

## **A View of The Church in the World: A Pastoral Letter to Congregations**

**1.** We are struggling. As Christians, as members of religious communities, churches, denominations, and movements we are faced with a number of challenges and opportunities. Our contexts may vary from individual churches to individual Christians, but there is a sense of unity in our overall position in today's world. Many parishes, or communities struggle with very real issues of finances and material needs. Dwindling resources, members, energy, and commitment leads communities to consider the tragic possibility of closing their doors. The administrative structures of many denominations are reducing staff and resources. Many communities wrestle with a sense or question of relevancy in today's society. In urban, suburban, and rural contexts in Rhode Island it seems to many that the hope of the Gospel is not seen as real, relevant, or necessary in today's world. The lures of materialism, individualism, power, control, as well as other temptations draw people away from the salvation of Christ. Many communities feel as if they are under attack and as a result feel antagonistic towards the secular world. Such antagonism easily leads communities to close the doors to the outside, closing the Gospel to the world. We are striving to claim the hope of Christ in a difficult age. Our communities are facing questions of relevancy, openness, and hope in the world. The state of the Church in the world lead many if not all Christian communities as well as individuals to ask what it means to be in and engaged in the world.

**2.** In response to our struggles, we are pulled towards possible solutions. Many of these potential solutions are surface, actions of desperation, lacking depth and a sense of discernment of the movement of the Holy Spirit. These are solutions that look at the surface, the facades of the difficulties facing many Christian communities and turn a blind eye to the deeper, true struggles of the Church in the world.

There are stories and examples of success that call us to celebrate the victories of the Gospel. We see many churches that are vibrant and this is good; every time the hope of Christ is proclaimed and received is a time that we are all called to celebrate. Yet those of us who struggle are pulled to examine and consider the mechanics of those successful churches and then look to replicate those mechanics with the hope of obtaining similar results. Many communities look to change themselves, to become like other communities in an act of self-preservation. Some look to trends and aspects of the world that seem enticing and popular with people of the world and then look to replicate those trends. In these cases we are called to wonder about genuineness, fidelity to the movement of the Spirit, and honesty about the gifts of one's community. If one is copying another church or an aspect of the world authenticity is brought to question. Specific mechanics and methodology do not offer the solution to the challenges facing churches today.

Finally, some communities reject the world in response to their struggles. A level of righteous indignation fuels this rejection of the world giving up hope that the people of the world will ever hear and receive the Gospel. The doors of these churches close

through a belief that outside the church none can be saved. These are some of the temptations that we face as we struggle, leading us down a negative path.

**3.** While many of the worries and temptations felt by struggling churches are temptations that seem to be rooted in claimed needs and desires of the world, there is a real and true urgency facing churches in Rhode Island and in the world. We, the people of the church mystical and universal, have been slated with a task, a commission, and a responsibility through our faith and following of Christ. While our understandings of this task and commission may differ from community to community, we share an urgency that we are in a world that is hurting, we are surrounded by individuals who are crying in pain, and we are tasked with sharing and showing the love of Christ and mercy of our Lord. There is a crisis facing churches of Rhode Island, a crisis that has been facing Christianity from its inception. It is a crisis of people in need of the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

**4.** Thus it is incumbent upon us to embrace ways in which the Church (universal) and communities of Christians (particular) can be in the world in such a way that people will continue to see the glory of the Lord. We are called to be successful in sharing the Gospel.

The nature of this success will look different from what many might consider. Rather than using numbers of members, size of buildings, and other quantifiers to label success we look to the light of scripture to guide us. The Psalms speak of God's presence in the world; the prophets look to God's thirst for righteousness and justice. In the New Testament through the teachings of Christ and the writings of St. Paul we are reminded that creation itself is still in process of becoming what it can be. There is a "groaning" in the world that the Christians are called to respond to. When we live according to scripture we are living into God's success, the Kingdom of God. The idea of the Kingdom of God is an idea of something better, something that we all are called to anticipate in one form or another.

These ideas, attitudes, values, and visions that we find in scripture all direct the church on how to live in the world. They call the church to consider how it can be naming God's presence in the world, carrying the prophetic mantle, working with the groaning of creation towards God's end, and heralding the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Such visions and values do not necessarily lead to growth through numerical standards, but call Christian communities to a level of authenticity that is important. Rather than considering how to pay bills or fill pews one can consider how to be true to scripture as we have accepted it through our faith in Christ.

**5.** We encourage churches, communities, and movements to be engaged in the world authentically and without apology. We offer the following suggestions as possible ways to be engaged; it is the responsibility for each community to discern how the Holy Spirit is leading it to be engaged in the world.

*Interaction with the Community* – on the hearts and minds of many people in the world are questions concerning how to be human, how to be connected with creation, and how to honor the rights and values of others. These are questions that are not easily answered. Christians can be actively involved with this conversation offering the direction found through scripture and the Holy Spirit.

*The Nature and Method of Interaction* – The way in which Christians can engage such conversations will vary from community to community. Some communities may actively carry the liturgy of worship into the world, showing a true intersection between the sacred and the secular. Others may engage in a way that goes outside of the liturgy of worship through various types of social interaction along with works of charity. What is important is that we continue to keep the cross of Christ and the light of scripture before us in all that we do.

*Framing “issues” of the world* –As Christians are pulled into conversations of concerns we need to walk with humility and care when considering “issues” that many hold dear. With a healthy sense of empathy towards the secular, trying to understand what it might be like to be in different situations, Christians should engage issues of life, death, addiction, isolation, and many other areas where groaning occurs. All creation groans and we are called to respond to such groaning (Romans 8:22). In the stated issues of society we hear the groaning of creation.

*Advocacy and Charity* – The voice of the poor, oppressed, marginalized, and disenfranchised will always be in need of amplification. It is in their voice that we often hear the concerns spoken loudest. Thus with the prophetic mantle Christian communities should proclaim the groaning voice of the poor and oppressed. Yet this should always be done with charity and sensitivity. There is not an “other” in any place of suffering nor are we to frame ourselves in contrast with the suffering. When one suffers all suffer and with such an awareness the Church can tend to the oppressed while loving the oppressor at the same time. We are to show how all people in the world suffer through the plight of the poor.

*Evangelization and Joy* – We are called to go into the world and to make disciples of all people (Matthew 28:18-20) We are called to share the life that we have claimed and found through Christ. When considering the hurts and concerns of the world our hope is in Christ. We believe that through Christ a hope, love, and faith can be found that will change the lives of the disheartened and lost. We believe that it is the gospel that compels the individual to speak for the hurting and oppressed. As a people of Christ we are called to evangelize the Good News, and to do that with a sense of joy. There is joy to sharing the hopes of the Lord.

**6.** There is a sense of struggle and urgency in Rhode Island felt by many churches and communities. It is an urgency that arises out of an anxiety of becoming obsolete in today’s society. We encourage all Christian communities to continue to be in the world, active and present. With scripture as our guide, staying true to the different

chrisms of individual communities we can be engaged in the world sharing the hopes and joys of Christ. It is our hope that each congregation will take the time to:

- Name the perceived threats and the real threats facing their community
- Claim or reclaim the calling/mission from God demanding action and engagement with the world
- Look to scripture and tradition for hope and direction with that calling
- Follow the movement of the Holy Spirit and bravely embrace God's calling with the gifts that each community has

It is with hope and faith that we believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ will continue to be shared with the world and will continue to change the world.