

# My Journey in the Episcopal Church as a Gay Person

---

 [delaware.church/my-journey-in-the-episcopal-church-as-a-gay-person/](https://delaware.church/my-journey-in-the-episcopal-church-as-a-gay-person/)

I was surprised and honored when I was asked to write a reflection of what it was like to grow up as a gay person in the Episcopal Church in Delaware.

My family were members of what was then St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Wilmington, and church was intimately intertwined with the rhythms of my family's life. Beside my immediate family, my grandmother, two aunts, an uncle, and a cousin were members as well. Our family history there began around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. My father and his sisters were baptized there as were my brother, my cousin, and I. The ties that bound us to The Episcopal Church were multi-generational.

During my childhood, there were lots of adults plus many children my age in church. It was also very formal and at times a little scary. As a little child, when I heard the organ for the first time, I laid on the pew and covered my ears. I attended Sunday school, sang in the junior choir, and served as an acolyte. We attended faithfully. In fact, Sunday morning simply didn't seem right if we weren't in church. Being gay at this point didn't seem to have much of an impact. It began to come into play in the 1960s as I came to awareness. I remember reading a feature article in Time magazine in the mid-1960s on homosexuality and it struck me like a thunderbolt. I thought: "That's what I am." The description, feelings, and orientation matched me perfectly. Immediately following that thought came another thought: "No one must ever know." In that instant, I knew I was a member of a despised minority that was surrounded by a pall of silence. I was now dealing with fear of losing things that I valued dearly. I felt isolated and alone. I knew no one like me, and I had no one to turn to.

So, I was on my own. I was fearful of discovery. I tried to monitor my behavior so that I didn't give myself away. In a haphazard way, I tried to process my situation. I pondered, I read, I prayed. I hoped and tried to change. When that proved unsuccessful, I tried to act in a straight fashion (and from what people tell me that wasn't particularly successful either!). I tried to suppress and even repress the core of who I am. I was overwhelmed. My processing was like taking a book from a shelf and reading a little bit at a time, then putting the book back on the shelf. I could only handle my gayness in small doses.

During my university years I participated in Intervarsity Christian Fellowship and my overall theological outlook leaned in the literalist direction. While this didn't help my processing, it did greatly expand my knowledge of scripture that became a critical piece of my journey.

My participation in the life of the church not only continued but increased. After college, I continued attending St. Andrew's where I joined the adult choir, and I served on vestry and other committees. I became a chalice bearer and a Eucharistic minister. As time went on, I found a literalist construct harder and harder to swallow. By the time I began Education for

Ministry, a theological vacuum had formed. The readings and information provided in the program helped to fill that void. Also, during this timeframe several individuals in church came out to me which helped immensely. I came to realize that I was not alone, and that there was nothing wrong with our gay orientation. My life experience and my theological reflection were teaching me that being gay was how I was made and a part of who I was. I became more confident in myself.

Despite all this there was the ongoing concern that I would be discovered and expelled from church. I wasn't sure how my family would respond, and I certainly didn't know how the congregation would respond. It was a difficult time in many ways. Despite my worries about human reactions and my own struggles with my orientation, I always believed that God truly accepted me without reservation.

I continued to take my own sweet time processing it all. By the time I came out I was good and ready. I came out to my parents, to family, and then to church, beginning with my Education for Ministry group. My mother was my ultimate champion. If she thought that anyone was heading towards possibly making an anti-gay statement, she would pre-empt them by simply saying, "Before you go any further, I think you need to know I have a gay son." The congregation, many of whom had known me practically from birth, was accepting. I wondered, was the gay me so different from the image of a straight male that I tried to project? Ultimately my fears of rejection and expulsion were unfounded. Unlike many gay persons I received inclusion and acceptance from my church family.

