

**Bishop's Address to the 127<sup>th</sup> Annual Council**  
Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia  
The Rt. Rev. James Magness, *Bishop Diocesan Pro Tempore*  
February 8, 2019

“O be joyful in the Lord, all you lands; \*  
serve the Lord with gladness  
and come before his presence with a song.  
Know this: The Lord himself is God; \*  
he himself has made us, and we are his;  
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.  
Enter his gates with thanksgiving;  
go into his courts with praise; \*  
give thanks to him and call upon his Name.  
For the Lord is good;  
his mercy is everlasting; \*  
and his faithfulness endures from age to age.”<sup>1</sup>

We have many things for which to be joyous and thankful.

The very first thanksgiving that comes to mind is thankfulness for the leadership of my predecessor and colleague, Bishop Holly Hollerith. Though Bishop Holly will not say so, he was elected to the episcopacy in this Diocese during a time angst and neuralgia. I was here in this Diocese at that time, and my memories of the misaligned priorities and relationships are still very clear to me. For ten years he worked to build staff and structures that would, as we used to say during my Navy career, “right the ship.” To “right the ship” requires at least two things. First, you have to get the ship upright, without any list to port or starboard; left or right. To do this he fully embraced the Anglican via media approach and held to it. The next thing you have to do to “right the ship” is to get the vessel on a good course and at the proper speed. Having had to do some of this work during my career, I am very aware of how extremely difficult this can be to do. As our spiritual leader, Bishop Holly had to know upon what the Diocese needed to be focused accompanied with a good sense of how quickly we could get there. Bishop Holly had the required deft hand upon the tiller to guide us in the direction we needed to go.

The challenge to Bishop Holly was no mean task. A person with lesser capability and experience would have failed. By the grace and goodness of God, he achieved the task that was set before him. The ultimate result is the Diocese we have today, the Diocese you have asked me to lead during this transition period. In my opinion, this is a Diocese that is stable in all ways and has the appearance of good health.

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<sup>1</sup> Jubilate or Psalm 100, Book of Common Prayer version.

Very much aware of the challenge confronting me this morning, to talk to you about my assessment of the Diocese, I was completely cognizant that I needed help. In order to determine where as a Diocese we are, a few weeks ago I spent the morning with all of our diocesan staff and asked them what we are doing well, and what we might not be doing so well.

To begin my assessment, let me say what I am talking about when I refer to our Diocese. You as representatives of the congregations in which you serve, are the Diocese. A diocese is the people of God in Christ who are led by baptized and ordained leaders. The baptized and ordained leaders are served by and led by a bishop, most recently Bishop Holly, and now me.

The bishop, by extension, has an extensive cadre of people to execute this spiritual leadership. Of course there are the members of the diocesan staff. This is my opportunity to say something that perhaps only the bishop can say about her or his staff. The collegial, mutually supportive, and professional conduct of their work and ministries is truly impressive. For a diocese the size of Southern Virginia, we have a staff that is relatively few in number. Notwithstanding, I think it is fair to say that the quality their work and dedication is far beyond what you would find in a staff much larger than what we have. Please stand as I name you and remain standing so we can recognize you: The Rev. Canon Charles Robinson; The Rev. Canon Ed Tracy; Canon Lynn Farlin; Missioner Angélica Garcia-Randle; Leah Sicignano; Gareth Kalfas; Ann Turner; Susan Allen; Judy Dobson; and Kelly Riley.

Also, the leadership has to be extended to other baptized and ordained Christians who are members of the central committees of the Diocese. As I name of each of these central committees, if you are a member, I would like for you to stand: the Standing Committee; the Executive Board; the Convocation Deans; the Commission on Ministry. Thank you.

Of course there are many other committees and task forces, for the purpose of this address a few too many to mention. Yet, throughout our time together this weekend you will hear presentations from these other committees and task forces. As one of the larger dioceses in The Episcopal Church, I am keenly aware that without all these baptized and ordained leaders, we would not be able to pursue our Christian mission.

During my almost two years back in this Diocese I have been impressed that we continue to have excellent internal financial controls. Gone are the days when any one person can inappropriately misuse or disburse the funds that you give us. Quite diligently we are working to assure that when you contribute your parish funds to the diocesan mission, we are carrying out our fiduciary responsibilities.

