



EPISCOPAL DIOCESE
OF WASHINGTON

ENGAGING A CHANGING WORLD WITH AN ENDURING FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST



**A DECISIVE MOMENT:
DIOCESAN CONVENTION ADDRESS
2016**

The body does not consist of one member, but of many. . . If one member suffers, all suffer together it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. We are the body of Christ, and individually members of it . May we strive for the greater gifts and allow God to show us a still more excellent way. I Corinthians 12:26-31

My friends in Christ:

I am overjoyed to be with you in this sacred place. If this is your first Diocesan Convention, we're so glad that you're here. If you are a seasoned member of this diocesan community, we're grateful for your faithfulness. Would you take a moment and say to someone near you, "I am so glad you are here!" On behalf of all, I thank the Rev. Sari Ateek for his inspired preaching and the Theodicy Jazz Collective for their amazing music. Andy Barnett will be with us all week and Theodicy will be back next weekend for three music events, culminating in the Absalom Jones service with Presiding Bishop Michael Curry on Sunday afternoon.

It's good to be back in our beautiful Cathedral, and we're trying a new format. For two years we were at Reid Temple, a site that easily accommodated workshops as part of Convention. We came back to the Cathedral for a one day Convention based on your feedback. Many of you told us that the workshops offered were valuable, but that there wasn't enough time at Convention to sufficiently engage the subject matter, and that the people who would most benefit from the workshops weren't necessarily Convention delegates. So this year we'll offer two Leadership Days in late February and early March so that your leaders can pick most convenient site and engage subjects most helpful to them. We've assembled an awesome team of teachers and facilitators from around the diocese and the country. That's all coming up ahead -- inspired worship with our Presiding Bishop, and practical resources to assist you in leadership and ministry.

But we're here today, taking up the governance responsibilities of church.

We are here, each one of us, because at some point in our lives we made a commitment to follow Jesus. It might have been a conscious decision or a gradual awareness. Regardless of how it happened, we are here because of Jesus.

We are here, each one of us, because we have found a spiritual home in the Episcopal Church. Perhaps it's always been your home, or perhaps you discovered the Episcopal Church along the way. Regardless, we're all here because we've chosen, or God has chosen us, to be part of this "particular branch of the Jesus Movement."

And we're here today as stewards of the faith. We're the ones God has entrusted with responsibility to be the Episcopal Church in our respective communities. It's a sacred trust and I'm honored to share it with you.

This is what I have on my heart to say to you:

We have come to a decisive moment as the Episcopal Diocese of Washington.

I have come to a decisive moment as your bishop.

It's been four years since you blessed me with the greatest vocational gift and challenge of my life, to serve God and the people of this diocese as bishop. We've spent the last four years getting to know each other. You've been kind, supportive and inspiring. I've grown to love you; I'm honored to serve you; and I gladly give my whole heart to this work. God willing, we will share this ministry adventure for years to come.

The first four years have been devoted to building relationships and trust. You blessed me with the role of leadership at my election, but I have to earn your trust, which only comes with time and shared experience. Based on the priorities you articulated during the transition between bishops, we've redirected diocesan resources and staff toward the areas that matter most now: congregational vitality, resources for discipleship and spiritual growth, equipping leaders, and the work of justice that we share as those who follow Jesus. Together we've undertaken an evaluation of ministries funded and managed at the diocesan level. That includes campus and young adult ministry, Latino

ministry, ministry among the deaf; diocesan-level youth Ministry and Camp EDOW, and diocesan support for the Bishop Walker School. In these areas and more we're doing good and important work together.

Thus we've come now to the end of our first season of shared ministry. We've articulated key priorities and assessed core ministries as reflected in the diocesan budget. I'm no longer the new bishop. And we've arrived at a decisive moment as we turn our gaze to the next four to five years, and the five years after that.

The last six months have been a time of prayer and soul-searching for me. We've had many discerning conversations across the diocese. I continue my study of Christian communities that are thriving in the cultural and spiritual contexts in which we live. And there are many all around us from whom we can learn.

