

Listening Sessions Summary Report
to the Standing Committee of the Episcopal Diocese of Florida
The Rt. Rev. Mary Gray-Reeves, Conflict Consultant

December 30, 2023

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you for the opportunity to assist you during this challenging time in the life of the Diocese of Florida. As per our agreement, a 'listening session' was held via confidential emails sent to me by anyone of the Diocese of Florida.

This summary report was requested by the Standing Committee, following a more detailed report, for the purpose of sharing an abbreviated version of that content with the wider diocese.

As a reminder, the invitation to submit letters, issued in September, 2023, stated:

*"As Bishop Howard moves toward retirement, he has again authorized the Standing Committee and I to proceed, this time listening via letters in the form of confidential emails. Letters may be submitted by anyone in the Diocese of Florida. Information, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, ideas and stories can be expressed and will be held in confidence by me. Letters will not be shared with the Standing Committee or anyone else. These may be emailed to mgrayreeves@gmail.com. **The period for submissions will be one month, from September 20th until October 20th.** Acknowledgement will be made to each correspondence. After the one-month period I will generate a confidential report to the Standing Committee. The report will synthesize the content of letters, as well as content from the listening sessions with the Standing Committee, Diocesan Council and staff, reflecting major trends of strengths, areas of improvement and growth, sentiments, and perspectives from around the diocese. This report would not disclose any individual contributor's identity, and the original emails will be deleted after the submission of the report to the Standing Committee. The content of the report will be focused on the data received in the letters."*

Please be mindful of the timing of these listening sessions. The listening sessions with the Standing Committee, Diocesan Council and staff were held in the spring before the consent process was concluded and the confidential letter-writing listening session held in the fall before Bishop Howard's retirement. The design of those three listening sessions were focused on the following questions and intended as a pilot to ascertain readiness for further listening.

- What do you want to get out of this listening process?
- What has been your general experience of serving on the Standing Committee or other diocesan ministries?
- What has been your personal experience of the election process?

- How do you feel your leadership group understands and fulfills its role and work beyond the current circumstances?
- What would you imagine the role of this group to be in the future life of the diocese?
- What else would you like to express today?

It is important to note that the confidential 'listening' email invitation allowed for the writer to choose the topics as they discerned, vs, these more directed questions.

Report of Confidential emails received from September 20th through October 20, 2023

In total, 71 letters were received with one person requesting a zoom call; which I chose to honor. Letters were read, with salient points observed and a response sent to the author. Some individuals responded to my response indicating appreciation for the listening process as well as personally feeling that they had been heard. The opportunity to participate in this process generally appeared to offer pastoral support as well as a sense of empowerment during this difficult time in the life of the diocese.

Some writers expressed fear in sharing their stories, reporting that it took them some weeks before they could find the courage to send their letters. They feared a loss of anonymity, which they thought might bring retribution. Additionally, it appeared that for some, the writing of their stories meant revisiting painful memories of encounters that centered on the way power and authority have operated in the diocese. For some, these encounters have greatly impacted their lives.

Most letters expressed concern for the overall health and well-being of the diocese, offering prayers and sincere hope for its recovery. There was concern that the level of conflict, the general culture of acrimony and distrust were significant barriers to a productive future.

More than half of the letters focused on the general well-being of the diocese and particularly its administrative functioning. This included matters regarding finances, audits, inconsistent communication, orderly and canonical processes, responsiveness to congregational requests for assistance and managing the election processes as well as the fallout associated with it. Among these letters were concerns about Bishop Howard's impact as a leader, and to a lesser extent, that of Canon DeFoor. The Standing Committee and its' appropriate 'ownership' of the matters at hand were worrisome to some writers.

Numerous letters included personal experiences of Bishop Howard and Canon DeFoor and their use of authority. These encounters were reported as disrespectful to the individual or congregation, biased, or inconsistent with canons or diocesan policies. These experiences reportedly left individuals and congregations feeling uncared for, confused, sometimes isolated or abused. Many of these same letters reflected that the leadership affect of the bishop was a primary cause of the lack of trust that may be currently experienced across the diocesan system.

Perspectives on LGBTQ+ persons and the matter of their full inclusion as well as the equitable treatment of persons of color and women were of note. Letters reflected personal stories of perceived systemic bias and exclusion, as well as opinions supporting limitations on the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons.

