



## Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia February 25, 2023

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

Can you imagine a world without challenges? Can you imagine living your life without having to face obstacles? Well of course, such a world doesn't exist. We have known challenges and obstacles abundantly. Now as we emerge from the pandemic to contemplate a season of revival in our church, we face several challenges. Today I would like to talk about three of those challenges – three challenges that unless we face them head on and come up with creative solutions, we will find ourselves missing the opportunity to cooperate fully with God in the revival of His church in Southern Virginia. Those three challenges are as follows: fatigue and discouragement, anxiety about resources, growing clergy shortage (actually an opportunity for change and growth).

Our first challenge – fatigue and discouragement. Throughout the diocese, I hear that people are tired, exhausted and burned out. The pandemic has exacted a huge toll on our emotional, spiritual, and physical resources. The World Health Organization states that “pandemic fatigue” is a reality. Those who suffer this fatigue present as “demotivated” and exhausted with the demands of life during the Covid crisis. This demotivation can lead to outbursts of short temper and frustration, anger and irritability, sadness, depression, anxiety and fear, physical exhaustion and burnout, difficulty focusing, prioritizing, problem-solving and decision making, and lack of motivation. One manifestation of pandemic fatigue in the Church is that people are more reluctant to take on new responsibilities and leadership positions. Increasingly churches are reporting that it is hard to fill roles for Vestries, Wardens and Committee Chairs. Many are looking to their by-laws and canons to see if there are ways to reduce the number of vestry positions required to meet this challenge. Another manifestation is that more and more clergy are moving up the date at which they decide to retire. Exhausted and burned out, many are moving into retirement sooner than they might have originally anticipated prior to the pandemic. We are tired, and we cannot pretend that we are not. Our challenge is to find ways to address our fatigue and discouragement.

Our second challenge – when we are tired and discouraged, we tend to become anxious. In the church, we are anxious about two things – people and money. We are anxious because attendance numbers are not what they were prior to the pandemic. Even churches that are growing are expressing anxiety about the people who have not

returned. It is normal to miss and be anxious about those who have not returned; but this anxiety prevents us from celebrating the people who ARE coming, who ARE sitting in the pews and who ARE fully engaged in life in the Church after pandemic. We are also anxious about money. While some parishes have experienced a post-pandemic decline in income, the majority have fared well thanks to the stewardship of very faithful members. Still, we are worried that this won't last, that we will be forced to close our doors. Our anxiety paralyzes us and prevents us from seeing the many ways God continues to provide for us. In many parishes I have visited over the last couple of months, I have heard this anxiety about money in the same breath as I have heard expressions of gratitude and amazement that stewardship campaigns have gone well. So we are anxious, and we are anxious even when things are going well. We can't have it both ways. We can't lament the lack of resources even as we are celebrating evidence of new growth. Our second challenge then is to find a way to reduce our anxiety about what is a perception of lack of resources but maybe not always a reality. Is God God, or is He not? Is He going to provide for us or abandon us?

The third challenge is not actually a challenge but an opportunity. An opportunity for change and growth. When parishes find themselves vacant of a priest, or when priests decide to seek another call, everyone shifts into transition. In days past, it used to be that for every open parish seeking a priest, there were multiple priests expressing an interest. Today that transition landscape has changed. Today, for every six parishes seeking a priest, there is only one priest seeking a new call. The number of clergy willing and available to relocate has dwindled, and churches face long search processes with fewer candidates to interview. Some of this increasingly barren landscape is demographically driven. I mentioned earlier that more and more clergy are deciding to retire early. An additional reality is that baby-boomers are reaching retirement age, so there is a greater segment of the population in general that is ready to retire, clergy included. Canons Roy Hoffman, James Harlan, and Willis Foster, our transition team, will tell you that of those clergy who are willing to relocate, two-thirds of them have geographic restrictions on their ability to relocate, with the primary reason for the restriction being that they want and need to be close to family. So, the challenge is that for more and more open congregations in search of a priest, fewer priests are available to fill those vacancies. We face a clergy shortage. But do not despair. This challenge affords us an opportunity to become creative in ways that will excite you I hope as much as they excite me. More about that later!

Challenges are opportunities. Instead of seeing insurmountable obstacles, let's look to see if God might be pointing a way for us to do something new and life-giving. Let's see if there's a remedy for our fatigue and discouragement that would revive us. Let's see if we can focus more intently on the presence of Jesus to dispel our anxiety about our perceived lack of people and money.