Later, I was introduced by mutual friends and fellow Episcopalians to my husband to be, Phillip Stephens. He was in Colorado at the time — I was here in Delaware. As we grew closer, fell in love, and became more committed, he moved East to be with me in Delaware. Shortly thereafter we started to attend Immanuel on the Green in New Castle, a church that we selected jointly. We also asked for our union to be blessed by the Church. This turned out to be a lengthy process involving meetings of a small diocesan committee to draft the language of the liturgy and there were parish meetings as well. The parish meetings were very public but a very necessary part of the process. As the time for the blessing approached, the rector sent a letter to all households in the parish. There was no hiding at this point. A small group of parishioners did object, but some of those withdrew their objections when they found out who the individuals involved were. In all, the process took seven years. Ultimately on September 29, 2001, our relationship was blessed at Immanuel Church with about 140 people in attendance. Given the distinct possibility of protesters we were advised to employ a plain clothes policeman to monitor the event.

We have fully participated over the years in the life of our various parishes — attending regular worship (sometimes more than once a week), as secretary to the vestry, choir master of the junior choir, Eucharistic visitor, chalice bearer, members of the choir, treasurer, junior warden, chair of the finance committee, etc. We have seen seven God children baptized, confirmed, or received into the Episcopal Church.

We are now legally married in the eyes of the state, but the priority was always to be right in the sight of God. In September 2001 our vows were taken in the presence of God to God and to each other.

Being an Episcopalian is at the foundation of who I am, with my life revolving around the church — Sunday worship, choir rehearsals, committee meetings, fellowship, etc. I believed then, and still believe, that I was placed in the Episcopal Church for a reason. If I hadn't been baptized into it, I would have needed to have found it. It has been an integral part of a lifelong journey.

# Fellowship in Altar and Pulpit

---

 [delaware.church/fellowship-in-altar-and-pulpit/](http://delaware.church/fellowship-in-altar-and-pulpit/)

In April, the Episcopal News Service reported that The Episcopal Church and the Church of Sweden (Lutheran) had formally established full communion, one with another, following some three decades of discussion. The agreement was signed March 27 in Paris during a Liturgy of Thanksgiving celebrated by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, primate of The Episcopal Church, and Archbishop of Uppsala Martin Modéus, primate of the Church of Sweden.

“Every time two or more churches sign agreements or agree theologically, spiritually in any form, I think the angels in heaven rejoice and today we rejoice with them ... and we have a lot to do in this world,” Modéus said, referring to the Gospel reading for that day, Matt. 9:35–38: “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few” (Episcopal News Service).

While the agreement added an international dimension to Episcopal – Lutheran relations, it follows up on the establishment of full communion between The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 2001. Headquartered in Chicago, the ELCA is the largest Lutheran denomination in the United States, formed in 1988 by the merging of three Lutheran church bodies.

So what do we mean by full communion between churches? Let’s start by clarifying what full communion is not.

Full communion is not the merging of two institutions or jurisdictions into one denomination. It is not the erasure of any church’s identity, traditions, or culture. Full communion is like a marriage. The partners are equal, each bringing their own unique personhood into a relationship of mutual love and support. This relationship is something deeper than ecumenical cooperation in the service of common goals, admirable as these efforts are. Full communion between churches is the recognition and affirmation of a common life.

According to *Called to Common Mission*, a statement on full communion adopted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and The Episcopal Church:

We understand full communion to be a relation between distinct churches in which each recognizes the other as a catholic and apostolic church holding the essentials of the Christian faith. Within this new relation, churches become interdependent while remaining autonomous. Full communion includes the establishment locally and nationally of recognized organs of regular consultation and communication, including episcopal collegiality, to express and strengthen the fellowship and enable common witness, life, and service. Diversity is preserved, but this diversity is not static. Neither church seeks to remake the other in its own

image, but each is open to the gifts of the other as it seeks to be faithful to Christ and his mission. They are together committed to a visible unity in the church's mission to proclaim the Word and administer the Sacraments.

