



Clergy Webinar for January 19, 2021

Leading and Speaking with Truth in this Time of Change and Violence

Opening Prayer

Bishop Goff's opening remarks

Focus today: Leading and Speaking the Truth in this time of change and violence.

Four clergy will each offer a brief reflection on this, particularly the questions:
How do we clergy speak truth that is big enough and deep enough to include our people?
How do we clergy speak truth that calls us and others to conversion?

We bishops may add brief reflections afterward, if so led by the Spirit, but we have not planned to address these questions. The context, the opportunities and the challenges of our speaking truth in this time are different from yours, and we want the focus today to be on you.

After hearing the reflections, we will break into small groups so that you can talk with each other about what you heard and about what you experience. We will not come back to the large group afterward. Whenever you bring your conversation to a conclusion, please pray together and then click off. The chat rooms will be open until 5:15.

Two notices before we dive in:

1. **Regarding COVID-19** - every county in our diocese is now in the red zone. The average of new cases per 100,000 in the Diocese of Virginia is 60.5, compared with 56 one week ago. This is better than the Commonwealth as a whole, where the new case rate is 72 per 100K. You can find the information for your locality at the [usual place on our website](#).

There are now 24.1 million cases in the United States and over 399,000 deaths.
Worldwide, there are 95.7 million cases and 2 million deaths.
In Virginia, here are 447,000 cases and over 5,700 deaths.

Given this dramatic increase in infections, and the slowness of the rollout of the vaccine, we will continue in this time of physical distancing and other protective actions for some months longer. You can find a quick summary of the guidelines currently in effect at the top of the link on our website.

On top of this ongoing crisis, there are:

2. Credible threats to mainstream churches in Capitol cities.

The United Church of Christ has been targeted. A Religious News Service speculates that other mainstream Churches may be targeted as well. Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, sent a letter to all bishops about this on Saturday. He wrote:

“In the days to come, people across the nation will gather to worship God, observe the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther Kings, Jr., and watch the inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. In light of public health and security concerns, we must proceed prudently and carefully.

“Although discussion is circulating of threats of violence to places of worship that may occur over the next few days, we are not aware at this time of any threats to Episcopal churches. We encourage you to stay apprised of information from law enforcement in your area.

“As you consider your own local and regional responses, please be assured of my prayers for you and your dioceses, as well as my confidence in your continued faithful and wise leadership.”

The churches closest to Capitol Square and along Monument Avenue in Richmond are taking appropriate precautions. Thus far groups gathering in Richmond have been small and things remain quiet.

The Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations is distributing [this document](https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Mitigating%20Attacks%20on%20Houses%20of%20Worship%20Security%20Guide_508_0_0.pdf), published last month by the Department of Homeland Security, about how to mitigate attacks on houses of worship. https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Mitigating%20Attacks%20on%20Houses%20of%20Worship%20Security%20Guide_508_0_0.pdf

The document is long and a bit daunting on first glance. There is an executive summary, though, and many practices you already have in place. Share this as you will with your vestry and other leaders.

It feels surreal that we are talking about these issues, like something about of a dystopian novel. And it is our reality in this time of multiple crises of pandemic, racial injustice, political unrest and growing anxiety. There are no easy fixes, but please:

- Keep breathing.
- Get outside and take a walk.
- Eat healthy foods, with maybe a not-so-healthy comfort treat thrown in once in a while.
- Get enough sleep.
- Remember that some of the anxiety that is coming your way is free floating anxiety that is looking for someplace to land.
- Get the help you need in sorting out what you are responsible for and what you are not responsible for.
- Talk with your spiritual director, your therapist, your spouse or a trusted friend, your colleague group.
- Play. And then play some more.
- Pray. And then pray some more.

- Hold onto the things that give you hope, the things that make you laugh, the activities that bring a little refreshment.

And be assured that this feels hard because it is hard - it's not your weakness, it is not a failure or a sign of faithlessness. This is hard. It is a horrifying wilderness filled with scorpions and blazing sun, prowling lions and attacking thieves. And God is present in this wilderness, as God is present in every wilderness. There is manna here. There is water from the rock. And, yes, it is still hard as we make our way through this wilderness toward all that God intends for us and for all people as God's beloved community. I assure you of my continued prayers for you, and the prayers of my sister and brother bishop. You've got our cell numbers. Don't hesitate to text or call when you need prayer for any circumstance.

Finally, two quick announcements:

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry will participate in a virtual prayer vigil this evening from 7 to 8. It is organized by Sojourners on the theme of "Peace with Justice." A wide range of Christian leaders will take part.

Next week in our webinar we will focus on training for lay pastoral visitors to take communion to people in their homes or other settings where they are permitted. Charlie Dupree and Whitney Edwards have done good work that they will share.

