Please have a seat. My name is Bill Powel and it’s good to be with you this morning. Like you, I started out at St. Paul’s 26 years ago sitting in the pews, and then became involved, first as a church school teacher and confirmation sponsor, and then on the Vestry and Senior Warden. I also spent seven years chairing what was called the Apostleship Commission (or Outreach). Before joining the Bishop’s staff in 2015, I served as the Chancellor to the Diocese. And now, I serve as the Canon to the Ordinary, essentially the Chief of Staff for Bishop Hollingsworth. My role is working with clergy and lay leaders throughout the diocese, after a career as a hospital general counsel in Cleveland and Akron.

As I know you are aware, and thanks to William Vodrey’s work as the Bicentennial Missioner, we are in the midst of celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Diocese of Ohio, the first diocese formed outside of the 13 original colonies. Parishes around the diocese are answering the question “what’s your 200?” by making pilgrimages to Trinity Cathedral, collecting food and clothing, planting 200 bulbs and a variety of other things. St. Paul’s parishioners are pledging funds to the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, preparing 200 baby bundles for Central American Medical Outreach, raising $200 for Reading Camp, 200 personal care kits for the Homeless Stand Down, and 200 hours of participation in the EDWINs programs—all great ideas, and in the spirit of paying it into the third century of the Diocese.

The celebration culminates in November at our 201st Convention, when Presiding Bishop Michael Curry will join us, as well as other distinguished guests, including Bishop Clark and Wendy Grew. On Sunday, Nov. 12, Presiding Bishop Curry will dedicate Bellwether Farm, the new diocesan camp and retreat center in Wakeman, Ohio that is rising out of the ground as we speak. We are also very pleased that the Forest City String Band will be there, too, to help us celebrate.

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Today’s Gospel contains the familiar phrase: “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” In the story, Jesus is in the prime of his ministry—teaching in the synagogues, curing every disease and every sickness. Matthew writes: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” We then hear Jesus instructing his disciples “therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” He goes on to send forth his twelve disciples to cast out unclean spirits, and to cure every disease and sickness.
When I first read this in preparation for today, the passage seemed pretty straightforward: we’re being called to get out there and do good work. Give of your time. Volunteer. Help others. Perhaps we won’t focus our energies on casting out demons, but it seems that we are clearly called to minister to the “sick, the friendless and the needy” as we say in the prayers of the people. It’s an Outreach message—we must be the harvesters—going out in the fields with the ultimate goal of serving others.

I had the opportunity to ponder this passage further when I was privileged to accompany Bishop Mark Hollingsworth and Bishop Alan Gates from the Diocese of Massachusetts last month for a 12-day mission trip to the Diocese of Tanga in Tanzania, Africa. Both Dioceses have long-standing companion relationships with Tanga, and this was the first time since Bishop Gates’ consecration in 2014 that we could coordinate a visit.

The focus of the trip was familiarizing Bishop Alan and Margaret D’Anieri, our Canon for Mission, with the ministries of the Diocese of Tanga. The relationship goes back to the time of Bishop John Burt in the 1970s, when the Diocese of Ohio provided the funding for a building that now houses the Diocesan Offices. After the late 70s, the relationship was dormant until Bishop Hollingsworth took an interest, and invited his former boss, Bishop Tom Shaw of the Diocese of Massachusetts, to participate with us.

Since 2005, both dioceses have made multiple trips to Tanga, which is one of 27 anglican dioceses in Tanzania, in the northeastern part of the country, near Kenya—not far from the various wildlife national parks. It’s about the size of the eastern half of the diocese of Ohio: Cleveland to Ashtabula to Gambier, with 120 parishes and 55,000 members.

Our delegation had a distinctive St. Paul’s flavor. In addition to former Rector Alan Gates, we were fortunate to have the language and logistic skills of Brendan Knoblauch, who grew up at St. Paul’s and lived in Tanga for several years after serving in the Marines. Brendan’s father, Mike Knoblauch, and I served on the Vestry and he also served as senior warden. We also had another Brendan on the trip: Dr. Brendan Patterson, an orthopedic trauma surgeon, who spent a week with us beginning the day after he retired from MetroHealth. In addition, to Canon Margaret, we were joined by the Rev. Sister Sarah Randall, an ordained Episcopal nun from the Order of the Sisters of St. Margaret in Duxbury, Massachusetts.

Since my first visit in 2012, new paved highways have been added, but mostly we traveled on muddy and bumpy roads after a very rainy season. It took us 3-1/2 hours to get to climb the Usambara Mountains to get to Church on Sunday for a double confirmation service that was about was about the same length of time!

