



## The 130<sup>th</sup> Annual Council February 22-26, 2022

### Address to Council by the Rt. Rev. Susan B. Haynes

#### “Behold I make all things new!”

In late January I went on retreat at St. Gregory’s Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Three Rivers, MI. I’ve been retreating there for twenty years. This Episcopal group of monks has contributed much to my spiritual development. The intended purpose of my retreat was to write this Annual Council address; but as is often the case with retreats, a lot more happened. One thing that happened is that on a walk in the woods I was reminded of an experience I had at this monastery about 15 years ago. Then I was on a similar retreat at a time in late March or early April. Most of the world was beginning to hope for spring, but in Southwest Michigan, the norm was still dark days, filled with snow and blustery wind. On this earlier retreat, I was struggling with doubt and uncertainty. Both of my young children were chronically ill, and doctors had not been able to arrive at a definitive diagnosis or treatment. I had taken a couple of days retreat to try to sort out my thoughts and come up with a plan forward. As I trudged through the snowy woods surrounding the monastery, however, I was feeling hopeless. The snow-covered ground, the bone-chilling wind, the stark bare trees, and the cloudy, dark skies reflected my interior landscape exactly. I did not see a way forward. There seemed to be no hope.

I arrived at the monastery pond. In warmer seasons, this pond is a lovely place on which to take out the rowboat. But on this day, the pond was still frozen. While daytime temperatures were approaching a thaw point in March, the ice covering on the pond had not yet begun to melt. As I walked along the shore of the pond, suddenly some bright colors caught my eye. Bright colors in gray, snowy, late March Michigan are something to notice because they aren’t usually there. I looked more closely. My breath caught. Poking through the snow in vivid yellow and purple was something I did not expect to see – crocuses! The first sign of spring! There they were! In the midst of this deathly, snowy, gray depressing cold, was a sign of hope and life. Resurrection! Winter did not have the last word. Life was going to bloom again!

It seems simple, doesn’t it, and perhaps even a little silly... to be so moved by the sign of a couple of flowers in the woods, beside the pond, in the snow. But in seeing them, my entire focus shifted. I suddenly understood that the whole world is inclined toward Resurrection. Even in the midst of death, we are wired to move toward life. When a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, death is not the last word. The last word is life!

Now when I was at St. Gregory’s a month ago, walking beside this same frozen pond in these same snow-covered woods, I did not see crocuses. Crocuses would have been unheard of in late January. But I was reminded of them. And I was reminded of our inclination toward life as the birds swooped through the trees, as the squirrels scurried through the snow, as deer

nibbled on what precious green stuff they could find. I was reminded that death does not have the last word. I was exhorted to hope that even in the midst of a deadly pandemic that has robbed us of so much, life could re-emerge stronger than ever.

As we are about to conclude our second year of living with the Coronavirus, for how many of us is it hard to hold onto hope? How many of us are barely hanging on in a sea of despair that the world will ever be lively again? How many of us are trudging through the snow looking for blooming crocuses, but seeing only death and darkness?

Brian MacLaren, author, speaker, activist, and theologian, in his recent podcast series *Learning How to See*, looks at six different biases that exist within the human brain – six different biases through which we filter information that prevent us from seeing things as they really are. These biases often lead us away from reality and cause us to make false choices based on false information. One of the biases which MacLaren examines is called “The Catastrophe Bias.” The Catastrophe Bias assumes that no matter what, the world is getting worse and worse. When under the influence of this bias, our brains gravitate toward information that seems to enforce it. This bias is so strong that we are often unable to see any information or evidence that would be to the contrary. For example, which story is more likely to be reported in the news: the story of the man mentoring an underprivileged child or the story of someone who pushes a woman onto the tracks of an oncoming subway train where she meets certain death? Good news does not get reported. Catastrophic news does. It’s what our brains are wired to notice. We are not wired to notice the good.

Listen to these words from the Prophet Isaiah: *For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!) I am the LORD, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, “Seek me in chaos.” I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right. (Isaiah 45:18-19)* So if God did not create the world to be a dark chaos, why are we so insistent that that is the direction in which the world is headed? How can we not see the Resurrection that God intends?

Christians are not called to a world of darkness and chaos, but to a world of new and re-emerging life. Isaiah also says, *“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:18-19)* This perception springing forth, this way in the wilderness, this river in the desert, this new thing in life! That’s what we’re called to notice as Christians. I do not intend to discount the darkness we have faced over the past two years. It has been dreadful...the sickness, the death, the isolation, the fatigue. But I stand before you today in the tradition of Isaiah, in the tradition of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, seated on the throne, who said “Behold I make all things new.”

