

219TH CONVENTION OF THE DIOCESE OF RHODE ISLAND
24 OCTOBER 2009
ADDRESS TO CONVENTION
THE RIGHT REVEREND GERALYN WOLF

“Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.” 1Corinthians 16:13

First and foremost, thank you, thank you to each of you who give so generously of your time and talents to the ministry of the Church, both in your congregation, and for the benefit of the diocese as a whole. We come together to give thanks for the blessings of this life so generously given to us by our beloved Jesus; for the renewal of friendships and the meeting of new people; and to face together the important realities that challenge our church and call forth our creative and faithful response.

We gather at a time when unemployment in our state is 13% and parishes and people are anxious about economic security. Budgets are very tight, and some churches have had to reduce staff and programs. Church leaders are concerned about membership, stewardship, decreasing income from endowments, and the viability of our congregations over time.

We know that the familiar church is passing away. I do not mean that The Church — the Body of Christ — is dying, but that our human structure of the earthly church is troubled and we are being called to discover a re-formed character. And, while there are many visions of this “new” church, and many books and speakers have sparked our imagination, we have yet to grasp adequately an expression of the faith that is both rooted in our historic beliefs and traditions and coherent for these changing times and the culture of New England.

I believe that we are living in the throws of a corporate Holy Saturday. Jesus’ body has been removed from the cross, and the promised rebuilding of the temple has yet to occur. Holy Saturday is the day when nothing seems to be happening, only mourning and sadness, and grasping at what will come next. Every main line denomination, including the Roman Catholic Church and Jewish communities has lost a significant number of members, and 15% of the population claims no religious identity at all. We are not alone in this season of anxiety. Christendom in the Western world is mourning for what was lost and not quite sure of what is to come; grieving as Cathedrals become tourist attractions and pews are empty on Sunday morning.

Holy Saturday, is a time of anxious waiting: faithful to Jesus and his promises, uncertain as to how and when they will occur, but endlessly bound to his Risen Life.

In times like this it is important to remain faithful and vigilant because the Evil One “prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour,” knowing that in our anxiety we are vulnerable to unproductive behaviors.

One of these is to become insular, focused on our particular congregation, concerned more with survival than with proclamation. We all know that in turning inward, we are neither salt nor light for others. As a church, we need to be keenly aware of the world around us and the conditions which characterize our age. We need to go apart with God in stillness, and into the world with vigorous faith.

Another behavior to which we are vulnerable is to blame others for our situation. Casting fault provides temporary emotional relief, but it does not address the underlying problems, and is a way of escaping the truth and responsibilities of a given situation.

When Jesus was crucified he did not focus on himself but on Mary, his mother, John his disciple, and the two thieves crucified with him. We do not hear him uttering words of blame, only forgiveness, blessing and hope.

Inspired by Jesus' response, I have the gall to think that this is one of the most challenging and engaging times to be a Christian, an Episcopalian, and part of the Anglican Communion. I believe that God is doing something new across Christendom, and if this is a time of grave uncertainty perhaps it is because the trumpet is sounding and a wake-up call is arousing us from our complacency.

I am encouraged by signs of new life in our diocese, exemplified by ten characteristics of congregations that are experiencing significant transformation.

1. They changed their attitude. They got honest with themselves, owning their responsibilities. Instead of acting as victims they re-set their vision;
2. They are people of abundance instead of scarcity. They speak of God's blessings in their life, of gratitude and thankfulness. They experience the joy of giving instead of complaining that they don't have enough;
3. They place a high priority on Christian formation for all ages, acknowledging that informed believers make faithful disciples;
4. They see new comers not as sources of money, but as people who are seeking a Christ-centered community;
5. They create an environment of mutual responsibility member to member, organization to organization;
6. They develop achievable goals, and rely upon shared ministry to accomplish them;
7. They move from triangulation and gossip to effective ways of communication;
8. They unashamedly give voice to the core of the Christian faith: to the sinful failings of the human condition, redeemed through the transforming love of the Word made Flesh.
9. They use new technologies in the service of evangelism and proclamation, and
10. They expect people to worship every Sunday; hearing the Word of God, and receiving the Bread of Life.

No church has all of these characteristics, but each church has some. I invite every Vestry and Bishop's Mission Committee to reflect seriously on these ten signs of congregational vitality.

Stewardship and Evangelism are two key words for our Diocese today.

