

DIOCESAN LISTENING REPORT

APRIL 2025

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MASSACHUSETTS

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS



PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

The Diocese of Massachusetts officially began with the first convention in 1784, but has churches whose beginnings date back to 1714. The diocese has a long and vibrant history. In the last 20 years, ASA in the Diocese has fallen by over 50%, and baptized membership by almost 50%. In the same time, the number of worshipping communities in the diocese has decreased by approximately 15%.

Over the past 30 years, the episcopate has experienced several challenging transitions, creating a complex and deeply rooted institutional history. Bishop Julia Whitworth was consecrated as the 17th Bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts in October 2024. As part of the diocese's regular five-year cycle of mission review and renewal, Bishop Whitworth plans to present a refreshed mission, along with core values and strategic goals, at the annual convention in November 2025.

Ministry Architects was contracted with in December 2024 to provide a thorough discernment process that engages key stakeholders and results in a compelling vision that defines the mission, values, and long-term goals of the diocese along with implementation support to guide the diocesan staff and leaders through implementation of vision-supporting initiatives. This listening report represents the first step in the discernment process and is the culmination of insights gathered from 37 listening sessions and conversations with over 300 individuals—both lay and ordained—across the diocese.

HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS

Desired realities expressed by a significant number of listening group participants

- **Highlight Our Distinctiveness:** Boldly proclaim our inclusive, grace-filled Christian practice in the midst of the largely secular Eastern Massachusetts.
- **Parish Vitality:** Foster community and facilitate leadership to nourish vital congregations, characterized by a deep spiritual focus, genuine community engagement, and a welcoming, inclusive environment.
- **Impact Society:** Embrace active involvement in both internal and external community needs, fostering relational Christianity rather than a consumer mindset.
- **Tangible Diocesan Support:** Develop robust diocesan supporting and equipping mechanisms for our diverse faith communities.
- **Collaboration:** Cultivate a culture of collaboration between varying partners (diocese and parish, parish and parish, parish and community organization, etc.) to highlight and embrace unique gifts and contributions.

CHALLENGES

Potential barriers to moving strategically forward toward the hopes and aspirations above

- **Uneven Support for the Ordained Ministry:** There is a negative climate among clergy and their ever disparate roles, in addition to a lack of general collegiality.
- **Holding Their Breath:** Previous diocesan mission-strategy processes have lacked follow-through; stakeholders are hesitantly hopeful for more implementation this round.

- **The Lingering Pathos of Trauma:** The tragic and abrupt endings to several recent episcopacies have created an institutional memory of trauma.
- **Congregationalist Spirit:** Reconciling the geographic history of American democracy and Puritanism with the hierarchical structure of the Episcopal Church proves difficult.
- **Size Matters:** In the last 20 years, average Sunday attendance and baptized membership have declined by around 50% while there are only 15% fewer worshipping communities, developing a significant burden on smaller congregations.
- **Perception of Low Diocesan Impact:** A general feeling that people cannot clearly see the positive impact of the diocese's work in their local parish.
- **Concentric Neglect:** A sense that the support and resources of the diocese are most easily accessed by those closest to Boston, which leaves the parishes further out from the metro area feeling at least unfavored, if not neglected.
- **Communication Clarity:** There is overwhelm in keeping up with what is going on as well as difficulty finding specific information quickly.
- **Relational Equity:** There is a perceived lack of equipping of lay leaders, leading to clericalism, as well as a general sense of distrust.
- **Navigating Without a Compass:** A broad and diverse diocese will always have a wide range of values within it; without identified core values for the organization, decisions affecting the common life of the diocese too often create distrust.
- **A Need to be Frank, While Also Kind:** We are challenged to speak both directly and kindly when it comes to evaluating choices around diocesan resource investment.

