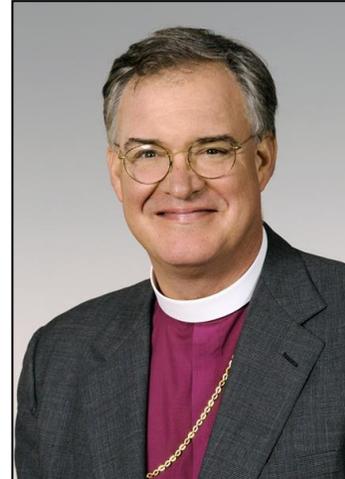


125th Annual Council Address
The Rt. Rev. Herman Hollerith IV, Bishop of Southern Virginia
February 10, 2017

It is again a distinct pleasure and privilege to stand before the Annual Council of the Diocese of Southern Virginia as your bishop and to gaze upon the faces of friends – new friends and old friends – who are actively engaged in the work of Christ in the world. It warms my heart to see you and to be with you and to watch us work together for the sake of the Kingdom.



And it's no small thing that we've been coming together like this for 125 years now – it's the 125th anniversary of the Council of the Diocese today. In the year 1892 when all this started, Grover Cleveland replaced Benjamin Harrison as president. It was the year that Thomas Edison patented the telegraph, Arthur Conan Doyle published Sherlock Holmes, the Dalton gang was killed in a bank robbery in Kansas and, interestingly enough, Ellis Island first opened its doors to receive European immigrants. This last one in particular ought to give us pause.

Regardless of what it was like 125 years ago, the fact that we are here today bears witness perhaps to our persistence, but even more so, to the continuing faithfulness of Almighty God. So happy 125th anniversary Annual Council! Once again, while our overt purpose is to engage in legislative work this weekend – hear reports, elect leadership and pass resolutions and a budget – the really good stuff to take away will be – as always - the fellowship we share in Christ through the sacraments and the gifts of learning we receive from each other.

My dear friends in Christ, it's been *quite* a year! On the world stage it was another tumultuous and unsettling one. Geo-politically our planet continued to suffer terrible environmental deterioration, terrorism continued its violent westward trek, the European economy suffered the shock of "Brexit", thousands more died in Syria, and religious extremism continued to spread in the Middle East and in South Asia.

At home here in the USA we suffered through one of the most contentious, disquieting, disheartening and destructive political processes in the last century. Regardless of ones political leanings, all of us were scarred by the election. It is evident that we are a country suffering from deep divisions. The nature and depth of our polarization can be seen in just about every major political issue. Many of us are wondering where we are headed as a nation.

And yet, despite the kind of year it's been, our parishes, from one end of the diocese to the other, have remained thoughtful and persistent in following the call of our Lord. Despite sometimes not knowing what to do or how to respond to the contention, you have worked hard to maintain a non-anxious presence in your respective communities and to be places of sanctuary for the perplexed, the downhearted and the disenfranchised. I have been impressed by your faithfulness. And I understand how hard it is to be faithful in face of the things that worry some of you – like membership loss, budget challenges and aging leadership.

And the simple fact of the matter is that there is much for us to worry about – globally, nationally and within the life of the church. The future is highly uncertain and many of us are disillusioned.

Someone once said that the positive thing about being disillusioned is that it means you are no longer *illusioned*. It's a form of spiritual progress on some level. As Christians we do not suffer the fate of being illusioned because we know about the reality of death on the cross.

But, neither do we remain *disillusioned* either because we also know about the third day. We know about the empty tomb. We understand through our experience that what is improbable for humanity is completely possible with God. God is forever bringing into the world new hope and new life – even in the worst of times, especially in the worst of times. As disciples we've just got to be diligent enough to stay alert and keep our eyes open and look for stones being rolled away.

I have very little concrete data for saying this – call it more of an intuition – but I sense us entering a period when more and more people will be turning to the church for answers and for meaning and for community. It's just a hunch, but I think we are on the threshold of a sea change – not so much back to the Church of the past – because the church our grandparents is gone – but a turn toward a new kind of expression of our faith tradition.

