

The Peace

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Clergy Transitions

The Reverend Deacon Jessica Abell now serves as Diocesan Safe Church Coordinator for the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee. *The Reverend Dr. Jesse Abell* (no relation) previously served in this role.

The Reverend Deacon Randy McCloy, M.D. retired from his ministry at Church of the Holy Communion in November 2025.

Since 2016, *the Reverend Peter Kuria* has faithfully served St. Paul Episcopal Church in Mason and as chaplain at LeBonheur Children's Hospital. He has accepted a chaplaincy call in Seattle, Washington.

The Reverend Amanda McGriff concluded her ministry at St. George's Episcopal Church in October 2025 and now dedicates herself to full-time hospital chaplaincy, as well as supply ministry around the Diocese.

Following unanimous and enthusiastic decisions of both the discernment committee and vestry, *the Reverend Christopher M. Robinson* accepted the call to be St. George's Episcopal Church's fourteenth rector. He previously served Church of the Redeemer in Biloxi, Mississippi. His first Sunday with St. George's was November 16, 2025.

The Reverend Wesley Rowell was ordained to the transitional diaconate on December 1, 2025 and continues to serve on the ministry team at Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis as Minister for Congregational Care. He will be ordained to the priesthood in Summer 2026.

The Reverend Christina Salzer was ordained to the priesthood at Church of the Holy Communion in Memphis on November 1, 2025.

The Reverend Canon René Francisco Somodevilla died on November 5, 2025. He served in the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee from 1997 until his retirement in 2013, including as Rector of St. Elisabeth's Episcopal Church in Memphis, Canon to the Ordinary, and Associate Rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Collierville.

The Rev. Dr. Dorothy White was appointed Campus Missioner for the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee and began her ministry at the Barth House Episcopal Center on November 3, 2025. She previously served as Interim Rector of St. George's Episcopal Church (Germantown).

Correction

In "Finding Community Among the Birds," which appeared in the Summer 2025 edition of *The Peace*, author Connie Cruthird's biography incorrectly states that she is a parishioner at Church of the Holy Communion in Memphis. She is a member of Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis.

On the Cover

A holy hush, passed hand to hand. Jean Arehart shares the light of Epiphany with her grandchildren during the diocesan Feast of Lights service at St. Columba Episcopal Camp & Retreat Center, a tender reminder that Christ's light is given, received, and carried forward, generation by generation.



The Peace is the official publication of the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee.

We encourage the submission of articles and images. We reserve the right to edit materials offered for publication. Please submit content to Emily Austin: eaustin@episwtn.org.

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A MESSAGE FROM Bishop Phoebe



Dear friends,

This issue of *The Peace* highlights significant events over the past several months, including a successful 2025 Diocesan Convention hosted by Calvary Memphis, youth activities, the ministry of vergers, and updates regarding Barth House and St. Columba.

There is much to celebrate in our diocese. And yet, our ministries have taken place in the context of significant societal unrest. Members of the immigrant community and those protesting the actions of federal law enforcement agents deployed in major US cities have been killed in recent months. While staff from 13 federal agencies are currently stationed in Memphis, we have been spared the worst of the violence experienced in other places. However, the fear experienced by members of the immigrant community in Shelby County is real. Our neighbors have been separated from their families and deported in some instances.

In the midst of such tragedies, both large and small, it can be hard to maintain a sense of hope regarding the future. What has been sobering to me is our collective compassion fatigue in the face of suffering. Or perhaps we are so overwhelmed that it's difficult to formulate a response.

Bishops are often encouraged to make public statements denouncing problematic actions on the part of local, state and federal government. Statements are necessary at times, but statements are ultimately monologues without much opportunity for true dialogue. I have chosen to exercise my ministry in a more relational fashion. In recent months, I have engaged in countless small group and individual conversations regarding the deep divisions within our nation. These conversations are challenging at times and they aren't reflected on social media. However, leaning into hard conversations is how Jesus regularly exercised his ministry, and I am attempting to follow His example.

One of the best antidotes to the pain of the world is to continue to manifest the light of Christ. Members of our diocese do this every day, often quietly without public acclaim. When I feel frustrated by the state of affairs today, engaging in ministry with others lifts my spirits. My prayer is that we continue to engage in collective efforts to be salt and light in the world.

Peace,

Bishop Phoebe

The Right Reverend Phoebe A. Roaf



(ROW 1) Candace Walsh and Elijah Noel, lifetime parishioners of Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Whitehaven, share in the celebration of 150 years of faithful witness. Founded in 1875, Emmanuel is the oldest Black Episcopal congregation in Memphis and has shaped the life of the city and the wider church for generations. IMAGE COURTESY OF EMMANUEL EPISCOPAL CHURCH, MEMPHIS. **(ROW 2, left)** The Rev. Wesley Rowell and Bishop Phoebe Roaf share a moment following Wesley's ordination to the transitional diaconate on December 1, 2025 at Calvary Episcopal Church. Bishop Phoebe ordained him on behalf of the Right Reverend Sally French, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey. IMAGE COURTESY OF ROBYN BANKS. **(ROW 2, right)** The Rev. Christina Salzer stands with Bishop Phoebe Roaf following her ordination to the priesthood on November 1, 2025, at Church of the Holy Communion. Bishop Phoebe ordained Christina on behalf of the Right Reverend Kimberly D. Lucas, Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Colorado. IMAGE COURTESY OF CINDY McMILLION. **(ROW 3)** Clergy new to the Diocese of West Tennessee gather at the Diocesan House for Clergy Compass, a fellowship and onboarding initiative designed to orient, connect, and equip leaders for ministry in this corner of the Church.