Though the Chanco Camp and Conference Center staff is rightly preoccupied by their capital campaign and very impressive construction process, simultaneously plans are underway for a very exciting summer camping program. If we are fortunate and finish our construction on time, the campers will find a near-totally made over Chanco. One of the strong positives of our new construction is that for the first time in a long, long time all of the campers will be able to eat their meals together in the new and significantly enlarged dining hall.

I am a product of The Episcopal Church's summer camping program in Western North Carolina. I can say without hesitation that there are no better Christian formation opportunities than those we have with our summer campers.

Yet, Chanco is about more than just summer campers. Chanco is doing its best to be focused on the year-round opportunities to be a choice destination conference and meeting facility. With a small staff and modest budget, we do a great deal. The force multiplier for this productivity is our cadre of volunteers. For both the staff and volunteers we are very thankful.

Regarding the capital campaign, the Chanco staff tell me that this effort has generated a significant amount of positive institutional acclaim through getting the Chanco brand in front of people who may never before have thought of it. Today, countless people are talking and thinking about Chanco, and how we can take an already very good program and make it better.

From the standpoint of communications, as a Diocese we have done a very creditable job of appreciating our game of digital communications. Yet, as any of you know when you do digital communications, it is a daily process of staying ahead of the curve and finding new and innovative ways of getting our Christian message in front of the people whom we intend to reach. By and large this means working one-on-one with parishes to provide parish communicators with the training and resources they need.

If already you are not aware of it, we have opportunities for communications grants of up to \$1,000 that are targeted at our smaller and rural congregations. If this is of interest to you, please be in touch with Ann Turner on our staff to inquire.

As many of you know, in conjunction with the other two dioceses in Virginia, we have a two-year school for those in pursuit of diaconal orders. In the school we have teachers from all over the church who do an excellent bit of work to ensure that our graduates have the best and most current information for their emerging ministries. This is our way to build the unique diaconal ministry in this Diocese.

Of course those who are pursuing holy orders in our church complete their discernment in collaboration with our Commission on Ministry. Having had the opportunity to have met with the Commission, I can say with certainty that they take their work seriously, prayerfully, and have the best interests of the applicants with whom they confer and the people of the Christ's church whom the applicants will serve.

Early on in my time back in this Diocese I had the opportunity to work with Tim Coyle and Sam Webster, our excellent chancellors. After working closely with chancellors in two other episcopacies, I want you to know just how fortunate we are to have such outstanding persons. On your behalf, Tim and Sam are, on a near-daily basis, doing the hard and demanding work of legal advisement. Whether deliberating on issues that can range from property sales to canonical development and interpretation, I have full confidence in their abilities.

Speaking of our chancellors, there is a diocesan process with which the chancellors are intimately engaged: diocesan discipline, often referred to as the Title IV canons of The Episcopal Church. The still relatively new disciplinary canons of our church have been revised significantly over the past decade to ensure the most equitable and fair implementation of Christian justice. During my 22 months back in this Diocese I have been very gratified to observe how accurately and faithfully we are carrying out our duties to ensure the highest levels of fairness to both complainants and to accused persons. There will always be an ongoing educational process for this work, but I am assured that we are doing our Title IV work as well as it can be done.

As it happens in any family, there times when relationships and systems do not work as we would have them to work. From time to time every family has its challenges and dysfunctions. That is very true for our congregations. We are fortunate to have a team of clinicians who serve as our intervention specialists. As time and time again they have quietly served to walk into some of the most conflicted parish situations that are imaginable, we are regularly thankful for their work.

All dioceses must have programs and people who are engaged in what we call transition ministries. In another diocese on the diocesan staff I served as the transition ministries person. On the basis of that experience I know when I am seeing and experiencing a quality transition ministries program such as we have in Southern Virginia. Whether you are a clergy person who wants to serve a congregation in our Diocese or a congregational representative in search of a new ordained leader, I know that you will be treated with care, dignity and professionalism by the members of our transition ministries team. I should note that we do our transition work not only with diocesan staff members, but with an extensive team of consultants, advisors, and interim pastors who help us.

As you are aware, on the Eastern Shore and to a degree throughout the Diocese, we have a significant Latino ministry. Learning through a great deal of trial and error we have finally gotten to the point that our hard work has paid off as is evidenced by the trusting relationships we are forming with the Latino members of our community. We are being taught that the burden of this mission calls us to leave the walls of our church buildings to connect with our Latino neighbors. As we do we are learning about such things as their food insecurity, their legal challenges and their need for social justice. We have even begun to connect the Latino children with Camp Chanco. This is a huge leap forward in our Latino mission.