What full communion means, practically, is fellowship in altar and pulpit. Each church may invite clergy of the other church to preach, teach, officiate the sacraments, and do pastoral and administrative work in the other. Each church recognizes the ordinations of the other's clergy — with the proviso that the two churches work together to bring the ELCA's episcopate into line with the historic succession model of The Episcopal Church. Also, full communion means, practically, that the lay people of each church are welcome to participate fully in the worship and sacramental life of the other church, as much as they may wish to. Clergy and laity may move freely between the two churches.

Within the Episcopal Church in Delaware, the sharing of clergy is already happening.

“We have several ELCA clergy serving in the diocese now,” said the Rev. Edward E. Godden, currently diocesan chaplain to retired clergy and their spouses. “I’m certainly no expert, but I’ve traveled further down this path than many, or most, Episcopal clergy, having served as interim pastor for an ELCA congregation in the Delaware-Maryland Synod for about 18 months.”

Formerly rector of Immanuel Church, New Castle, and interim rector at three other parishes, Godden was invited by Lutheran friends to take the pulpit at Zion Lutheran Church, Wilmington, in 2013–2014. In 2018 Zion merged with Spirit of Life Lutheran. Today the congregation is known as Unity Church ELCA.

“It began with the personal connection,” Godden recalled. “There are lots and lots of incredible blessings in this experience of ministry. It’s different enough from Episcopal service to be nourishing as well as challenging. The feeling is like traveling halfway across the country without somehow leaving home.”

The key, Godden said, is accepting that “they don’t adapt to you, you adapt to them. I assured them that I would be using your books, your vestments, your titles — so it was pastor instead of father. You’ve got two or three months to build credibility and trust. My experience was that we need each other in order to be each other. The distinctiveness of gifts in each tradition enriches the other. The Lutherans have a rich liturgical history and some stunning eucharistic prayers.”

Delaware is home to more than a dozen ELCA parishes, which are part of the ELCA's Delaware-Maryland Synod, based in Baltimore, pastored by Bishop William J. Gohl, Jr.

The close relationship between America's Anglicans and Lutherans — in particular, Swedish Lutherans — goes back a long way.

“It all started back in the 18th century, when Swedish congregations in America needed the services of Episcopal priests and Swedish priests helped out in Episcopal congregations,” said the Rev. Christopher Meakin, former ecumenical officer for the Church of Sweden, during the thanksgiving service in Paris (Episcopal News Service). “This shared service continued in various forms through the centuries and has also been expressed in ecumenical contexts where we’ve been able to do things together.”

There’s a lot of history in Delaware and the Philadelphia region, too. Following the establishment of the United States, several churches founded by Swedish Lutherans became Episcopal, including Trinity Old Swedes in Wilmington; Gloria Dei St. James and Christ Old Swedes in Philadelphia, and Trinity Old Swedes in Swedesboro, New Jersey. In July of 2024 Presiding Bishop Michael Curry will be visiting Wilmington to preside at a service celebrating the 325<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Trinity/Old Swedes’ consecration.

It’s also noteworthy that the English translation of Lutheranism’s seminal Augsburg Confession influenced the composition of the first of the Anglican articles of faith in the latter 1530s, culminating in the Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563.

The fostering of Christian unity has been a goal of the Anglican Communion and The Episcopal Church since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, spurred by an essay by Episcopal priest William Reed Huntington (1838–1909), sixth rector of Grace Church, New York City.

## NOTES

- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America uses the word *evangelica* in the strict and classic sense that the Protestant Reformers used it, “of or according to the teaching of the gospel or the Christian religion, ... of or denoting a tradition within Protestant Christianity emphasizing the authority of the Bible, personal conversion, and the doctrine of salvation by faith in the Atonement” (Oxford English Dictionary). Its use does not imply that the ELCA is affiliated with other churches or fellowships — frequently nondenominational communities — that also use the word *evangelical*.
- Also in full communion with The Episcopal Church are The Moravian Church (Northern and Southern Provinces); Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar, India; Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, and the Philippine Independent Church.