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Opposite Page
Youth from across West Tennessee gathered in September 2025 to worship together at Church of the Holy Apostles (Collierville) for bluegrass mass followed by a picnic and games.



One Church

One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism

The 44th Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee

The 44th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee convened November 14–15, 2025, at Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis, gathering clergy and lay leaders from across the Diocese for worship, discernment, and shared governance. Centered on the theme “One Church: One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism,” the convention reflected both continuity and change as the Diocese looked honestly at its present realities while faithfully preparing for the future.

An Opening Eucharist for the Whole Diocese

The convention formally began on Friday evening with an opening Eucharist followed by a reception at Calvary Episcopal Church. Unlike the legislative sessions of convention, the Friday evening liturgy was open to all members of the Diocese, extending an invitation beyond registered delegates and convention attendees. Clergy, lay leaders, parishioners, and friends from across West Tennessee gathered to worship together, marking the beginning of convention as a shared celebration.

The reception that followed provided space for fellowship, reunion, and welcome, setting a tone of hospitality and connection that carried into the sessions that followed.

Bishop Phoebe Roaf presented the Bishop's Cross Award to Andy Cobb, Chancellor of the Diocese of West Tennessee, in recognition of his longstanding service and faithful leadership. The Bishop's Cross Award is among the diocese's highest honors, given to individuals whose ministry has had a lasting and significant impact on diocesan life.

In presenting the award, Bishop Phoebe lifted up Cobb's years of service as chancellor, noting his steady counsel, deep institutional knowledge, and commitment to the well-being of congregations and diocesan leadership alike. Cobb's legal expertise and pastoral sensibility have guided the Diocese through seasons of growth, transition, and complexity, always with an eye toward the Church's mission and canonical integrity.

Keynote Address: Trust, Leadership, and Adaptive Change

On Saturday, the Rev. Dr. Tod Bolsinger offered a two-part keynote address titled “When Trust Is Not Enough” and “The Problem for Pleasers.” Drawing from his work in adaptive leadership, Bolsinger invited delegates to consider the limits of trust alone in times of deep institutional change and the necessity of courageous leadership rooted in mission rather than comfort.

His reflections resonated strongly in a diocese navigating congregational transitions, shared ministry experiments, and shifting demographics. Bolsinger challenged leaders to resist the temptation to appease competing expectations and instead remain grounded in God's call, even when that call requires difficult decisions or faithful letting go.

Resolutions: Governance, Mission, and Ministry

All resolutions brought before the convention were adopted, addressing governance issues, clergy support, and the Diocese's longterm mission strategy.

WTN 2025-2: MISSION STRATEGY FOR A CHANGING DIOCESE

Proposer: The Rev. Sarah Cowan (Holy Communion); Endorsers: The Ven. Hester Mathes (Holy Trinity), The Rev. Donna Gerold (St. John's)

This resolution supports the Standing Committee and Bishop & Council in discerning and developing a diocesan mission strategy with input from clergy and lay leaders throughout the Diocese, with a progress report to be presented at the 2026 Diocesan Convention. The resolution acknowledges changing demographics, evolving congregational realities, and the potential merging of faith communities, while reaffirming the



(ROW 1) Bishop Phoebe Roaf stands with Andy Cobb, Chancellor of the Diocese of West Tennessee, following the presentation of the Bishop's Cross Award during the Opening Eucharist.

(ROW 2) The Rev. Scott Walters, Rector of Calvary Episcopal Church, welcomes the Diocese and offers words of hospitality as Calvary hosts the Opening Eucharist of the 44th Diocesan Convention.

(ROW 3) With energy and conviction, the Rev. Dr. Tod Bolsinger invites delegates to wrestle with adaptive leadership and what it means to live fully into our call as One Church during his keynote.



With smiles and name badges at the ready, seminarians Lavonnie Perry Claybon and Pam Evans welcome delegates at the check-in table, offering a warm first stop at Convention and a glimpse of the future leadership of the Diocese of West Tennessee.

Church's responsibility to "the cure of souls" across geographic communities.

WTN 2025-3: DEACON PARTICIPATION IN CHURCH PENSION GROUP

Proposer: The Rev. Deacon Gerri Endicott (Holy Apostles); Endorsers: The Ven. Hester Mathes (Holy Trinity), The Rev. Deacon Debbie McCanless (St. John's)

This resolution establishes requirements for diocesan faith communities to provide financial participation in the Church Pension Group for compensated deacons and to offer nominal remuneration for uncompensated deacons, enabling access to benefits and wellness programs. Implementation begins January 1, 2027, with encouragement for early adoption.

