

Dear children of God,

I write to you on the Feast of John Henry Hobart, the third Bishop of New York. Bishop Hobart served the Church in the early 19th century, in the days before the creation of the Episcopal Diocese of Albany. And so he was, in that sense, one of our earliest Bishops. During his episcopacy, the number of churches in New York more than tripled; the Episcopal Church experienced tremendous growth. Some of our own churches were founded during his episcopate.

Bishop Hobart was a busy bishop. Not only did he shepherd the people of New York, he was also asked to oversee the diocese of Connecticut because, as *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2018* tells us, "its high- and low-church party roils had prevented the election of a bishop." Being the Church has never been tidy or easy.

Saturday was a day of great joy and happiness for me and my family. Because, unlike the Episcopalians in early 19th century Connecticut, you did successfully elect your 10th Bishop. For many of you it was a day of celebration, an exciting moment in diocesan history. The generous reaction of the Convention was moving and inspiring; it brought tears to my eyes. But undoubtedly, because this is the nature of contested elections, for some it was a day of disappointment, discouragement, or trepidation.

I know that the past few years in the Episcopal Diocese of Albany have been difficult. There has been contention and pain and heart-break. Relationships have been strained, in some cases even broken. Emotions are raw. And people are weary. And while hope certainly pulses through the diocese, so too does fear and anxiety.

We are living in a tender time, in an emotional time. And that time is not made easier by the uncertainty that many of you must feel. Because while you know some things about your new Bishop-elect, you do not yet know me.

My biggest worry, as your Bishop-elect, is that churches, lay ministers, congregations might never give me a chance. It pains me to think that some in the diocese might believe that we cannot follow Jesus together because we hold some different views. I can assure that if your faith is built on the sure foundation of Jesus, if your mission is love, if your work is to spread the Gospel, if you were washed in the waters of baptism and are sustained by the Body and Blood of Christ, what we have in common is far greater than our distinctions.

We, as Christians, are called to be ministers of reconciliation. I know that reconciliation work is difficult. But being a Christian is never easy. God calls us to do good hard things. But also gives us grace equal to our calling.

I am not coming to Albany as any kind of savior or hero. I come as a fellow servant of our Savior. I don't have all the answers. I have no intention of imposing my will or forcing my views on others; we will discern the will of God together. I come to you with an open heart, intent on building a big tent for all the people of the Diocese of Albany. Sometimes you might think I am too liberal. Sometimes you might think I am too conservative. I have

heard both. Like you, I will try my best to hear the Holy Spirit and to be faithful to the Gospel.

I will always do my best to be fair with you. I will do my best to hear you and honor you and respect you. I am a gentle person. I have pastored people all over the political/theological/liturgical/social spectrum. And I have done so faithfully and with great kindness. Some members of my parish are incredibly conservative; I love them and they love me – even though on some things we don't align. Some members of my parish are incredibly progressive; I love them and they love me – even though on some things we don't align. The truth is: I am not terribly interested in partisan talking points or identities. I care about the Gospel. And my primary identity was forged at the font when I, like you, was marked as Christ's own forever. That is what matters to me.

If you love God and love the Church, we will work together beautifully. I promise. True community should offer us a diversity of opinion and belief. I want us to learn to love and trust each other so much that we can wrestle with the Scriptures, debate theologies, and discuss hard topics and divisive issues.

We live in a fractious time in a divided nation. But we are called to love one another, to be ministers of reconciliation, to be one as Jesus and the Father are one. This is our work and our witness. How will this world believe that love has the power to heal if we choose not to allow our divisions to heal? How will this world believe that God is in the reconciliation business if the members of the Church refuse to reconcile? St. Paul reminds us, "If all were a single member, where would the body [of Christ] be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body."

St. Paul has been preaching this message to the Church for almost 2000 years now. Occasionally the Church has even listened. There have always been issues that threaten to splinter the Church, damage our witness, and injure our relationships. Our job is to resist, to hold onto each other, to love each other with a love that transcends our differences.

I know it is hard. I know the future, with a new Bishop, can seem scary. But I believe, in the coming months and years, we will build a beautiful trust. The same Holy Spirit who has called us together will bind our hearts together.

In these days in which we await the confirmations of the Bishops and Standing Committees of our Church, I ask your prayers. Until the consecration, the Standing Committee of Albany continues to be the Ecclesiastical Authority in the Diocese. They have done difficult, but incredibly important work in this time of transition. I am glad for their leadership as I say my goodbyes in Colorado and begin to turn my pastoral gaze to this next exciting adventure.

The future that God has in mind for us is beautiful. I know it is. I want to walk into that future with you.

Your brother in Christ,

The Rev. Jeremiah D. Williamson
Bishop-elect, Episcopal Diocese of Albany