# All Christians are Called: The Discernment of Vocation

---

 [delaware.church/all-christians-are-called-the-discernment-of-vocation/](https://delaware.church/all-christians-are-called-the-discernment-of-vocation/)

by the Rev. Jeffrey Ross

By virtue of our baptism, all Christians are called to ministry. For some, this takes the form of work in a particular area, such as teaching children or working with the hungry. For others, this may manifest in helping the elderly do their taxes or working as a chaplain to a family in the hospital. We are all gifted by the Holy Spirit for ministry and each of us is called to serve in our own unique way.

The Catechism in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer makes it clear that every baptized person, whether lay or ordained, employed or volunteer is a minister. We each have a duty “to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God” (pgs. 855–856).

Living out this duty is called one’s vocation. This word comes from the Latin word, *vocare* which means to call. The Holy Spirit calls every one of us to use the gifts we have been given in service to God by serving others. Each vocation is as unique as the individual. In his book, *Wishful Thinking*, the great theologian Frederick Buechner wrote that: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

How does one hear the Spirit’s call? Sometimes a vocation evolves quite naturally in the course of one’s life. We may enjoy singing or playing music and embrace opportunities to share this gift with others by becoming a pastoral musician. At times, the Spirit calls in particular situations and through experiences, such as encountering a homeless person and being drawn to care for them and others by working at a shelter. Living out a vocation is more than just an occasional experience; it becomes not just something we are drawn to, but something that becomes integrated into our whole life.

The process of finding our vocation and answering God’s call is called discernment. Discernment is a lifelong process of hearing and responding to God’s call to serve. We discern first by listening for how God is speaking in our lives and by noticing our internal affective movements — that is what moves or draws us. Sometimes this call comes easily, even suddenly and obviously. Other times it takes time for us to listen, notice, and reflect. As we see in the Hebrew Scriptures, sometimes we are called with clarity, like the prophet Jeremiah, while at other times we might struggle to accept God’s call and go to great lengths to avoid it, like the prophet Jonah.

A friend of mine likes to tell the story of a farmer who looked up in the sky one day and thought he saw a sign from God. Very clearly, the only two clouds in the sky that day formed the letters “P” and “C”. The farmer was convinced this was a sign that God was calling him to leave farming and to take up the ordained ministry to “Preach Christ.” What else could clouds

forming P and C mean? He sold his farm, enrolled in seminary and began to seek ordination in the church. Sadly, he barely passed all of his courses. His sermons were not well received, and he seemed to have great difficulty being pastorally present to those he encountered in his field education internships and clinical pastoral education experiences at the hospital. Finally, he went to meet with the bishop about his vocation. The bishop expressed concerns about the seminarian's struggles academically and pastorally, but the farmer persisted in his certainty that this was precisely where he was supposed to be and to what God was calling him. The bishop asked him to share the reason for his discernment and the farmer told him about the clouds he saw in the sky. The bishop thought for a few moments and then looked gently into the farmer's eyes and asked, "Did you ever consider that maybe God was encouraging you to plant corn?"

Discernment is never a solo journey made alone. While it begins with God, the source of all good, it is affirmed by the community, which is the people of God. In moving through discernment, it can be very helpful to be connected to a soul friend or spiritual director who prays with us and for us, and who gently helps us to notice how God is moving in our lives. If we are truly called to a ministry of service to a faith community, then that vocation will be affirmed by the community. God not only calls individuals to serve, but also calls communities to receive the gifts of those God calls to ministry.

Discerning one's vocation is sacred. When Moses was drawn to the burning bush, he was led into a conversation with God in which he heard the call to serve God's people in bondage in Egypt. He was told to remove his shoes, for he was standing on holy ground. Answering a call and living out a vocation is intimate and close to each one of our hearts. It is sacred. Spiritual directors and clergy who work with those in discernment need to recognize the same and act with great care and humility in helping others discern the movement of the Holy Spirit.