Like you, I love the Episcopal Church. For years, I've felt a claim on my heart to do all in my power to ensure that our faith communities learn to thrive, to sufficiently adapt and engage the world around us so that more people might experience Christ through the treasured spiritual insights and expressions of our church.

There's no guarantee that we will succeed in this adaptive work. Some of our congregations will succeed, but how many? Almost all will continue to exist, but how many will thrive? And what might we do now to ensure that as many of our congregations adapt and thrive, so that in five or ten years we are stronger as a church than we are now, with greater capacity to fulfill the vision of church that God has entrusted to us?

Having served as your bishop for four years, this is what I know:

- The challenges before us are bigger than any one congregation can meet on its own.
- The opportunities before us are greater than any one congregation can fulfill on its own.

- The vision entrusted to us is larger than any one congregation can realize on its own.

For these reasons, among all that we will undertake at this Convention, there are two main tasks before us. First, I ask you to approve a change in our governance structure that would rename, realign, and re-invigorate our regions as the foundation for increased collaboration; and second, to approve a diocesan budget that reflects a shared commitment to our common life and devotes an unprecedented level of resources to increasing congregational collaboration and financial health.

These are important decisions for a decisive moment. By far the most interesting stories in the Bible are of people at decisive moments--people who make a choice to respond to challenging circumstances or to do something brave. The decisions they made, in faithfulness to God's call, had life-changing implications for them and for others. Think of Ruth, as a young choosing to follow her mother-in-law, Naomi, to a foreign land with these words, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Or in the gospels think of the young boy standing among the hungry multitudes who offers to Jesus what he has--five loaves and a few fish. When common sense and self protection would say, "hold on to what you have," the boy chose to give and through his gift, the multitudes were fed with baskets left over.

Decisive moments are times at which critical need and exciting opportunities come together. They are every bit as holy as experiences of unanticipated grace that just seem to happen, uninvited and unplanned, as signs of God's love. Decisive moments are also grace, but they don't just happen. As the word implies, we have a decision to make. And that decision has far-reaching implications, for it is based on a vision for our future that we dare to believe God wants for us.

Back when I was member of the CREDO faculty, an organization that provides wellness retreats for Episcopal clergy, I used to guide people through a seemingly simple, yet courageous process of personal self examination. It went something this:

- Start with an honest assessment of where you are right now.
- Follow the trajectory if you made no changes to the most likely outcome.
- Ask the question: What might God's preferred future for you look like?
- Identify steps you can take now to move toward God's preferred future.

In any life assessment, it's important to start with all that is good and strong. But as each of us has potential for great things that we cannot accomplish on our own, we need to take steps toward areas of great potential--they don't just happen. Each of us has struggles in life that we'd rather ignore. And in the demands and distractions of life, it's easy to go on autopilot, moving from one day to the next without sufficient thought for the future. But what are the consequences of not putting ourselves in places of great potential, and for not tending to the things we'd rather avoid? It takes real courage to stop and ask the question "If I continue in this way where will I likely end up?" And then when we ask God for help to envision a different potential future that we could move toward? That opens us to the possibility of a decisive moment of grace.

To use a similar process for our congregations is at the heart of strategic planning. All of our congregations are blessed with strength in some areas of ministry, and admittedly, some have more strengths than others. But all have places of untapped opportunity and unrealized potential. All have blind spots and barriers to growth. And while there is enough to occupy our attention and keep very busy at what we're doing now, if we don't address those areas of untapped opportunity, unrealized potential and untended challenges, we can predict with considerable accuracy what the future will hold.

Looking across the diocese, there is so much to celebrate and ample reason for hope. We have good reason to love our church. I'm proud of what we've accomplished together.

For example:

We're in the third year of a new ordination process for the priesthood, and this year launched a long awaited ordination track for deacons. Last October, we approved 15 people as postulants and they have begun their education and formation process. By

the end of next year, first cohort of deacons will be ordained for ministry throughout the diocese. We have been blessed by those who have worked on the deacon's initiative and we give thanks to God for those are saying yes to this servant ministry.