WTN 2025-4: CLARIFYING LANGUAGE IN CANONS 7 AND 11

Proposer: Committee on Constitution and Canons; Endorsers: The Rev. Canon Rob Courtney, The Rev. Jonathan Chesney (Holy Communion)

This resolution clarifies eligibility language for service on the Standing Committee and Commission on Ministry, aligning these canons with existing provisions governing Bishop & Council and ensuring consistency

across diocesan governance.

WTN 2025-5: ENHANCING THE ROLE OF STANDING COMMITTEE IN CANON 15

*Proposer: Committee on Constitution and Canons
Endorsers: The Rev. Canon Rob Courtney, The Rev. Sarah Cowan (Holy Communion)*

This resolution revises Canon 15 to clarify approval processes for the conveyance or encumbrance of diocesan and congregational property, strengthening collegiality and procedural clarity among diocesan leadership bodies.

Elections and Leadership

Delegates elected nominees to diocesan and churchwide leadership roles, affirming a slate of lay and clergy leaders from across the Diocese of West Tennessee. All nominees standing for election were elected.

Those elected are as follows:

BISHOP & COUNCIL

Amanda McGriff (Clergy, 4-year term, Non-Parochial)
Bill Webb (Lay, 4-year term, Good Shepherd)

STANDING COMMITTEE

Katherine Bush (Clergy, 3-year term, Calvary)
John Planchon (Lay, 3-year term, St. George's)

DISCIPLINARY BOARD

Sandy Webb (Clergy, 3-year term, Holy Communion)

TRUSTEE, UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH

Dalton Lyon (Calvary)

GENERAL CONVENTION DELEGATES

Robyn Banks (Lay, Calvary)
Gerri Endicott (Clergy, Holy Apostles)
Donna Gerold (Clergy, St. John's)
Scott Haight (Lay, St. Mary's Dyersburg)
Cynthia McCarty (Lay, Holy Apostles)
Lisa McIndoo (Clergy, Holy Apostles)
Ollie Rencher (Clergy, Grace-St. Luke's)

Discerning a Shared Future: The "New Wineskins" Conversation

A significant focus of convention discussion was the ongoing discernment among five Memphis congregations—All Saints', Emmanuel, Good Shepherd, Holy Trinity, and St. Joseph's and often referred to as the "New Wineskins" group—as they explore



Convention attendees enjoy a meal and conversation in the Mural Room at Calvary. For many, Convention was the first visit to Calvary since its 2024 renovations. Founded in 1832, Calvary is the mother parish of the Episcopal Church in Memphis and Shelby County, founding five daughter churches, including St. Mary's Church in 1857, now St. Mary's Cathedral.

the possibility of merging into a new, shared faith community. This discernment process, initiated by the congregations themselves and facilitated by diocesan leadership, arises from years of collaborative ministry, shared Holy Week services, and changing congregational realities.

Delegates heard about the theological, pastoral, and missional dimensions of this work, which is unfolding alongside broader conversations about diocesan mission strategy. The potential merger was framed not simply as a response to decline, but as an opportunity for renewed Episcopal presence, creative mission, and faithful stewardship in under-served areas of Memphis. The conversation served as a concrete example of the adaptive leadership themes raised throughout the convention.

The Bishop's Reflections and Looking Ahead

In her address, Bishop Phoebe Roaf reflected on a year shaped by sabbatical, global engagement within the Anglican

Communion, and deep gratitude for diocesan staff and leaders who sustained the work of the church in her absence. She highlighted the success of the Small Church Conference, the continued impact of Do Good & Share Ministry Grants, growth in youth leadership through the Diocesan Youth Council, and ongoing support for those discerning ordained ministry

Bishop Roaf also pointed toward the future, noting plans for strategic planning in 2026, continued discernment around shared ministry, and preparation for the 82nd General Convention of The Episcopal Church.

One Church, Faithfully Moving Forward

As the 44th Diocesan Convention concluded, delegates departed with a renewed sense of shared purpose. In worship, legislation, conversation, and prayer, the Diocese of West Tennessee affirmed its commitment to live as one church, grounded in baptism, attentive to change, and hopeful about the work God is doing in its midst.





Scott Blake (left) and Andy Pouncey stand at the Bishops' Gate at St. Mary's Cathedral, where new gates and a commemorative plaque now mark a threshold shaped by generations of episcopal leadership and lived faith in West Tennessee. IMAGE COURTESY OF ST. MARY'S EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL.

Bishops' Gate

*A Threshold Marked
by Memory and Meaning*

EMILY
AUSTIN

In Fall 2025, a new plaque was installed beside the Bishops' Gate at St. Mary's Cathedral, quietly anchoring centuries of episcopal leadership and lived faith in West Tennessee.

The plaque does not call attention to itself at first glance. But for Andy Pouncey, that restraint is precisely the point.

"It's not about when it was built," Pouncey said. "It's about what the gate is for."

Why a Gate, and Why a Plaque

The project began with a practical concern. When Pouncey's tenure as cathedral administrator at St. Mary's began in 2022, there were no gates securing the cathedral's front porch, creating challenges for hospitality and upkeep.

While St. Mary's has long been committed to ministries of compassion, the front entrance needed clearer boundaries. Gates provided safety, but Pouncey believed they also required interpretation.

"A gate is a threshold," he said. "It says something about who we are and how we welcome."

That understanding led to the decision to include a plaque naming the bishops who have shaped the Diocese over time.