WHAT'S NEXT

- 1) **Discern the Vision** - *Articulate and develop a compelling vision that defines the mission, values, and long-term goals of the diocese in a way that articulates the direction of the diocese and aligns all leaders and congregations. Pursue the following steps in collaboration with Ministry Architects' guidance and facilitation:*
 - Conduct a Vision Summit engaging a curated and broadly representative group of engaged leaders and resulting in a mission statement, core values, and 3-year goals with one-year benchmarks.
 - Form a Vision Implementation Team to guide the communication and implementation of the newly formed vision throughout the diocese over the course of 9-12 months.
- 2) **Strengthen The Foundation** - *While working on setting the vision and strategic direction for the diocese's future, also shore up the foundation of the diocese's operations. Strengthening and improvement efforts should be focused on the following areas:*
 - Improved Communication
 - Prioritized Support for Parishes
 - Diocesan Office Operations
 - Parish-to-Parish and Parish-to-Diocesan Collaboration
 - Spiritual Formation and Discipleship
 - Data Stewardship

FULL REPORT

BACKGROUND

The Diocese of Massachusetts officially began with the first convention in 1784. However, with churches dating back to 1714, the diocese's connection to the history of the beginning of what is now the United States is deeply entrenched in the culture of the diocese. The Puritan ideals of leadership and congregational self-governance still provide an undercurrent of the culture within the diocese.

As the nation grew, so did the diocese. By the 1880s, the diocese had already become the second largest diocese in the Union. As stated in the profile for the latest bishop election, "The boundaries of the deaneries have been drawn according to natural watersheds to remind us of our connections with God's creation and symbolic of the waters of Baptism." The deanery system was created in 1900 and has remained the same structural foundation today.

Over the past 30 years, the episcopate has experienced several challenging transitions, creating a complex and deeply rooted institutional history. The memories of how the tenures of the last three bishops came to an end remain vivid for many clergy and lay leaders who were active during those times. These experiences have significantly influenced both the decision-making process and the way leadership, vision, and the hierarchical structure of the Episcopal Church are understood and received today.

Bishop Julia Whitworth was consecrated as the 17th Bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts in October 2024. From the start of her leadership, she made it clear that she

intended to thoughtfully examine the current culture and landscape of the diocese. As part of the diocese's regular five-year cycle of mission review and renewal, Bishop Whitworth plans to present a refreshed mission, along with core values and strategic goals, at the annual convention in November 2025. Her vision includes fostering greater transparency and implementing strategic systems to strengthen the diocese as a whole.

Ministry Architects was contracted with in December 2024 to provide the following deliverables through November 2025:

- A thorough discernment assessment of the diocese that engages key stakeholders, captures a 360° view of the diocese, names strengths, challenges, hopes, and dreams, and provides recommendations for moving forward strategically and sustainably
- A compelling vision that defines the mission, values, and long-term goals of the diocese in a way that articulates the direction of the diocese and aligns all leaders and congregations
- Implementation support to guide the diocesan staff and leaders through the creation of sustainable systems and processes and the implementation of vision-supporting initiatives that result in a solid foundation on which the ministry can thrive
- A strategic staffing plan for the diocese that takes into account staffing needs for implementing the new vision sustainably and effectively while providing a healthy ecosystem for diocesan staff

This report represents the culmination of insights gathered from 37 listening sessions and conversations with over 300 individuals—both lay and ordained—across the diocese.

PREVAILING HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS

Desired realities expressed by a significant number of listening group participants

Highlight Our Distinctiveness

The Episcopal Church in Massachusetts is distinctive within its contexts, both the largely secular and agnostic culture of Eastern Massachusetts and the current socio-political culture of Christianity that is highlighted frequently in the media. The Episcopal Church brings a hope in the gospel that is not seen in the predominantly secular culture of New England. One participant said “There is a chance for us to be loud about who we are and what we stand for.” At the same time, the church provides an inclusivity, grace, and welcoming warmth that is missing from some current expressions of Christian ideology. This was reinforced with statements from group members, “christianity is being co-opted” and “how do you counter the branding of Christians as Nationalists?” Listening group participants shared a desire for the distinctive hope of the Episcopal faith to be well-highlighted and promoted within Eastern Massachusetts. Participants spoke of the need for branding, as one person said “we need to say - this is who we are - and we state it loudly.”

