

## **Address to the 135<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Diocese of Bethlehem**

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**Cathedral Church of the Nativity  
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This is our eleventh regular convention together, and as the years pass the joy of greeting you on this occasion only grows. We are deeply bound together in our faith and our partnership in doing God's work; I don't know what else one can ask. The Talmud defines the rich person as the one who is happy with what he has. We have a good deal of abundance to feel rich about.

If you were to visit Diocesan House on any Thursday morning, you would participate in a spoken eucharist very much like any parish eucharist on a weekday or Sunday at 8:00. There is perhaps one exception: the prayers of the people might seem to you to go on forever. That isn't an accident—they are very long every day, especially on Thursday, and we are quite intentional about this. The welfare of the parishes and many individuals of this diocese are continually brought before God by those called to serve in Bethlehem. Some of you are geographically far from the center of the diocese, but none of you are forgotten.

As we consider prayer from the other point of view, it has meant a great deal to me to know how many of you have borne me in prayer through what remains a physically challenging year. As other shoulder patients will know, having two surgeries meant that I have slept sitting up for more than half of the last 12 months, but that posture provided a kind of spiritual moment each night. In my recliner I was wrapped from underneath in a prayer shawl from Good Shepherd and St. Mark's in Milford, and covered on top by a blanket depicting St. Brigid's in Nazareth. The experience of being surrounded by your love gave both comfort and strength in difficult times, and I am grateful for all the expressions of love and support Diana and I received around that pair of surgeries.

I was explaining by email to one of you this week that we do our reviewing in five-year chunks when compensating clergy, and with that on my mind thought it might be interesting for us to look at a some five-year chunk of our own performance as a diocese. I begin with some numbers courtesy of George Maniatty, Dan Charney, and Canon Shallcross. Our latest comparative parish data is 1999 through 2004. In that five-year period we find that total parish income in the diocese is up by 25.9%, with giving to the diocese increased by 20.5%. The average pledge increase by 32%, and all annual giving, including non-pledgers, is up 38%.

It is instructive and inspiring to note that the increases are largely if not entirely found in parishes where there is a year-round stewardship program, especially those using the Consecration Sunday program. Average annual giving is whopping 69%, sixty-nine percent, higher in parishes that have an intentional year-round stewardship plan. Can any parish afford not to do this?

The fact that intentional stewardship works is an illustration of how theology is practical. To be technical about it, you can't get blood from a stone. Stewardship begins with the recognition of the depth of God's love for us in Christ, God's generosity for us that gives us warm and lovely hearts. Stewardship is rooted in nothing else but the desire to follow Jesus with all of our being. Christians who are helped to integrate disciplined generosity into their walk with Jesus Christ simply do respond. The numbers are there because the smiles are there. Stewardship always comes back to evangelism: hearing and responding to the good news.

Again, you cannot get blood from a stone, and neither people nor parishes bring forth very much unless they are positively focused and celebrating Jesus. I would be the first to admit fund-raising events are fun and do a great deal of good, especially in building parish community, but the core of the church's financial ability to do ministry comes from each of us making the commitment we are increasingly seeing in our diocese, a commitment to offer gratefully our first fruits. When we accept Jesus' discipline of looking beyond ourselves, we change.

When each of us sees ourselves as having a part in Christ's mission in life, much around us changes, too. The family in Bethlehem diocese has affected its neighbors unforgettably. In the last five years our relatively tiny diocese has given over \$800,000 to relief for Africa, for tsunami victims, and for hurricane relief. And that is just the money we know about because it flowed through us to Episcopal Relief and Development. Certainly there has been more. No one can doubt that the love of God lives among us, and I thank you on behalf of the many who have no other way to address you.