From "Dean's Gate" to Bishops' Gate

Initially, Pouncey considered calling it the "Dean's Gate," reflecting the cathedral's role in diocesan life. But after conversation with leadership, including former interim dean Gary Meade, the name shifted.

"Bishops' Gate made more sense," Pouncey said. "A cathedral is the bishop's church."

The plaque traces that episcopal lineage back to the era when West Tennessee was part of the Diocese of Tennessee. The 1982 General Convention of the Episcopal Church voted to divide the Diocese of Tennessee, thus establishing the Diocese of West Tennessee. The plaque commemorates the following bishops:

THE DIOCESE OF TENNESSEE

James Otey (1834-1863)
Charles Quintard (1865-1898)
Thomas Gailor (1898-1935)
James Maxon (1935-1947)
Edmund Dandridge (1947-1953)
Theodore Barth (1953-1961)
John Vander Horst (1961-1977)
William Sanders (1977-1985)

THE DIOCESE OF WEST TENNESSEE

Alex Dixon (1983-1994)
James Coleman (1994-2001)
Don Johnson (2001-2019)
Phoebe Roaf (2019-present)

Designing Something That Would Last

Pouncey worked with St. Mary's parishioner Scott Blake to design the plaque, along with diocesan staff and fabricators. Accuracy mattered. So did durability.

"Once you order it, you can't afford to make a mistake," he said.

The process took nearly a year. One of the most challenging elements involved incorporating the historic diocesan seal, which had never been digitized in modern formats.

Even the placement required care. The plaque was mounted to compensate for the cathedral's subtly uneven masonry and positioned so it could be read comfortably without dominating the entrance.

"I didn't want it to say, 'Look at me,'" Pouncey said. "I wanted it off to the side."

Early designs imagined gilded details and sculptural flourishes. But those ideas were ultimately set aside, both for financial reasons and theological ones.

"What does that speak to the people across the street?" Pouncey recalled asking. "That we have something and you don't?"

Instead, the final design relies on proportion, texture, and contrast, especially the visual interplay between the dark metal gate and the cathedral's red door behind it.

"The simplicity works," Pouncey said. "And if you paint something, what does that mean? You have to paint it again."

A Lifetime at the Threshold

For Pouncey, the Bishops' Gate is deeply personal. His family's connection to St. Mary's dates back to the early 1930s. His parents were married in the chapel in 1944. He and his wife Kate were married there in 1974.

"It's always going to be home."

As a historian, Pouncey sees the plaque as more than a list of names. It is a reminder that the church stands at the intersection of memory and mission.

"St. Mary's ministers to those on the fringes," he said. "That's what Jesus did. And that's what this place continues to do."

At the Bishops' Gate, the past does not close the door. It frames the passage forward.

(ROW 1) The Bishops' Gate plaque is carefully installed beside the cathedral entrance, anchoring the names of past and present bishops in a design intended to endure for generations. IMAGE COURTESY OF ST. MARY'S EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL.

(ROW 2) During the dedication of the Bishops' Gate, former Interim Dean Gary Meade offers prayers as Scott Blake, Andy Pouncey, and Kate Pouncey witness the blessing of a space that frames both welcome and legacy. IMAGE COURTESY OF MARY LAYTON.



Good Steward of Creation

St. Columba Earns Project Green Fork Certification

By Candice Baxter

Last year, St. Columba Episcopal Camp and Retreat Center earned certification with Project Green Fork (PGF). The designation means they champion sustainability in all processes of service. From recycling and composting to conserving energy when buildings aren't in use, all efforts are dedicated to being good stewards of God's creation.

Chef Ashli King was instrumental in getting PGF certified. She met with members of Clean Memphis and Project Green Fork to review sustainability practices and set up a food rescue program. This partnership turns surplus into support by establishing an easy donation process for any excess food to be diverted to local charities. If a group does not have as many guests as originally intended, the extra meals are picked up and delivered to those in need.

St. Columba has recycling collection bins in every lodge for aluminum, paper and glass. Real dishes are washed and reused in the dining hall. If disposables are needed, there is no styrofoam in any food service on campus, because it never decomposes. Other points of sustainability include motion lights in restrooms and programmable thermostats to save energy when facilities aren't in use.

Anyone who has visited Scheibler Lodge in the past year has seen the little green bin next to the coffee pot, labeled for spent coffee grounds and filters. Instead of being wasted, these are used in the garden and flower beds to add nitrogen and attract worms to aerate the soil. When the vegetable harvest comes, the kitchen will save unused vegetable scraps like carrot tops and squash stems for compost. When mixed with dry leaves and shredded office paper, over time what was bound for the landfill will break down to become nutrient rich soil.

And the cycle will begin again.



(TOP) A small decal with big meaning. Chef Ashli King places the Project Green Fork certification on the door at St. Columba, celebrating a campus-wide commitment to conserve energy, compost scraps, and care for creation.

(RIGHT) Smiles that say, "Nothing goes to waste." Candice Baxter of St. Columba and Ali Manning of Project Green Fork celebrate a certification that turns coffee grounds into compost and extra meals into nourishment for neighbors.