Our multicultural ministry has also deepened in the four years. Our Spanish speaking congregations, with a long history of collaboration, have undergone many changes in recent years. Three are entirely supported at the congregational level, and the remaining three are on a path to self-sufficiency, including one of our largest congregations, St. Matthew's/San Mateo, that regularly draws 500-600 people for worship.

Clergy of multicultural congregations continue to meet regularly, and as part of the Leadership Days in February, over 50 lay and clergy multicultural leaders have committed to a two-day workshop with the Rev. Eric Law and the Kaleidoscope Institute. Kaleidoscope has a proven track record for improving and strengthening multicultural congregations within the Episcopal Church.

Without question, one of the important times in the life of a congregation is during clergy leadership transition. It's also the time that you both expect and need to be well supported by your diocese. This is a high priority, as it is one of the most significant ways that as a diocese we invest in one another. In the last four years 48 -- over half-- of our congregations have experienced or are experiencing now clergy transition.

Among those in right now is Washington National Cathedral, and as you may know, I am serving as interim dean. It was a decision made in consultation with Diocesan Council, the Standing Committee, Cathedral leadership. Among the many reasons I felt God calling me to this work is to strengthen the ties between the cathedral and the diocese. This Cathedral is a treasure for all of us, for the wider church, and for our nation. And in partial compensation for my time, the Cathedral is contributing \$75,000 (above its annual gift) to the diocesan budget.

So let me say just a word, briefly, about the Confederate Flag windows in response to our good friend and colleague Robert Hunter. Dean Hall, as you know, right at the time of the Charleston killings and the conversation around the country regarding the placement of the Confederate flags and other iconography from the Confederate era,

called for the removal of the windows that are in the Cathedral. To be honest, up until that time, neither he nor I knew about the windows.

He himself did not have the authority to remove the windows, by himself, just as you wouldn't have, as a clergy person, have the authority to remove any windows in your congregation; he asked the Cathedral chapter to engage that process and I can gladly report to you that the Cathedral Chapter has formed a task force. There are several people from the wider diocese, and they are undertaking that work.

What I have said to them is, that from my perspective, regardless of the decision with the windows, the most important thing that we do in this period is examine our history, so that we really understand the history of the Civil War, the post-Civil War period, the end of Reconstruction, the rise of renewed segregation, the rise of Jim Crow, the glorification of the Confederacy, and the desire among white Americans to unify at the exclusion of African Americans in this country. We must understand that history; we must understand how it is embedded in our architecture, not only here but around the nation. I daresay in many of our congregations. And we must repent of that history so we are not bound by it.

In that light, what happens to the windows will be understood in the context of that conversation and we will come to that conclusion then. And so I invite your prayers for the Cathedral and its work and I invite you to consider whether there is in your architecture or in your communities similar work to be done.

There is much to celebrate and give thanks for in the Diocese of Washington. God is good. Jesus is Lord. The Spirit is here. And many are working very hard in faithfulness and love. And yet, I ask myself almost every day, if we continue on the path we're currently on, what does the future hold? If we follow the trajectory of our 88 congregations on the course we're on now, what do we see?

Certainly some of our congregations will be stronger in the next 5-10 years, with greater capacity to serve Christ's mission in the future.

But some will continue on a path of steady decline.

Most, despite lots of hard and faithful work, will plateau either where they are now or at a slightly larger size.

Thus, even with our best efforts, the trajectory of congregational growth suggests:

Some growth. Some decline. Most plateau.

I believe that God has a preferred future for the Episcopal Church, and it beckons us. It is a future in which all of our congregations are vibrant, strong gatherings of people who have experienced the mystery of faith -- a palpable sense of God's love for them, a transformative experience of the Risen Christ. It is a future in which our congregations are bursting at the seams with people deeply engaged in Christian practice--prayer and Scripture study, hospitality and peacemaking, loving God and neighbor, serving their communities and working for justice in our land. In God's preferred future, we are raising up children in spiritual confidence and honoring elders for their wisdom. In God's preferred future, our worship is joyful and our people are singing. In God's preferred future, we are known in our communities for showing up and really caring for our neighbors and for refugees.

