

PRESIDENT'S 2021 REPORT TO THE GEMN MEMBERSHIP

The Rev. Canon Titus Presler, Th.D., D.D.

Global Episcopal Mission Network Annual Meeting, 23 April 2021

Greetings to all in the community of the Global Episcopal Mission Network! I thank God for your vision of the mission of God in the life of the world, your personal participation in that mission, and your dedication to catalyzing others to join the movement of God in the human and planetary community.

The major conditioning factor in local, national and global life over the past 15 months has been the coronavirus pandemic and the restrictions, fears and conflicts engendered by millions of Covid-19 infections and now over 3 million deaths worldwide, with many millions more affected by bereavement and financial distress.

The **pandemic has affected the global mission efforts** of all Christian denominations and the efforts of organizations, congregations and dioceses of the Episcopal Church. Historically, geographical travel and in-person encounter across boundaries of ethnicity, language, religion, nationality, culture and economics have been considered intrinsic to what mission means. So we have all been challenged by the near total restrictions on travel, which in turn have cut off almost all in-person encounter with mission companions.

As in other forms of ministry and as in education, culture and commerce, **people committed to global mission have adapted**. Some longterm Episcopal missionaries came home for a variety of reasons, some missionaries stayed in place, but all continued in communication and relationship with the people they served. Organizations, dioceses and congregations had to halt in-person travel and collaboration in their many mission companionships around the world, but they continued in communication, relationship and collaboration in shared initiatives.

Continuity in relationship has been facilitated amazingly by contemporary forms of communication – now not only the telephone, but videoconferencing via FaceTime and Zoom. How different from the influenza pandemic of 1918-19. Going through the service registers at the Bonda Mission District during my time as a missionary in the remote highlands of eastern Zimbabwe, I found that my predecessor during the flu pandemic, who had been accustomed to visiting dozens of distant villages on horseback, had to stay home at Bonda for something like six months during which all gatherings were forbidden by the colonial government. There were no telephones with which to stay in touch, let alone videoconference facilities. Nevertheless, the church not only survived but flourished, largely because of the home-based spirituality that had developed among the Shona people.

A **mixed pandemic bag of opportunities and restrictions** has emerged in global mission work in this pandemic. One of the major developments in global mission over the past several decades has been an **emphasis companionship and friendship in mission**. A multi-denominational consensus has developed that mission must begin not with analyzing, planning and providing, but with meeting, listening and relating – not doing, but being; not prescribing, but discovering;

not instructing, but learning. Especially striking has been the emphasis on **companionship and accompaniment in mission** that goes beyond partnership in mission, which often emphasized projects pursued on a business model. Likewise, **recognizing genuine friendship as a mark of authentic mission relationship** liberates mission work from a preoccupation with giving and providing. It is difficult, after all, for friendship to survive a one-directional traffic in beneficence from giver to receiver. A good question for Western mission practitioners in relation to our companions is, “Are we truly friends?”

The pandemic has brought these priorities to the fore because lots of what we call mission projects couldn’t go forward. So all of us have had to ask, ‘What is the true character of this mission work? Are we truly companions? Are we truly friends?’ That has been useful, and I pray that all of us have grown in our relationships through the pandemic. I’m reminded, for instance, of how the Dominican Development Group, which ordinarily fields dozens of mission teams to the Dominican Republic, developed what it calls ‘virtual teams,’ in which people visit, pray and worship together electronically over the distance between the DR and the USA. I would not be surprised if those relationships have ended up being deeper than when the participants were preoccupied with painting a house or building a classroom block.

Disparities in accessibility to today’s forms of communication have made some relationships more difficult to pursue than others. Those disparities reflect the gaps between the poor and the wealthy that continue to afflict the global community. The poor and People of Color, more than White people, have borne the brunt of the pandemic. Similarly, vaccines are generally much more accessible to people in the Minority World of Europe and North America than they are to people in the Majority World. So just as we are concerned with Climate Justice at this conference, we in Christian mission need to be concerned with Vaccine Justice. Meanwhile in-person mission initiatives may be hampered until the entire global community is equally vaccinated.

Like its constituent mission organizations, **GEMN has adapted**, and the ministry of this network has both survived and flourished during this period.

In order to make up for the cancelation of last year’s Global Mission Conference, we launched **Mission Thursdays** online in September: hour-long presentations and discussions of how particular mission initiatives are adapting during the pandemic. The four well-attended sessions heard from Five Talents, the Mission Personnel Office, the Dominican Development Group, the Diocese of Indianapolis, and the Mission Formation Program. We plan to resume these forums this year and continue the practice beyond the pandemic.