The human need to belong is timeless and priceless, and the privilege of serving students, faculty, and staff at the University of Memphis and surrounding places of learning finds fertile soil at the Barth House Episcopal Center.

As an extension of the Diocese of West Tennessee, Barth House exists to partner with Episcopal congregations in their mission to be the hands, feet, and tangible manifestation of God's love within campus communities. While our ministry on the University of Memphis campus is well established, we are now intentionally expanding our focus beyond Shelby County to institutions of higher learning throughout the 21 counties of our diocese.

We are eager to walk alongside congregations as they explore and strengthen ministry with students, faculty, and staff in their own local contexts. Whether your church is near a large university, a community college, or a smaller institution of higher learning, Barth House is ready to offer ideas, support, and energy as you discern how God is calling you to serve in your geographical area.

Mission and ministry are lifelong endeavors. As fellow pilgrims on the way, we hope to offer companionship, encouragement, and practical partnership as together we nurture communities of belonging.

We invite your prayers and your participation. Please pray with and for us, and consider how your congregation might engage in campus ministry close to home.

Possible ways to partner include:

- *Planning and implementing a welcome picnic at the beginning of the academic year*
- *Serving as mentors for students pursuing your professional area of concentration (training provided)*
- *Providing care packages during midterms and finals*
- *Offering periodic prayer and formation opportunities*
- *Sponsoring or participating in music nights, game nights, or life-skills workshops*
- *Hosting vigils that nurture quiet, reflection, and a sense of belonging*
- *Joining us on Wednesdays for Eucharist at noon, followed by lunch*

Beloved, we are excited about the possibilities ahead and about working with congregations across West Tennessee. We look forward to reaching out, listening, and, when invited, visiting your congregation to dream and plan together.



From Campus to Community

Barth House's Call to Congregations

THE REV. DR. DOROTHY WHITE



The Calm Behind the Curtain

Verger Ministry in West Tennessee

By Emily Austin

Have you ever experienced a liturgy that feels seamless? Where readers arrive at the lectern at just the right moment, processions move with quiet confidence, and even the unexpected unfolds without visible disruption? If you have, there's a good chance a verger was at work.

Verger ministry is one of the church's most attentive and least visible lay ministries. It is rarely noticed when done well, yet it shapes the entire worship experience. That quiet, intentional leadership was the focus of a recent conversation between Emily Austin and two longtime vergers in the Diocese of West Tennessee: Jeffrey Berry, who has served as verger at St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral for ten years, and Elizabeth Colbeck, who has served as a verger at Calvary Episcopal Church for five.

"The verger is the director of the show," said Berry. At the Cathedral, the role includes planning the flow of services, coordinating the altar guild and liturgical ministers, training acolytes, and ensuring that clergy have everything they need.

"If you're going to come near that altar," he added, "we're going to have a conversation."

For Berry, who became a verger in 2015 and completed formal training through the Vergers Guild of the Episcopal Church, the ministry is both deeply practical and profoundly holy. "To me, it's probably one of the most holy things that you can do," he said.

Colbeck's path to verger ministry was shaped early on. Raised in The Episcopal Church and formed as an acolyte, she grew up watching her mother serve as a verger at their cathedral church in Atlanta.

"I think being a verger was just what I was going to do," she said.

Over time, she came to understand the role as a privilege. "You don't just raise your hand," she explained. "You

have to have the training. You have to have been a lay Eucharistic minister. You have to understand the church."

Both vergers emphasized that while the role requires knowledge of the liturgy, the learning curve is less about memorization and more about attentiveness. "A lot of it is just paying attention to detail," Berry said. "You're putting a puzzle together. If something changes at the last minute, you've got to rearrange that puzzle so it still looks good, and make it look like that was the plan all along."

Colbeck agreed, noting that the verger's job is often to hold the bigger picture while staying grounded in what truly matters. Recalling advice she received while training, she said, "All that really matters is that everyone ends up coming to the communion table."

For Berry, verger ministry begins long before the opening procession. It starts with simply entering the space. Reflecting on his years at the cathedral, he described the sense of grounding that comes with stepping into the nave each Sunday.

"When I walk into the nave, there's this sense of calm, like, *Okay, this is a holy space. Someone is here with me. We're going to work through this, and it's going to be a good Sunday.*"

That calm is not accidental. It grows out of preparation, familiarity, and trust in the liturgy itself. The verger's role is not to control the service, but to help hold the space so that worship can unfold as it should: predictable in structure, yet open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. When the verger is steady, the congregation can be too.

Colbeck echoed that understanding, noting that the beauty of Episcopal worship lies in the fact that so much is already given. The prayers, the rhythm, the shape of the service: these have been practiced over generations. The verger's task is simply to tend that structure, stepping in when human chaos intrudes, and stepping back when the liturgy speaks for itself.

That perspective becomes especially important when there's a hiccup in the service. Berry shared a moment from a Christmas Eve service at the cathedral when an acolyte fainted. "Everybody was like, 'Oh my gosh, what do we do?'" he recalled. "You keep calm. You help. You have someone step in. And the service goes on like nothing ever happened."

The verger's calm, he noted, helps the entire congregation feel that "it's going to be okay, because it is."