Now to our topic for the day.

Our four presenters are:

Dorothy White

Webster Gibson

Lynn Ronaldi and

Lee Gandiya

Guest Speakers

Dorothy White, St Peter's, Richmond

"How do we clergy speak a truth that calls us to conversion?"

"How do we clergy speak a truth that is big enough and deep enough to include our people?"

These thoughts are intended to be answers to the two questions Bishop Susan posed to us.

- **Conversion** is not just an event but the initiation into a life-long journey (When Jesus says *It is finished* .. perfect tense in Greek -- something occurs at one moment in time and the effect of that event continues.)
- Since I see conversion in this manner, we (clergy) must embrace the reality that our hearts are not our own. We are being molded by God.
- We must be cautious that we do not have a right to say whatever we want. A hermeneutic of love will cause you to be stretched as well as inconvenienced.
- We must ask ourselves the question, "Does my heart break with the things that break the heart of God?" Or, am I trying to ask God to sanction those things that break my heart?
- Please remember that the Sacred Ground curriculum is not a panacea for bigotry. Our conversion is ongoing. We have to lead with love. As many of you know, August 2017 was a

pivotal time. I have to acknowledge that not only did Heather Heyer die that day, but so did Lt. Jay Cullen and Trooper Pilot Berke Bates.

- My last point is this, from my life and my perspective, the Confederate Monuments were not covered in profanity beginning in the summer of 2020. As I saw them, they have always been covered in profanity. So my challenge is to love those who believe those monuments should stay in place. We must learn to love those with whom we differ.
- Why plant seeds on ground that needs plowing? Does the ground of your heart need a good plowing?
- We are called to be fishers of people. [*Fishers of people -- and the bait is not collar, denomination -- it is LOVE. (Rolf Jacobson)*]
- We earn our degrees and wear our collars but please remember we are lifelong learners sitting at the feet of Jesus. We can assume that we have arrived but remember: we are on a lifelong journey. The bait with which we fish is love. We climb into elevated pulpits but it certainly does not mean that we have arrived. We are still sitting at the feet of Jesus.
- *We need to remember that God loves the people that you hate. (Rolf Jacobson, Sermon Brainwave)*
- God does not ordain dehumanization. No human being should be labeled illegal.
- God is in control, in spite of evidence to the contrary.

We are called to lift up the standard of love. I'm a witness. I have to be sure that I don't spend the week in a text with a heart that needs to be plowed. We are called to speak God's word and be lifelong workers who learn at the feet of Jesus. Take heart. God is in control.

Webster Gibson, Christ Church, Winchester

When I first read the questions, the quote from Pilate came to me: "What is truth?" So many claim to know their truth and then make the mistake that that truth is everyone's truth. This is not an original problem. As I work with so many people, I can honestly say that as a presbyter, facing all the different truths that are presented, it is difficult. Exhausting. How can we even be heard? Part of the challenge is the anger and rage that begins within me. I try to find ways to remember that my own emotions are worthy but must be conveyed appropriately – I've got this silly "screaming goat" that my sister gave me, and sometimes pushing the button that makes the goat make that ridiculous noise is what I need. [*laughter*] It is that moment when my staff wonders if they should proceed with the next question. It seems so obvious to me how wrong things are, and I get parishioners saying "but I'm not a racist." It can become so frustrating and enraging – because the defensiveness is something I understand but it is unhelpful. Then I find a glimpse for what God's seeks for us to be about. The people who present these struggles of their own, it is their struggle, not mine, that they are working through. It is challenging exhausting work to listen patiently while they struggle and seek the opportunity that God provides. How can we feed other people, do music, gather in fellowship? The truth of Christ is much bigger than we can possibly be. But how do we do our work in a way that cares for ourselves as well as our parish community? It is tempting to try and force it, but in the meantime, we do all the work we do as the clergy of the church. In the days ahead, I also can't wait to see our community where God has broken in in a new way. Especially when we realize the truth is not our own, but Christ's truth.

Lynn Ronaldi, Pohick, Lorton

Far from knowing the answer, I, like you, am struggling with making a path to speak truth in these troubled times. I have found that these times have stretched me and continue to challenge me.

As a person and priest I was formed in Benedictine spirituality. As you well know, Anglicanism was based in part on Benedictine monasticism. I feel at home with Benedictine emphasis on balance, the middle way, and *listening*. To give you a sense of Pohick's context, several of our founding fathers and mothers were formed there, including George Washington. Today we still seem to have a more non-partisan, moderate spirit.

So when I'm preparing to "speak truth," I tend to begin not with "my truth," but with praying and *listening* for the higher, more universal truth. Then I work my way toward more particular truths. In other words, I don't start with the justice issue of the day, no matter how worthy that particular issue may be. I begin with the "bigger picture," so to speak.

