



# Address to the 126<sup>th</sup> Annual Council of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia

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February 16, 2018

Williamsburg Lodge Conference Center, Williamsburg, VA

Even knowing that Diocesan Council gathers primarily as a legislative body, I still think the strength of this event is that it's an annual family reunion for us. Besides doing business we are here to enjoy one another's company for the next few days and to catch up on what's been happening in our lives over the past year. We are here to learn something new from one another perhaps. And while like most families, we may very well fuss and argue a bit before the day is through (for certainly no one in this room has strong opinions). I hope in the end we will leave knowing once again that our strength and our hope resides in the larger "we" of which we are all a part as Episcopalians. Christ manifests himself most powerfully in community - and the wider the circles of that community, the more he is revealed.

I find it hard to believe, but this is the tenth Annual Council over which I have presided. Quite honestly, there was a time early on when I didn't think I would survive one Annual Council - much less ten of them! And I distinctly remember my first. It was less than 12 hours after my ordination across town. Everybody was coming down with the flu. I was totally exhausted and generally overwhelmed. I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. And I vividly remember sitting up here desperately trying to referee a series of rather contentious diocesan resolutions - for which people were amending the amendments of their amendments. It was like trying to follow a Quidditch match, and I thought "what have I gotten myself into?" Some things come naturally. Presiding over Diocesan Council was - for me at least - not one of those things. Fortunately, you were quite forgiving of your new bishop. You got me through it. And now here we are 10 years later.

Not long ago a new bishop asked me what my greatest hope has been for this diocese - what I've wanted all along for Southern Virginia. After some thought I said, "I just want Southern Virginia to be healthy." Now, it's not my place to say if we are or if we aren't, but as I look around this Council I feel like we have come a long way since 2009. We are different - a work in progress certainly - but in a different place, and, God willing, on a journey together following Jesus through the wilderness of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

What I will claim though is that the word "healthy" is not one I would apply to the present state of our national life. Last Council I noted the grim climate. Things haven't gotten any better in a year. Between the tragedy of Charlottesville, mass killings in

places like Las Vegas, and Wednesday in Florida, and the ongoing political rancor, I cannot remember a time in this country when we have been so at odds with ourselves, so wounded, and so divided. Recently I heard a colleague mention a study - done I believe by the Pew Foundation – in which sixty percent of Americans surveyed report that the greatest stressor in their lives is not parental concerns or even economic concerns, but the present state of our nation and culture. Sixty percent believe that we are at the lowest point in our national life in recent memory. Think about that. Consider the context in which we now find ourselves as Christians. We have huge challenges. What might we have to offer?

For three or four years now we have talked about the changing religious landscape we face in this country. We know – unless we've had our heads in the sand – that the church as an institution is crumbling around us and that organized Christianity is losing its place in modern society. Many of our congregations are showing a decline in average Sunday attendance. As the baby boomers age-out, the next generations are not filling the gaps in the pews as in the past. Money is tight. Many parishes cannot afford full-time clergy and the demand for part-time clergy is outpacing the supply. Overall, demographic studies for the institutionalized church are not promising. In some places the clergy are spending more time doing funerals and palliative care than working to form disciples. And leadership positions in the church are becoming harder and harder to fill – including on a diocesan level. Rapid change is at hand.

We also know there is no formula for reversing these trends – no simple fix. This has been especially frustrating for the diocesan program staff whose job it is to help you in your local ministries. But there are no easy solutions and there is no repair manual that we can give you – in fact, its time to throw out most of the manuals.

But we can tell you what we've learned. For instance, we've learned that it's all about mission consciousness. Parishes where the clergy and vestry are focused primarily on their church's mission are thriving. In contrast, parishes in which the greatest priorities are to maintain the good order of the building or to balance the budget, or to just get more warm bodies in the pews, are sliding backward. Keeping the church doors open, keeping it looking nice, and making sure the clergy are available for weddings and funerals are all fine things, but have less to do with mission and more to do with institutional maintenance. Parishes that truly understand this distinction and focus their priorities on mission are going to have a chance for a living future. Those who don't will end up as well-maintained and well-endowed, empty, historic landmarks – reminders for passing tourists of a grand old church from days gone by.

