

The Bishop's Address to Diocesan Convention – November 7, 2020

This is an unusual convention, and this is going to be an unusual convention address.

We have much to be thankful for. In the midst of this storm, in the midst of all of this uncertainty, we have not thrived exactly, but we have managed to continue to be an effective community worshipping, praying and serving. And that is the most important thing.

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York, and the Bishop of London wrote a letter to the people of the Church of England earlier this week as they were facing a new lockdown in England. The bishops said that the vocation of the church in England is “to pray and to serve.” I spent some time thinking about that and realized, essentially, that's a summary of the law. You shall love the Lord your God, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

The job of the church is to pray, and the job of the church is to serve, and we have done both of those things in this moment.

We have done both of those things in this moment in ways that we did not anticipate we could do. And we have responded in ways that I would not have imagined we would have responded. But I have been gratified to see that what I had always suspected is in fact true

I always have thought that the Episcopal Church, and all of you here in Rhode Island, have an extraordinary range of gifts and all that had to happen was for us to start believing in our ability to do things in new and creative ways. In the midst of this pandemic we have been forced to do just that. And you all have risen to the challenge.

In the first few weeks when we were scrambling to try to understand what it was going to be like to be Church in a moment that none of us had anticipated, we figured out how to stream or share our services on Facebook and YouTube. We used our cell phones to create Bible studies. We learned new ways to gather and have meetings and we managed to keep things going. And as time has gone on, we have gotten more skilled at all of this. We have begun to experiment with these new tools and there are things that are happening today that are extraordinary and there are new things that we wouldn't have been able to do before.

A lot of people have said that there isn't much life left in the Episcopal Church and have looked at our demographic trends and said that we have no future. I think our experience in these last few months have shown that not to be true. We are ready to step into a new future. We have the capacity to transform ourselves and we have a passion for being the people of God. No matter what the circumstances.

Early next year we will be holding a conference on how to lead when you don't know where you're going. We've engaged the Reverend Dr. Susan Beaumont to come and work with us to help us both on the diocesan level, and I hope, in our congregational settings, to begin to think about what it is that we need to do next, as a people.

We don't know where we're going. We don't know when this pandemic will end. We don't know when the division that we are feeling as a community will be resolved. We don't know how we are going to respond to the profound challenges that we face: to overcome racism, to overcome poverty, to overcome the inherent sexism in our society.

Yes, we have all those challenges in front of us, and we will respond to them, and I expect we will respond with power and we will respond with love.

But we need to think about how that's going to happen. And I encourage you all to plan on participating in this conference in January. There will be pre-recorded presentations and then there'll be discussion. It's not going to give us a sudden plan that we're going to all be able to use, but it's going to show us a new way of imagining how we as a community, picking our way along a path into a future that we do not yet recognize or cannot fully understand, will be able to thrive. We'll be able to refine our vision of who we are as we move into this new moment in the history of the church.

II

I also this year, particularly want to again say thank you. I want to say thank you to my staff. We were thrown the biggest curveball I ever imagined we could be thrown and the staff for the diocese, the staff across the state have responded incredibly.

The camp staff has figured out new ways to hold programs when we can't gather. They have used this time creatively and we are investing in refreshing the facilities at camp, so that when we can be back together we'll have an even stronger and more productive program.

The Center for Reconciliation made a transition from in person events to these online webinars and we have seen that attendance go up by a factor of 10. We have now been able to bring people in to speak to us from all around the country and as a result, we have had some extraordinary lessons and speakers. We're learning how to do a museum that's both virtual, socially distanced and impactful.

I want to thank the staff who have worked so hard there. And I want to thank the Board of Directors who have worked to refine the mission, and come up with a vision of how we will do the work of responding to historic racism and the legacy of slavery in this country now in the 21st century.

I want to thank my staff as well. Right from the very beginning when we began to try to understand what the financial implications were going to be, to see the finance department, to see Dennis Burton and Canon Dena, to see the Finance Commission and Diocesan Council and the Standing Committee all rise to the occasion. We have been able to find ways to support our congregations in the midst of all of this. Thanks be to God, we made some good decisions a few years ago, and because of those good decisions we have the resources to be able to help.