Besides visiting numerous parishes, we toured the several diocesan hospitals and health clinics, as well as the secondary schools, and professional nursing schools. The focus was on potential medical and educational collaboration, including a potential exchange program with medical and nursing students, and perhaps exchanges with lay leaders,
seminarians and recently ordained clergy. We hope to continue the conversation with Bishop Maimbo Mndolwa at the Bicentennial celebration in November.

Tanzania is a western-style democracy, and the government is devoting resources to infrastructure improvements, including a new transportation hub in Korogwe, the diocesan see. It also does its best to provide health care to all, but there are many challenges in a developing world. 75-80% of the population is subsistence farming. The good news is that the harvest has indeed been plentiful. They expect a second harvest in December.

There is quite a contrast between life in the US and Tanzania. The United States population is 83% urban-dwellers; only 30% live in cities in Tanzania. The median age there is 17; here it’s 38. Another statistic: Tanzania has 1.5 million Anglican members in a country of 55 million. There are about 2 million Episcopalians in the US, which has 6 times as many people.

In a meeting with clergy leaders in Tanga, one of the Area Deans asked the American Bishops about the secret to securing resources for their churches. We are seen as having unlimited funds. But the Bishops turned the question around: how is it, they asked, that you have such a vibrant parish life in Tanga, with the richness of worship and the joy that the people of Tanzania show for their church.

So, we have resources and fewer people and they have the people in the pews and fewer resources. They think they need to learn our secret; perhaps we need to learn theirs, or maybe there is no secret. In his book, Going Global with God, Titus Presler defines Mission as “the work of reconciliation across boundaries of difference.” Maybe it’s not what we can do for them, but the experience for us of understanding the differences. In understanding these differences between us, we are changed.

This is not a new concept for the people of St. Pauls. This parish has had a long history of connecting with the African people through Rich and Mary Nodar, with the Diocese of False Bay, South Africa and the parish in Masiphumele. Through our Global Missions Action Group, we continue to support the work of AIDS orphanages, including St. Paul’s House of Hope that was built with funds raised by St. Paul’s. The Rift Valley Children’s Orphanage is another Tanzanian connection first made by Meredith Bowen, and we continue to provide support for a 10-year old boy. So St. Paul’s is no stranger to understanding those differences and making connections.

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I am a fixer—but not a handyman, as Sandra will attest. But I do see situations that need improvement and I want to fix them. And so it was for me on this trip. As we visited hospitals and observed the most basic of medical facilities, we saw so many ways that their system could be improved. I said to myself that it’s simply a question of resources, or telling them how to do it the right way. It was us vs. them: how could we help them?
In the Gospel, before Jesus directed the disciples to work in the harvest, he also called on them to be compassionate—in essence, to walk a mile in their shoes. We are therefore called to do more than just solve a problem, serve a meal, or alleviate someone’s pain. We are called to get to know the other person we’re helping. In my case, applying my solution to the health care system in Tanzania wasn’t the answer—it took listening closely to hospital and church leaders as they talked about their needs and their strategy until I could understand how we might work together to help them achieve their goals. I finally understood why the diocese wanted to rebuild a hospital when it didn’t seem to me to make financial sense.

In doing so, it changed my perspective. Instead of fixing what we see as a problem, our help is really in understanding their situation through a series of conversations, asking questions and listening to answers—back and forth. In short: developing a relationship.

Jesus calls us to labor in the harvest, but instead of seeing the harvest as a task, or a transaction, we are called to have compassion, and get to know the other person on some level. Those of you who serve at Loaves and Fishes know it’s important to hand a full plate of food to our hungry guests, but isn’t it just as important to sit down with them to learn their struggles (and not hang back in the kitchen), because in that interaction, our perceptions change. We aren’t just solving a problem or doing good—we are following what Jesus said: to show compassion and to relate the other person.

When we go to work in the harvest, we are not alone. In Tanga, I had my St. Paul’s posse with me. On my second visit there, it was nice to be a guide for Alan Gates. And that’s the way it is here—you are not alone when you volunteer at Edwin’s or Loaves and Fishes or Miles Park, your St. Paul’s community is with you. You are part of one community as you encounter and serve another community.

The Tanzanian priest saw the abundance of financial riches in the US, while we saw the joyful abundance of spirit in the worship lives of the people of Tanga. Our churches are different. But together our two churches are complementary— we are more complete together when we share each other’s experiences.

Just as Jesus calls us to work in the harvest, he is asking us to learn from each other and help fill in the gaps in each others’ lives.

Amen.