DIOCESE OF WESTERN NEW YORK SUMMER LISTENING PROJECT FINAL REPORT

August 2026

Report respectfully submitted by:

WNY Bishop Search Committee Members Sue Sims, St. Phillip's Buffalo and Susan Woods, Good Shepherd Buffalo, and Devon Anderson, Search & Transition Consultant

Listening Sessions Overview

The Diocese of Western New York (WNY) is ready for renewal and resurrection guided by a strong spirituality rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The second round of listening sessions, held on site at 49 parishes representing 96% of the diocese, revealed that WNY Episcopalians are ready to move forward, seek connection, and want to engage at the diocesan level. The listening sessions reflect an overwhelming, although not absolute, commonality in responses.

We are a resilient and hardworking family of individual parishes (rural, small-town, urban and suburban), each different yet all striving to survive and thrive in a rapidly changing world.

We recognize that one size doesn't fit all. We need solutions suited to diverse parish circumstances.

We seek a Bishop who will be accessible and personal, a "boots on the ground" leader. We seek a person who listens deeply, with an open-mind and heart, and is willing to take risks. Ideally, we are looking for someone who has had experience with challenges on a diocesan-level and has overcome them. We welcome new leadership who will bring us together, develop a shared vision inspired by the Gospel, and work with us to think "outside-the-box" to discover innovative solutions at the parish level and across the diocese. Numerous congregations suggested ideas worth exploring such as the formation of an inter-generational ministry, a diocesan-wide Commission on Creation Care, as well as expanding social media.

Listening Session participants expressed a desire for new ways to 'do church' that more effectively reach into our communities. We seek a spiritual leader who will be visible and active in the community to increase awareness of the Episcopal Church and our call to spread love and justice.

We recognize clergy, congregations, diocesan leadership, and staff all have a role to play in any process of renewal. We seek a new bishop who is administratively skilled, able to make hard decisions fairly, and leads through conflict resolution to build relationships, collaboration and engagement. We seek a servant leader who brings enthusiasm and compassion by teaching us to live into the Gospel, guiding us toward unity and deeper faith.

We hope for a shepherd and healer to walk alongside us, be fully present, make their home in the diocese and delight in living in Western New York.

Why This, Why Now?

In May 2026, the WNY Standing Committee recognized that the original timeline for the bishop search and transition process was overly ambitious. The Diocesan reality, shaped by the aftermath of the six-year partnership experiment with Northwestern Pennsylvania and its dissolution, revealed we had become more like a collection of local, independent parishes rather than a body connected through shared identity and purpose. We had lost a sense of who we are as a Diocese. The search committee needed to move forward with increased "clarity, communication, shared expectations and broadened diocesan engagement."

For these reasons, the Standing Committee called for a "renewed season of listening across the diocese" to create "space for clergy and lay leaders to reflect on who we are and who God is calling us to become." From Sunday June 7 to August 23, 2026 designated and trained teams of Search, Transition, and Standing Committee members visited, two by two, nearly every, single parish in the Diocese of Western New York and led a listening session after Sunday worship. The

same six questions were asked at every listening session, and responses were recorded on-line by the following Tuesday of every Sunday visit. Also, during each listening session, a 16-minute excerpt of the report we received back from the diocesan-wide Holy Cow survey was viewed.

Who Participated

Of the 51 worshipping communities that constitute the Diocese of Western New York, all but two hosted a listening session after one of their Sunday morning worship services over the summer. Of the two that were not able to host a listening session, one does not worship during the summer, and the other was not able to respond. This project enjoyed **96.08%** parish participation, which is an incredible response. Congratulations Western New York!

Listeners went out two-by-two to visit congregations and facilitate each listening session. In most cases, one listener facilitated the session, and the other listener took notes and then recorded what was heard. Listeners were members of the Bishop Search Committee, Bishop Transition Committee, and WNY Standing Committee. A full roster is listed below.

Listening Session Agenda

Each listening session followed the same agenda:

- Welcome
- Opening Prayer
- Introductions
- What are we doing, and why? (background information; context)
- Themes: Here's what we heard (16-minute recap of report from Holy Cow diocesan survey)
- Response/Listening (does the Holy Cow survey results resonate? How "yes" or how "no") Questions (6)
- Next Steps
- Closing Prayer

Response Themes (per Question)

1. General responses: what stood out to you as a particularly important insight? What caught your interest? Did you hear in it opportunities for renewal and resurrection?

Several listeners reported a frustration from participants with the Holy Cow summary video, stating the material was too dense, not understandable, out-of-context, presented too quickly, or "not spiritual enough." Also there was some skepticism regarding low survey response rates, age/demographic bias, and whether parishioners felt engaged enough for their input to matter.

