



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF EAST CAROLINA

THE RIGHT REVEREND ROBERT S. SKIRVING, BISHOP

To the People of the Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina:

February 26, 2025

Dear Friends in Christ,

These last weeks have been difficult for the people of this nation, as the fault lines of our polarization have grown deeper, and the angry rhetoric has sharpened. Nowhere has this been clearer for me than in the range of responses I have witnessed to the contrasting religious language offered publicly on Inauguration Day and then on the next day at the National Cathedral. Language used by some in my social media circles has too often been hateful and ignorant. To be clear: the outrage has been focused in every direction. I've often wondered, how does the world make sense of this sort of behavior by followers of Jesus?

As I have struggled to know how best to respond amid all this noise, God has blessed me in moments when I have been present with the people of the Diocese of East Carolina, including with some of those who are most vulnerable. On Friday evening, January 31st, I joined the people of La Iglesia de la Sagrada Familia for worship in their brand-new church building. Worship was enthusiastic, many adults and teens were confirmed and received, and my liturgical Spanish skills held up reasonably well. The best parts of the evening, though, were the quiet conversations I had with members of the congregation about their immigration status and their awareness of ICE agents in the area. I heard expressions of hope and of courage, and of appreciation for my interest in what they were facing.

A couple of weeks later, I spent time with the staff of our Interfaith Refugee Ministry in New Bern. Executive Director Debi Miller invited me to visit, after she and I had gone back and forth by email about the challenges this long-standing ministry now faces. By way of explanation, for those not familiar with their work, this ministry has been charged with welcoming legally authorized refugees from other parts of the world and helping them to settle in the local community. For now, at least, they will not be welcoming new refugees. Still, they have contracted responsibility for the support of refugees who arrived as recently as this past January and all of this without the confidence that they will be reimbursed for their work. During my time with our IRM staff, clear concerns were expressed. They asked me questions like these:

- "What will happen to our work, and to the people who legitimately need to escape parts of the world where they are not safe?"
- "What about our jobs, if funding disappears?"
- "Where are those people, including Christians, who will show us that we are safe and welcome in the communities where we live?"

This last question was from a staff member who themselves had come to eastern North Carolina as a refugee a few years ago.



252-522-0885



PO Box 1336, Kinston, NC 28503



rskirving@diocese-eastcarolina.org

A third and final moment from these last weeks stands out and, in large part, shapes this pastoral letter. On February 2nd, I made my Sunday visit with the people of St. John's Church in Wilmington. As I do most every Sunday, I led worship that included the renewal of our Baptismal Covenant. At St. John's, as I did so, I stood in front of the altar with forty adults and teens gathered in front of me, all ready to reaffirm their baptismal faith and be confirmed or received into the fellowship of our community. A photographer caught an image that included these words on the screen above my head: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" At St. John's, as it is in most of our congregations, this question was answered with a resounding "I will, with God's help."

Friends, we will not always agree with one another on important issues of our time. We will not always agree on who should serve as President. We who are followers of Jesus will not always agree on how scriptures should be interpreted or how faith should be expressed or lived. We will not always agree on how best to solve the real problems that face our nation.

We must, however, commit to loving God and to loving our neighbor. We must see every person in our lives as neighbor and then serve them as we would serve Christ. Our neighbors are not just those who look like us or who agree with us: they include people who are very different from us. Some of our neighbors live in fear, fear that they will be driven from the only country they have known as home, that their job will be taken from them, that they will face ridicule and abuse from those they pass on the street.

Loving our neighbor is not just a nice idea, something we can affirm in church and then avoid every other day of the year. Loving our neighbor involves building relationships with those with whom we share community. Our relationships with our neighbors help us to better understand them and their needs, and them to understand ours, and then to respond to one another compassionately. Mutual understanding allows us to work together to address issues of concern. It can guide us in how best to spend our time and our resources. It can lead us to speak up against injustices, to correspond with our political leaders and to work for peace.

With this pastoral letter, I want to offer you a practical opportunity to love your neighbor. As I described, the Interfaith Refugee Ministry staff live with the fear that they will lose funding to serve the needs of refugees who are already living here in eastern North Carolina. Recently, they have learned of a matching grant opportunity and have invited us to share this opportunity with the people of this diocese. In an attached document, you can find out how to help turn donations totaling \$25,000 into \$50,000 or more of funding for their work. I hope that you can support them generously.

Look around the communities where you live, and work and worship, and seek and serve Christ in all persons you meet. As Fred Rogers shared, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." To this I would add, look for concrete and practical ways that you can be a helper to neighbors who are most seriously impacted by "scary things in the news."

Yours in Christ,