Enough with the numbers for the moment. They are meant to illustrate my joy in being part of a diocese where so many are working in exceptional ways. But faith also shows through when times are tough. In the last year we have also seen courage, resilience, and creativity on the part of the congregations of Susquehanna Country Ministries, Carbondale, and Nanticoke as they have rebounded from flood damage. I salute them and also those who came forward to encourage and assist them. Father Charles Cesaretti has done exceptional pasturing in this situation. Although we do it with sadness, we must also acknowledge the courage of the members of St. Elizabeth's in Schnecksville, who decided last month that their task from God was better fulfilled by discontinuing their parish life and dispersing to other congregations. That is

not an easy decision to make. I am grateful to Fr. Scott Allen for his care of St. Elizabeth's through these last months of stock-taking.

As we look on the more apparently bright side, I can report to you that the Daughters of the King, a vital ministry of prayer and witness by women, continues to grow at an astonishing rate from a very small group five years ago. The Episcopal Church Women faithfully traverse the diocese in support of the women workers of Kajo-Keji and on behalf of needy children at home and we greet their new president, Jane Nurse, while thanking the long-term leader Marlene Hartshorne. I pray that soon we will see the Brotherhood of St. Andrew offer men similar opportunities—and dare to wonder, if God is calling any of you here to take up that ministry? The Peacemeal community in Scranton is celebrating its first anniversary this month. Working on the creative “emerging church” model, it provides us with a way to serve people who would not be drawn to conventional parish life. It is our hope to see similar communities next in Berks and Lehigh counties.

Those of you who were in Wilkes-Barre ten years ago when I first addressed this convention know that a great part of my dream for the diocese has been that we become much more serious about evangelism, a slightly frightening word that really means inviting others to share what we treasure. The news on this front has gradually become very good. So far 33 of our parishes have taken advantage of the evangelism training session, and they will be entering stage two of the training this year. Please read the material the Evangelism Committee has put into your convention packets. I can add that we were told this summer that no diocese in the Church has as thorough a program and structure for evangelism training as has Bethlehem, and I am grateful for the hard work that many are putting into our response to Jesus' charge to make disciples.

A number of parishes have been aggressive in using national church advertising materials for both print and broadcast, and it is my hope that we will increasingly get word of our hospitality to the region. Our work this weekend is being both blogged and podcast. If you don't understand those words, we have youth delegates standing by to explain—and we welcome their presence for the fourth year.

Another long cherished dream is coming true. In January at Trinity, Easton, I will be celebrating Confirmation in the Spanish language for the first time in my episcopate. As Latino culture is increasingly present in Pennsylvania, perhaps God will give us more such opportunities, and I am grateful to Trinity for forging ahead. Another start is also urban: we now have our first grade school, at Grace Church in Allentown, and there are educational starts contemplated in two other places.

Youth work is turning innovative corners, and we hope to see our first diocesan youth mission trip this summer. For younger children, please look at the display materials regarding next steps in advocacy.

It has been wonderful to have staff again for stewardship and planned giving. I remind you that the St. Matthew Society, our planned giving group, is not a group for the wealthy alone, but is a means for all of those who plan to support the church to be recognized and more importantly, to give our witness.

Well, the canons require me to give my sense of the state of the diocese, and there you have it. Numbers are up and significant things are happening. Rural parishes and urban centers increasingly recognize that the choice is between slow extinction and intensive mission, and many are making the life-giving choice. We hope at this convention to find ways to assist all our parishes when challenges come. I thank God to be serving a community such as this.

## II

Questions occasionally come to me about the Anglican Communion and the Windsor Report as they relate to the life of our diocese. About the Communion, we continue to participate enthusiastically with our sisters and brothers without reservation, particularly in several nations in Africa. As to the Windsor report, I can restate what I have written to you previously: in order for the process that Windsor invites to take place I have agreed to abide by both the letter and the spirit of the Windsor requests and those of the General Convention in response to Windsor. As you know, this is not the way I would have preferred to see the matter resolved. At the very least, I would have preferred a theological rather than a diplomatic solution. However, as someone who speaks often and loudly about the importance of both democracy and community in Church life, it is important for me to model how I believe one ought to behave when one's own point of view does not prevail. Although I believe the position I support to have lost, at least for the present, nothing that has occurred would justify my abandoning my duty to support and advance our common mission and to remain connected to the sisters and brothers God has given me in Baptism.