Of those who did respond to this first question the discussion tended to be more general in nature, with major themes centering around:

a. <u>Vague Understanding of Diocesan Structure</u>

   i. Lack of familiarity about what a diocese is, how it functions, how it interacts with local churches, or how its governance works.

b. <u>Communication Breakdowns</u>

   i. General lack of communication from Diocese and within/among parishes; desire for more energy and excitement

   ii. Insufficient distribution channels: A single weekly newsletter is currently the primary communication tool, which fails to reach younger demographics (highlighted by the fact that only 1% of survey respondents were under 35).

   iii. A persistent frustration was expressed of feeling "left out," siloed, ignored and not listened to

c. Geographic Differences

i. Perceptions that the diocese is "Buffalo-centric," leaving rural and Southern Tier congregations feeling overlooked, disconnected, or unseen. We live in all sorts of communities: urban, suburban, town, and rural -- each with their own particular gifts, strengths, and struggles.

ii. Resourced vs. struggling parishes: A noticeable divide where larger, active churches thrive, while smaller congregations face fragile realities, declining membership, and crumbling buildings by themselves.

d. Current Leadership Needs Across the Diocese

i. Distant leadership: Historical dissatisfaction with previous bishops who felt absent, lived elsewhere, or made infrequent ceremonial visits rather than relational ones.

ii. Appreciation for direct engagement: Strong praise for relational leadership when bishops actually visit, engage locally, and become familiar with the people of each congregation, and not just on Sunday morning! We hope for a spiritual leader who will join us in our celebrations, times of grief, community events, fundraisers, and outreach initiatives.

iii. Clergy shortages & parish vulnerability: There is high anxiety around clergy recruitment and deployment including aging clergy, a lack of full-time priests/deacons, and a heavy reliance on local lay leadership to keep parishes functioning.

The desire for transparency, clear and assessable structure, and collaboration was a consistently expressed. Listening sessions revealed a clear call to shift from mistrust and isolation toward shared identity, proactive intervention for struggling churches, and clearer accountability. Participants expressed a strong desire for a new bishop who is connected to the people at a parish level – accessible and able to earn trust over time. Finally, many people wanted to be able to trust the diocese and bishop in times of tension and uncertainty hoping for a future in which conflict is resolved through dialogue, collaboration, and consensus-building. Participants also expressed a desire for a Bishop who is visible and engaged in the broader community of WNY and through interfaith community to bring forward the presence of the Episcopal Church and help spread the Gospel beyond the four walls of the church.

2. What have you personally experienced in the diocese that reflects where Holy Cow located WNY on the grid (low satisfaction and low energy)?

a. Themes repeated from Question #1

i. confusion around the role of the diocese and bishop along with a perceived lack of practical guidance, coaching, and support for local parishes facing economic or geographic challenges;

ii. lack of a sense of unity and solidarity with each other (feeling that churches operate now as separate, isolated, independent entities, really want to be connected with each other and know each other)

iii. lack of trust of the diocese

iv. not enough transparency

b. Sunday Attendance and Generational Shifts

i. Aging Congregations: declining attendance, aging memberships, and general demographic shifts are impacting attendance

ii. Youth Engagement Challenges: Busy Sunday schedules for youth and shifting cultural preferences make traditional long services less appealing to younger generations who seek relevancy, meaningful engagement, and autonomy without losing core traditions.

c. Diocesan Communication, Leadership, and Trust

i. Widespread feelings of disillusionment, mistrust, abandonment, and betrayal stemming from poor communication.

ii. Very much want a diocesan identity – a clear sense of who we are, together, rooted in the Gospel

iii. "Diocese" seems to be present in times of conflict, but that's it

iv. Looking to Diocesan leadership to guide healing and strengthen trust

d. Parish Identity, Isolation, & Growth Opportunities

i. Visitor Integration & Outreach: Need for programs, initiatives, ideas, and energy to onboard new people with clear branding to distinguish identity, and active outreach initiatives like social media engagement, grants, and community mission work.

ii. Want opportunities for healing.