In the Episcopal Church, each diocese is responsible for forming a Commission on Ministry (COM) to support all Christians in living out their vocation as the baptized. This group collaborates with the bishop to raise up those who are called to particular a ministry in the community, both lay and ordained. The commission also offers support and guidance in the discernment process. Here in Delaware, we have established a partnership with the Stevenson School in Pennsylvania to provide distance learning for those seeking to be licensed as a lay worship leader and/or preacher. They will also be working with those seeking ordination as vocational deacons. The COM also works with those called to the ordained priesthood.

If you have felt the Holy Spirit tugging at your heart and wondered about God's call in your life, I encourage you to speak with the clergy person who serves your congregation. Perhaps you might also want to establish a relationship with a spiritual director. If the Commission on



Ministry or I can be of any help to you, please feel free to reach out to me at [com@delaware.church](mailto:com@delaware.church). As you begin this journey, I commend to you this prayer for discernment penned by Thomas Merton:

O Lord God, I have no idea where I am going, I do not see the road ahead of me, I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself. And that fact that I think I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire to please You. And I know that if I do this You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, For You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to make my journey alone. Amen.

# The Future:Answers We Seek

---

 [delaware.church/the-future-answers-we-seek/](https://delaware.church/the-future-answers-we-seek/)

by Kristin Sausville

It's been my experience over the years of attending several Episcopal churches that while we share a common liturgy, a lot of what each parish does comes from tradition or is a reflection of parishioners past and present. This can be a good thing. Common, shared experiences can bond people and congregations together. The little quirks and unique touches help churches feel like homes.

That said, attending the Episcopal Parish Network (EPN) conference in Jacksonville earlier this year helped me realize that there is a lot to be said for working together and learning about what different parishes are doing. When we connect with each other, we realize that despite our differences, we are dealing with a lot of the same issues and situations. We are all facing what can feel like an overwhelming turning point in several different areas — the fallout of the COVID pandemic, the increasing secularization of American society, a growing perception of Christianity in our society that runs counter to what we believe as Episcopalians, and rapid advances and changes in technology.

The bulk of the conference I spent meeting with other wardens. It was there that our different experiences in our parishes became a strength as we came together to share how we were facing these situations. Realizing that we weren't alone, and that it was ok if we didn't have all of the answers ourselves, was reassuring. We could put together the parts we had figured out like pieces of a puzzle. Ideas like evening services, contemporary music and/or services, dressing more casually (so as not to intimidate those who got comfortable wearing sweatpants while attending online during lockdown), developing small groups and after school programs, making newcomer greeters more visible, discussion series that were open and promoted to the broader community, and increasing communication — these were ideas that all of us could take home and consider whether they were right for our own parishes.

Technology issues were something where my own parish, St. Thomas's in Newark, has had some success and turned out to be my piece to contribute to the discussion. Some people reported that their parishes were very frustrated that they had members who still preferred to attend online rather than in person. At St. Thomas's, we have accepted that online worship is the only option for some people, whether due to medical circumstances or distance — and how great it is that we now have the technology to allow those people to continue to worship with us! We invested in quality live-streaming and implemented a digital usher program to engage with those attending via YouTube in the chat. It put a different perspective on the situation for other attendees, and several asked me later for our digital usher script. This is

an example of how sharing ideas can strengthen our congregations; if those parishes' online members feel welcomed now instead of resented, it builds bonds and helps those members feel more connected to their faith.

Other parishes had different technological solutions, some of which we have already adopted at St. Thomas's. One parish was using less paper by making a QR code for service leaflets available for those who prefer to use their phones or tablets. This also serves as an accommodation for those who prefer to adjust the font size to one that works best for them. We've implemented this ourselves now.