Both vergers described their ministry as one rooted in hospitality as much as ceremony. Verger robes can look imposing, Colbeck acknowledged, especially to someone unfamiliar with Episcopal worship. "I'm very aware that I look like I might be intimidating," she said. "So I make sure to drop that. 'Oh, hi. Come on in. It's fine. Just find a seat.'"

In many churches, the verger is among the first people a newcomer encounters, making warmth and approachability essential.

Both Berry and Colbeck expressed a shared hope: to connect with other vergers across the Diocese. Despite serving churches only blocks apart, they noted how rarely vergers have

opportunities to gather, compare practices, and learn from one another.

“I bet we have a lot in common,” said Colbeck.

Those who currently serve as vergers (or who are discerning a call to this ministry) are encouraged to be in touch. Berry and Colbeck would welcome the opportunity to connect with others serving in this role across West Tennessee. Interested vergers may contact St. Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral to begin the conversation.



(TOP) Formed in the Episcopal Church from childhood and inspired by her mother’s own verger ministry, Elizabeth Colbeck now brings steady leadership to Calvary Episcopal Church.
IMAGE COURTESY OF EBET PEEPLES.

(LEFT) Jeffrey Berry, who has served as verger at St. Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral for ten years, attends the 2025 annual Vergers Conference in Oklahoma City.
IMAGE COURTESY OF JEFFREY BERRY.

What does it mean to truly welcome someone into the life of the church?

That question was at the heart of a recent conversation among clergy and lay leaders who gathered for an Invite Welcome Connect workshop last fall at St. John's Episcopal Church in Memphis. Facilitated by Mary Foster Parmer, creator of *Invite Welcome Connect* (IWC), the one-day workshop brought together participants from across the Diocese of West Tennessee, representing congregations large and small. Developed by Parmer in the 2010's, IWC is the welcome and hospitality ministry of The Episcopal Church.

What lingered well beyond the day itself was not a checklist or a program, but a deeper theological and pastoral invitation: to see welcome not as surface-level friendliness, but as a spiritual practice rooted in dignity, relationship, and shared life.

The workshop came to Memphis through the leadership of the Rev. Donna Gerold, Associate Rector at St. John's, whose longstanding commitment to hospitality shaped the event and the conversation that followed.

For Gerold, welcome ministry is not an accessory to parish life; it is essential to the gospel itself. People can experience pain when they feel unseen or out of place, especially in spaces that should feel like home. Churches, she notes, often describe themselves as friendly, but friendliness alone is not the same as welcome.

"One of the phrases Mary [Foster Parmer] uses that really sticks," Gerold reflected, "is the difference between being a friendly community and being a community of friends. Most churches

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– The Rev. Donna Gerold

are communities of friends, and that can unintentionally make it harder for newcomers to find their way in."

That insight resonated across contexts, from legacy parishes to congregations with a dozen people on a Sunday morning.

At St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church in Humboldt, the Rev. Deacon Tommy Rhoads sees welcome embodied in small, attentive gestures: someone helping a visitor navigate the prayer book and hymnal, announcing page numbers clearly, or following up with a personal note after a first visit. In a small congregation like St. Thomas the Apostle, he observed, people are rarely invisible, but hospitality still requires intention.

When a young family visited St. Thomas recently, Rhoads noticed parishioners instinctively stepping in to help, not out of obligation, but care. One member quietly assisted them through the liturgy; afterward, Rhoads followed up. Not to claim them, but to honor their discernment. He even suggested other nearby Episcopal congregations that might better meet their needs, modeling a diocesan understanding of church that prioritizes people over parochialism.

That posture of mutuality, humility, and generosity echoed throughout the conversation.

At Church of the Holy Communion (Memphis), the Rev. Sarah Cowan (Associate Rector) has been engaged in strengthening hospitality practices over the past several years. Even so, she was quick to name the ongoing challenge: welcome is not a task to be completed, but a culture to be tended.

Cowan emphasized that Invite Welcome Connect succeeds because it pairs practical tools with what she called "heart work." Communication strategies, signage, and systems matter. However, they must be grounded in prayer, relationship, and a shared sense of purpose.

She recalled launching a newcomer greeter ministry that began not with instructions, but with prayer. Greeters gathered before services to pray together, framing their role not as a job to be done, but as a ministry they were called to share. That distinction, she said, makes all the difference.

Welcome is as much inward-facing as outward-facing. It invites long-time members into renewed discipleship, calling them to notice who is missing, to reach beyond fa-

Beyond Friendly

Living a Theology of Welcome

(ROW 1) During the Invite Welcome Connect workshop at St. John's, Mary Foster Parmer challenges participants to move from being a "community of friends" to becoming a truly welcoming community where intentional hospitality reflects the heart of the gospel.

(ROW 2) Participants from congregations large and small listen attentively during the Invite Welcome Connect workshop at St. John's, exploring how hospitality becomes more than friendliness. It becomes a way of being Church.

miliar circles, and to practice the sometimes-uncomfortable work of love.

Gerold spoke openly about that discomfort, especially in large, historic congregations where deep roots can unintentionally create closed loops. "Many churches say they want to grow," she said, "but the truth is, they often like things just the way they are." Welcome ministry, she argued, gently but persistently challenges that instinct. True welcome does not disrupt community; it expands it.