A few letters reflected upset and disappointment in the outcome of the election process, generally, given the administrative challenges but also that the Rev. Charlie Holt was hired onto the diocesan staff and now serves as a rector in the diocese. Some expressed their upset that the Rev. Charlie Holt was not given consents to his election and deprived of a what was perceived as a fair election. Both “sides” expressed a sense of the process being “rigged” with a bias in his favor, or, against him.

It is important to note that some writers indicated a personal lack of trust for the listening process, and that they believed that ‘most’ laity in the diocese would share this same perspective. The lack of letters in support of the Rev. Charlie Holt, Bishop Howard and the functioning of the diocese, may suggest that there is a significant number of diocesan members who lack trust and feel unsafe in expressing their views. While the letters represented in this report have gathered valuable data and provided an important outlet for certain perspectives, it is an important awareness that this mode of listening may not have been a place where a significant number of people believed they would be heard and respected.

Listening sessions with the Standing Committee, Diocesan Council and staff were opportunities for the sharing of their personal and corporate experiences of the election processes, and the conflict and dynamics in the diocese at the present time. Both the Standing Committee and the Diocesan Council reported functioning cohesively but did not always feel supported or resourced to carry out their duties. Similar concerns about diocesan functioning were shared by the Standing Committee and Diocesan Council.

All of these listening opportunities revealed hope for a more smoothly functioning diocese with qualities of trust, transparency, tolerance of diverse viewpoints, improved communication, and a greater sense of joy in common life and ministry.

The level of conflict is obviously very high in the Diocese of Florida. While there are arenas of conflict, such as human sexuality, small and large churches, opinions regarding the election, etc., the climate of the diocese is one currently governed by conflict generally, characterized by deep mistrust, fear, hurt, isolation, and lowered functioning, productivity and innovation. What was expressed in the letters typifies, I believe, a psychologically unsafe environment. In the book, “The Fearless Organization” by Amy Edmondson, psychological safety is defined as, “a climate in which people are comfortable expressing themselves. More specifically, when people have psychological safety at work, they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution. They are confident that they can speak up and won’t be

humiliated, ignored, or blamed.”¹ The culture and environment we create and by which we nurture the structures of the church, as well as the individuals within it, impacts its overall identity and functioning.

As further gatherings and opportunities for listening and reconciliation are designed it will be essential to do so in ways that create as safe an environment as possible, both physically and psychologically. Making intentional provision for people to express themselves without retribution is critical to forward movement in the Standing Committee’s goal to facilitate healing and reconciliation. This will build much needed trust in the diocese as it learns new behaviors of communicating that can improve relational functioning while also learning to solve its corporate problems in productive ways.

Additionally, efforts by all diocesan entities to communicate information clearly, responsibly, and with transparency so that the membership of the diocese may exercise its ministry is essential. This will be necessary to build trust and confidence that the shared culture of the body is focused on a goal of healthy spiritual and administrative functioning. Sharing resources and working together for the greatest good will give individuals an opportunity for relationship building, the deepening of the bonds of Christian love and the building up of the body.

One of the strongest assets in the diocesan structure is that the elected/appointed leadership bodies I have encountered - the Standing Committee, Diocesan Council and the Convocation Steering Committee – all appear to be functioning in a collaborative and respectful way. This would appear to be a hopeful sign of a structure that is seeking to improve its functioning and lead well amidst a challenging situation. Continuing on a trajectory of group health and accountability will support the renewal that is surely intended by the Holy Spirit.

Culture change in any organization takes time, patience and commitment. With God all things are possible, and conflict is often a means by which the Spirit works. While this does not mean that the destructive behaviors apparent in conflict situations continue, it does mean that there are signposts and opportunities in the places that appear most broken. Going into the conflict may seem counter-intuitive, but it is often where the solutions lie. Neither do our conflicts heal overnight, but they can heal, sometimes in new and unimagined ways. My prayers continue for you as the Spirit continues to guide and enlighten the path of reconciliation that is set before you.

Thank you again for this opportunity to serve with you as God’s calling continues to unfold in our midst. May our hearts and minds be open as we seek to give God the glory!

With grace and peace,

+Mary Gray-Reeves

¹ Edmondson, Amy, *The Fearless Organization*, Wiley, 2019, pg. introduction xvi.

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