3. What do you think makes the Diocese of Western New York unique and special (because it is!)?

Participants had a great time with this question and are passionate about, and proud of, where they live.

a. Community Identity and Personality

i. Neighborly & Welcoming: WNY is described as a region of "good neighbors," friendly, welcoming to immigrants, and resilient. We come together in times of crisis.

ii. Local Pride & Tradition: Strong connections to local identity, including sports teams (the Buffalo Bills/Josh Allen), unique food ('beef on weck,' fish fries, chicken wings), history, and local arts (Roycroft movement).

iii. Down-to-Earth Spirit: Emphasis on working together through hardship, pragmatism ("do more with less," stick to basics), "every man" energy, care about one another, friendly, and lack of pretension. Great sense of humor and slightly irreverent.

iv. "Provincial by nature but pragmatic about change"

b. Geographic & Lifestyle Advantages

i. Location Highlights: Proximity to Canada, Lake Erie, and Niagara Falls, alongside easy commuting with minimal traffic.

ii. Diverse Landscapes: A blend of urban, suburban, village, and rural settings across four seasons. WNY I becoming known as a "climate change" refuge.

iii. Cultural Amenities: Great theater, music, and diverse communities across both small towns and larger cities; cultural festivals and celebrations throughout the year.

c. Church, Faith & Diocesan Support

i. Diocesan Role: A new perspective where the diocese genuinely wants to support local parishes rather than just dictating to them.

ii. Faithful & Resilient Congregations: Parishes are composed of reliable, traditional, and faithful believers who are charged up about their congregation.

iii. Transition & Possibility: Even in extreme transition we remain open to experiment, adapt, and grow together

d. Inclusivity & Diversity.

i. A native American parish with native American priest, an historic African American congregation dating back to 1861

ii. Welcome, recognition, and inclusion of LGBTQ+ clergy and lay leadership

iii. Multicultural and international influences within liturgy and parish life

iv. Sharing building space with immigrant churches in their communities that are seeking space to worship

v. An active Bishop Holly Chapter of Union of Black Episcopalians

vi. An active Commission to Dismantling Racism and Discrimination that works to promote Becoming Beloved Community.

vii. While WNY has a demonstrated value of diversity and inclusivity, we acknowledge that much more is needed.

4. Let's talk about hope: where do you feel or experience hope – or, what makes you feel alive and feel the presence of God? (it can be in your church, in the diocese, in your community, neighborhood, or the world – anywhere!).

What gives us hope is the Gospel and the people. Plus:

a. <u>We have hope because we have ideas!</u>

i. ...about making the church relevant to attract youth and young adults (we acknowledge that responsibility falls on local leaders to train the next generation rather than relying solely on the diocese to bring in new members.

ii....about visibility and connection to our communities such as food trucks with Episcopal logos at civic events, awards for youth, and outreach beyond standard Sunday services.

b. <u>We have hope because we have had experiences, or moments, of church leadership that revives, energizes, and unites.</u>

i. Appreciation for Presiding Bishop Rowe, and Bishop Lane

ii. Great experience from these listening sessions led by the Bishop Search Committee

iii. Seeing God's presence in spiritual leaders like Archbishop Tutu and former Presiding Bishop Curry

iv. Appreciation for diocesan outreach and staff

v. For the potential of a new bishop's leadership, witness, and guidance

vi. When we are able to support and comfort each other

c. <u>We experience hope when we recognize God's presence and when we are able to live out our faith</u>

i. Experiencing faith in action through practical ministries, such as diaper drives, volunteering to feed others (and their pets), social and environmental justice (clean water, tree preservation, dismantling racism), and presence at community events like Pride, Juneteenth, and 'Every Child Matters.'

ii. Through open discussions, community support, prayer, and small dedicated groups making a real impact in the world

d. <u>We experience hope in our Episcopal worship, music, programs, ministerial initiatives, and church culture.</u>

i. The importance of varied and unique music (blending traditional and contemporary styles, flute performances, collaborations) to bring joy, hope, and diverse participation.

ii. Desirable parish culture includes welcoming environments where differences are respected, new ideas are encouraged, and failure is not feared.

iii. We are a people who are open to change and new focus – and that gives us hope!

iv. In parish communities: consistency in Sunday attendance, parish like family, accepting of female leadership, and more young families are coming to some of the parishes

v. Parishes are engaging in meaningful ways in the community through local outreach, including recovery ministries, food pantries, and pet food pantries.

vi. We've made some significant progress in youth ministries

vii. We've had some success with family outreach – a sense of working together and building within the community

5. What are we looking for in our next bishop? Imagine a new bishop coming to visit your parish. What do you hope that person would be like? How would they preach? Interact with others? What would be meaningful for you to hear?

