

## EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF NH

*A message from the Right Reverend A. Robert Hirschfeld, Bishop of New Hampshire  
to the Episcopal Church of New Hampshire on Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2023*

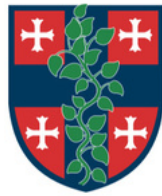
Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me. (Psalm 51:11)

The reason why we celebrate, and not merely observe, Lent, is because it's the one season of the church year when we are specifically encouraged to imagine being recreated from scratch, as though brought right back to the beginning of time. Lent should not be a season of morbid self-preoccupation, punishing ourselves with comparisons of images or people we assume are more holy, more worthy, more prayerful, more generous or devout than we are. Instead, Lent is a season in which God invites us to become who we are at the core of ourselves. It is a time for us to get ready to live again, as though for the first time, as Jesus would have us live. It is a time to consider who is the person, and what is the church, that God seeks to reshape out of the ashes, out of our distracted and often self-absorbed lives? This is the season of new beginnings, even if — especially if — we're convinced that we've run out of new beginnings.

The best part of smearing our foreheads in ashes at the beginning of Lent and hearing, "remember you are dust and to dust you shall return" is that in those actions we are asserting: Yes! God is ready to start all over again, taking what is wonderful and not so wonderful about each of us, and reshaping a new creation. A new creation that looks and talks and breathes and sees more how the Beloved Christ looks and talks and breathes and sees and heals and rises.

As a diocese, we too are recommitting ourselves to this work of new creation. New things are being born out of dust even as some things are being returned to dust with the promise of new life to come in God's time.

In January, we closed the mission of Faith Church, Merrimack. This was a difficult and painful process made graceful by the faithful and courageous members who faced this loss with kindness and the certain hope that God will not abandon them as they begin to worship in neighboring congregations.



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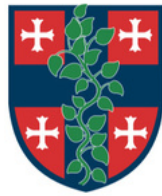
Around that same time, I also announced that Christ Church, Portsmouth would cease being a mission and would become a Gospel-oriented Community in order to intentionally explore a new purpose and new vision for that property. A vision that may include housing, childcare and youth ministry, a revised community worship space, and a refreshed way to honor the formerly enslaved black persons who are buried on that property along with the beloved parishioners and family members more recently deceased. This new effort was preceded by the ending of the Seacoast Shared Ministry, a partnership between Christ Church, Portsmouth and Trinity, Hampden that had lived through its lifecycle and needed to end in order for something new to emerge.

The Spirit urges us to reimagine the ministry of the two parishes in Claremont: Union and Trinity. How could the stated purpose of the Episcopal Church of New Hampshire — to claim the power of God’s love in our worship, learning, and service so that all may know the love and joy of Jesus Christ — inspire these two congregations to coordinate for a more effective mission for God’s sake? I have no doubt that Jesus is calling us toward some new vibrant creation in Claremont to bring the hope and joy of God to that often-neglected part of our State.

As the church faces a clergy shortage, we are witnessing the end of an era that many of us, including me, never thought we’d see. The experience of church where one priest (or more) served one parish, and that priest did all things spiritual, religious, and administrative while the lay members of the church showed up on Sunday, said their prayers, took communion, paid a pledge and then went home to life as usual...that vision of church, to be blunt, is dust, or will level the church to ashes. Before our eyes, God is creating something new — we can’t see all of it, but we do see some of the contours. The new creation will undoubtedly embrace a more spiritually formed and equipped laity that is ready to preach, teach, offer prayers for healing, advocate in the public sphere for a restored humble relationship with earth, and with each other in the Beloved Community.

The School for Ministry, with the astute and capable leadership of Dean Kelly Sundberg Seaman, has a growing number of lay and ordained students preparing for roles of leadership in all corners of our diocese, and inevitably in all corners of the Episcopal Church. With God, the Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee aligning we will be ordaining four priests by the end of the year, all to serve here in the Granite State and possibly in shared ministries in Maine and Vermont.

Which brings me to the evolution of those collaborations. We have just entered a new agreement with the Diocese of Maine. As of March 1st, Canon Tina Pickering will share her duties and valued gifts with our friend Bishop Thomas Brown, becoming Canon to the Ordinary for both dioceses. Many of the details of this new arrangement will be shaped by experience and the Holy Spirit in the coming months.



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In broad strokes, Tina will continue to oversee transitions and deployment in New Hampshire (the processes of finding the right clergy for the parish openings), and she will continue to coordinate the staff of Diocesan House. She will also serve as “chief of staff” for the Diocese of Maine and serve as senior advisor to both Maine and New Hampshire bishops. In the meantime, Vermont Bishop Shannon MacVean-Brown and I continue to look for opportunities to share leadership and extend collaboration, not merely for its own sake, but for the sake of furthering the Beloved Community in Northern New England.

There will be some shifting of duties and roles of other members of our staff here on Green Street: the Rev. Louise Howlett’s role to help me provide support for clergy continues to grow, as does the Rev. Kelly Sundberg Seaman’s work to expand opportunities for vocational discernment and formation of ministries, both lay and ordained. Shelli Gay, my executive assistant, the one who keeps me organized and scheduled for visitations will soon devote half of her time to the success of our From Deep Roots, New Life campaign which we hope to bring to completion this year.

Lent has often been described as a journey toward the new life ushered in by the Resurrection. My fervent prayer in the coming weeks and years is that we see all our life together—the beginnings, endings and new beginnings—in the light of the words of Jesus Christ: “Behold, I am doing a new thing!”