Christian formation, for years one of our most positive diocesan assets, continues to show evidence of positive forward movement through such as our Invite, Welcome, and Connect parish training program; our Christian Education Network (CE-Net) of parish Christian educators; and the extensive network of dedicated trainers who are conducting Safe Church training across the Diocese. One of the positive things we are working on with CE-Net this winter and spring is to enhance the content of our Christian formation program for the Chanco summer camping sessions. Good things are coming!

Through my diocesan staff and episcopal experience, I have learned to be sensitive to the essential diocesan relationships we have with both the Church Pension Group and the Church Insurance Corporation. During my time in this Diocese I have been overwhelmingly impressed with the precision and dedication of our staff as they attend to the important details of both of these relationships. Since I know that the work of the maintenance of these relationships is all but entirely silent, I want to commend our staff for their attention to detail.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't say something about the extremely dedicated and faithful work of the ordained and lay leaders of the Diocese. In an era of significant ecclesiastical and societal change, I am thankful for the integrity of your labors. Every day I am more and more impressed by the creative efforts you are making to live out your commitments as Christ-followers. You are the front line of mission to take the love of Christ to people who would not otherwise know Christ. I give thanks to God for you!

Years ago Lutheran theologian Martin Marty wrote a book entitled *Being Good and Doing Good*. One of his conclusions was that there has always been a significant distinction between our being, who we are as children of God, and our doing, how we act as children of God. Our goodness notwithstanding, there will always be things we can do better.

As a diocesan staff we need to spend more time out in the Diocese where you are engaged in your ministries. As your bishop and diocesan staff we need to devise ways to be better attuned to your needs, AND you need to be clearer with us about how we can support your mission.

Congregations need to develop stronger mutually supportive relationships with one another. Though our Christian mission may vary from one physical location to another, our commonalities in Christ do not. At the very least, congregations geographically close to one another need to spend time with one another.

The capital campaign and construction work at Chanco is taking a toll. Trying to keep up with everything such as serving meals and housekeeping in the midst of a construction site is difficult. While the work of the capital campaign has opened new connections between the Chanco leadership and congregation leaders, additionally this work has shined a light on the fact that much more of this connective work needs to be done between Chanco and the people of the Diocese.

All of us need learn to be more creative with our local communications. Every congregation needs to have a designated person who is skilled in social media and who can tell the stories of the good ministries being done in your community. I am convinced that we, and I include myself in this grouping, need to be more engaged in what are now standard modes of social media communication.

Our diocesan Latino ministry is at a significant crossroads. Last month Angélica Garcia-Randle, our Latino missionary, informed me that she was resigning from her position in order to take a new position on the West Coast. We shall truly miss her. The good news is that based upon her

dedicated work we have a firm foundation upon which to build for the future. Our challenge is not only that we will need to identify a new missionary, but additionally there are two other critical challenges. First, we need to extend the Latino ministry leadership to new volunteers. Second, we must find ways to effectively establish and sustain our Latino mission through the Diocese.

Our CE-Net, Christian Education Network, has served us well. Yet, the time has come to pause and reboot the organization. Gone are the days when a substantial congregation of almost any size would have a staff member whose sole purpose was to design Christian formation programs. Today as often as not the Christian education persons in our congregations are volunteers. Our diocesan Christian educators are rightly asking what CE-Net should become as the face of Christian formation is changing.

We have two standing groups that are struggling to figure out their role: our Stewardship Commission and Repairers of the Breach. On the face of things these committees may look to be very different. One is focused upon time, talent, and treasure. The other is focused upon racial justice and reconciliation. Yet, both face a common challenge: how to advocate for two very basic and, I believe, complementary missions. For each there is much more that could be done, but how?

Our diocesan youth programming is at a pivotal crossroads. Last year my predecessor disestablished the Youth Council and commissioned a task force to accomplish two tasks: review our diocesan policies for youth activities and to develop some short term programming. Though the members of the task force have completed both tasks and are moving forward with some programming, this is no more and no less than a short-term solution. This spring I am committed to meeting with the youth of the Diocese to see where we can go in the future and what needs to be done to get there.

