

The Episcopal Diocese of Olympia

The Episcopal Church in Western Washington

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December 27, 2019

A LETTER TO THE PEOPLE OF THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF OLYMPIA FROM THE RT. REV. GREGORY H. RICKEL, BISHOP OF OLYMPIA

Dear Ones,

A little over a year ago we embarked together on a journey of discernment and listening. This journey was sparked by a vow I made in the episcopate election of 2007 in which I stated I would probably leave this position in 10-12 years. If you have watched the videos I have made about this, and/or attended many of the “Walk Again” listening sessions of this past year, you know about how all of this transpired. I felt it very important that I honor that vow and that we review it carefully together. I appreciate the way the Standing Committee, and especially its President, the Rev. Arienne Davison, took up that challenge and has led us in that process this past year. I continue to believe what I said at the beginning of this journey, that regardless of the outcome we would learn and grow from the process. I believe that has happened. It has certainly happened for me. I was also clear in my mind, and heart, and in my words throughout the year that we would most likely not do this perfectly, and that we would find, as we always do, ways we could do it better the next time.

The data from our year of listening, along with countless messages, sharing, words of discouragement and encouragement, and an immense generosity on behalf of the many faithful in this diocese willing to be part of this conversation, have been priceless to me in my discernment. In short, it has led me to believe that we should walk on together still, at least for a time. I can only claim this for myself, but what I want to say now is that I am still, and very much still, enthusiastic about our work together. More pointedly, and more personally, I still love working in this vocation, for you and for the Church. I know I have many failings in this work, and I will continue to have them, but I do strive daily to do the best I can, and to be the best I can for all of you. I would like to continue that.

There is still so much yet to be done. At our Walk Again gatherings this past year, and in my sharing with you during that time, I have shared the first words I heard after I told the governing bodies that it was probably time to leave: “It feels like we just got started.” And those words have continued to ring true to me. In some ways, it always feels that way when we, collectively, are on an important mission together. But this specific pilgrimage we share definitely feels that

way to me. There are many good turns and accomplishments, and many things we have yet to really address enough, or make headway in, that do deserve our concentrated effort, and do not deserve the instability of a search, and transition.

I believe this decision offers us all a chance to set some new priorities and essentially set out on a “second episcopacy.” In the first, we set some good solid foundations in place, focusing on the local and the leaders in those local contexts, giving skills and tools to bring health and strength to our shared mission. We have lowered assessments, trained for leadership and development, streamlined and reimagined the Office of Bishop role, and put the diocese on a sound financial footing. Now, I believe, we can focus on some of the weightier and more life transforming issues for our Church, such as true growth of the Church and not continued decline, such as parity in leadership in gender, culture, and color, such as finding more ways to give from our abundance to the greater Episcopal Church and Christianity, and to continue to envision and live into the church of tomorrow.

As I said in the Walk Agains, in the years ahead I see us moving from maintaining to growing, living into and owning our innovation and sharing that with the greater Church, and being a prophetic voice in the Church, and for Western Washington and beyond.

These are all systemic changes and systemic change takes time and effort and does not often move at the pace we would wish, nor sometimes in all the directions we wish. That has, and will continue to bring, challenge and frustration as the needs are great, in many cases long standing and sometimes unacknowledged. By being forthright, generous, and expectant about these challenges, we can make the space for deeper discussions and hopefully, an openness to explore new ways and approaches to many of these issues.

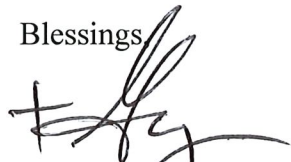
Some things are obvious: as a cisgender straight white male, who is choosing to stay, I am not making room for new leadership, especially persons of color and/or female leadership. That fact is not lost on me. I do hope we can use this time to prepare even more for that as a real possibility when the transition does occur. I do believe we, as a people, still have work to do in that area as well. We are seeing a most welcome change in the makeup of the House of Bishops in race and gender, but certainly we have a long way to go.

One thing this year of pilgrimage and my sabbatical of pilgrimage have taught me is that with each step we are changed. We arrive at every new turn, or hill, or stream, new and different. Each day, we leave behind the person we were yesterday. As a diocese, a collective journeying together, we also live that reality. We are not the same as we were 13 years ago, and certainly, in all the ways we are changed, the judgement as to whether those changes are for good or ill are up for debate. However, the overwhelming feedback seems to be that we are heading in the right direction, that we are focused on the right things, or trying to be. That seems worth continuing, at least for a time, and I offer myself to do so.

I would also say the intent is that this “second episcopate” will be different, focused in different directions. The staff will continue to be reorganized for that difference and focus, and even my role is going to evolve differently than the time behind us. More on all that later, but for now I simply want to say, I would like to continue in this role, walking with all of you. One of the most

powerful determinants in my decision was the joy and blessing I have received in being part of our work together, in this place, at this time. For that blessing I am deeply grateful, and I thank you.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gregory H. Rickel', written over the word 'Blessings'.

The Rt. Rev. Gregory H. Rickel
VIII Bishop of Olympia