6. What kind of relationship would YOU like to have with a bishop?

We are not waiting for a new bishop come to fix all of our challenges. We want someone to walk alongside us, be fully present, to make his/her home in the diocese and delight in living in Western New York, to bring enthusiasm and compassion, to teach us about the Gospel and following Jesus, and to guide us toward unity and deeper faith. And we have new ideas to explore, like intergenerational formation, that need a bishop's consultation and experience to develop more fully.

a. Presence and Visibility
   i. Desire for a leader who is physically present, visits parishes regularly, and shows up for community and interfaith events beyond Sunday services.
   ii. A strong emphasis on being accessible, approachable, and available to clergy and congregations to reduce feelings of isolation.
   iii. Someone who can plant seeds for new ideas and connecting with the community

b. Relational Leadership and Personal Connection
   i. High value placed on a "people-person" who listens, knows names, remembers individuals, and makes members feel like they matter.
   ii. Focus on empathy, compassion, patience, and warmth (e.g., sense of humor, delighting in kids, "chilled").

c. Authenticity, Honesty, and Transparency
   i. Demand for truthfulness without "rose-colored" promises or spin.
   ii. Looking for a leader who can admit mistakes, display openness, and build genuine trust through transparent communication. (someone who has experience with failure, learned from it, and grew).
   iii. Someone able to make hard decisions fairly and explain rationales clearly and fairly

d. Bridging Divides and Fostering Unity
   i. Need for a unifier capable of bridging political, social, and cultural gaps (e.g., conservative vs. liberal, urban vs. rural, resourced vs. struggling)
   ii. Emphasis on effective conflict mediation, handling chaos, and facilitating constructive dialogue to avoid repeated crisis management.

e. Evangelism, Growth, and Youth Engagement
   i. Focus on working with us in growing the church, teaching parishes how to reach out and bringing people back to the fold.
   ii. Repeated emphasis on connecting with youth, engaging the next generation, and adapting to modern society.

f. Strong Administration, Vision, and Adaptability
   i. Looking for a servant leader, someone who leads through influence, humbly modeling the life, teaching and self-sacrifice of Jesus
   ii. Need for a capable manager/administrator who can work with leadership to handle finances, organization, non-profit dynamics, and long-term planning without being purely transactional.
   iii. Openness to change, willingness to foster lay ministry, support deacons/clergy, and innovate without being overly constrained by costs or tradition.
   iv. Someone unafraid to guide us in creative, non-traditional, innovative imagining about what church can look like with a renewal and transformational mindset.
   v. Able to avoid repeat crisis management
   vi. Willingness to engage and work collaboratively with parishes and staff, not a CEO, and support the development of others.

Inspiring Ideas

During the listening sessions, participants offered many innovative and compelling ideas for consideration once the new bishop has been called. They include (but are not limited to):

a. Developing the deanery system and structure into something life-giving, relational, fun, and mutually supportive. It has potential and we can cultivate it. What might it look like, for example, a bishop to have a week-long residency in each deanery every year? The bishop would live in that deanery, visit all the churches, attend events, provide pastoral care and teaching, engage in mission and outreach together, and offer an opportunity for congregations to connect with each other relationally.

b. The listening sessions revealed a desire for inter-generational connection and relationships across the diocese. An idea was offered for a possible Minister for Intergenerational Faith Formation diocesan staff position that could organize a variety of opportunities for people to gather (to have fun, pray, serve) across the generations and together build their faith. Ideas such as intergenerational hikes, summer family camp opportunities, Holy Week offerings were offered. We feel it a huge charism we possess is the desire to be together and build relationships.

c. Reimagine diocesan convention. Participants offered a vision of convention where the main goals are to gather, worship together, share meals, learn new things, have fun, and build relationships – and where required governance business gets done, but is more on the edges. It is a vision of a transformational experience, an event where people want to attend because it offers so much inspiration, life, and relationship – a feeling of being connected to something bigger than the single congregation.

d. Facilitate parish warden relationships was another brilliant idea that was raised. This idea could be a regular monthly (or every other month) Zoom gathering of all junior and senior wardens in the diocese to build relationships, share resources and information, meet with the bishop, and help locate their work as wardens as ministry to and with the church. Another group could be parish treasurers with an annual peer-to-peer all-day audit so instead of paying auditors, parishes trade books in person and diocese provides professional guides on-site to assist the process.

e. Reimagine relationships across the Diocese with networking, brother or sister parishes, resource sharing.

Participating Parishes

Thank you to each and every WNY congregation that was willing and able to hold a listening session after a Sunday worship service. We are so grateful for your engagement, hospitality, honesty, energy, and faithfulness. Listed in order of Listening Session date.