I wonder if we've really been listening to what our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is trying to tell us in talking about the "Jesus Movement." The concept is not merely some advertising slogan he's dreamed up for the Episcopal Church. Rather, it's his way of reminding us of our biblical heritage – reminding us that in order to be a living, vibrant witness to the word of God, we've got to get up and go somewhere. In the Bible the

people of God are always a community on the move. Faith involves movement – it’s about going to the next town – and the next town, and the next town. It isn’t about staying stuck in the same spiritual place because our grandmother happens to be buried in the church yard, or because the stained glass has to be preserved.

I think we are at a point in our common life in this diocese when every parish should consider engaging in a resource inventory process – in which the leadership takes the time and effort to assess their parish’s resources. To put this another way, the parish leadership needs to ask “What is it that we are offering the world around us?” or “What are the assets we are deploying for the spread of God’s kingdom in our corner of the Commonwealth?” And here’s a hint, the answer is *not* primarily the church building, nor does it have anything to do with money. So please don’t say to yourselves our greatest resource is “our beautiful church building” or “our endowment” because you have so much more to give than that. I know you do! Like the faith that is in you, for instance.

Quite honestly, we’ve become so focused on preserving buildings and money that in many places we’ve lost sight of the *real* spiritual assets with which God has endowed us. Buildings and money are certainly important. But our fear of losing them – keeps blocking some of us from seeing the opportunities for mission at our doorsteps and from re-conceiving ourselves locally.

And goodness knows, we have so much to give the world. We have the balm of Gilead – the medicine - that the world needs.

Think about it. One of our greatest assets in the Episcopal Church is that we are what has been called a “bridge church.” Here’s what I mean: where can you go in this society and find rich and poor, male and female, gay and straight, liberal and conservative, young and old, black and white and all colors in between kneeling together in common prayer? And can you tell me of one other place in this world right now where Republicans and Democrats are actually doing something peaceful and constructive together on a regular basis – even if it’s just being in worship together on Sunday? “The Episcopal Church welcomes you.” Those are powerful words! They are grace-filled words – painted words on a metal sign under some street-corner tree perhaps - but still words that point to a living, breathing vision of the kingdom of God. We have a vision and we have a story to tell about where that vision comes from – and the world is desperate to hear it.

If we are in Christ and Christ is in us, what other resources do we need? I think all our parishes in Southern Virginia are already fully equipped for doing significant mission. It’s just a matter of not letting our fear of what we might lose block us from seeing what we might give.

Over the past nine years I have circled this diocese many times. And I can tell you, it's seldom I return home on a Sunday afternoon being anything less than totally impressed by what I find. And it's not the programs or liturgy that impress me as much as the resources we have in people! I always come away impressed by who I've met, by your faithfulness, your dedication, your love of the Lord, your good cheer – your “gracious affection and kindly generosity” toward me. And, the labor you are performing in our parishes to create Christ-centered community from week to week is truly remarkable. While we may wish we had more warm bodies in the pews in Southern Virginia, we have no shortage of faithful, capable people who have the ability to move mountains. I know this because I see it Sunday after Sunday. And as leaders we would do well not to focus on who we don't have in the pews, but rather on who is already there just itching to do new, meaningful ministry.

Time and time again people say to me, “Bishop, you have such a hard job. I sure wouldn't want to be you or to have your job.” The comment is always well intentioned, but sometimes makes me feel like Dr. Doom is lurking around the corner. Quite honestly, my job really isn't as bad as people think. In fact, I consider myself blessed. Admittedly, being a bishop has its unique challenges, but compared to what the average parish priest does week to week in this diocese, it's pretty reasonably demanding. The bishop's job is a “hit and run” ministry. I show up, do what I do and then I leave. The average parish priest doesn't get to leave. Day after day, they are in the trenches serving you in your parishes. I am always moved by how hard our clergy work to serve you, how faithful they are. Being a parish priest is more demanding now than it's been in the last 150 years. Clergy are asked to do more and more with less and less - and doing it in an environment where respect for their vocational authority is largely dwindling. We must never take for granted the incredible spiritual assets we have in those who put on the white collar and represent our Lord at the altar week after week on your behalf.

If you haven't figured it out by now, this is my way of saying to you, yes, times *are* tough, but the glass in this diocese is *not* half empty. It's not even half full. It's completely full! And there is no reason that will “hold water” for our not taking what God has given us through baptism and stepping out and following Jesus on this road that lies before us. We just have to summon the courage to go!

The fact that this is my tenth Council is admittedly making me a bit nostalgic today, but as I look back and reflect over the years, I can't feel anything less than profound thankfulness for the ministry that I have shared with you in Southern Virginia. And that thankfulness arises particularly when I consider the list of those who work so hard behind the scenes to support my ministry as the Bishop. While that list is a long one, there are a few on it who will soon be in transition and deserve mention.