One thing that emerged was that when we are open and honest with ourselves and each other about our situations, truly innovative and creative ideas can emerge. There was an attendee from a parish in Virginia that like many, struggled with a building that had been built for a larger congregation back in the day. That building was now holding them back from fulfilling their mission. Their solution was to ground-lease their land, which led to the demolishing of their building, a new apartment building with over 100 units for lower-income residents, and the construction of a new church building better suited to their current needs. This exact idea won't be the solution for all parishes that find themselves in that situation, but the realization that we can go that far outside of the box when brainstorming solutions is empowering.

I also attended a workshop on the *Future of Beloved Community*. Presenters and attendees alike from different parishes reported concluding that the Gospel is political, even though it is not partisan. Not discussing social justice and politics at all is itself a political position. Parishes that had embraced this work found themselves engaging youth and young adults, as well as forming connections with groups in their communities that had already started this work. They also advised being open to disruption and acknowledgement of painful histories such as owning enslaved people or perpetuating white supremacy via fighting against integrated schools and neighborhoods. Working together on this with other parishes can demonstrate that we as a denomination are committed to justice.

Another workshop I attended, where Cynde Bimbi of the Episcopal Church in Delaware was a presenter, was on the *Future of Congregations*. Isn't that what all of us are trying to figure out? I am sure that a lot of the attendees were hoping for easy answers. But this workshop discussed the questions we all need to be asking ourselves — what will our congregations look like in 20 years? What will they need, want, and desire? What question would we have for them? It's only when we try to picture the future that we can form a plan with concrete steps to get there. The answers we seek are in those questions. Obviously, things can change, and we may need to adapt those answers to new circumstances. We've seen how COVID upended everything, but also how we're learning to work with that. We may find technological innovations like ChatGPT (artificial intelligence) daunting now, but I'm sure our ancestors thought the same of the printing press. Our institutions and practices have survived numerous changes over the past 2000 years, and that's something in which I take

comfort and strength. This world's pain and need to hear our message of God's love certainly haven't changed, and by being willing to ask ourselves these questions and be open to any and all directions they may take us, we can continue to fulfill our mission.

Seeing it in person at the EPN conference, as well as in other places like Episcopal Facebook groups where people share questions and ideas, the future to me feels like parishes beginning to work together more and more. Initiatives and events are a great place to start. I've been heartened to see the beginnings of that here in Delaware.



## THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN DELAWARE

### Mission Priorities

#### Renew ECD: A Blueprint for 2023 – 2027

---

At our annual diocesan convention in November 2022, Bishop Brown announced “Renew ECD: A Blueprint for 2023-2027” to help guide and shape our common life in the Episcopal Church in Delaware. Among other things, the blueprint lays out the four mission priorities for our parishes, Arrowhead Camp and Retreat Center, and other ministries. The goal, over the next five years, is to stabilize and strengthen our diocese and to harness our energies toward growth—not to preserve our past but rather to expand the reach and impact of our proclamation of Christ Jesus.

Our mission priorities are:

