

The 234th Convention of the Diocese of New Jersey
Bishop's Address to Convention - Part Four
Reflection on Anglican Mark of Mission # 4 – “To seek to transform unjust structures of society,
to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation...”
The Right Reverend William H. Stokes, 12th Bishop of New Jersey

Reflection on Anglican Mark of Mission # 4
“To seek to transform unjust structures of society

*I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream....* Amos 5: 21-24

A shepherd and a dresser of Sycamore trees, meaning he gathered fruit; Amos was not a professional prophet. The introduction to the Book of Amos in the NRSV Oxford Annotated Bible tells us, “Amos was called by God from a shepherd’s task to the difficult mission of preaching harsh words in a smooth season.”¹ I appreciate that description. They go on. “He denounced Israel for its reliance on military might, and for grave injustice in social dealings, abhorrent morality, and shallow, meaningless piety....”²

This Ash Wednesday we were confronted with the mass shooting of 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Mass shootings have become epidemic; we have come to expect them. It is a sick expectation. We are a society with a disease. Children are being gunned down in our schools and in our streets.

There were 38,000 caused by guns in 2017; that’s more than 90 people per day. No other developed nation in the world comes close. Other countries have equal challenges with mental health. Other countries have lapses in security. No other developed country tolerates children being violently killed the way this country does. Each and every time it happens, Christ is wounded again, whether that killing occurs in a school, a nightclub, a church, on a city street, or as a suicide.

I am grateful for the leadership of ELCA Pastor Mark David Johnson, Vicar of St. Michael’s Episcopal Church in Trenton. Mark is committed to the work of social justice being done in the local setting. On their north yard in downtown Trenton, the people of St. Michael’s have created a Memorial Garden to remember the victims of gun violence in Trenton.

The vast majority of people in this nation want to see sensible gun legislation. I joined Sara Lilja, our Director of LEAMNJ – (Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry of New Jersey) and The Rev. John Mennell of the Diocese of Newark on Wednesday at the State House to support just such common sense legislation.

The wishes of a majority of Americans are being ignored by politicians who are beholden to the NRA and Gun Manufacturers. This is evil. Their desire to arm America, including its teachers, is strictly to benefit gun-manufacturers with more sales. It has nothing to do with safety. It is a fact: where there are more guns, there are more gun deaths and deaths overall, period. We have an obligation to speak and act out. Our baptismal covenant demands it.

In response to the Parkland shooting and the overall evil of gun violence in our country, I am calling for a Day of Lamentation. This will take place on March 14th, at Trinity Cathedral commemorating the one month observance of the Parkland shooting.

I will be at the Cathedral for 12 hours of prayer, fasting, repentance and silent reflection. I invite anyone who wishes to, to join me for all or part of the day. We will be sending out details of this event in the next week. First we pray and repent, then we act. *Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

On March 24th, along with other members of Bishops United Against Gun Violence – a network of more than 70 bishops of The Episcopal Church - I will stand with the students of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School community, joining them in their *March for Our Lives* in Washington, D.C. Through Sara Lilja and LEAMNJ, buses are being sponsored for others in the diocese who wish to join clergy and laity from the Diocese of Newark and the ELCA New Jersey Synod for this rally. 500,000 people are expected to attend. Please see Sara if you wish to sign up. Local observances are also being organized for those unable to go to Washington. First we pray and repent; then we act.

Wherever human dignity is being assaulted, injustice is at work. In September 2017, the lives of more than 800,000 persons were placed in jeopardy when the President ended the DACA program (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals). The President's decision has placed a "Damocles Sword" over the head of these Dreamers. 27,000 of them live in New Jersey. They are terrified.

The vast majority of Americans – people from both major political parties - are compassionate on this issue and feel Dreamers should be allowed to remain in this country. Many also believe Dreamers should be afforded a path to citizenship. Dreamers are part of our diocesan family. They attend our churches. They live in our neighborhoods. They go to school with us, work with us, pray with us, defend us as members of our armed forces and police departments.

I am grateful in particular for the work and witness of Deacon Ted Foley of Christ Church, Toms River who last year helped lead us to pass a resolution calling on the Diocese of New Jersey to be a Sanctuary Diocese and inviting our churches to be sanctuary churches. These efforts are supported through the work of our Immigration Task Force under the leadership of

Angelin Pozo and Deacon Dan Somers, our Anti-Racism Committee under the leadership of Deacons Ted Moore and Ted Foley, our Hispanic Commission under the leadership of Fr. Sal Ros and Sebastian Vasquez as well as through a number of individual churches across the diocese who feel strongly about the unfair treatment of immigrants and especially Dreamers. I support them completely.

