The divide in our country is growing and the need to come together is obvious. At the same time the pandemic is making it difficult to come together safely. How do we as churches step up as leaders in our communities to help break down divisions and prejudices during this pandemic? Similarly, how would you as Bishop lead us through this time as a diocese?

In today’s widening divides of discord, I believe the Episcopal Church has an opportunity as never before to embody “creative demonstrations of dialogue and bridge-building,” that serve toward creating communities of peace, justice and healing in the spirit of bridge-building, that can enable us to live together more harmoniously. We are uniquely positioned to be one of the most effective mediums to bring about respect, enable sharing, and deepen friendships between those on different sides of the numerous divides, providing new pathways of understanding that transcend borders and how one sees the “other.”

As a result of the pandemic, a wonderful opportunity is being given to us to think “outside of the box,” to envision and initiate new creative approaches that bring people of divergent views together that demonstrate the reconciling message of Christ, and unite us, rather than divide, toward realizing a better future for all.

Having spent much of my life involved in developing creative initiatives that seek to build bridges between diverse and divided peoples, there are several foundational principles that I believe can serve as a guide on this journey of relating to the “other” in a way that God intended for all of us.

First, I believe we need to primarily focus on “building on all the commonalities.” I love the illustration that the crescent moon in the dark sky provides us. Whenever we see the light of a crescent moon, the majority of the moon is dark. I liken the slim crescent to the differences that divide peoples, and the large dark side to what we all have in common. Our culture is so often blinded by the constant illumination of our differences, that we can’t see all we have in common. The challenge before us is to create outreaches and programs that build relationships with each other on the “dark side of the moon” - on our commonalities and similarities. This includes not just beliefs and values, but also addressing our basic common needs – spiritually, emotionally, psychologically and physically. Around common interests or common needs, perhaps the church could build on its Fresh Expressions movement and create unique “encounter points” that bring people together that would not normally come together, toward encouraging people to see through the eyes of others, and offer a mode of reconciliation. For as the Christian mystic, Kahlil Gibran, so powerfully said, “Our neighbor is our other self dwelling behind a wall. In understanding, all walls shall fall down.”

Secondly, I believe it is critical we see ourselves first and foremost as pilgrims, journeying in life toward God, rather than having arrived. So often our culture, and even our faith, teaches us that we “arrive.” However, as a church we are essentially a “people of pilgrimage.” A pilgrim is someone on the move, always journeying, and therefore more open to asking others for directions, meeting new people, and even asking others completely different than ourselves for assistance on our journey of trying to live the life God desires us to live. Being a “pilgrim” implies a certain attitude and spirit - of openness, gentleness, and willingness to grow, regardless of where it comes from.

Thirdly, one of the deepest divides today relates to political views and affiliations. In leadership, I have primarily served in contexts where there were diverse political associations. Often the path between being prophetic (which can sometimes be seen a political) and pastoral, is a very narrow one. This requires great sensitivity, always keeping in mind how others may interpret something. Personally-speaking, I have tended to avoid public political stances whenever possible, as I see the church called to a higher loyalty, and needing to do all possible to remove any barriers preventing people from drawing closer to our Creator through Christ.
Within all of this, there is no question that this new context will require an imaginative embrace of new media, not as a substitute, but as an inspired and strategic vehicle of outreach and mission. The exciting opportunity before us in this new world of the “virtual,” is to discover how to most effectively facilitate through it a genuine encounter with the teachings of Christ, and an experience of the Sacred. In so doing, the “virtual” ceases to be virtual, and instead becomes a means for real spiritual and societal transformation. As a church we will need new 21st century media content, that helps unite our communities through transformational virtual initiatives. For example, I could envision a statewide social media and online communications campaign run by the diocese on the theme “Together We Are Stronger Than The Storm!” – that reaches into every community via their computer, mobile phone, radio and billboards, and that is supported by an assortment of both online programs that bring people together and in-person services, providing encouragement, care and community.

However, more than anything else, I believe the way forward is to focus on increasingly aligning ourselves as a church and individuals, to the way and teachings of Christ - living “the kingdom of God.” This of course entails a sacrificial approach - one of kindness, selflessness, forgiveness, and ultimately living Jesus’ second great commandment of “loving our neighbor as ourselves” – seeing everyone as equally made in the image of God.