Parish Vitality

The people of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts want thriving worshipping communities, and they understand that the vitality of a parish goes well beyond attendance numbers. Amongst listening group participants, a vital congregation was thought to be characterized by a deep spiritual focus, genuine community engagement, and a welcoming, inclusive environment. As one participant stated, “A vital congregation is place where people love the gospel, care for one another and look outward.”

A vital congregation would have a strong sense of belonging and spiritual growth where everyone is actively involved. “Are they being fed on Sundays to live in the world the rest of the week?” is the question one participant remarked that a parish should be asking of themselves. It would also be marked by healthy relationships and collaborative leadership between clergy and laity, supported by clear internal and external communication. Vitality is also evident in an infectious, joyful culture that is both forward-looking and respectful. “We are light to overcome darkness,” said one participant.

Impact Society

A distinct marker of vital worshipping communities that the people of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts named was active involvement in both internal and external community needs, fostering relational Christianity rather than a consumer mindset. Listening group participants felt that the people and parishes of the diocese should be a model for sharing the Gospel in our lives, as one participant noted, the church should be “where the gospel gets preached and

ministry happens.” There was a strong desire to provide tangible assistance to people in each parish’s geographical community, especially the marginalized and disadvantaged.

Tangible Diocesan Support

A key aspiration expressed by participants is for the diocese to more effectively support and equip parishes—especially smaller ones. One person shared a desire for “more support and expertise in moving forward over the next ten years,” while another emphasized, “I want them to remember the little guys that need the support.” Another added, “Come alongside me—support me when I need it—and help me thrive.” There’s a desire for centralized functions like communications, HR, and property maintenance, at least for smaller parishes. One clergy member noted their wish for “help with administrative pieces that detract from the real work.” Another commented that they had received “zero support for Safe Church.” Collective buying power and shared resources are seen as potential benefits and stronger partnerships would provide better support and resources to parishes. “Help me do the things I’m not good at” one clergy person said. Additionally, people expressed a desire for clearer communication and coordination between the diocesan offices and individual parishes. There’s a hope for greater transparency and accountability from the diocese, with clear information about available resources and support. As one listening group member said, “there is a supportive infrastructure - a lot of resources - both human and property; they are just not being deployed in the most effective ways.”

Collaboration

Amongst all stakeholders, there is a desire for stronger collaboration both within the diocese and with external partners, including between the diocesan office and parishes and between parishes. One participant felt that there was a need for the diocese to create and model “networks of collaboration. There is a strong desire for the diocese to acknowledge and address the current challenges and work collaboratively with parishes to find solutions. One participant acknowledged that “collaboration brings anxiety,” and another added, “it is against the culture of New Englanders.” Despite some of this sentiment, many listening group participants felt that collaboration is an essential action to be taken toward acknowledging and addressing the challenges of numerical decline and planning for the future. One listening group member stated, “we have to practice what the gospel says by taking care of the least (practice with small parishes) it’s not just about money but about faith.” The feedback from stakeholders across the diocese also showed a strong desire for fostering a collaborative and inclusive environment where lay and clergy work together effectively. As one participant noted, “We need resources that are intentionally collaborative because lay people don’t know where to look.”