Sunday June 14, 2026

St. Paul's, Stafford
St. Peter's, Eggertsville St. Andrew's, Burt
St. Mark's, LeRoy
St. Mark's, Orchard Park

Sunday, June 21, 2026

St. Luke's, Jamestown

Wednesday, June 24, 2026

Advent, Kenmore Table Eucharist

Sunday, June 28, 2026

Holy Apostles, Perry
St. Paul's Cathedral, Buffalo St. Paul's, Holley
St. Mary's, Gowanda Good Shepherd, Irving
St. Mark's, North Tonawanda

Sunday, July 5, 2026

St. Luke's, Attica
St. Simon's, Buffalo

Sunday, July 12, 2026

Trinity, Lancaster
St. John's, Youngstown Christ Church, Albion
St. Matthias', East Aurora
St. John the Baptist, Dunkirk St. Phillip's, Buffalo
St. Paul's, Angola

Sunday, July 19, 2026

Christ Church, Lockport
St. Peter's, Westfield
St. Paul's, Springville
St. Alban's, Silver Creek
Good Shepherd, Buffalo

Sunday, July 26

St. Martin-in-the-Fields, Grand Island
St. John's-Grace, Buffalo
St. Paul's, Harris Hill
St. Stephen's, Niagara Falls
St. John's, Medina
St. John's, Wilson
St. Paul's, Mayville
St. James', Batavia
Trinity, Fredonia
St. David's, West Seneca

Sunday, August 2, 2026

Advent, Kenmore
Trinity, Buffalo
Trinity, Warsaw
St. Peter's, Niagara Falls
St. Aidan's, Alden
Calvary, Williamsville
St. Stephen's, Olean

Sunday, August 9, 2026

St. Andrew's, Buffalo
St. Mark's and All Saints, Buffalo

Sunday, August 16, 2026

Trinity, Hamburg
St. Paul's, Lewiston
Grace, Randolph

Saturday, August 22, 2026

St. Patrick's, Cheektowaga

Project Listeners

Thank you to each and every listener – who each were trained, then scheduled their visits, facilitated the listening session, and recorded responses. Your time and talent, given so freely and unreservedly, is a gift beyond measure to the entire diocesan family.

Bishop Search Committee Members

The Rev. Nick Evancho, St. Martin in the Fields, Grand Island and St. Peter's, Niagara Falls
Lisa Yaggie, St. Luke's, Jamestown
The Very Rev. Rebecca Barnes, St. Paul's Cathedral, Buffalo
The Rev. Diane Cox, Genesee Regional Initiative
Cheryl Emerson, St. Peter's, Niagara Falls
The Rev. Marc Gutierrez, St. Paul's, Harris Hill
The Rev. Shawn Clerkin, St. Mark's, Orchard Park
Mark Henger, St. Simon's, Buffalo
The Rev. Karen Lawler, Trinity, Lancaster
Abrielle Monaghan, St. Luke's, Jamestown
Katelyn Nicoloff, St. Patrick's, Cheektowaga
Benjamin Phillips, Church of the Advent, Kenmore
Deborah Seals, St. Phillip's, Buffalo
Sue Sims, St. Phillip's, Buffalo
Amy Swanson, St. Paul's, Stafford
The Rev. Thomas Tripp, St. Peter's, Eggertsville
Susan Woods, Good Shepherd, Buffalo

Bishop Transition Committee Members

Beth Weeks, St. Simon's, Buffalo
Bill Duthe, St. Stephen's, Niagara Falls
The Rev. Cathy Smith, St. Luke's, Jamestown

The Rev. Elizabeth Grohowski, St. Paul's, Lewiston and St. Andrew's, Burt
Gloria Longo, Good Shepherd, Buffalo
Joan Jennings Scalfani, Calvary, Williamsville
Karen Gengo, St. Patrick's, Cheektowaga
The Rev. Kim Rossi, Retired
Leslie DeLooze, St. Mark's, LeRoy
The Rev. Robin Kozlowski, Genesee Regional Initiative
Sharon Drennen, St. Luke's, Jamestown
Saxon Deck, St. Matthias, East Aurora
Su Hadden, St. Paul's Cathedral, Buffalo
The Rev. Thomas Mitchell, Christ Church, Lockport

Other Listeners

Ed Walker, St. Paul's, Lewiston
Cheri Maytum-Krull, St. Luke's, Jamestown
The Rev. Ann Tillman, St. Matthias', East Aurora
The Rev. Luke Fodor, St. Luke's, Jamestown
The Rev. Joe Kozlowski, Genessee Regional Initiative
The Rev. Daniel Thibodeau, St. Mark's, Orchard Park
The Ven. Diana Leiker, St. Peter's, Eggertsville
The Rev. Canon Barbara Price, St. John's, Youngstown