Related to youth programming are our college and university campus ministries. While I applaud our Canterbury programs such as the one nearby at the College of William and Mary, the truth is that there are a lot ministry gaps at other campuses. I think that given the directions of the church today, we must find some appropriate ways to provide ongoing support for and engagement with this vital component of our ministry beyond the front door of the church.

I am fairly certain that all of you are aware that we have some geographic challenges within the Diocese. While we are working to implement IT technology to network our people, there are times when it is absolutely necessary to reap the benefits of physical presence. As an old friend once told me, you can never fully replace the ambiance of physical proximity. Locations, times and dates for our meetings are and will be a challenge for the foreseeable future.

As my staff and I were working to prepare for this year's diocesan Council, I observed that there appears to be a shortage of nominees who are coming forward to fill elected positions. When we had a discussion about this I learned that this is a trend that they have been seeing for the last several years. We have to find ways to encourage people to run for elected offices.

Probably the first step is to find out why in the current era people are reluctant to be available to fill crucial diocesan leadership positions.

Decades ago an educational and training program by the name of Fresh Start was begun in The Episcopal Church through dioceses such as Southern Virginia to orient transitioning clergy into new congregations. For many years it worked very well and was warmly received by both diocesan and congregation leaders. Yet, the time has come for us to ask some hard questions about the appropriateness of such an orientation program today. Does a program based in older corporate models continue to have application for leaders in a dynamically changing social milieu? One of the questions I continue to ask is if today's ordained leaders can even retool their existing skills and talents into a new congregational setting. Do our ordained leaders, and I would include lay leaders in my question, actually need a new set of skills and talents?

We have a number of small congregations in locations where there once may have been thriving communities. Over time and for a variety of reasons, the vibrancy of those communities has evaporated. These congregations struggle to survive. Many congregation leaders have come to the point of having to make the decision that they can no longer assume the human and financial cost to do such as keep patching the roof, repairing HVAC unit and paying the salary of a priest. What are we to tell them? At the same time there are population areas that are growing and expressing their own vibrancy. Yet, we have no presence there, and our expression of the Christian message is not available in these vibrant communities – because we have not yet crafted an appropriate plan of action to be with those people.

Across the church, and particularly in this Diocese, there are about half as many priests available as there are parishes that need clergy. If we are serious about the mission of proclaiming the Christian gospel to people, and I think we are, we have to be engaged in new strategies to turn this trend around. I am a trustee for one of our Episcopal theological seminaries where we are grappling with this question. The urgency of the Christian mission is forcing us, and it is about time, to think of new and innovative ways to recruit, train, educate, and strategically position our ordained leaders in order for them to be the collaborative leaders we need. This has significant implications for how we do our work in this Diocese.

Friends, that is our Diocese. By and large all is well. Or is it?

Let me tell you a story. In 1985 as an Episcopal priest and an active duty Navy chaplain, I had the opportunity to spend two years on exchange with the British Royal Navy in the US Navy/Royal Navy Personnel Exchange Program. I was ecstatic! I was licensed by then Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie to function as a Church of England priest. I was going home into the “cradle of Anglicanism,” right? Yet it did not take me long to learn that using almost any metric from baptisms to average Sunday attendance, the Church of England was in trouble. I remember remarking that I felt fortunate that we in The Episcopal Church don't have to worry about any of those things.

Now fast forward 34 years to 2019. As I look at our tribe of the Anglican Communion, I wonder if perhaps we are in the same place.

A few weeks ago Verizon ran a full-page advertisement in the Washington Post. The topic is about Verizon's projected roll-out of its new 5G cellular system. Yet, what caught my attention in the ad was not its description of the 5G system. My attention was drawn to the very first line in the text: "Everything is about to change."

Today as I look across our Christian faith community, everywhere I look I can see change. The message of Christ's redeeming grace is still the same, but everything else is changing. Across this land we are into the second and third generation of people who for the first time in centuries have never effectively heard the story of Jesus. These are areligious people have no relatives of faith in climbing distance of them on their family tree. It is not that they are hostile to the basics of our Christian faith. Quite simply, they have not heard the message. The key piece of this is that the way we are going about being Christian is not working for them. Our modes of communication are not getting to them. Even though I have enumerated a host of challenges in our Diocese, this one is the greatest.