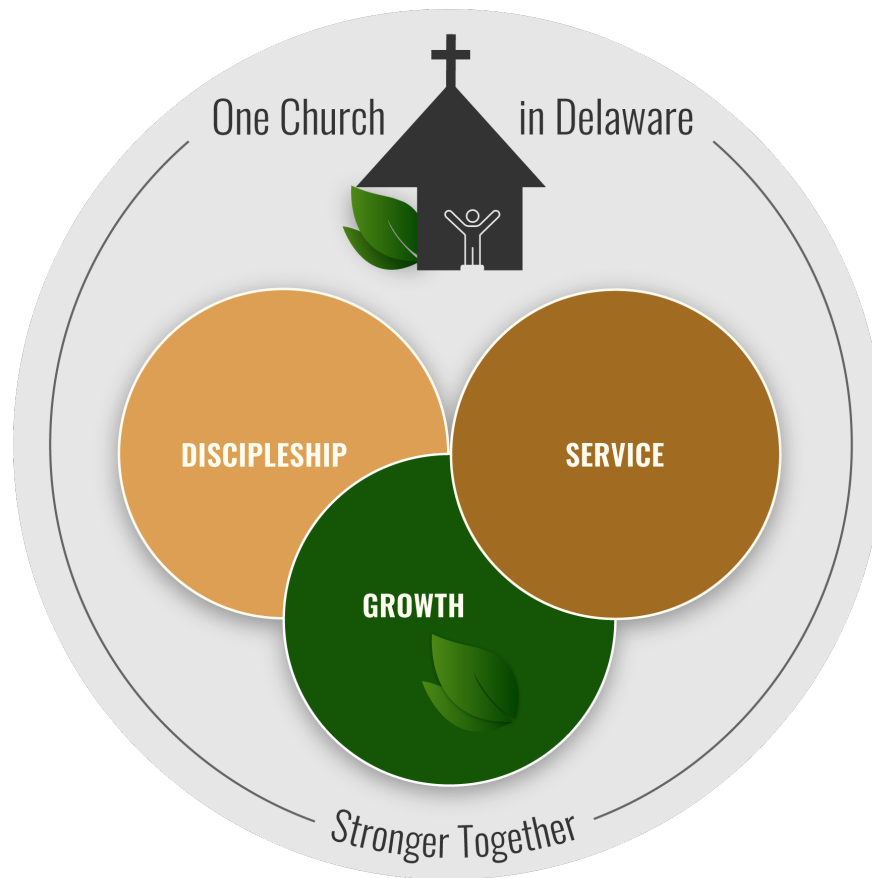
1. **Growth.** We commit to growing our church and bringing people to baptism. This is a commitment to invest our time and energies in evangelism – joyful invitation and robust welcome – to reach out to folks not in church and, ultimately, to invite them to the font. We cannot assume a parish will grow if it does not create and nurture dedicated growth ministries.
2. **Discipleship.** We commit to deepening our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The Christian journey takes a lifetime, and the church is dedicated to providing its members with the inspiration and means to connect with Jesus more deeply and to sustain this faith for the long haul. This focus on strengthening our spiritual lives is as essential for our existing members as it will be for those who join us in the years to come.
3. **Service.** We commit to loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. The church embraces our gospel call to be living witnesses of Jesus’ healing and reconciling love to each other and to the world. This includes strengthening our commitments to racial justice and reconciliation, to helping the poor and feeding the hungry, ending violence and protecting the innocent, and to caring for our planet. We share this work with community organizations, ecumenical and interfaith partners, and anyone working to bring hope and new life to the world.
4. **One Church in Delaware.** We commit to serving Jesus Christ as one church across Delaware. We know that our parishes and ministries are stronger when actively cooperating and supporting each other than when working alone. And when our parishes and ministries are stronger, our opportunities for effective growth, discipleship, and service soar.

Earlier this year, Bishop Brown reorganized the Mission Support Office in support of these priorities, and he expects the blueprint to shape future conversations around mission, budgets, and strategy.

Which of these priorities resonates most powerfully for you? In which areas could your personal ministry or the ministry of your parish be strengthened?

# MISSION PRIORITIES IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN DELAWARE

## Renew ECD: A Blueprint for 2023 – 2027



### DISCIPLESHIP

*Deepening our relationship with and commitment to Jesus*

- Lifelong connections to Christ and the Church
- Support for lay leadership
- Pathways to deeper faith



### SERVICE

*Supporting our witness to the world and our care for each other*

- Racial Justice and Reconciliation
- Healing and outreach
- Volunteer recruitment, support, encouragement
- Community and faith partnership



### GROWTH

*Bringing others into a relationship with Jesus*

- Joyful invitation and robust welcome
- Sharing our personal stories of faith
- Crafting attractive spaces and compelling worship

*Five-year Mission: harnessing our energies toward a future of growth*