Imagine the witness of our ancestors, who gave money towards the building of our churches, schools, orphanage, and nursing homes; who gave memorials of bibles and prayer books, statues, and pews. Some donors were people of great means, but most were working people, immigrants, who thanked God every day for their blessings. They were

people of vision and sacrifice, creating a church for their own time and for generations to come.

What would it look like for us to follow their example and contribute significantly, joyfully, so that the mission of the church will flourish today, and in future generations? This is a critical question for our diocese, for it challenges our spiritual attitude towards money. Scripture tell us that if the gifts are freely given, the ministry will prosper, if not the tree will be pruned.

Another challenge for us is membership? I've never visited a church that didn't want new members, and by extension more money. But, Jesus didn't send out the seventy-two to balance the budget, but to baptize, to invite people to let go of their old lives and to experience new life in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

It is shown that the most effective evangelism is relational, people inviting people to church. However, there are new forms of invitation, using internet techniques, to bring people together around various interests and events.

Some congregations support mission trips, soup kitchens, suppers and fairs as events to encourage participation. Regardless of the method, the goal of our evangelism must be rooted in faith filled invitation and incorporation, for we live in a highly spiritual age and it is the spiritual life for which people hunger.

If you search the internet for either Stewardship or Evangelism you will find an amazing array of ideas and opportunities.

As a diocese, we have had committees, special speakers, and programs, on both these topics and have supported attendance at Province I and national events. Our next opportunity to gain the tools for effective ministry is at Diocesan Convocation, this coming February. However, it is in the local church that ideas are transformed into action.

Soon, we will be presented with a new three year budget, developed over the past year, in which everyone was invited to participate during three hearings held last Spring. It is tight, it is manageable, and it speaks to our commitment to do those ministries which are best done as a diocese through our common giving. However, we can't do everything; we cannot fulfill the whole of the gospel mandate. No diocese or congregation has the resources to do it all, but as members of Christ's Body the whole church attempts to do the whole ministry, in which we play our part.

Our goal is to focus on the priorities we have set, with a commitment to growing our churches and increasing our stewardship, and from time to time to evaluate and clarify our direction, knowing that it is better to do a few things well, than attempt more than is possible.

Our apportionment dollars form our common purse for mission. One of the ministries we fund together is Hispanic ministry. We now have two congregations, and what may be news to you is that they have a combined average Sunday attendance of 260 people, with one priest between the two churches. Our proposed diocesan budget for the next three

years includes funding for one additional bi-lingual full time priest, the planting of two new Hispanic congregations, and the strengthening of our call to urban ministry.

On the administrative side of the budget, we have the smallest staff in over 40 years, and I cannot say enough about their faithfulness, professionalism, incredibly hard work and dedication. They are true Christian servants, whose goal is to help and assist our churches in carrying out God's mission. Some have suggested that we need to increase our number, and I agree, but not now. Staff compensation, set in the 2010 budget, will remain largely unchanged for three years unless there is a change in our financial situation.

Every church in our diocese has people who are creative thinkers, good cooks, technologically saavy, visionary, hospitable, welcoming, Christ-focused: all the gifts necessary for effective ministry in a new age, and these gifts need to be placed on the lamp stand so that they are used for the challenges at hand.

I believe that we are on the threshold of a new resurrection in the Church, but it is up to all of us to leave the tombs of our hesitation, roll back the rock of nostalgia, and discover what the Risen Lord wants for the extension of his reign in the world of today. It will not be the church of our memories, but a different, authentic expression of God's kingdom in our midst.

Year after year, I offer a Convention Address only to watch it evaporate into thin air. This year, I invite you to share this with the leaders of your church, paying particular attention to four parts: what it means to live in Holy Saturday, the ten characteristics of transforming churches, new models for evangelism, and what you're going to do about your attitude toward money.

It is important that we listen to each other's thoughts on these topics, and engage in conversation for the purpose of sharing ideas, and strengthening mutual ministry. To this end, I extend an invitation to everyone who has discussed these four points in their church, to join me for breakfast and conversation on Saturday, January 16, at 8:30AM, at the Cathedral.

Listen to a section of the Collect for Holy Saturday. ... Grant [O, Lord that] as the crucified body of your dear Son was laid in the tomb and rested on this holy Sabbath, so we may await with him the coming of the third day, and rise with him to newness of life.... (BCP, 221)

The Christian message is a message of newness of life and eternal hope. "We need believers who are informed, engaged, missional, and faithful."
[The Rt. Rev. Mark Lawrence] We need generous spirits, thankful hearts, and works of mercy, so that our Holy Saturday will lead to the Feast of Resurrection.