Nine years ago in this Council the late Phyllis Tickle spoke to us about the "emerging church." As I was, many of you were here and heard her. One of the things she said was that the historic narrative of the Christian faith indicates that about every 400 years or so our faith community goes through a period of significant upheaval. This is a time when everything begins to change. The last time this happened in our global faith community was during the time reformation on both the continent of Europe and in England. Those reformations didn't happen overnight, but rather gradually. Yet, ultimately almost everything about what it meant to be a Christian changed. Phyllis Tickle postulated that within our faith community we are about to enter another such period of remarkable change and upheaval.

Many of you will remember that over a year ago I stated that we would like to launch a new congregation in this Diocese. That vision has not been abandoned. Quite the contrary, it has been readjusted in the face of stark reality. David Fitch is a missional leader and writer who is immersed in the life of missional Christianity. He has written about a meeting he attended with denominational leaders where one of the leaders made the stark statement, "We will spend no more money on traditional church planting. The failure rate is over ninety percent. No one is willing to give us funds for this kind of effort anymore." David Fitch evaluates this statement as absolutely true. So do I. At this point we are not sure how to launch a new and sustainable congregation.

Fitch believes, and I agree with him, that the landscape has changed for church planting. He writes, "For years, to expand their reach into new neighborhoods and population groups in North America, denominational groups would send small groups of people into a locale, set up a worship service and provide a list of support services for families. They would announce their arrival with some advertising, then wait for people to gather at a public "launch" service. A new church would be born. There are now, however, fewer and fewer Christians even remotely

interested in another local “franchise” of a church. What used to work in starting new churches now fails. We need a new practice of church planting for the challenges of a post-Christianized society.”<sup>2</sup>

Instead of bringing people to church so that we can then bring them to Christ, let’s bring Christ to people where they live.

With some a few notable exceptions, the Christian church is on a fast slide to the edges of our culture and society where our relevance is in question. With many of our congregations quickly approaching free-fall, we are in the midst of opportunity. Why? How? Sisters and brothers, opportunity awaits us because today we are closer to the life of the original followers and advocates of Jesus than any of us know. When in the first three centuries after Jesus these Christian follower-advocates began to spread their message of grace, forgiveness, and salvation, they were not disappointed because of their small numbers. They were thankful for the opportunities to bring Christ to people where they lived. However, if we intend to begin thinking as these early Christians were thinking, we have some work to do. Re-formation is hard work that can’t be done overnight and which requires a great deal of diligence, prayer, collaboration and faithful dedication.

To that end, both of our keynote speakers for this diocesan Council are going to be addressing this from the perspective of a movement that began in England called “Fresh Expressions.” This afternoon Mr. Gannon Sims will talk about his experience with “Fresh Expressions” in his role as the director for Fresh Expressions USA. Then tomorrow morning, the Rev. Canon Bobbe Fitzhugh will talk about her work with Fresh Expressions in in the Diocese of Wyoming where they have been working and praying to discover new ways of being Christian and exploring ways to start new Christian communities.

I believe that both of them will tell you that a central part of the Fresh Expressions message is that we have to get beyond the walls of our buildings where we worship Jesus as our Lord. We need to take down the walls that separate and go into the streets where God’s other people, who do not yet know that they are God’s people, are found. We need to connect with these other people whom our Lord Jesus loves.

Later this spring Tod Bolsinger, Vice Dean at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California and author of *Canoeing the Mountains* will join a gathering of lay and ordained leaders for a Saturday of teaching about how we can be both challenged and transformed by our embrace of the practical theology of Fresh Expressions.

Then in mid-summer we will come together again for a “visioning day” to begin assembling our thoughts, ideas, passions, and dreams about how we can, as stated by another Fresh

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<sup>2</sup> David Fitch, in Mark Lau Branson and Nicholas Warnes, eds., Starting Missional Churches (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 9.

Expressions author, take the gospel we love from our steeples and buildings into the streets where the people whom Jesus loves are located.

In closing I want to thank you for welcoming me and my wife Carolyn back into the Diocese. Thank you for all of your generosity and hospitality during our episcopal visitations during the last couple of years. Thank you for allowing me to collaborate in Christian leadership with you in this Diocese. I hope and pray that my next year of service to you as your bishop will be a productive time. My intention is to do all I can to bring us closer together, sharpen our mission focus, and prepare us for the next generation of episcopal leadership in the Diocese of Southern Virginia.