There are a lot of disillusioned people in our country right now and fearful people – and their numbers will be growing. There are many who have become recently disillusioned by our political system. There are many who don't know what is true anymore or who they can believe. Likewise, people grow weary of the rampant, consumerist, capitalism “get all you can regardless of the cost” life style being pushed on the one extreme, and on the other extreme, religious fundamentalism that rejects and destroys all that is good and reasonable – the two nihilisms that, as the theologian Miroslav Volf says, are today “grinding the world into dust”.

So, I wouldn't be surprised if we start seeing more new faces on Sunday at the narthex door or at evening service or Wednesday night Bible study – faces of people seeking meaningful relationships and ultimate value for their lives. The challenge for us will be to stay alert to their presence and welcome them in - as Jesus would welcome them in.

I am sure by now you are aware that this year's Council theme is Christian Stewardship. The Rev. Canon Timothy Dombek from the Diocese of Arizona has been kind enough to expose himself to February weather in Virginia and join us as our guest speaker this weekend. His reason for being here is not to convey some sort of “cookbook” on how to raise money for the annual budget. Rather, he's here to help us think about our relationships - our relationship to the world at large, to one another, and to God.

I cannot stress enough how incredibly important I think the subject of stewardship is to our common life and our future in this diocese. Again, I'm not talking about our financial survival as a collection of church buildings, but rather our mission of bearing the news of Jesus Christ to the world.

Here's a simple analogy: Imagine a scenario where one day you walk into an art store and come upon a small painting that you find breathtaking. After discovering that the painting is for sale you dig deep into your life savings, purchase the painting and take it home and place it on your living room wall. Everyday you walk by the painting and admire it for what it is.

Now, imagine an entirely different scenario where you don't know a thing about the painting. But, one day, someone who loves you - and you love - hands you a package carefully wrapped in brown paper and twine. "It is a gift," they say. With surprise you open the package and discover the same beautiful painting and you are deeply moved by your lover's thoughtfulness.

Now, under which of those two scenarios would you value the painting the most? The first you would admire certainly. But the same second painting would hold *special* and *enduring* value. *

Christian stewardship is ultimately about understanding all of one's life - from the air we breathe to the resources we enjoy - as having special value because of the gifted nature of God. I want to suggest that special value is precisely what those new faces in the narthex are hungry for. And, if we in our churches have any hope of responding to them authentically - any hope of offering them something that is truly valuable - then let's first make certain we're clear about the role of Christian stewardship in our own lives. Stewardship is not some fund raising trick that we pull out of the office file once a year for the budget, but rather a way of understanding all that we have as sacrament.

While 2016 was a difficult year on the world stage, here in the Episcopal Church in Southern Virginia we moved steadily forward with our vision. The Diocesan Executive Board continued its "task group" focus on three areas: Local Formation, Chanco Development and Social Justice. I won't talk about all three today because I know you want the bishop's address to end at some point before sunset, but I do want to talk in depth about two of them.

The Social Justice Task group was a new addition in 2016. It was created in an effort to assist parishes in considering how our Episcopal brand of Christianity might go about enabling positive social change on both a local and state wide level. The first task was to send out a brief survey to assess where others are in their thinking on the matter and to find out what parishes are already doing. Much of the information received was promising, but what stood out in particular was the amount of negative responses the subject of social justice invoked. It was as if for some the mere mention of the term raised red flags.

On one level, such a reaction is expected given the tense, polarized political climate we've been in as of late. And it is quite possible that we have a bit of a language problem as well, causing some to identify the word "social" with the word "socialism", and the word "justice" with images of angry protesters marching through the streets. What I had in mind initially, however naively, was certainly different. I believe the Church's role is one of raising people's *awareness* about problems in society - especially when a segment of the population is being mistreated or alienated for the sake of someone else's personal safety. In the past, when the Church has remained silent about injustice and should not have, (for instance, in Germany in the 1930s and 40's) it has - in the annals of history, lost great credibility. I also believe that this role is both implicit in the Gospels as well as clearly stated in our Baptismal Covenant when we promise before God to "seek and serve Christ in all persons" and to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."

