

Personal Mission Statement of the Rev. Brian Vander Wel  
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Prompted by an invitation from the Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde for all clergy of the Diocese of Washington to write a personal mission statement, I offer the following.

**“[The sons of Issachar were] men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.” 1 Chronicles 12:32**

**My Mission.** The image of a farmer dominates my thinking and imagination in my work as a parish priest. I am not drawn to this image simply because the parish I serve is in an historically rural community. Rather, I am drawn to this image because there are so many agricultural stories and pictures within the Scriptures which resonate with my work and because it best reflects how I think about my work day to day.

As a farmer-priest, then, my mission is to cultivate parish life within and in response to a culture of death to form hearts and minds that love God and his kingdom. It was John Paul II who used the line “culture of death” in his 1995 encyclical titled *Evangelium Vitae*. In it he writes, “we are confronted by an even larger reality, which can be described as a veritable structure of sin. This reality is characterized by the emergence of a culture which denies solidarity and in many cases takes the form of a veritable ‘culture of death.’” Pope John Paul II goes on to say that this “structure of sin” involves “powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency. Looking at the situation from this point of view, it is possible to speak in a certain sense of a war of the powerful against the weak: a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another. A person who, because of illness, handicap or, more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or life-style of those who are more favoured, tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated. In this way a kind of ‘conspiracy against life’ is unleashed.” (paragraph 12)

While it is certainly difficult to name and describe broad-sweeping cultural forces, we clearly live in an age when doing so is essential to ministry life, particularly when they inhibit and disrupt our love for God and his kingdom. This statement will name what I believe are some of these key factors which

contribute to this culture as well as describe the resources God has given his Church to counter this culture and nurture within us a love for him.

**Some factors which contribute to a culture of death.** Few would doubt that we are undergoing a major cultural shift in the Western world. But I would argue that the shift is itself a work or fruit of patterns of thought which have been at work for many generations. These patterns can be broadly labeled “the Enlightenment.” I believe that the Enlightenment and two movements which have responded to it, Romanticism and Post-Modernism, are powerful forces shaping our world today.

It is way beyond what I can do in this document – and beyond, quite frankly what I have thought about – to connect these broad patterns with a culture of death. But I simply state that I believe it to be so. I believe, in other words, that these patterns are the roots of the plants whose fruits include a culture of death. Each of these, the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Post-Modernism, hold sway over Western thought, behavior and imagination. I will summarize each briefly.

Most acknowledge that the Enlightenment roughly began with René Descartes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and his search for unshakable knowledge in the volatile world of the religious wars of Europe. His conclusion in Meditations, “I think, therefore I am,” provided significant energy and traction for this new and emerging way of perceiving the world. But Descartes certainly was not the only force. Bacon, Locke, Hobbes, Hume and Kant, just to name a few, all had profound influence in shaping what is labeled “The Enlightenment.”

Its aims are three-fold. The first aim is to elevate human reason. Adherents would claim that this includes identifying and overthrowing the corrupting powers of the Church, state, social structures, economic class and superstitions which have prevented Reason from flourishing. A second aim is a dedication to the study of Nature, believing that human reason set free and engaged in the study of Nature would discover everything humanity needs. A third aim is the notion of progress: life in general is getting better and better. All three work together for the Enlightened: people rationally engaging with the world and overthrowing the powers that stand in the way of Reason establish a life that can only improve over time.

The Enlightenment’s first responder, Romanticism, grew out of the distaste for the too-precise, mechanistic tendencies of Enlightenment thinking. Enlightened thinking saw Nature like a clock which the great watchmaker

god had wound up, and now it is simply unwinding. To the Enlightened, Nature was precise, measured, calm, uniform and controllable. To the Romantic, Nature is wild, unruly and free. Wordsworth's stanza from the poem "The Tables Turned" sums up Romanticism's resistance well:

Enough of Science and of Art;  
Close up those barren leaves;  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.

The heart knows in ways the head does not, says the Romantic to the Enlightened, and is not so easily squeezed into your mold.

A second responder to the Enlightenment, Post-Modernism, is a relatively new but equally powerful development. While the term has been applied to a host of cultural factors from philosophy to art to literature to architecture, Post-Modernism seeks to expose underlying ideologies, presuppositions, moral opinions, etc. of writers, politicians and those in power with the chief aim of demonstrating how these are themselves captured and part of a system of oppression. In fact, Post-Modernity can be characterized as a response to **any** story or narrative which claims prominence over any other narrative, because these "metanarratives," the Post-Modern says are always, by their nature, oppressive. As a result truth and reality – for the Post-Modern – are fluid. "That may be true for you, but not for me!" is a popular sentiment of the Post-Modern.

While these are broad and imprecise strokes, there is no doubting the influence of these three movements. They remain strong and have powerful sway within our world. While connecting these streams of thought with the actual patterns of the culture of death is way beyond what I can do in this exercise, I simply assert again that these forces, aims and projects produce destructive patterns in our world which contribute to a culture of death and, most concerningly, have power over the thinking and life of the Church.