The **Mission Formation Program**, the only one of its kind in the church, was held online for the first time a year ago, and you’ll be hearing from Holly Hartman about that at this meeting. It was striking that enrollment more than tripled in the online format. Mentor groups for the 2020 first-year participants have been meeting since then to support the development their projects.

The monthly **Global Mission Prayer Cycle** was completed and is now online on the GEMN website. It provides a way to lift up before God daily the many global initiatives throughout the Episcopal Church. Today, for example, we are praying for the global mission work of the Society of St. Margaret in Haiti, the Diocese of South Carolina in the Dominican Republic, and the Diocese of Southern Ohio with the Sustainable Development Goals.

A major innovation this year was GEMN's publication of ***Questing: The Way of Love in Global Mission***. The seven-week curriculum builds on the seven steps in the well-known Way of Love of the Jesus Movement – Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest. Each session begins with a story from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean or Latin America and includes Bible study, theological discussion, prayer suggestions, and action options for individuals and study groups seeking to apply their faith globally. Published both in paper and online through Amazon, *Questing* is available in Kindle [formats](#) for e-readers and smartphones. We're especially grateful to Grace Burton-Edwards, the principal author, for this resource.

A major project has been the compilation of the **Global Mission Digital Toolkit**, which offers all sorts of mission resources online. Funded by a \$50,000 grant from the Constable Fund, this project is an unprecedented collaboration among the Standing Commission on World Mission, the Global Partnerships Office and GEMN. Jenny Grant and Tatiana Hoecker will talk about that presently.

As GEMN President, I am deeply grateful to the **GEMN Board of Directors**, an outstanding team who bring enthusiasm and insight to the network's tasks: Vice President Grace Burton-Edwards of the Diocese of Atlanta and the Standing Commission on World Mission; Jean Beniste of the Diocese of Chicago; Jaime Briceño of Bexley Seabury Seminary; Holly Hartman of the Diocese of Massachusetts; Jim Boston of the Diocese of Oregon; Jenny Grant of the Office of Global Partnerships; Bill Kunkle of the Diocese of Southwest Florida; Martha Alexander of the Diocese of North Carolina; Maurice Dyer of the Diocese of Pennsylvania; and Patricia Martin of the Diocese of Dominican Republic.

- Special thanks to Holly Hartman, who completes her second three-year term this year. She has served as secretary in the past and will continue to lead the Mission Formation Program.
- Thank you to Pam Boston, who as a non-Board member has been serving as treasurer.
- Thank you to David Kendall-Sperry for his work as assistant treasurer. We're also grateful to David for MC-ing the past three or four conferences, a mantle that has now passed to Maurice Dyer.
- GEMN is deeply grateful to Karen Hotte for her outstanding seven years as executive director, and we continue to need to consult with her from time to time.
- And thank you to Molly O'Brien, who has very ably picked up the mantle from Karen and as coordinator has been crucial to bringing this year's conference together.

Given the continuing unpredictability of the pandemic, we have not made specific plans for **next year's Conference and Annual Meeting**. However, we can say this: There will be a Conference & Annual Meeting. It will most likely be held in the spring, as in the past. Whether

it will be in-person as well as online remains to be determined. If it's in-person, the location remains to be determined. If it's in person, there will also be an online component. The theme remains to be determined, and we welcome suggestions.

It has been a delight over the past several years to develop a relationship with the **Partnership for World Mission (PWM)**, the network in Britain that is comparable to GEMN. Some of us on the GEMN Board have attended their conferences, and last fall 14 people from the Episcopal Church attended their 2020 online conference. Their 2021 conference will be held Nov. 8-10 at the usual location, the Hayes Conference Center in Swanwick in the north of England. We look forward to further developing our mutual relationship

Networks important in view of challenges of finance and shifting priorities faced by central church structures. The Mission Office at the Anglican Communion Office in London has been discontinued. You will recall that its director, John Kafwanka, spoke at the 2018 Global Mission Conference at Virginia Seminary. Janice Price's position as World Mission Adviser to the Archbishops' Council in the Church of England is being discontinued, thereby removing another important staff office for global mission. This highlights the importance of freestanding networks of mission activists to keep before the church the worldwide scope of God's mission.

Returning to the Big Picture, the mission question we need to be asking in the pandemic era is the same as the first question we always need to ask in all mission: *What is God up to?* What is God up to? Where do we see God working?

And then: What is this era teaching us about church, community and mission that we can and must continue beyond the pandemic? How is our understanding of God's mission being transformed? How can we join in what God is up to in the world?

May the Holy Spirit guide us as we offer ourselves into that mission of God.