

Episcopal Church presiding bishop Sean Rowe takes office, proclaims 'one church in Christ' for a changing world

by [David Paulsen](#)

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Michael Curry presents Sean Rowe with the primatial staff during Rowe's investiture November 2 at the Chapel of Christ the Lord. (Photo by David Rider/The Episcopal Church)

Sean Rowe began his nine-year term as the 28th presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church with an intimate but [festive investiture service on November 2](#) at the Chapel of Christ the Lord in New York that was livestreamed to close to 20,000 viewers in homes, churches, and dioceses around the world.

In his 10-minute [sermon](#), Rowe emphasized the importance of supporting the church's ministries at the congregational and diocesan levels—already a central theme of his nascent term, which officially began November 1.

“That’s where ministry is taking place. It’s in these places where faithful Episcopalians gather day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, to worship God, to celebrate and mourn their sorrows and to care for God’s people,” he said.

Rowe, 49, was [elected in June on the first ballot](#) by the House of Bishops and confirmed by the House of Deputies at the 81st general convention in Louisville, Kentucky. He was partly chosen for his experience overseeing adaptive responses to the challenges of denominational decline, as bishop of Northwestern Pennsylvania and bishop provisional of Western New York.

The scaled-down investiture was a deliberate contrast to the church’s past tradition of welcoming new presiding bishops with greater fanfare at installations hosted at Washington National Cathedral, the seat of the presiding bishop. Rowe was partly motivated by an interest in reducing the service’s carbon footprint while increasing opportunities for churchwide virtual participation.

The service incorporated a wide range of cultural traditions and languages, most notably in its intercessions, spoken in languages including Spanish, Mandarin, German, and French. The intercessors also included interfaith guests, Mohamed Elsanousi, a Muslim who spoke in Arabic, and Rabbi Esther Lederman, speaking in Hebrew.

The presiding bishop has a range of responsibilities, as outlined by the Episcopal Church’s constitution and canons. Those include presiding over the House of Bishops, chairing the executive council, visiting every Episcopal diocese, participating in the ordination and consecration of bishops, receiving and responding to disciplinary complaints against bishops, making appointments to the church’s interim bodies, and “developing policies and strategies for the church and speaking for the church on the policies, strategies and programs of General Convention.”

One of Rowe’s first tasks as presiding bishop is to oversee a [“structural realignment” of churchwide operations](#) while developing a plan to save \$3.5 million on staff over three years, or about 5 percent of the church’s total personnel costs.

Last month the church, at Rowe's request, contracted with Compass, a consulting firm with experience in organizational development, to help facilitate engagement with the churchwide staff. Those discussions will continue November 7-9 when Rowe [chairs his first executive council meeting](#) in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Rowe's investiture served as a ceremonial changing of the guard—featuring a literal passing of the staff, as Michael Curry handed his primatial cross over to Rowe during the service. Curry, whose nine-year term concluded October 31, now plans to spend much of his retirement closer to home in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Rowe and his family will maintain their primary residence in Erie, Pennsylvania, though he has already begun visiting the more than 100 Episcopal dioceses. His message to those dioceses is that their good work is part of something greater.

"The days are over, if they ever existed, that diocese and congregations and institutions of our church could just go it alone and do it their own way," Rowe said in his sermon. "For we must acknowledge our mutual interdependence, our need to do ministry together, to share what we have and to sustain one other. Especially now, in this badly hurting world, we need to become one church." —Episcopal News Service