I stand with the Dreamers and other refugees and immigrants who are being persecuted. I do so without equivocation or apology. I hope and pray you stand with them too, in fact, I urge you to. As a follower of Jesus Christ, who was himself a refugee, how can we do otherwise? *Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

At a conference they sponsored in Chicago last year, at which Rutgers Chaplain Scott Russell was a presenter, the Bishop's United Against Gun Violence underscored the "Unholy Trinity" of Racism, Poverty and Gun Violence. This Unholy Trinity finds its roots in the founding of this nation. It is part of our national DNA. It continues to scar us and mar our common life.

Racism, Poverty and Gun Violence infuse virtually all our social systems. Sara Lilja and the Board of LEAMNJ – our partnership with the Diocese of Newark and the ELCA New Jersey Synod work diligently to help local churches address the realities and impact of the Unholy Trinity.

They held a very successful Justice Gathering last spring at Cross Road Camp. About 150 people attended. This summit featured speaker Dr. Traci West, Professor of Christian Ethics and African American Studies from Drew Theological Seminary and focused on the priorities established by the LEAMNJ Board of immigration, criminal justice, hunger, economic justice, environmental justice, and violence prevention.

Michelle Alexander, a civil rights lawyer, social justice advocate, legal scholar and visiting professor at Union Theological Seminary as well as the author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) spoke at Princeton University this past Monday. I tried to attend the event, but it was over-filled and I couldn't get a seat. Many in this diocese have read her book. The 2012 General Convention of the Episcopal Church passed a resolution urging all Episcopalians to read it. I think it's great so many went to hear her at Princeton.

Alexander argues, rightly, that the US criminal justice system functions as a system of racial control even as it formally adheres to the principle of color blindness. The war on drugs from the 1980s was actually a war on black and Hispanic communities. It's part of a systemic pattern in this country. Mass Incarceration and its effects are a great evil. This has been recognized by leaders of both political parties. I am grateful for the leadership of the New Jersey Ministry to the Imprisoned – a joint effort with the Diocese of Newark chaired by Deacon Dan Somers for spearheading our diocesan efforts to minister to persons in prison and address the challenges of a system that is clearly flawed.

I joined Sara Lilja and a diverse group of New Jersey leaders at the State House this past Monday to support the introduction of legislation which, if passed, will restore voting rights to nearly 100,000 persons in prison, on parole or probation in New Jersey. It is one step toward correcting the injustice of Mass Incarceration and the New Jim Crow. *Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Matthew Desmond, author of the book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* is now teaching at Princeton University. I hope we will put together a diocesan event featuring him. Last fall, in one of my reflections in Good News for the Garden State, I shared my own experience of having been evicted when I was a teenager. I encouraged people of the diocese to read *Evicted* during Advent. I felt it would be eye-opening to read this account of the vicious cycle of poverty during that time of year when the American religion of consumption is at its height.

The book follows eight people in inner city Milwaukee who are trapped in the poverty machine. One statement in this book leaped out at me. He wrote, “If incarceration had come to define the lives of men from impoverished black neighborhoods, eviction was shaping the lives of women. *Poor black men were locked up. Poor black women were locked out.*” It captures the deadly spirit of the Unholy Trinity of Racism, Poverty and Gun Violence.

Racism, Poverty and Gun Violence – an Unholy Trinity. They confront us every day in the Diocese of New Jersey. They challenge us with their injustice and cruelty. They call for us to have eyes that see, ears that hear, hearts that respond. Canon Annette Buchanan, National President of the Union of Black Episcopalians and Chair of our Black Ministries Committee, Canon Clive Sang, Our Canon Missioner for Black Ministries and Linda Shomo, President of the Earl B. Scott Chapter of the UBE, as well as our Black Clergy Caucus assist us all in having eyes that see and ears to hear. *Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

When it comes to developing hearts that respond in both advocacy and service we are blessed in this diocese with a woman named Clara. Canon Clara Gregory is our Jubilee Officer. Remember the mandate of Jubilee Ministries which I shared with you in the last reflection? Jubilee is to be a “ministry of joint discipleship in Christ with poor and oppressed people, wherever they are found, to meet basic human needs and to build a just society.” As much as anyone I know, Clara Gregory understands the “heart” connection of poverty and justice. She is helping Episcopalians throughout this diocese to understand this connection as well. Please welcome Clara Gregory who has a story to tell. My, what a story...

¹ See “Amos” *The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV) with the Apocryphal and Deuterocanonical Books* ed Bruce Metzger and Rolan E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1170

² Ibid