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Last week I electronically forwarded a report from our Bishop about the state of our diocese. It is not an easy read. Yet I am proud to say that some of you slogged through it anyway. Once you set aside the technical discussions of diocesan governance and politics the report has one single and very clear message: our church is in crisis. Right now we are a diocese of 140 parishes. Yet approximately 60 of them cannot afford to continue with the traditional model of parish ministry with a full time priest. To put it another way 3 out of 7 churches are in danger of closing. 3 out of 7. That picture is grim indeed that is, unless we change how we approach the business of parish ministry.

So what keeps us from being successful? Frankly the question has troubled me for a long time. We have so much to offer.... beautiful buildings and a rich and wonderful tradition of music and liturgy. We have a culture that tends to be not only hospitable, but is generally welcoming and supportive of diversity and even encourages freedom of thought and expression. In short, we offer a lot. So why aren't more people coming?

Well there are many reasons. Some factors are beyond our control. To begin with, the culture has changed. People no longer come to church in the same numbers as they used to. And out of those that do come, many no longer give as generously. Add to this the economic factors of declining city population and manufacturing jobs, skyrocketing healthcare costs, the housing crisis and high levels of unemployment and it is no wonder that our parishes are having trouble making ends meet.

But while none of us can control such massive shifts in the economy, and in social values and behavior, we still shoulder much of the responsibility. Society did not change overnight. It has been changing for fifty years. The truth is that we all could see that patterns of church attendance and giving were falling, but we did not adapt. Our attendance dropped. The number of children in our pews and Sunday School's dwindled. Our buildings began to fall into disrepair because we lacked the money to fix them. Yet we still refused to change. On the contrary, many churches clung ever more stubbornly to the way we always had done things. As a result the hour is now too late for some. Many parishes, including quite a few right here in our own Wissahickon Deanery, have fewer than 40 people in church on Sunday. Their buildings are in decay. They have few if any programs that would attract new members and their endowments are have been spent down to the point of no return. Yet even now, under these dire circumstances, some clergy and parishioners still resist the obvious need for change.

We are not alone in this. The other mainline Protestant denominations and even the Roman Catholic Church face the same dire reality. When you look only at these trends it may seem that our Episcopal Church is slipping inexorably into the dark night of irrelevance. But hope is not lost. For although people may have changed the way in which they look for spiritual meaning and nourishment, their need for G-D and for a community of support is just as real and perhaps even more urgent. They still long to hear the Good News of the Gospel. They still thirst of the waters of baptism and hunger for the bread of life. Just because people are no longer drawn to the church that we grew up with doesn't mean that they don't have a very deep and real need for what the Church has to offer. And if we focus on those needs instead of our own comfort then we can, at the same time, take a giant step towards revitalizing our parishes.

But if we are going to discern and meet the spiritual needs of those with no church connection then we must first be willing to question or even leave behind the traditions and assumptions that keep us comfortable. It is not that our traditions lack beauty or merit. But the hard truth is that the traditions that mean so much to us have ceased to hold the same relevance for the people outside our walls.

There are no quick fixes. The answer doesn't necessarily lie in modernization. We can't solve the problem of relevancy simply by tearing out the organ and bringing in a praise band or by exchanging the traditional liturgy for experimental or multimedia worship. Indeed, music and liturgy is some of the very best that we have to offer. No, in order to really transform our churches so that they are then equipped to meet the needs of the world around us we must first reconnect with the mission that stands at the core of our existence.

Today's Gospel tells us of the call of the first disciples. In responding to Jesus' call Peter, Andrew, James and John form the nucleus of the community that will become the Church. The story itself is incredibly brief. Jesus calls and in turn the disciples drop what they are doing and follow. So what is the Gospel really trying to tell

us? It is not that in order to follow Jesus we have to be rash and impulsive. The truth is that we don't know how long they might have deliberated or how seriously they had to wrestle with their decision. The key to understanding it lies not in how quickly they reached their decision but in what they were willing to leave behind. Peter and Andrew leave behind the security and familiarity of their homes and business. James and John go a step further leaving not just their business but also their father. If we want to follow Jesus then we must also be willing to leave what is familiar and comfortable behind and instead venture out into the unknown. We are here now because we have heard that call. We are searching for the Kingdom of G-D. But we will not find it if we insist on sitting still. In order to follow Jesus... in order to become the fishers of people that he calls us to be, we must be willing to risk change. That isn't easy. Following Jesus as fully and completely as those first disciples did is a very real and significant risk. Even when it is less dramatic than leaving our career or families behind, getting up out of where we are comfortable and leaving what is familiar behind can be frightening. Yet only by stepping out of our comfort zone can we really follow where G-D is leading. And that is exactly what we must do it as individuals, as a parish and as a denomination.

I am pleased to say that St. Timothy's has already taken steps in the right direction. In my time with you we have made changes in our worship and in our culture that have helped to make us more attractive to visitors and more relevant to our community. The results can be seen all around you, not just in all the new faces who have joined our congregation in the past couple of years but also in the fact that the average age in worship keeps getting younger. Last Sunday at the 10:30 service we had more people under 15 than there were over 55. That alone is a very real accomplishment. Yet it is only true because we have found new and innovative ways to connect with and serve the community around us... through the Franklin Society, the Craft Group and St. Francis Fest... through our Youth Ministry and our work with North Light and most recently through a revitalized ministry at Memorial Hospital. All of these things create a sense of engagement, relevance and hospitality that not only embodies our Christian mission to serve others but also draws people to our door. We can and should feel good about this. For when so many in our diocese and denomination are trying desperately to hold onto a glorious past that has long since gone, we are moving forward. Yet we cannot rest on our laurels. The Gospel does not stand still and so we have to keep moving forward. We have to keep finding new and creative ways to share what we have with the community around us. The only way to do that is to keep questioning assumptions about how we do things even when those things were once considered essential to our identity.

It won't be easy. Change never is. But we have heard Jesus' call. If we want to follow him we must be willing to keep on adapting to the ever evolving needs of our community. Only then can we ensure that future generations come to know and love the best parts of our Episcopal tradition just as fully as we do. Only then will we truly be able to ensure that St. Timothy's doesn't just continue to exist but actually grows and thrives. Only then can we become the fishers of people that Christ calls us to be so that we might then draw all people unto him. And to be blunt about it, there is no other reason for the Church to exist. AMEN