That expansion increasingly happens beyond church walls.

Gerold, Rhoads, and Cowan each shared stories of congregations in West Tennessee engaging their neighborhoods through blessing boxes, food pantries, Pride festival booths, pet blessings, chamber of commerce involvement, and simple, visible acts of care. These efforts were not framed as marketing strategies, but as expressions of presence. Ways of saying, *We are here, and we care.*

In that sense, welcome becomes incarnational. It mirrors the God Christians proclaim: one who shows up, takes on flesh, and dwells among us. The conversation also surfaced a shared conviction that the pandemic, while disruptive, can no longer be an all-purpose explanation for disconnection. The deeper challenge is relational. In a world saturated with digital communication, people are often more informed but less known. Churches have an opportunity to model something different: communities where absence is noticed, joy is shared, and people are reminded that they matter.

As the discussion drew to a close, there was a palpable sense that this work is just beginning. Ideas sparked at the workshop are already taking root across the Diocese, adapted to local contexts and carried forward by people who see welcome not as a program, but as a way of being Church.

If there is a single thread that binds these stories together, it is this: authentic welcome is not about perfection, polish, or growth metrics. It is about attention. It is about relationship. And it is about the quiet, faithful work of making room, again and again, for the neighbor Christ sends our way.



iness

EMILY AUSTIN



LEFT: In January 2026, West Tennessee seminarians Mike Johnson (St. James, Bolivar), Pam Evans (Grace, Paris), and Lavonnie Perry Claybon (St. Paul's, Mason) completed the Alternative Clergy Training at Sewanee program at the School of Theology at the University of the South. Congratulations! IMAGE COURTESY OF LAVONNIE PERRY CLAYBON.

BELOW: West Tennessee clergy gather for lunch at Seasons 52 in Fall 2025.





TOP: Students, school leaders, and community partners gather for the ribbon cutting of the new Little Library at Drummonds Elementary School, an initiative sponsored by Ravenscroft Episcopal Church in Brighton. Representatives from DES administration, Tipton County Schools, Ravenscroft Chapel, and the project's builder joined in the dedication, offering prayers for a successful school year for students and teachers alike. Already a favorite at dismissal time, the colorful library is quickly becoming a well-loved stop for young readers.

IMAGE COURTESY OF RICHARD VANDERGRIFT.

RIGHT: Diocesan Youth Council members Erin Maury (Holy Communion), Thomas Meinhart (St. Andrew's), and Neya Sam (Holy Apostles) attend a meeting of Bishop and Council in May 2025..





LEFT: At the 5th annual Advent Arts Market at the Barth House, Tricia Horton of Holy Trinity's art guild shares the fruit of a year's worth of faithful crafting with the Rev. Eileen Farmer. Every handmade item tells a story, and every purchase helps fuel Holy Trinity's outreach ministries. Beauty, generosity, and mission all wrapped up in one table

BELOW: At the Feast of Lights at St. Columba, the Rev. Canon Rob Courtney pauses to pray over the newest members of the West Tennessee Diocesan Youth Council. Meet the new members on page 22.





TOP: Offering a joyful witness of welcome and love, the Rev. Deacon Gerri Endicott (Holy Apostles), Marta Lopez-Flohr (Grace-St. Luke's), Paige Shoemaker (Holy Apostles), and Nancy Smith (Holy Apostles) staff the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee table at the Vincent Astor Celebration at the Memphis Public Library in September 2025, sharing a simple, powerful message: You are loved. No exceptions.

RIGHT: In January, the Rev. Dr. Dorothy White spoke at Christ Church Episcopal School in Greenville, South Carolina, for their inaugural all-school gathering in honor of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In keeping with the reality of Dr. King as a dreamer, Rev. Dorothy shared a Dream Catcher gifted to her.



YOUTH

Diocesan Youth Council

The Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee is pleased to announce the following new members to the Diocesan Youth Council (DYC):

Cannon Edwards

St. Mary's Cathedral

Tucker LaCroix

St. George's

Katherine Meinhart

St. Andrew's

Braxton Musso

St. George's

Ellis Saffer

St. George's

Cannon, Tucker, Katherine, Braxton, and Ellis join current DYC members MC Hitt (Calvary), Erin Maury (Holy Communion), Thomas Meinhart (St. Andrew's), Emily Poindexter (Holy Communion), Neya Sam (Holy Apostles), and Alana Wade (Holy Communion).

Revitalized in 2023, the DYC in West Tennessee is tasked with creating meaningful fellowship and service events for young people and providing their insights and perspectives to adult diocesan leadership.

Please join us in praying for these remarkable young people and their ministry in West Tennessee.



Cannon



Tucker



Katherine



Braxton



Ellis

Cannon Edwards

St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral (Memphis)
Maxine Smith STEAM Academy '26

"My faith helps guide me in the way I live every day. It reminds me how important it is to be kind, honest, and forgiving, even when that's not always easy. My faith reminds me that I'm never alone and that God is always with me, helping me make good choices."

Tucker LaCroix

St. George's Episcopal Church (Germantown)
Briarcrest Christian School '28

"Being a part of the Diocesan Youth Council is a way for me to show others how amazing God is and to help improve youth ministries."