The first is our diocesan chancellor, Sam Webster. Sam has faithfully served us for a number of years now. He initially inherited the position from Gordon Tayloe who

stepped down during a relatively quiet period in the early days of my Episcopate. That quiet period was short-lived for Sam once the diocese decided to sell Talbot Hall! Because so much of what Sam does is behind the scenes, it's hard to conceptualize the work involved for a chancellor. But let me tell you his faithfulness and his wisdom in legal matters has been extraordinary. The good news is that while Sam is retiring as chancellor, due to term limitations in our canons, he will become vice-chancellor for a year and trade places with Tim Coyle who has agreed to be our chancellor. Either way, we can't lose. Tim is another legal sage who is totally committed and a joy to work with. We've been working with Tim all along, so it will be a seamless transition. Nevertheless, I wanted you to know about the change so that you will thank both Sam and Tim.

The second transition I'll mention is one that won't be as easy for us in Southern Virginia. As of this April, Caroline Black, Canon for Formation, will retire from Diocesan life. Caroline joined the staff when Bishop Buchanan was in office and she has served faithfully since. She has been a gift to so many of our parishes through her support of local Christian Education programming. She has also planned and led a number of diocesan-wide conferences including Bishop Days with Vestries. When any big educational event took place in this diocese in the past 12 years, you can be sure Caroline was probably behind it in some significant way. She's been our program guru. She's also the only person in this diocese who knows how to creatively and constructively and respectfully harass and prod a bishop and get away with it without getting into any trouble whatsoever – a unique and rare skill indeed. In all seriousness, Caroline has been wonderfully supportive of my ministry. I have relied on her wise counsel as well as her unflagging desire to get things done. And I have enjoyed our friendship. She will be greatly missed.

While no one can fill Caroline's shoes, I do plan on filling her position in the near term. I am please to report that I have made significant progress to that end and hope to have someone for Caroline to train as her replacement very soon.

Working relationships in the Church will come and go – that is inevitable. But, it has always been my experience that God in God's abundance always provides. What better example than Jay Magness in our midst this past year?! What a gift it has been to have him back in Southern Virginia! While Jay is with us only from September to May, he has already become an important asset to the diocesan staff, a supportive colleague to me, and, most importantly, he's visiting you on Sunday mornings for confirmation. Jay has also been initiating the first steps of a church planting strategy in the Virginia Beach area – having just recently assembled a local team for strategic planning.

I know you are enjoying Jay. He has kindly agreed to be our preacher for the Council Eucharist. We will look forward to hearing the "Word" from him when we gather in a short while.

Before I offer you my final thoughts today about our common life, there is one other important “transition” matter I need to speak to you about. For some of you this may come as a surprise - for some of you, perhaps not - but after much prayer, thought and reflection, I have decided that it is time for me to retire as bishop diocesan of Southern Virginia.

Quite honestly, this has not been an easy decision. In fact, it’s one with which I have really struggled over the past few months. But after 35 years of ordained ministry, I have given what I can give. I would never claim that my work is done in Southern Virginia. One’s work in ministry is never “done,” never completed because there is always more that one can do for the Lord in any place. But, there does come a time when you realize that you’ve used all of your skill set and that a different skill set with fresh eyes and fresh energy behind it might be more appropriate for leading the community forward. And frankly, it is also time for Mrs. Hollerith and me to get on with the next chapter of our lives.

To that end, with the pending permission of my colleagues in the House of Bishops, and with the blessing of the Standing Committee, it is my intention to resign on December 31<sup>st</sup> of this year.

Rest assured, the Standing Committee and I have been in conversation about this since December and necessary first steps for initiating a process are already underway. Likewise, we have been in conversation with Bishop Ousley from the Office of Pastoral Development. Bishop Ousley will be coming to Newport News and visiting with the new Standing Committee and the staff later this month.

The experience of the wider Episcopal Church has been that it takes about 18 months from announcement before a new bishop is elected, ordained and in office. If you do the math from my retirement date you will see that there will be a small six to eight month gap between my leaving and the new bishop being in place. This is somewhat intentional on my part. I think it will be healthy for Southern Virginia to have a short break between diocesans. Fortunately, there is a wonderful, capable bishop with a North Carolina mountain accent who will be in residence in Southern Virginia.