So how shall we tackle these challenges? Well first, before we do that, we should spend some time with Scripture; because any strategy for confronting challenge should be grounded in Scripture. The prophet Isaiah we heard proclaimed this morning commands us to “remove the yoke from among [us].” And he defines the yoke as “the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil.” Instead of pointing fingers and speaking evil, he exhorts us to “offer [your] food to the hungry and to satisfy the needs of the afflicted.” So instead of gossip, division, and fractiousness, we should look around to see who is hungry, who is afflicted and then offer from our resources to those folks. Isaiah goes on to counsel that we should honor the Sabbath, not go our own ways, not serve our own interests, and not pursue our own affairs. If we do those things, Isaiah proclaims...if we remove the yoke of self-seeking, here is what will happen:



- Light will rise in the darkness and gloom will be like the noon-day.
- The Lord will guide us constantly.
- The Lord will satisfy our needs.
- Our bones will be strong (and we can stand and walk confidently).
- Water will never stop flowing into our gardens.
- Ruins will be rebuilt to last for generations.
- Our name will be “repairers of the breach, restorer of streets to live in.”
- God will feed us with the heritage of Jacob (eternal salvation and blessings).

So, if we do these things – if we abandon the fractious divisions among us and seek to care for those in need, if we honor the Sabbath and abandon our self-seeking ways, then our darkness will cease and we will become God’s children. As we face challenges in the church, the promise that God will bless us as His children is one tool we can put in our toolkit.

We can all agree that the world would be a better place if each of us would abandon our self-seeking ways. But this is more easily said than done. For those of us who like to be in control, not having things go our way is difficult and most of us will do whatever we can to control the outcome of things. We are a sick people that does not have our act together. But the good news is that God is not interested in hanging out with those who have their act together. The good news is that God has come into our world to be with those who are a mess, with those who are in need of restoration. Those people who are a mess and who need restoration are the ones that God calls to be His church. In the Gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus calls Levi to follow Him. Levi is a tax-collector, not a popular guy, and maybe not even happy with his work. Jesus the Rabbi calls him to follow. It is an honor to be called to follow a Rabbi and Levi abandons his prosperous work to do so. Later he invites Jesus to his home to socialize

with his low-life tax collector and sinner friends. When the Scribes and the Pharisees criticize Jesus, Jesus answers that He did not come to hang out with people who are well. Instead he intends to hang out with the sick – to surround Himself with people who need His grace and healing. That's us. We don't have our act together. We need Jesus to sit at our table with us. And when He does, He can impart the grace to us that we need to abandon our self-seeking ways and begin to reach out to others. Another tool for the toolkit – the presence of Jesus and His healing grace.

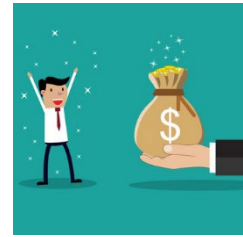
And now, back to our three challenges: 1. Fatigue and Discouragement, 2. Anxiety about Resources, 3. Clergy Shortage.

### **1. Fatigue and Discouragement**

When we are exhausted and discouraged, we become frustrated. When we are frustrated, we look for someone or something to blame. We blame the pandemic, we blame the government, we blame our brothers and sisters. We point fingers. We let evil divide us. How shall we remove this yoke of pointing of fingers and speaking evil from among us? How shall we address our fatigue and discouragement? The answer lies firmly in our Baptismal Covenant and most specifically in the first Baptismal Promise: Will you continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers? The answer to our fatigue and discouragement lies in keeping Christian community, receiving the nourishment of the Body and Blood of Jesus, and continuing through prayer in intimate relationship with God. The first of our five initiatives as a diocese promotes a Rule of Life. A Rule of Life is a set of disciplines in which Christians engage in order to support and grow their relationship in God through Jesus Christ. Each Christian should have a Rule of Life. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus pointed the way to a Rule of Life: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind." Heart, soul, strength and mind. A Rule of Life should contain disciplines that support one's heart in Christ, one's soul in Christ, one's physical strength in Christ, and one's mind in Christ. This year, many parishes are focusing on Rule of Life development as a Lenten discipline. The diocese is planning to offer further instruction as well. I would encourage and exhort each of you to think of your own Rule of Life – what can you do to more firmly support your relationship to Jesus? Lent is a good time to begin. Psychologists and sociologists have conducted studies that support the idea that good habits take about six weeks to establish. Coincidentally Lent is about six weeks long. What better time to start developing your own Rule of Life? Here is the chance to have the yoke of fatigue and discouragement removed from among us. Here is a chance to begin to receive the life that Isaiah promised.