Katherine Meinhart

St. Andrews Episcopal Church (Collierville)
Fayette Academy Middle School '26

"I think it's important that we connect with each other at a young age, so that we can have others to share and help grow our faith with as we become adults. I want to be part of making that happen."

Braxton Musso

St. George's Episcopal Church (Germantown)
Houston Middle School '26

"Church is a big part of my life, and I want it to be for a long time. Being a part of the DYC is going to help me grow my faith."

Ellis Saffer

St. George's Episcopal Church (Germantown)
Houston Middle School '26

"Faith helps people support each other through hard times, offering kindness and encouragement when someone starts to lose hope. Even when beliefs are different, faith reminds us that everyone is searching for meaning in their own way, which helps build respect and empathy."

Fostering the Future of the Church Started Yesterday

by MC Hitt

My name followed by an asterisk has been on the back of every Calvary Episcopal Church program for the past two years. The asterisk denotes a youth representative: someone who is in the 10th–12th grade, confirmed in The Episcopal Church, and attends vestry meetings to represent the interests of the youth, but does not receive a vote.

I joined the Calvary Vestry in January of 2024 as a Sophomore. I had just been confirmed the previous month and thought that it would make a good resume filler, but over time it became much more than a spot on my resume.

I looked forward to the third Tuesday of every month because it was a space that I felt valued in. And, it was a lot of fun.

It was also a peek into a more adult world. I learned how to read a budget and what a capital campaign is. I once got home after a vestry meeting and told my mom, “I thought that adults would have it all together, but I’m starting to realize that we’re all just faking it.”

To my surprise, Calvary is the only church in Memphis with youth vestry representatives, but I can confidently say that Calvary is not the only church in Memphis that has youth who want to be on the vestry.

I am a member of the Diocesan Youth Council, which represents youth on a diocesan level. I once asked the group if they knew why their churches did not have youth vestry representatives to which one person explained that they had asked their rector, but they said no. The rector said that since vestry meetings are open to the congregation and the youth representative would not have a vote, their place on the vestry would be inconsequential.

And yes, I’ll admit that sometimes it is awkward to sit there while everyone else votes, but during my time on the vestry every single vote was unanimous and it always went the way I would have voted. Not having a vote was inconsequential.

For me, being on a vestry went beyond the one hour meeting once a month. I got a name tag that said “MC Hitt, Vestry.” My name was on the back of every single bulletin and magazine for two years. I had a profile on the Calvary website underneath the

vestry tab.

I often hear the phrase, “the youth are not the future of the church; they are the church now,” but I disagree. It is possible to both be the now of the church *and* the future of the church.

In the future, I want to work in the church, and I know that because Calvary fostered my enthusiasm instead of telling me to wait until I’m 18. For now, I want to encourage every church to have at least one youth vestry representative and make it an official title. Give them a name tag and put their name in the bulletin. I’m certain that there are more youth like me who want to be involved.

As I entered my final semester of high school, I rolled off the vestry and may have cried a little. I now have nothing to do on the third Tuesday of every month, but then again vestry meetings are open to the congregation, so maybe I’ll still show up.

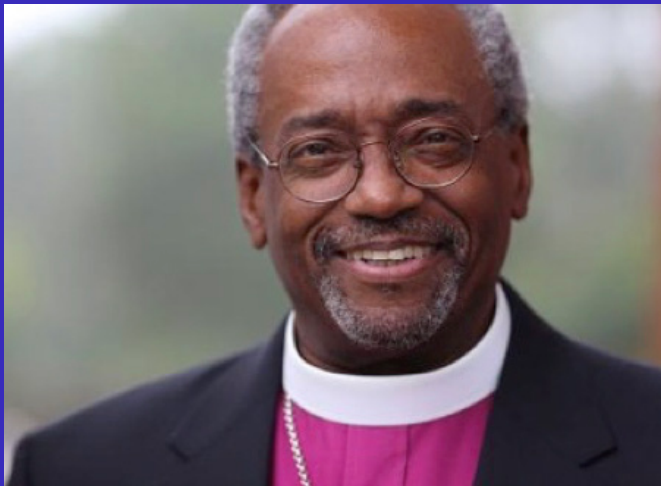


MC HITT is a proud member of Calvary Church and is a senior at St. Mary’s Episcopal School. She is the editor-in-chief of her school’s newspaper, *The Tatler*, and loves rock climbing. She is also a member of the West Tennessee Diocesan Youth Council. MC plans to attend Sewanee: The University of the South this upcoming fall.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

*The 45th Convention
of the
Diocese of West Tennessee*

**NOVEMBER 20-21, 2026
ST. LUKE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
(JACKSON)**



Summit on the Power of Love
Tuesday, April 21 | Crosstown Theater, Memphis

Retired Presiding Bishop Michael Curry will visit Memphis this spring for a special community event, Summit on the Power of Love, at Crosstown Theater (1350 Concourse Ave., Memphis, TN 38104).

The evening will feature a keynote address from Bishop Curry, along with a book signing, refreshments, a joint choir led by Patrick Scott of Grace–St. Luke's Episcopal Church, and music by the Memphis Jazz Workshop. All are welcome.

Free and open to the public.

Details and ticket registration information will be announced soon.