the challenges of culture change and strategies to overcome obstacles to it.

Michael D. Watkins, a professor of leadership and organizational change, describes culture as the organization's immune system, providing an important clue to why organizational culture is so difficult to change.

Culture is the organization's immune system. Culture is a form of protection that has evolved from situational pressures. It prevents "wrong thinking" and "wrong people" from entering the organization in the first place. It says that organizational culture functions much like the human immune system in preventing viruses and bacteria from taking hold and damaging the body. The problem, of course, is that organizational immune systems can also attack agents of needed change...⁵

⁵ Michael D. Watkins, "What is Organizational Culture? And Why Should We Care?" Harvard Business Review, May 15, 2013.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Begin Reconciliation Process

The primary recommendation of this report is that Bishop MacVean-Brown and the members of the core Standing Committee (as newly constituted after diocesan convention) enter into a process of reconciliation as soon as possible after the conclusion of diocesan convention. The reconciliation process should be professionally facilitated. Any member of the Standing Committee who is unwilling to commit to a reconciliation process should resign from the Standing Committee for the good of the diocese.

Recommendation 2: Establish Near-Term Diocesan Goals

After a reconciliation process has concluded, the bishop and the new Executive Council, with the assistance of others as needed, should work together to establish near-term goals (for next two years) for the work of the diocese using the data generated by the Mission Leadership Review and showcased in the SWOT Matrix.

Recommendation 3: Articulate Broadly the Strategic Vision of the Diocese

The bishop should work with clergy and lay leaders to refine the diocese's strategic vision and articulate it in ways that promote hope and purpose; deepen identity and vocation; and inspire people to service and witness.

Recommendation 4: Engage Becoming Beloved Community in Vermont

With a Black female bishop in a predominantly white state and diocese, the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont has a unique opportunity to expand efforts to become Beloved Community through a multi-faceted, comprehensive strategy that engages the bishop, staff diocesan structures and leadership, clergy, congregations, and staff. This work could be of significant interest to grantmaking institutions such as the Episcopal Church, Trinity Wall Street, the Lily Endowment, and other faith-based grantmaking organizations that can provide capacity for this essential effort.

Recommendation 5: Leadership Development for Diocesan Leaders

The diocese would be well served by offering leadership development opportunities for diocesan leaders serving on various diocesan bodies. In particular, leadership should be trained in Episcopal polity and governance and roles and responsibilities associated with each diocesan body, and how to access resources and set standards for meetings.

Recommendation 6: Diocesan Staffing

The bishop and the diocese would benefit from a review of how to align its staff configuration with the diocese's strategic vision. Additionally, the staff must be structured and supervised with attention to workplace standards, including skill sets, updated position descriptions, workload, role clarity, supervision, accountability, and authority.