As I mentioned a moment ago, deciding to retire has not been easy for me. I love my ministry. Now, in all honesty, I don’t know that as a retired bishop I will pine away every February for a chance to run a large legislative session in an oversized hotel ballroom. Nor am I likely to miss regularly reviewing Title IV canons. But I am certain that I will miss you. We have come a long way together. You have taught me much. I will miss not working with you. That’s the part which I know will be hard for me to give up when the time comes – particularly in regard to our wonderful diocesan staff who have become my extended family. But we all must keep moving – and following Jesus.

Just so I don't get too sappy, I'll stop here. Enough said about retirement. As to the business at hand, allow me to remind you that for the next several months I am *still* your bishop and we *still* have a lot of work to do together. Case in point, the resolution before us from the Executive Board regarding required mission share.

As I said earlier, I want Southern Virginia to be a healthy diocese – with all of my heart. And, I know that this issue of parish giving is one of the last great impediments to our corporate health. It has worried me since the beginning of my Episcopate. It is high time we had a family conversation about this. In fact, the resolution before you is about initiating a diocesan-wide conversation in the coming year.

I think you know I speak honestly when I say that I have absolutely no stake in future diocesan budgets. But, I certainly think you should. And I would think the last thing you want to do is limit the effectiveness of the next bishop a few years from now.

Nine years ago the Diocese of Southern Virginia was pledging the Episcopal Church barely 5% of its budget. This weekend you will pass a budget pledging 13.75%. We have worked hard to be responsible givers. And yet, many of our parishes have not reciprocated. While I am deeply thankful for the 30 plus parishes who do give their fair share, some of you continue to balance your budgets in a manner that suggest the wider church in Southern Virginia is of secondary concern to you – or, that your relationship to your neighboring Episcopal brothers and sisters is a very low spiritual priority. I find this troublesome.

While I know that many parishes want to be responsible givers, I also know that these same parishes find it easy to devalue their relationship with the larger Church rather than ask their congregations to wrestle with spiritual priorities. In many cases - from a stewardship standpoint - vestries are modeling the exact opposite spiritual behavior that they expect from their members.

For some time now I have wondered why our clergy have been so resistant to leading their vestries toward responsible giving. You know what they say: "If the clergy aren't behind it, it won't happen!" The answer is obvious. Many clergy feel like they have to protect their own livelihood or their budgets. It's not that they don't care about diocesan ministry or keeping our Episcopal identity strong - on the contrary, such things are really important to most clergy. Rather, it's that personal survival matters even more! And how could it not?

Those of you on vestries and on parish finance committees need to be conscious of how you can sometimes - even unintentionally - use money fears as a way of holding your clergy captive in their own fears. Clergy can't lead effectively when you tell them – however subtly – that leading courageously may negatively impact their lives or that unless they get more warm bodies in the pews they might not have paychecks. This is

particularly damaging to their ability to exercise prophetic witness in community, and it has a direct impact on their leading you in mission.

The point I want to make to you today is a point you will hear from Dr. Scott Bader-Saye, our eminent guest speaker. Fear has a way of causing a certain “contraction of the heart” where we extend ourselves to fewer and fewer things. Diocesan giving isn’t just a money matter. *It’s a spiritual matter.* And we will not possess the corporate health necessary for meeting the challenges ahead until the day arrives when we live *not* out of fear, but out of our abundance and out of faith that God does provide.

Do you know what the word “Episcopal” means? Yes? Let me guess, you think it means “of bishops” right? Well, you are wrong. What it really means is “*We!*” “We” as the Episcopal Church are the Episcopal Church. I believe it’s time for us to recommit ourselves to honoring that greater “We” in Episcopal. For in doing so we will not only honor the Christ that binds us together into one body, one spirit, we will also honor ourselves – and strengthen ourselves spiritually and corporately for the hard work that lies ahead. So let’s have the conversation!

Well brothers and sister in Christ, I have taken enough of our time today. It has been a privilege to stand before you for the tenth time now. Needless to say, I don’t have all the answers, and I have no idea where the road leads or how we will even get there. But what I do have is faith – faith in the rightness of the journey and faith in the one who always strengthens us to take it. And, finally, I have faith in you – the people of the Episcopal Church in Southern Virginia. I know what you can accomplish and I know the goodness and greatness of your hearts. That’s the hope I carry with me today.

It has been a joy to serve as your bishop. Thank you for trusting me with the privilege.