CHALLENGES

Potential barriers to moving strategically forward toward the hopes and aspirations of the diocesan stakeholders

Uneven Support for the Ordained Ministry

Throughout the listening process, multiple conversations arose around the issues of the care for those who are ordained and understanding of the current clergy climate. One person noted, “clergy don’t like each other and don’t care to know each other”. Recognizing that the diocesan “system” has been traditionally set up for full-time clergy, when the shift moved to having more part-time clergy, the structure didn’t change accordingly. Full-time administrative and operational expectations placed on all clergy are taxing to those who are working in a church with part-time hours and compensation. Also, “the shift” involved declining parish revenues which means less administrative support - but not necessarily less administrative burden. There appears to be a disparate divide between congregations with full-time and part-time clergy. These inequities are further compounded for clergy who are people of color and for women, who often face additional barriers to opportunity, inclusion, and support. “We have a problem with how we treat others”, said one participant. Furthermore, input from listening groups divulged low morale among active deacons and candidates for ordination due to past practices and a lack of response to concerns. A participant commented, “The ordination process lacks imagination, at times is disrespectful, and lacks racial equity.”

Holding Their Breath

The diocese has engaged in mission strategy work in the recent past, but many stakeholders in the diocese feel the mission strategy has lacked implementation and has been unsuccessful. Stakeholders are hopeful of this latest iteration of strategic visioning under Bishop Whitworth, but they are also tempering their excitement until evidence of hammer-to-nail implementation can be seen.

The Lingering Pathos of Trauma

The tragic and abrupt endings to several recent episcopacies have created an institutional memory of trauma. Responses from the groups were often framed within this context. As one member acknowledged the existence of “deep decades-long trauma history gone untreated and a Lack of transparency addressing it.” It is this sentiment that keeps many people reserved and cautious in their posture toward the diocese as an institution.

Congregationalist Spirit

Founded in the center of American democracy and Puritan history, many listening group participants stated that there continues to be a strong influence of the congregational nature of some parishes within the Episcopal system. As one group member stated “We have a state that is run by town meetings - we are really congregationalist.” Another participant said that within the diocese, there is “closet congregationalism”. Parishes want the benefits of collaborating with other parishes and having strong diocesan leadership, but also want to hold onto a strong degree of autonomy and self-determination.

Navigating Without a Compass

All frustration comes from unmet expectations. There is not a shared set of expectations or operating values across the various parishes and the diocesan office. Everyone is bringing their own values and expectations to the table, and often those are presupposed and not even conscious. The values and expectations of any given person in the diocese are potentially different, and even in conflict, with those of other people in the diocese. Sometimes one's own set of values conflict with one another. There is no true north provided by the diocese to help people filter and prioritize their expectations and values.

Size Matters

Fewer people are attending church, and thus many parishes have smaller congregations than in the past. This foundationally affects how these smaller parishes operate and many congregations are feeling this change as a dire inflection point. The diocese is perceived as not acknowledging the sense of crisis, as one person said, "It's like they are reshuffling the deck chairs on the Titanic." People feel the need to address numerical decline and confront the idea of potential congregation closures. One participant named "we need to have a conversation around our own (church) death and permission to die if that is what is needed." Additionally, listening group participants expressed that the different needs and expectations between small and large parishes seem to be largely unacknowledged by the diocese. One member noted that the only piece that is acknowledged is money, stating, "The largest budgets get the most attention."

A Need to Be Frank

In the movie *Home Alone*, there is a scene between the dad, Peter McAlister, and Uncle Frank:

Frank: "We are never gonna make this flight."

Peter: "Be positive, Frank."

Frank: "You be positive, I'll be realistic."

They end up barely the flight making, but leaving a child behind in the process. There are big hopes for the way the diocese can support churches moving forward, but the diocese is also doing a lot currently. Some listening group participants sang the praise of the ministries initiated by the diocese recently, while other participants felt that those ministries were moderately effective, agenda-driven projects of diocesan leaders. Leaders and stakeholders across the diocese will need be frank (both honest and realistic) about what is possible and what is of the highest and best use for the good of congregations in EDOM.

Perception of Low Diocesan Impact

A significant number of listening group participants named that they cannot clearly see in their local parish the positive impact of the diocese's work. When discussing the assessments, there is an overall feeling that parishes are "paying the tax collector" as one participant said or "paying a franchise fee" as another noted, to the diocese without clear benefits. When considering the programs offered by the diocese and the impact on the individual congregation, listening group participants also expressed a need for a diocesan staff member with deep knowledge of Christian formation. As one participant stated, "we need to be grounded in deep spiritual life."