It is not my place to say what kinds of social justice ministries our parishes should be engaged in. That is for you to discover in your own context. But, we need to be aware of the difference between social justice ministry and outreach. While the two go hand in hand, outreach is about directly addressing human need. Social justice, on the other hand, is about seeking systemic change. Outreach is what you do in a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter. Social Justice is what you do when you invite people to explore why there is hunger in the first place, or why there are no supermarkets in a 20 block radius in an urban area or no job training or program for refugees. Both are the work of the Christian disciple.

And social justice can be done creatively, sensitively and in a manner that invites consciousness-raising rather than reactive anger. Case in point, the recent art display highlighting gun violence sponsored by some of our downtown Norfolk parishes. That has been a wonderfully creative and thought-provoking way to invite others to think about the serious problem we have in our cities with gun violence.

But, one size doesn't fit all. What works in Norfolk might not be right for Bracey. And what might work in Bracey might not be appropriate in Halifax or Eastville. Each community must do its own discernment.

I know that religion and politics don't mix. Yet, sometimes standing up for someone in the name of Christ will have implications. As such, should we therefore not stand up? If we cannot accept the sometimes unavoidable political realities of a practiced faith then we might as well just "take Jesus down off the donkey".

One thing is for certain - when it comes to those new faces in the Narthex I've been talking about - no one wants to join a church that has an angry political agenda. But, on the other hand, no one wants to join a church that has *no* agenda either. A church that claims to be Christ-centered in its values and yet fails to demonstrate any interest in transforming the world or standing up for the rights of others is not going to be attractive to young seekers.

The point is that the Episcopal Church in Southern Virginia is well situated for raising issues in local communities and working for positive change. We're also in a perfect position to invite non-anxious conversation around very difficult matters. And God knows, such conversation is desperately needed these days. Call it what you will, but I think we have a real opportunity to be a positive force for healing and change and to be part of how God, in Christ, "is reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corth.5:19). I hope you will explore these opportunities in your parish in the coming year. The Executive Board task group stands ready to assist you.

To complete my reflection on the work of the Task Groups, I will address recent developments at our diocesan camp and conference center. Chanco has been and remains one of the most important physical resources we have. It is a place of great spiritual significance for many in Southern Virginia. Overall, in the last five or six years Chanco has come a long way. Its budget is stable and well-managed and the camp has been enjoying success – despite the fact that the main facilities are ailing and in need of complete overhaul or replacement.

As you know, for the last several months the Chanco Board has been exploring the possibility of a major capital funds program for facility improvement – something desperately needed. Specifically, the Board, with the approval of the Executive Board, engaged the services of CCS Fundraising to assess fundraising viability and to establish a target figure. Many of you were kind enough to be interviewed by CCS and I thank you for your cooperation in that process and, above all, your input. As it stands now, the Chanco Board is ready to move forward and to ask the Executive Board to authorize the next step with CCS and actually begin the process of soliciting gifts.

There are a couple of things that you need to hear from me about this matter. First and foremost, I wholeheartedly support the development process and believe strongly that it is high time we do this. A few months ago I asked our treasurer and PB&R committee to assess if the diocesan budget itself could consider making a gift to the effort. That decision is ultimately the Executive Board's. Point of fact,

Chanco has already received 1.1 million dollars in support in the last eight years from the diocesan budget. Yet, I am optimistic that going forward a new gift will be both appropriate and possible.

Again, let me say that I hope the entire diocese will get behind Chanco's efforts in the coming year. I also believe the diocesan family needs to continue to discern what final form the renovation and capital improvement work will ultimately take. But I think we can do that work while the Chanco Board is moving forward.

Allow me to speak candidly to you for a moment. After eight years of experience in this diocese as your bishop, I have concluded that we are of "two minds" when it comes to Chanco. Historically, Chanco was forged when the former camp facilities near the Scotland Ferry moved to its present site on the James. In an effort to justify the purchasing of the land, the diocese erected the present conference facilities. In short, what we have now was never really part of any grand vision for Chanco as much as it was the result of a compromise between camp and conference desires. But the result of that compromise was the building of facilities that *were themselves compromised* – or at the very least, adequate only for the short term. Consequently, we've been doing a lot of putting bandaids on inadequate buildings in the last several years.