### **2. Anxiety about Resources**

We are concerned about numbers – numbers of people and numbers of dollars. Much to our dismay, when we resumed public worship, not everyone came back to church. Many stayed away because of health concerns. Many had moved on to other habits that occupied their Sunday mornings. Our churches were not as full as they used to be. We are anxious about that. Unfortunately our anxiety about numbers has prevented us from seeing the beauty of the folks who ARE coming to church. The ones who ARE coming to church are excited and engaged. They WANT to be there. They WANT to be the Church. They WANT to make a difference. I have been several places in the diocese confirming and baptizing people whose first experience of Church was during the pandemic – very often on virtual services. And now they are here, in person, wanting to follow Jesus. But instead of celebrating those who come, we have paralyzed ourselves by lamenting those who have not come. While it is perhaps an uncomfortable idea to hear, some of you have heard me speak of the pandemic as a “holy pruning” for churches. Our numbers have been cut away and are not returning, just as dead wood is cut from a tree and cannot be regrafted. Why is dead wood cut away? So that the branch can bear fruit. We have people who are sitting in our pews now who want to bear fruit. This is not to disparage people who have not returned, or to insinuate that any person is a piece of dead wood – all are God’s children and I’m sure He has plans for all. But I am suggesting this idea so that we will understand that instead of looking longingly at the past, God needs us to celebrate the people He is gathering into His church today and to move forward into the future with THEM. Jesus worked with a small core group of 12 disciples...and the Church emerged from them for all generations. That church has not always looked the same, but it has always been the Church.



Recently the Office of Public Affairs of the Episcopal Church released its 2021 Parochial Report data. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said this about declining numbers: “I empathize with the feelings of concern many may feel after reading this data, and yet it is important to remember that the institutional church as we know it has not been the form that Christianity has always taken....the essence and core of the church is not its outward form, which will always change over time. The essence and core is Jesus Christ – his Spirit, his teachings, his manner of life, his way of love – and the movement he founded cannot be stopped.... We need our church leaders, both ordained and lay, to embrace this moment of reinvention, and the folks I see rising up are going to bring us into a profoundly different age.”

We are also anxious about money. While many churches report that their stewardship giving did not suffer during the pandemic (due to the continued giving of faithful members), some churches did lose income and all churches seem to be anxious about whether giving will continue. We are gripped by fear about money. That kind of fear is a spiritual malady. I have attended Vestry meetings recently where I

have heard the sentiment that people base their pledges on what they “get” out of the church. If the church meets their needs as they expect, they give their dollars. If the church fails to meet their needs as they expect, then they withhold their dollars. This idea extends to giving to the diocese as well – if the diocese meets their perceived needs, they fulfill their pledge. If it doesn’t they withhold. This kind of “quid pro quo” mentality is a spiritual malady. Scripture exhorts us to give as a spiritual discipline, to give out of gratitude, and not to withhold our first fruits from God. We as Christians don’t give so that we can get, we give because God has given and we are grateful.

As a diocese we have some work to do around formation and instruction about stewardship. The Diocese commits to offering that formation in the coming year. Additionally, in keeping with one of our five initiatives around stewardship of resources, I would like to report to you on a couple of things the diocese has done to shore up our own efforts to properly manage resources. In July the diocese moved its offices to another location. Because the focus of our work takes place away from the diocese in the various convocations and at specific churches seeking our help, we found that we were spending less and less time in the physical space that we had previously occupied. Additionally the pandemic taught us that not all of us need to be in the office at the same time with each person inhabiting a particular space. As we noticed these things, we realized that we didn’t need so much space, and we didn’t need to spend the money we were spending on the large space that we were not using. Therefore, we relocated. That relocation saves the diocese \$100,000 a year in rent. Continuing our real estate stewardship, we began to look at other real estate owned by the diocese and to question if that real estate was being used for the growth and advancement of the church or whether it might be better stewarded by being sold with the assets going into funds that would promote new church growth. You can hear more about how this work has benefitted the financial status of the diocese when Judy Dobson, our Director of Finance and Administration, and John Fogarty, our Diocesan Treasurer, give their report later.