There are signs of this preferred future all around us. The seeds of that future are planted and taking root in our soil. But the challenges are bigger than any congregation can meet on its own; the opportunities are greater, and the vision entrusted to us is larger than any one congregation can realize on its own. We need each other.

I propose that we take the time in the next season of our life together--in the *next* four years-- to take stock of key areas of congregational vitality, and do that work in collaboration *with one another*, rather than individually; that we take time to assess the changes of the world around and within the church *together*, not alone; that we learn *together* who our neighbors are, what God is up to in their lives, and how we might know and love them for their sake and for God's.

Many of our congregations are already in the midst of good, strategic, discerning work. But most are doing that work in isolation, as if they were the Episcopal Church alone and everything about their future rested on their shoulders alone.

As if the eye said to the hand, "I have no need of you."

If we continue on that path, at best we would have 88 separate strategies for the future, which doesn't feel like the best stewardship of our planning efforts. For surely we are stronger together than alone. We are surely wiser together. We see more possibilities together. Together we can share wisdom and learning, and pool our resources. Together we can wisely allocate diocesan resources with strategic vision, no longer responding to each need or request for support in isolation.

That brings us to the first of our two key decisions for the day: voting on the new regional structure we discussed in a series of meetings this fall. In the proposed structure, we would divide the diocese into eight geographically based and named regions from which strategic work could take place, building upon the good work already undertaken in many of our congregations and considering the commonalities of a given mission terrain.

The new regional structure doesn't discourage other relationships as the basis for mission and ministry. It would simply be a foundation for collaboration, linked to our governance and representation. Once established, the regional bodies could exercise real authority in establishing priorities and allocating resources. When, in 2017, we ordain the first of two cohorts of deacons, their ministries could be part of the regional structure, significantly increasing collaborative ministry possibilities. Each region would elect representatives to Diocesan Council with real authority and accountability back to the regions for decisions made at the diocesan level. It will take time and effort to build these relationships. Yet the potential for fruitful ministry seems so much greater than if we continue on the individual paths we're on now.

I ask you for your support and commitment to the collaborative ministry process that we can create together.

The second decision before the convention is passage of the diocesan budget for 2016 -- our statement of shared commitment. This budget is unique compared to other years in that it includes a one percentage point increase of normal operating income from all congregations currently not at a ten percent tithe. Naturally, that is aspirational, but it is also critical.

If, as Jesus taught us, money reveals what we value, we have cause for concern. In the year 2000, the diocese moved to an all-voluntary giving policy, with an understanding that each congregation would work toward a 10% tithe. Most made an effort toward the tithe, I'm told, until the economic troubles of 2008. While the economy has improved, many of our congregations are still struggling financially. Last year six of our 88 congregations tithed to the diocese; 22 gave three percent of their income or less. The average is five percent. As a diocese, we've come to expect that low level of giving as a symptom of the financial vulnerabilities in many of our congregations.

There are other reasons for low investment, if we're honest. For some, it reflects a lack of engagement with diocesan ministries, for others, a lack of confidence that the money is wisely invested. For others it is the historical legacy of a breakdown in relationship with diocesan leadership. For most, it's simply the understandable desire to take care of parish needs first. I was a rector for 18 years -- I remember.

But we're at a decisive moment now, all of us, and I am asking you to raise your commitment, not to me, not to "the diocese" as some far off entity; but to one another, and for the possibility of greater fruitfulness for us all.

I ask this in full awareness of the financial challenges your congregations face. Addressing those challenges is now a top priority, not for the sake of the diocesan budget, but because of what it means for congregations. We need a financial strategy, a plan to address the shortage of funds that is constricting ministry possibilities and hampering efforts for growth.