The degree to which that reality of Baptism enables us to look beyond ourselves is growing. Last year at this convention we received cordial greetings from five representatives of other Christian bodies. Since that time, conversations between the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church have deepened to a point where our General Convention was able to approve interim eucharistic sharing between our two churches. As one looks over the history of Christianity in the years since the reformation, the one split that most surely did not have to occur was that between Anglicans and Methodists. The prospect that this unnecessary breach

could be healed in our lifetime is enormously encouraging. We are sending to the clergy copies of the plan for shared eucharistic worship with members of the United Methodist Church, and I very much hope that you will consider ways to draw closer to Christians with whom we have so much in common. It is on the local level that this relationship, as well as those with the Lutherans and Moravians, becomes meaningful, and I commend them to our clergy and lay leaders.

### III

What's next for us?

The recent General Convention did a number of newsworthy things, acceding to the Windsor requests and also electing our first woman primate. Beyond the merely newsworthy, however, it did something historic and globally significant when it adopted the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and asked us to affirm them. The Episcopal Church as one now stands with those most in need of life's gifts and possibilities. In one sense, this is a no-brainer in Bethlehem, as we are far, far ahead of the dollar figures they ask, which is a mere .7% of budget. What is historic and important about our parallel resolution is that an entire church, diocese by diocese, will understand itself to be together in a mission that transcends almost any human boundary one can imagine.

Jumping the fences and walls humans put up is important for the health of the church. The president of the provincial unit of the Daughters of the King told me last month how that organization has decided to keep chapters on board even though a few are now Lutheran, Roman Catholic, or continuing Anglican. The Daughters have decided to pray and work together right through the differences, a quiet lesson, perhaps, to some others of us. Similarly, the Millennium Development Goals allow all people of good will on the planet to strive together to eradicate poverty and disease, to assist the developing world. We see the possibility of people of all faiths – and none at all – working together for the good of humanity, giving everyone new hope.

“New Hope” is the working title you will see on a banner in this room and on leaflets in you packets. After a year of talking, praying, and consulting, Diocesan Council needs your feedback on what we might do together to give new hope to others.

Many of you know that the impetus for this project came from our relationship with Southern Sudan, and for me personally when, at the end of a week in that bomb-torn country, Diana and I baked in a bus for 14 hours in the Ugandan sun. Finally, you just give up wiping your face. As we became increasingly caked with red dirt and the overcrowded bus grew hotter and hotter, I found myself baking in a holy and creative sense: I knew God wanted my attention. Genesis says humans began our existence as kind of mud pies, and the red dust of the earth baking

into my pores helped me have the beginnings of a new insight: Here were sisters and brothers with almost nothing to their names trying to build a life and a country – how could I go on as usual with my life? As I told you last year, in addition to altering how I live personally, I have had to abandon some of my bricks-and-mortar dreams for our own diocese, particularly regarding a conference center, a good thing that I will leave to my successors, in order to see what God would have us do for others. The question that intrigued me was, *Could we dare to have a capital fund drive where we didn't get the money?*

Well, out of a large meeting last summer came three areas in which people from all around the diocese sensed God to be calling us. Foremost is the call to stand with the people of Kajo-Keji. They have asked our help in two specific areas. One, the building part, is to get their diocesan center replanted in Sudan after years of exile in Uganda. This allows them to worship and to train men and now, women, for jobs and leadership. They are keenly aware that the key to their future as a nation is the economic development that only education can provide. They will need help for decades in support of their educational programs: in Africa virtually no country provides free schooling and our help will be needed.

So in Kajo-Keji we consider doing three things, (1) to help them build the diocesan center—nowhere else can you buy a cathedral and its buildings for 750,000; (2) to reestablish the college; and (3) to establish funds administered from the US that will continue to support students and teachers and provide a small fund to lend to start-up business. The current goal for all of this work is \$4.5 million.