At their root, I have come to understand that these patterns are idolatries: they have set creatures up as gods. Identifying the idolatry, however, is hard work. For example, there is no denying that science and the scientific method have worked great good in the world and achieved great technological advances. So, it is foolish for Christians to unthinkingly brush aside science as "wrong." Yet, science and technology in our culture are often looked to as the saviors of all human ills. For the Christian, of course, there is one savior, Jesus Christ. So,

the culture surrounding science and technology can, at times, offer a vision of salvation that differs from that of the Christian faith. The Christian call to engage and understand this dynamic as idolatry is critical. We must be ready in general to understand where truth and falsehood lie in scientific claims. We must be unapologetic in identifying when and how good things which God made possible – science and technology – have become idols.

In light of this summary, my work is to read, think about, pray to understand, interpret for my parishioners and live a life counter to these factors. I am called to identify how these systems are idolatrous and are antithetical to gospel proclamation and gospel living.

**“His divine power has granted to us all things  
that pertain to life and godliness.” 2 Peter 1:3**

**The Central Remedies.** My ministry is to teach my parish to say no to the above-described projects and in one important way be faithful to our baptismal vows to renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. My ministry also includes articulating and employing the resources God gives us so that we may learn to desire and live the life which he has given us to live. The following resources serve to instruct, correct, admonish and comfort the Church and her people in this work.

*Jesus Christ.* The person of Jesus Christ and his revelation to the world is the central gift God has given us. His birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension give the Church her *raison d’être*. His teaching, his healing, his sacrifice for sin and most importantly the vindication of his life in his resurrection from the dead are the rock upon which we stand. He and he alone gives purpose to his bride, the Church. As John Updike so powerfully articulates in his 1963 poem “The Seven Stanzas at Easter,” without Jesus – and more precisely, without the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead – “The Church will fall.”

*The Holy Bible.* As I publicly professed when I was ordained deacon and priest: “I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation,” the Bible is a book unlike any other. It is a narrational telling of the Story of God spanning three continents, more than three thousand years, three languages and at least forty authors. Yet it is the unified testimony of God and his relationship with his people, as well as his people’s relationship with him. When we elevate the Holy Scriptures in our lives, when we read it with

reverence and delight, when we seek to be obedient to its teaching, God speaks to us. As N.T. Wright says in “The Last Word,” “the authority of God [is] *exercised through Scripture*.” (p. 25, his emphasis) We find ourselves loving and desiring the right things and living as he has commanded us to live.

*The Current and Living Church.* One of the critical lessons we learn from the Bible is that Jesus did not come only to establish a relationship of individuals with himself, but also to establish relationships between disciples. God makes it clear that our relationships with each other are critically linked to our relationship with him. The Church is meant to feed our hunger for community and meaning. The Church is also meant to provide a safe place for us to face the things that we are blind to about ourselves. Like a good marriage where fidelity and loyalty are bedrock (“forsaking all others, [I will] be faithful to you as long as we both shall live” BCP, p. 424), a solid Church family provides relational safety as well as real-world, concrete ways to experience the major theological themes of the Christian life: confession, forgiveness, reconciliation and grace. It is in the Church that we learn how to love and be loved. It is in the Church that we learn how to be adults.

*The Historic Church.* One of the great and often overlooked benefits of being a 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian is the overwhelming wisdom of those who have been Christians before us. If Christians in our local congregation need other Christians to learn how to be Christians, how much more, then, does the Church of today need the Church of yesterday to understand what it means to be the Church? Tens of millions of Christians have done exactly what we are called to do since the apostles died. We have much to learn from them.

Anglicanism has historically had particular strengths in this regard. Until recently it has managed to hold various traditions of the Church together under one roof. The fullness of its strength is when all of them are held together. The evangelical tradition emphasizes the primacy of Scripture, the person of Jesus and what he accomplished through his cross. It also emphasizes the need for all to have a personal, saving relationship with him. The catholic tradition emphasizes the proper ordering of church life through liturgical worship and the fourfold ministries of bishop, presbyter, deacon and layperson. The charismatic tradition emphasizes the presence and operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are always available to the Church. The world-engaged tradition emphasizes the call to engage and serve the needs of the world.

There is a dark side, however. The history of the Church is not full of only roses and sunshine. Many things done in the name of Jesus have been contrary

to Jesus. Similar to what I have outlined as a response to the culture of death, Christians today must be discerning in what is, or is not, consistent with God's plan for his people. T. S. Eliot in "The Choruses from the Rock" helps lead the way through the sometimes unsightly messes of the Church's history:

Of all that was done in the past, you eat the fruit, either rotten  
or ripe.  
And the Church must be forever building, and always decaying.  
and always being restored.  
For every ill deed in the past we suffer the consequence:  
For sloth, for avarice, gluttony, neglect of the Word of God.  
For pride, for lechery, treachery, for every act of sin.  
And of all that was done that was good, you have the inheritance.  
For good and ill deeds belong to a man alone, when he stands  
alone on the other side of death,  
But here upon earth you have the reward of the good and ill that  
was done by those who have gone before you.  
And all that is ill you may repair if you walk together in humble  
repentance, expiating the sins of your fathers;  
And all that was good you must fight to keep with hearts as  
devoted as those of your fathers who fought to gain it.  
The Church must be forever building, for it is forever decaying  
within and attacked from without ...