For if we follow the trends and look ahead five to ten years, the issue of financial vulnerability becomes even more compelling. Many of our congregations are dependent on one or two disproportionately high pledges to make budget; most have an aging membership base; and some are dipping into the reserves of endowments to pay the bills. For many, the cost of maintaining expensive, energy inefficient buildings completely overwhelms other ministry imperatives.

I don't believe that financial struggle is our destiny. There are ways to grow stronger, financially, linked to our mission. Other churches and nonprofits are raising money to great success. We can learn from them.

But first we need to talk about money. This year I'm initiating a different kind of money conversation, not based in email or at phone calls, but face-to-face engagement. We'll start with congregations who tithe or are making a percentage point or significant increase, to express our gratitude and learn how best to partner together. Then we'll talk with those who cannot or choose not to meet the one percentage point increase, so that we might better understand the financial challenges you face and explore strategies to address them. This will be a relationship strengthening exercise, to heal old wounds where they linger and begin to write a new chapter of ministry together.

All the increases in revenue from the tithe or one percentage point increase will go to enhance the financial health and strength of our congregations. The 2016 budget proposes investing new resources in three ways that Council moderator Maureen Shea will explain those in detail later this morning, that we discussed at regional meetings, that I wrote to you about last week, and can found in the narrative budget in your packet.

The 2016 budget recognizes that not all congregations can or will choose to meet the requested increase in giving. Thus, our categories of investment are contingent on what you actually give. I'm determined to make you proud to support our common mission, committed to invest in the ministry we share, and with demonstrated fruitfulness for that investment.

Those are our two major areas of business, and today's votes are decisive. But they are not entirely new things. What I am asking you to consider with your votes is already happening across the diocese.

Congregations have also begun to respond generously to the 2016 budget. For 2016 so far, we have received 34 pledges, 28 of which are increases. Five have committed to the tithe; 11 to the one percentage point increase.

And there are established and new examples of collaboration across the diocese:

Parishes in Capitol Hill are actively engaged with one another to serve a common neighborhood -- collaborating in programs and liturgies to share the load and increase the joy.

Georgetown parishes are actively working -- not only together but also with other faith leaders -- to address homelessness and other neighborhood needs.

Our parishes in Central Montgomery County have covenanted with Canon Joey Rick to begin this month developing a common strategy and discerning a specific financial plan to accomplish it. Leaders from the congregations in Central Prince George's county expressed a strong desire at our December gathering to do something similar.

Three congregations came together last summer to sponsor a joint youth mission trip. Next summer, there will be five parishes participating.

Some parishes in leadership transition are asking whether it makes sense for them to share clergy. That's already a success in Charles County, and parishes in St Mary's and Montgomery County are in various stages of considering it. Clergy in southern Maryland are known for their collegiality and deep friendship.

The various campus ministries have begun to think of themselves as a team that last month they decided to create a "Campus Ministry" banner instead of one banner for each university.

In closing, I'd like to remind you of another decisive moment from the gospels. The Gospel of John tells of a time when what Jesus had been teaching was so hard that many of those following him decided that they had had enough. According to the text, they simply left and "no longer went about with him." In that demoralizing moment Jesus turns the twelve--those closest to him -- and asks. "What about you? "Do you also wish go to away?" Speaking for the twelve, Peter replies, "Lord, to whom would we go? We believe that you hold the words of eternal life We have come to believe and know that

you are the Holy One of God.” They had come too far to turn back. Their lot was with him.

Friends, there is no doubt in my mind that you have cast your lot with Jesus.

And I hope that you know that in faithfulness to him, I have cast my lot with you. I feel your affection and devotion to me.

Today, through our prayers, deliberations, and decisions the question we are grappling with at the heart of this Convention is:

Will we cast our lot with one another?

Can the eye say to the hand, “I have no need of you?” We are part of the body of Christ and individually members of it.

We are the Episcopal Church in Washington DC, and in the Maryland counties of St. Mary’s, Charles, Prince George’s and Montgomery.

We have come to a decisive moment.

May we walk toward God’s preferred future together.

AMEN.