We are not a people consigned to darkness and chaos. We are a people who receive the promise foretold in the Song of Zechariah from the Gospel of Luke: *“In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”* Yes, we want the dawn from on high to break upon us, to shine upon us and to guide us away from the darkness and shadow of death into the way of peace.

How do we get there? How do we shift our focus so that we see crocuses blooming in the snow and dawn breaking out and shining upon us? Instead of focusing on chaotic things over

which we have no control, I suggest that we try to focus on areas where we have some agency, areas where we can do something. Last year, at Annual Council, I presented five initiatives and suggested them as a focus moving forward. Over the past year, these five initiatives have guided the efforts of the Diocesan staff to connect meaningfully in the Diocese and to serve as a resource for parishes and other faith communities. I'd like to spend a few moments reviewing those initiatives, where we have made progress and where we can still move forward. In so doing, I hope you too will see a way forward. I hope you too will see some crocuses pushing up through the snow.

### **INITIATIVE NO. 1: Discipleship**

Theories of congregational development suggest that if churches will tend sufficiently to the formation and discipleship of its members, then church growth will take care of itself. This means that churches must be about the business of forming disciples. To form disciples, churches should provide the necessary support for members to develop a Rule of Life. What is a Rule of Life? A Rule of Life is a set of disciplines that guide a person's life so that that person is drawn more fully into the life of Christ. Now there are many ways to develop a Rule of Life, but let me suggest one simple way now.

Most of you are familiar with **the Shema** that rule that is on the heart and soul and tongue of most devout Jews and which is part of our own Scriptures in Deuteronomy: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your HEART, and with all your SOUL, and with all your MIGHT. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead.*

The Shema provides a simple framework for a robust Rule of Life. In what disciplines can a Christian engage to develop his or her **HEART**? What acts of service, what kindness, what charity? How can Christians live for others? In what disciplines can a Christian engage to develop his or her **SOUL**? What is the specific makeup of that person's prayer and worship life? How does that person make God's heart available and active on this earth? And finally, in what disciplines can a Christian engage to develop his or her **MIGHT**? How is the Christian engaged with Scripture, with study of Tradition, with the exercise of reason?

A simple rule of life based on heart, soul, and might – a sturdy 3-legged stool for formation and discipleship.

### **INITIATIVE NO. 2: Congregational Vitality**

Each parish in Southern Virginia, regardless of its size, has a charism which contributes uniquely to the vitality of the whole Diocese. This means that every parish is important, and every parish must be vital and healthy. Over the last year, I and the staff have focused on connecting with parishes and clergy. We have gone on Convocational visits holding open office hours for anyone who wants to come. We have gathered for lunch with the clergy in each convocation hoping to promote fellowship and wellness. And when Covid protocols have prevented us from visiting in person, we have held Open Office Hours on Zoom for both clergy and for Senior Wardens in parishes that do not have clergy. These opportunities have allowed

us to share best practices, to support each other, and to pray for one another. Most importantly, these opportunities have enabled us to connect to each other.

Healthy parishes start with well-supported clergy. In addition to our weekly Open Office Hours for clergy, in the fall, we hosted an in-person retreat, attended by more than 50 priests and deacons. The focus of this retreat, led by Dr. Melissa Perrin a clinical psychologist and cradle Episcopalian from Chicago, was “Always We Begin Again.” Clergy had the opportunity to be in fellowship with one another, to worship together and to spend time processing the challenges they were facing in leading their congregations through the pandemic.

In August of this year, we welcomed to the staff, The Rev. Canon James Harlan, Canon Evangelist. Canon James will be meeting with every congregation to assess their gifts and how they each can become more vital. He will work closely with Canon Lynn Farlin, Canon for Formation and Canon Willis Foster, Canon for Diversity. One of the main things that Canons James, Lynn, and Willis will be doing is facilitating the rollout during 2022 of the Diocesan Congregational Development Institute, or DCDI. You have heard this week about DCDI, an exciting opportunity for congregations to engage in the work of healthy organizational and spiritual development. Very soon, your congregation will be able to sign up to bring a team to this important training. Let’s watch this short video as an introduction to DCDI.