Concentric Neglect

Though the regional canon model has been in place for six years, some parishes are still feeling less connected to the diocesan office, and its support, than parishes in closer proximity to Boston. Regional canons have helped lessen this sense of neglected. However, there is still a prevailing opinion that the feeling of connection to and support from the diocese decreases as you move in concentric circles away from Boston, the diocesan seat. There is a resistance among outlying congregations to the Boston-centric or “captive to the city” as one respondent said, reputation of the diocese. People expressed feeling that the support and resources of the diocese are most easily accessed by those closest to Boston, which leaves the parishes further out from the metro area feeling at least unfavored if not neglected. One group member noted, “We are the periphery.”

Communication Clarity

Though the diocese puts out a large amount of communication, stakeholders throughout the diocese still expressed trouble keeping

up with what is going on and finding the information they need quickly. Also, important information is getting lost in the sheer bulk and length of material communicated. Other stakeholders voiced concerns about intermittent, incomplete, and spotty communication. There is not necessarily a need for the diocesan office to communicate more information, but to communicate the important information more clearly and consistently.

Relational Equity

Listening group participants noted that there is a history of not equipping the laity for ministry. One person called it “a top-down, authoritative diocese” with marginalized lay people. This has led to concerns about clericalism and the role of laity. There is a broad perception within the diocese that not all people receive the same treatment and there was a felt need for the diocese as one group member said, “to facilitate the trust” and as another person commented they wished there was a sentiment “trusting that grace would build something greater.”

WHAT'S NEXT

Moving from listening to action, these are the key items to tackle next

1) Discern the Vision

Develop and articulate a compelling vision that defines the mission, values, and long-term goals of the diocese in a way that articulates the direction of the diocese and aligns all leaders and congregations. Pursue the following steps in collaboration with Ministry Architects' guidance and facilitation:

- Conduct a Vision Summit consisting of the following sessions:
 - A collaborative brainstorming process engaging a curated group of engaged leaders in thoughtful exploration of God's call and vision for this Episcopal community
 - Continued brainstorming with a smaller group of leadership to articulate and fine-tune the diocesan vision, resulting in these deliverables:
 - A diocesan mission statement articulating purpose, target audience, and desired results
 - Core values that define the spirit in which the diocese implements all aspects of worship, ministry, outreach, and fellowship
 - Three-year strategic goals with one-year benchmarks
- Form a Vision Implementation Team to guide the communication and implementation of the newly formed vision throughout the diocese over the course of 9-12 months.
- Executive Diocesan Staff and the Bishop attend monthly strategy meetings with Ministry Architects to ensure that things are moving forward successfully and to troubleshoot problems as they arise.

2) Strengthen the Foundation

While working on setting the vision and strategic direction for the diocese's future, also shore up the foundation of the diocese's operations. Strengthening and improvement efforts should be focused on the following areas:

- **Improved Communication:** Make strategic and tactical adjustments to ensure clear, consistent, and accessible information flow that reduces confusion, increases transparency, and builds trust.
- **Targeted Support for Parishes:** Increase support from the diocese to parishes, particularly in areas of facilities support, administration, financial management, and spiritual formation. Provide effective and equitable support to all parishes,

especially smaller and less resourced ones, to empower congregations and address the sentiment that some congregations feel undersupported.