While we want to be cautious at the Diocesan office about money and finances, we are optimistic. I am grateful to Judy Dobson and John Fogarty for their oversight. I am further grateful to Canon Roy Hoffman and Mr. John Rector, of St. Paul’s, Suffolk, for their oversight of the real estate team. But I would be remiss if I didn’t express my gratitude to all of you and your churches for your faithful payment of your asking to the Diocesan office. We see that many of you are striving to reach the 10% mark and that a few have even gone beyond that. Thank you for your gifts. The prophet Isaiah promises that God will supply our needs. As we strive to be faithful, we hold that promise close to our hearts.

### **3. Clergy Shortage – An Opportunity for Growth and Change**

While I made a dire pronouncement earlier about clergy being in short supply, we do not despair. The good news is that Southern Virginia remains a diocese that is attractive to clergy seeking relocation. Every week, priests contact us, hoping to move into our diocese should we have an opening that matches their gifts. Additionally, our transition team actively recruits clergy – telephoning seminaries, attending transitions conferences, even making cold telephone calls to clergy who might not necessarily be seeking a change. But recruiting clergy is only half of the solution about how to address leadership in the church. The other half, and in fact the half about which I am particularly excited, is finding ways to empower competent lay leadership to lead the church in the absence of consistent priestly presence. I am not seeking to eliminate priests. The church is comprised of four orders of ministry – bishop, priest, deacon, and layperson. All are necessary for the church to function. Across the diocese I have become aware of the number of parishes we have who either cannot afford or cannot attract consistent priestly presence. This is particularly true for historically black congregations. Instead of shutting their doors, lay people are stepping up to lead. Increasingly lay people are requesting licenses from the diocesan office to lead worship, preach, administer Sacrament to the homebound, and teach catechetical formation. No one is suggesting that the priestly role is restricted to Sacramental function only and that lay people can do all the rest. As I said earlier, the Church requires all orders of ministry to thrive. But I do believe this trend reflects a growing desire on the part of the laity to be engaged, to support the clergy in their roles and to continue to be the Church in every corner of our diocese. This is exciting!

This is exciting because this means that churches in our diocese want to find ways to be the Church no matter what their circumstances. Churches want to be equipped for vital ministry in every corner of our diocese regardless of their size or number of resources. We in Southern Virginia WANT to be the Church. To support that desire, the diocese is doing two things. The first, which we featured in an evening presentation this week, is our Diocesan Congregational Development Institute. We launched this program last year with several congregations participating. During four gatherings over the course of the year we assembled to receive instruction in organizational development and spiritual formation designed to empower teams of people to effect change in their own congregations. Those who participated are enthusiastic about what they are learning will empower their parishes. This year we are welcoming more congregations to begin this work. We will be gathering for the first time this year in April, and it is not too late to sign up and bring a team from your congregation. Please contact the Diocesan office to enroll your congregation.

The second initiative is even more exciting. Later this afternoon, we will hear from our Council speaker, Canon Lydia Bucklin, Canon to the Ordinary of the Diocese of Northern Michigan, who will talk to us about a model for ministry that we are calling “Rooted Ministry: Equipping Parishes for Vital Ministry.” I’m not going to



steal Canon Bucklin’s thunder by explaining what “Rooted Ministry” is but just to give you some context about why we are so excited about what she has to say, let me tell you a little about her diocese. It’s a small diocese – between 25 and 30 congregations. No church has a full-time priest. Three full-time seminary trained missionaries and two part-time locally formed missionaries oversee 16 congregations. Two un-ordained missionaries assist. The model that Canon Bucklin will explain to us is an extraordinary partnership among all the orders of ministry – bishop, priest, deacon, lay – a partnership which will revitalize any congregation

seeking to be a more empowered church. This includes congregations without consistent priestly presence as well as congregations that have multi-priest staffs. Rooted ministry is grounded in our Baptismal Covenant and promises to ground us in solid ways to be the Church, no matter what!

At Annual Council last year, I spoke of the image of crocuses blooming through the snow...those inspiring images of light and hope in darkness. I can tell you that as I visit various places in this beautiful diocese, I have seen these crocuses. I have seen the creative ways you are responding to the call of Jesus. Yes, we have challenges, but you are rising to meet them. I see light rising in the darkness. I sense the Lord guiding us constantly. He is satisfying our needs. He is making our bones strong. We CAN stand and walk confidently. Amen.