The witness of the historic Church to the present day Church is often unheeded because of her warts, sores and self-inflicted wounds. But that is the great opportunity of this day. We may allow the missteps of the past to be a mirror for us to look into and understand ourselves. We may allow God to work through us to "expiate the sins of [our] fathers [and mothers]" so that those sins may no longer have power over us and our children. We may pray for the strength to maintain the good our fathers and mothers "fought to gain." And finally, we may pray for the wisdom to know the difference.

*Worship.* Jesus says that the Father is seeking worshippers who will worship him in spirit and in truth. Yet, the human condition seeks to form gods according to its own desires. We would rather worship the creature and the creature's work than worship the Creator. Idolatry is a very serious danger, as my earlier section emphasizes.

One could argue that the call to rightly worship the true God is one of the central themes of the whole of the Old Testament. Yet, the human heart is

easily deceived and just as easily produces gods which are not God. When we worship idols, our judgment becomes clouded, and as Psalm 115 chillingly expresses, those who worship these images – which have mouths but cannot speak, ears but cannot hear, feet but cannot walk – become just like them.

The counter to idolatry is Christian, Eucharistic worship. In such worship we declare anew the death of the Son of God who takes away the sin of the world and is himself the way and the truth and the life. Through him, we are given access to the Father. Through him, we sit down and eat with God himself. Through him, we sit down and eat with each other. It is the living image of the reconciliation God has won for us. In Christian worship, the soul receives the antidote to the poison of idolatrous worship. Our hearts, minds and imaginations are shaped to desire the one true King and his kingdom.

*Service to the World.* Former Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev. and Right Honorable William Temple said, “The Church is the only organization that does not exist for itself, but for those who live outside of it.” The Church is called to serve the world in all it does. She identifies and addresses the true and deep needs of the world. She articulates and demonstrates what life really is. She witnesses that the God who made everything has intervened decisively in the affairs of history in the man, Jesus Christ. She is embassy of the kingdom that transcends and ultimately defeats all other kingdoms. But as John Richard Neuhaus says, she must always be aware that because she is ambassador of a “disputed sovereignty,” there will be push back.

These resources work on us. They help us to identify and respond to the culture of death. They help us to say yes to the abundant and eternal life God offers us. They teach our hearts and minds to love God and his purposes. My ministry is to articulate and live these realities within Christ Church, Accokeek while I am their Rector. I trust that as I do this work, God will strengthen the good work he is already doing. He will bring the necessary cures to the congregation and will more deeply infuse our parish with his new and resurrection life. He will help us tear up by the roots the thorns and weeds of the culture of death among us. He will rescue us from its effects. He will make us powerful agents of healing to those afflicted by it. We will know his love more deeply and deeply love in return.

**Conclusion.** The culture of death acts like a gaping wound in the soul of the Western world, a festering sore which saps people of their strength, leads them to love the wrong things, disorients them, and obscures the work of the Church. God has given us a kingdom through worship of and obedience to the

one true king, Jesus Christ. My mission is two-pronged: to lead Christ Church to say no to the culture of death and to cultivate Christian life employing the resources God has given his church. I know this vision for mission is broad-sweeping and, perhaps, overly ambitious. But God has worked this on me for many years, and it has only come into sharper focus in the last four or five.

I return to the image of the farmer-priest. It continues to form my vision and it feeds me: I cannot clear fields of brush or remove stones and boulders quickly or alone. Seeds do not sprout overnight or bear fruit in a single day. Farms have rhythms and seasons that must be listened to and honored. Protecting plants that are growing and bearing fruit, removing old underbrush, sowing seeds, nourishing soil – cultivating parish life within and in response to a culture of death to form hearts and minds that love God and his kingdom – is the essence of my work.

I close with a poem which is posted in my office and crystallizes this vision of my work:

I am trying to teach my mind  
to bear the long, slow growth  
of the fields, and to sing  
of its passing while it waits.

The farm\* must be made a form,  
endlessly bringing together  
heaven and earth, light  
and rain building, dissolving  
building back again  
the shapes and actions of the ground.

If it is to be done,  
not of the body, not of the will,  
the strength will come,  
but of delight that moves  
lovers in their loves,  
that moves the sun and stars,  
that stirs the leaf, and lifts  
the hawk in flight.

— Wendell Berry, Collected Poems, 1957-1982, pp. 190-1

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\* I replace “farm” with “parish church” to connect the meanings of the poetry to my work.