### **INITIATIVE NO. 3: Living Racially Just Lives**

Of all the initiatives, this one makes us the most uncomfortable. Some people get angry and frustrated because they do not think we need to be doing this work at all because we aren’t racist, while others get angry and frustrated because they believe we are not doing enough to be anti-racist. Regardless of where we are on the racial healing journey, we must all decide to stay on the journey. Remaining stuck in shame, guilt, and anger prevents us from moving forward to becoming beloved community.

Some people are just beginning the journey and want to become educated about the history of racism. Some want to go a step further to learn how to become anti-racist. Still others want to engage in action to promote truth-telling, restitution, and healing. Last year, I invited the Diocesan group called “Repairers of the Breach” to re-commission themselves as a Committee to address those three areas – education, anti-racism training, and action. To prepare for their work, they have been training with Dr. Catherine Meeks, Executive Director of the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing. You will be hearing more from them in the coming weeks and months about how you can participate in this important work.

This summer, we welcomed to our staff, The Rev. Willis Foster, Canon for Diversity. Canon Foster oversees the work and ministry of diverse groups in our diocese – he supports the work of historical African American churches. He partners with Fr. Mario Melendez, our Latino Missioner to support ministry in the Latino/Latina/LatinX culture. He works with those who are seeking to interface with the indigenous tribes which still populate our land. During 2022, Canon Foster will help us engage in further education and transformation around these ministries.

There is much happening on the journey to becoming Beloved Community and to learning to live racially just lives. We invite you to engage this journey with us.

#### **INITIATIVE NO. 4: Care of Creation**

***“...then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7)***

We were formed from the Earth. We were not fashioned in the clouds and plopped down on this planet. We were made from the ground that supports us. Our beginning was the Earth and in death, we will return to the Earth. Unfortunately, our culture and way of living have disconnected us from the Earth who truly is our mother. We are no longer connected to that from which we were formed. It is difficult to talk about Care of Creation without venturing into politics, and that gets Christians in trouble. But Sallie McFague in her book *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* describes Creation as the place of salvation and stresses the importance of the health and well-being of all creatures. Creation, she says in the end “is God’s place and our place.” Over the last year, the Diocese of Southern Virginia has partnered with other Dioceses in the work of the Matoaka Covenant, a covenant that seeks to promote proper stewardship of the resources of the Earth. We are just beginning this work but we are learning how even at the parochial level, our efforts can make a difference.

Even as we are learning to be proper stewards of creation, we are also paying attention to how we steward the resources that you give to us as the Diocese. Your dollars count and enable us to do the work we are called to do. For that we are grateful. Our commitment in this stewardship is that we want to ensure that every dollar we spend on your behalf is in line with the vision we agree to and the initiatives we set forth to work toward. Our financial staff is absolutely committed to the wise use of our diocesan resources and to making sure that expenditures are in alignment with our vision.

#### **INITIATIVE No. 5: Evangelism**

In the words of Richard Rohr, evangelism is the act of “making God’s heart active and available on earth.” Making God’s heart active and available on earth – so that all people are drawn into the good news of salvation. How do we do that? When we tend to Formation, Discipleship, Congregational Vitality, Issues of Justice, and Care of Creation – that is what we are doing. We are making God’s heart active and available on earth. Because when we tend to those things, we attract new Christians and churches grow.

But we must also be strategic. Being strategic means looking at those areas of our Commonwealth and Diocese to see where new growth is happening. Where are populations growing? Where is economic development happening? We have been studying this at the Diocesan Office and within the last month have formed a committee of folks who will be compiling this information with an eye and a heart toward church planting. Specifically, so far we have identified two areas where a church plant would possibly thrive. To think about planting a new Church even as most of us struggle to re-emerge from this pandemic might seem ludicrous. But I believe it might be a crocus bursting up through the snow.

The last two years have found us walking some of the hardest roads we have ever walked. We are weary. We are anxious. Sometimes we find ourselves secretly worrying that the Church might not survive. But friends, we are the Church! How is it possible that the Church will fail if we are still the ones being the Church – if we are still the ones living the church? As we re-emerge from this pandemic, let us look around to see who is re-emerging with us. God is giving us a whole new community...a whole new Church. As we move through 2022 and 2023,

the Diocese of Southern Virginia is in revival. Yes, we are called to revival. We will begin our work now and that work will culminate in a revival event in the fall of 2023 where Presiding Bishop Michael Curry will join us for a revival weekend. So get up! We have work to do! Let us celebrate those who have chosen to join us in this re-emerging church! Christ said, ***Behold I make all things new!*** Let us embrace our call to be that new, re-emerging Church that the world so deeply needs.