- **Diocesan Office Operations:** Implement strategies to improve transparency, responsiveness, and effective partnership between the diocesan office and the diocese's parishes and ministries to provide tangible support to parishes that is accessible, relevant, and timely.
- **Collaboration:** The Bishop's office should take steps to intentionally broker and facilitate partnerships and collaboration between parishes, especially within deaneries or connected geographical areas. Congregations should assume a posture of welcoming more direct intervention in partner pairing and connection.
- **Spiritual Formation and Discipleship** - Knowing that congregational vitality includes a genuine spirituality and parishioners who are growing in formation, provide direction and easily usable resources to parishes, especially lay leaders. Support and encourage parishes to focus on the Gospel, embrace inclusivity, and engage with their communities.
- **Improved Data Stewardship** - Put a renewed emphasis on the collection, upkeep, and utilization of data within the diocese with two purposes in mind. First, accurate parish and individual contact information is essential to good communication and support. Second, data about activity and trends in the diocese can aid wise decision making in a progression of data acquisition and analysis leading to discernment, which then leads to well-informed decision making.



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MerLynne has worked with Children, Youth and Families within the Episcopal Church for over 25 years. She has worked both nationally and locally with faith communities of various sizes. She has led children's and youth ministry formation programs, summer camps, Vacation Bible School, and Volunteer Training. She currently serves as Senior Associate at a church where her role

is similar to that of a Chief Operating Officer. Recognizing and supporting the voices of children and youth throughout their faith journey continues to be her passion. MerLynne has a Certificate of Christian Education from The Seminary of the Southwest and a B.S. in Child Psychology from the University of Minnesota. Additionally she has a Master of Public Affairs from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, with a focus on Nonprofit Management. MerLynne lives in Minnesota with her husband and Ruby, their English bulldog. She enjoys reading cookbooks and spending time with family and friends around the dinner table.



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Mike began serving in children's and youth ministries in 2001. He has worked in camp and para-church ministry, as well as serving in local congregations. From 2008 to 2014, Mike was the children's and youth pastor at a multi-site church in Western Arkansas. From 2016 to 2018 Mike served on staff at a church plant in the Palm Springs area as the next-gen pastor and a member of

the executive team. He is currently the part-time transitional director of kids ministry and staff development at Grace City Church. Mike holds a Bachelors Degree in Youth and Family Ministry from Abilene Christian University and a Masters of Divinity from Bethel Seminary. Mike has been with Ministry Architects since 2014 and has worked with a variety of churches, regional judicatories, and higher education institutions as a lead consultant and project manager. Mike lives in San Diego, California with his wife Lauren, who serves in campus ministry with international students, and daughter Addy (2013). Mike enjoys sports, history, interesting documentaries and podcasts, and grilling.



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Candi is a passionate and authentic servant leader who honed her skills in the private sector as a process engineer with Ford Motor Company and is now transforming systems, organizations, and programs to maximize positive outcomes in the nonprofit and faith-based sectors. Candi's career spans 20+ years of progressive experience since graduating from Tuskegee University

with a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering. She is currently the Lead Experience Director for

The Candi Cylar Agency based in Atlanta, Georgia, where she consults with organizations on the design, delivery, and implementation of strategic visioning and planning. Candi utilizes her Master of Divinity from Columbia Theological Seminary to draw upon knowledge and experience that facilitate supporting the unique needs of faith-based organizations. Candi's positive and lively work style allows her to build effective and collaborative partnerships with clients to provide organizational planning and support for new initiatives, change management, and continuous quality improvement. She is thankful to be walking in her purpose to create experiences that transform organizations and lives.



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Heather has a deep appreciation for God's sense of humor. As an MK (missionary kid), she had no desire to serve overseas. God, however, had other plans. She began her journey as a registered nurse, later transitioning into children's ministry at a local church in Georgia. That led to a passion for building teams and developing volunteers that keeps her energized and expectant of what God wants to do in and through people. In 2019, God led her family to Belize, Central America, with a dream to someday provide a place for people in ministry to rest, relax, and refresh for little to no cost. That ginormous dream is slowly being realized as they run Placencia Beach Club and hope to add accommodations soon. (Let her know if you want to be on the invite list!) A combination of ministry experience and business entrepreneurial adventure gives Heather a unique perspective as she continues to see God work in myriad ways.