Here's what I see: On the one hand we have the "camp culture" who is totally dedicated to Chanco and believe it is near heaven on earth. On the other hand we have a large segment of the diocese that really isn't invested in Chanco - they have not been part of the camp or youth experience or Cursillo movement – are on the outside of that culture - and find the conference facilities inadequate to their needs. As a result, there is a real lack of balanced ownership for Chanco across our diocese. People are either extremely emotionally engaged in Chanco or not engaged at all.

Frankly, I think we can do better as a diocesan family. I think we've got to do better. Otherwise we'll just repeat the past and in 10 years end up back where we started.

I don't profess to know the solution. But, I do think it is important to encourage and enable broad-based ownership of Chanco. To that end, I will ask the clergy to talk with me and with one another about Chanco at our Spring Clergy Day. I want to hear what they have to say about Chanco and how it is that we all might have a meaningful stake in its development.

Before I conclude my remarks this morning with comments about diocesan personnel, I want to briefly address the proposed Impairment Canon that is before you this weekend. The real hard work on the proposed canon has been done primarily by our diocesan Chancellor Sam Webster and the chairman of the Standing Committee, John Rohrs. But the genesis of the canon was my experience - and the Standing Committee's experience - of having vestries say to us – vestries whose parishes have suffered some terrible trauma – "Why didn't you do something to help our church before things got this bad? Why didn't you intervene, Bishop?" And the answer is: there wasn't a canonical process for doing so. In short, the real motivation for the canon is to establish a way for *rescuing* parishes that are trending toward crisis. But, if this body decides we are not ready for an Impairment Canon in Southern Virginia, I will rest easy with that decision.

2016 was a year for transitions within the diocesan staff. We were all saddened by Michael Spear-Jones retirement and departure last April. And yet, the good Lord brought us Charles. Charles Robinson has been a wonderful new addition to the diocesan staff. I am thankful for his hard work, gentle touch and keen insightfulness. I also know that many of you have been glad to have him as our Canon for

Transition because I have heard your kind words about the effectiveness of his work. So it's been a pleasure and a joy to have Charles onboard this past year.

In the early winter we were also saddened by the retirement of Nancy James as our diocesan comptroller and financial administrator. Nancy was highly effective at what she did and not one to be easily replaced. Nancy's gift in particular was that she could master difficult accounting matters, *and* work well with people. She also understood herself as a servant of the Church and allowed her faith to inform her sense of financial stewardship. Those are critical attributes of a great financial ministry.

Despite the fact that Nancy officially retired at the end of December, she has been kind enough to work on an hourly basis to assist in the transition to a new comptroller and to close out the financials for 2016. We owe her a debt of gratitude.

Just so you'll know, the search committee for her replacement has been hard at work and will soon recommend final candidates to me. I am confident that a new comptroller will be in place by the end of March, if not sooner.

Finally, looking ahead, I am glad to report that this coming year will see the addition of the Rt. Rev. Jay Magness to the diocesan team. Jay, who has just retired as the Suffragan Bishop of the Armed Forces and Federal Ministries, is well known by many in the diocese. In years past he has served as a navy officer in the Norfolk area, interim rector of Galilee Church, and for a brief period, as a canon of the diocese. He was also the Canon to the Ordinary of the Diocese of Kentucky. Jay will begin his work in late March and his official designation will be that of part-time assisting bishop. Each year between the months of September and May he will assist with Sunday visitation and other Episcopal pastoral duties. I have also asked Jay to explore a potential site for a new congregational planting.

Again, Jay is retired, and will therefore be serving on a part-time basis, but he represents the first additional Episcopal help we've had in a long, long time. The last assisting bishop, Donald Hart, served over 16 years ago, and O'Kelly Whittaker served many years before him. The primary reason for having Jay assist will be to decrease your wait time between Episcopal visitations. My visitation schedule will remain the same.

In summary, let me end by saying again how proud and honored I am to be your bishop. I also appreciate your patience this morning and attentiveness to this annual address. I don't know any more than you do about where we are headed in this great country of ours, but I know we have many challenges. I also know that the Episcopal Church in Southern Virginia has what it takes to play a holy and important part in addressing those challenges and being the eyes, ears, hands *and voice* of Christ. So in the coming year, despite what might unfold around us, let's stay focused on the Gospel, centered in Christ, and together, engaged in the world.

*A loose interpretation of an analogy used by Miroslav Volf in "Flourishing"