At home, the focus group felt there are two distinct populations in need of new hope. One is those who are flooding the region, coming to us with no connection to Jesus. We will never have the resources to do what, say the Assemblies of God do, which is to build an impressive building and start to draw people to its programs. Rather than build buildings, we would like to have the resources to sustain communities of faith, both traditional and innovative, in the formative years of their lives. Over the last decade our Congregational Development and Evangelism groups in the diocese have identified places where we should have been planting churches long before now. A fund of \$2.5 million would provide income to allow church planting wherever and whenever it is needed far into the future. Buildings would be a different matter; here we are concerned with establishing worshiping and witnessing communities. Will there be churches for your grandchildren?

The final population for whom we desire to provide new hope is the needy. As you know, our nation's leadership on both sides of the aisle has for some years been calling on local groups, particularly religious groups, to do for their neighbors what government could do only with

difficulty. We want to respond to that. I have written and spoken to you of the challenges of living in Appalachia, and of the unique blend of urban and rural poverty NE Pennsylvania must address. In Operation Reach in Wilkes-Barre and in New Bethany Ministries in the Lehigh Valley, we see examples of what can happen, but the needs are much more wide-spread, particularly in rural areas. A \$2.5 million fund would allow our Social Ministries committee to seed and support parish outreach, a second and larger Jubilee thrust.

I believe that coupled with our increased efforts in evangelism, the New Hope project can be the golden future of this diocese about which I incompletely dreamed nine years ago. I believe that in these areas we are poised to put faith into action in ways that serve the world for Jesus' sake, and do so efficiently and compassionately.

Diocesan Council has adopted the principles of this vision, and now Council and I ask you for two things. The first is that you *inform* yourselves by reading the material in your packets, hearing the presentations from World Mission, and visiting their booths. The second is that you prayerfully *teach us* what is possible. What we are doing now is a "feasibility study," an exercise whereby we hope to learn what goals you support and how thoroughly you are likely to support them. It may be that our goals have to be adjusted, or some even relinquished. It may be that we are thinking too small. Only you can tell us.

I ask you to be our teachers. All rectors and wardens will receive a survey questionnaire in the mail, as will some additional people. The rest of you are invited to pick up a questionnaire at the World Mission booth and fill it out tonight at your prayer time. Help us to know what you believe is possible for the Diocese of Bethlehem to do for God's world.

In the normal course of things I have about five or six years left with you as bishop, although I make no promises; nothing would give me a greater sense of completion and satisfaction than our working together for lasting change in evangelism and outreach, giving the hope of the Gospel to many and hope for life itself to even more. So, on this personal basis I ask you to give us your response. Teach us what we may hope to do together.

Now I began this talk by reflecting on stewardship, and here I am at this end talking about a possible capital campaign. There could be those who wonder if the two thrusts might cancel each other out. Wouldn't stewardship and capital funds cancel each other out. There has been careful research of this question, and the opposite is usually the case. Parishes find that stewardship actually increases when there is a capital campaign because people realize both the seriousness of the work they are called to do, and the joy of generosity

in doing it. The two have a reciprocal and complementary rather than an antagonistic relationship. The joy of generosity is cumulative, and leads to deeper faith and commitment.

Those of you visiting our convention for the first time have already figured out that it is something other than a big vestry meeting come together for business. Less than half our time at convention is spent talking and voting about resolutions. Convention in Bethlehem is our time to reconnect, worship, exchange ideas and resources, all that along with our planning and deciding. We are not one of the world's great deliberative bodies, and knowing that gives our discussions a certain freedom and plenty of room for grace.

This year is different, though, because as a family we are asked to contemplate what we might do to change the landscape of Sudan and Pennsylvania permanently. I ask only that you consider the possibilities with faith and with the expectation that the Lord Jesus will show us the way, and then teach us.

Thank you.