A quick illustration of this is when I arrived at Pohick, almost immediately I was told there was a suspected child predator in the midst. I had to confront that person, we were threatened with violence, and the person had to leave the church. Although the incident was kept confidential, people talked. I was faced with how to address the elephant in the room.

Rather than start with that particular issue, I prayed about the larger, more universal truth. I chose to preach about abuse of power in general, instead of a particular transgression. I used examples including the "Me Too movement" and other kinds of power abuses, as well as the particular issue. The congregation was not only able to hear it; many were apparently either deeply convicted or healed. They came to the altar rail in tears expressing gratitude.

This entire year -- especially recently with the attempted insurrection and sedition at the Capital -- I continue to begin with the universal then gently move to the particular. Rather than stand in the pulpit and preach a particular issue, I address the overarching issue first:

Our nation is polarized, with people taking stands on one extreme or the other. At the root is not only dualistic, black-and-white thinking, but underneath that, a *rampant individualism* that has gone off the rails. Each individual is so sure we have the right answer, "the" Truth, and that the other side is not only wrong, but evil. Whatever the issue, we talk over the opposition and demonize them rather than listening with humility and respect. If we "stand on soapboxes" about our view, we can alienate half the people, and move further apart. As individuals and as a people, we need to regain our sense of interconnectedness, interdependence and compassion.

What is the way forward? I believe it starts with hearing a universal truth: that we've lost a sense of humility and mutual respect and an ability to listen -- not just to God but to each other. As hearts are transformed, we can move to the particular.

The week of the Capitol Riots was the week Jesus' baptism came up in our lectionary. I'll share a brief reflection based on what I preached. ([see slides](#))

You may be wondering if and how I address particular justice issues. I still struggle with how. We are going to offer a course on *Just Mercy* co-led by an African American congregant. A parishioner led the

Diocese's Civil Discourse Bible Study. I plan to hold adult forums. But I am aware that none of the particulars can be heard or received until hearts are converted and united in love and humility.

To that end, our Lenten speakers will focus on Contemplation: on spiritual disciplines that lead to healing and renewal. Speakers include Martin Smith and Bp. Porter Taylor. Thank you for your attention. I look forward to hearing your approaches to speaking truth!

Lee Gandiya, St Paul's, King George

When I was reflecting on this question, I could not help but reflect on my ministry in the military and in the parish. As an officer cadet in training, my leadership function was summed up by two rules: -

1. The Mission; and
2. People care (Take care of your people)

And now as rector, I find people try to recruit me for this or that project - and sometimes life gets busy and it is easy to lose track of the reason one was called to the ministry.

It is important to stay anchored in God's call and mission and let that direct my ministry. And secondly, it is important to take care of our people.

The Mission/ (The Call)

The military expects its officers to complete the mission. And now as rector, to complete the mission, I try and go back to my first call to the ordained ministry when the Holy Spirit spoke to me saying, "*Come and see what we are doing.*" 'Come and see what we are doing' was the Holy Spirit's way of reminding me of my place - that I am called to observe and serve. And that call frees me to do things that normally do not come in the sphere of the ordained.

The second thing that was drilled into me while serving in the military was to "Take care of your people."

Take care of your people.

People often think of military chaplains' role in war as there to urge troops into battle - '*Onward Christian soldiers*' that sort of thing. But my effort on deployments was always to get them out of harm's way. So, when COVID-19 hit, it was only natural for me to want to get my congregation out of harm's way. And that includes how and where I speak to them...

As a Black rector of a White congregation, I try and reserve the pulpit for major issues such as the separation of children from their parents, the recent events on the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6th), and the murder of Mr. George Floyd. However, I reserve the parish house for the other issues as that gives the congregation an immediate right of reply.

How do I speak about the truth in either settings?

Speak truth from a place of my anchor (God's Call & Mission). But to speak the truth we need to know the truth, love the truth, love our people, and speak the truth in love, always remembering that truth and love are not opposites. As St Paul's says, "Let everything you do reflect your love of the truth" (Titus 2:7).

I try to do that with our congregation. I try to know the truth myself. And I also remember I Cor. 13, to speak the truth in love. I have to love my congregation. Then I have to speak to them in love. It is out of that place of love that I am able to address the issues of the day. As I used to say to my soldiers: truth and love go together. They are not opposites. I try to demonstrate to my congregation. Let everything you do reflect your love of truth. Let us guard the truth as if it were a Faberge egg and claim it as if our lives depended on it.

Bishop Susan

Thank you to each of our presenters – we know that it's a risky thing to do. We are grateful to you for going to that vulnerable place.

The attendees then went out to breakout rooms to discuss the topic further.