We can't make it all go away and we can't undo the strains that we're all feeling, but at least we can take some of the financial pressure and put it to the side so that, in this moment we can focus on what the mission of this church is and how God is calling us to respond rather than be completely worried or totally focused on the fear of not being able to pay our bills. Most of us, all of us have been able to take that to heart, and have been able to be creative and have been able to be responsive. I think that is probably the most important thing for us to hear; we have the resources we have to be creative, responsive, and to do what we need to do.

I thank the staff as well because they have made a transition to working remotely. It happened very quickly and unexpectedly. They have managed to learn new tools and new techniques and new technologies. Frankly I think we're working as well apart as we worked together and I'm beginning to

imagine what it might look to model a new way of being a diocesan staff and a new way of supporting the people of God in this state.

We have begun to realize that we have some new capabilities that we didn't have before. Having Diocesan Convention electronically today has allowed people, who wouldn't have otherwise been able to attend, to attend. We've seen that at Diocesan Council too. We've seen that at Standing Committee as well. People have asked if we could continue meeting this way, even after we're able to gather again, because it makes it easier for people who wouldn't otherwise be able to participate in the governance of the diocese to do so. Younger people who have childcare issues, people who live far away from Providence and couldn't manage the traffic and didn't have the time, can give of their gifts to the work of the church. People who are on Block Island are able to fully participate in the DIT and the Standing Committee now. That wasn't possible before we got to this moment.

I think there's a lot more for us to imagine and think about. We're beginning to imagine what it would look like to begin to hold services at the Cathedral, not necessarily in person, but in a virtual way, in an online way. We had a Compline service at the cathedral for election night. We are planning a Thanksgiving service at the cathedral and we are planning a Christmas service at the cathedral.

It will be a way for us to reach people who don't have a church. It will be a way for us to reach people who have become estranged from a congregation or have become estranged from their faith. That's the dream of what a cathedral can be for us; that bridge place where the secular world meets the sacred world. It gives us a place to experiment and try new things to see how we can more effectively proclaim the Gospel. I ask your prayers for all that in this coming time.

III

I thought a lot about this address and whether I wanted to lay out a grand vision or whether I wanted to try to have a moment filled soaring rhetoric. I will admit that I recorded this yesterday and I found that my recording ran 45 minutes. Thanks be to God my microphone died halfway through. And you may also thank God that my microphone died halfway through, so that you don't have to sit here for 45 minutes and listen to me go on and on.

Rather than trying to lay out a grand vision, what I want to do is look to the immediate. Let us get through this pandemic. Let us get through this present crisis and then we can take stock of where we are and begin to think of what comes next.

As I said, we're having to plan for a future that we do not yet recognize. We're being asked to lead in a moment where we do not know where we're going. So, what can we do in this moment? There are some pastoral things that I want to say to all of you. It's important for us to hold these in front of the entire State right now.

This is going to be a hard winter. We are going to have holidays that are different from what most of us have ever experienced.

The health department has been telling us all along that, with the collision of the normal flu season and this pandemic, as well as everything else, we will struggle. I was in a meeting earlier this week with Dr. Alexander Scott and she told us that unless something really significantly changes, we expect to exceed the capacity of Rhode Island's hospitals within the next three weeks. That means we'll have to open the

Field Hospitals. That means we will see increasing restrictions on our ability to gather, and that means that our Thanksgiving and our Christmas will be radically different.

They had Thanksgiving in Canada a few weeks ago, and as a result of people gathering in family groups, the Covid infection rate has risen significantly. There is realistic fear here in Rhode Island that trying to gather at Thanksgiving will cause the same thing to happen. The Governor is already asking us to avoid that. And I want to ask you, as much as it is possible for you, to cooperate with what the Health Department is asking us to do.

I think if we begin to plan now for what a Holiday Season, Advent and Christmas, will be like in an unusual and hopefully once-in-a-lifetime moment, we can begin to prepare for a return to normal. Christmas is going to be very different. I've spoken with the clergy about this previously and I want all of you to know that we are going to have to plan to hold our Christmas services differently this year.

I believe it'll be back to normal in a year. But for this year, rather than trying to find ways to make it normal, rather than trying to find ways to work around restrictions, because we don't want to miss one more thing, we just have to recognize that we will. It's okay to grieve that. It's okay to be sad about that. But it's also our vocation as Christians to do what we can to protect our neighbors and to serve the community in which we find ourselves. We have to balance our calls to pray and gather in community to worship God with our responsibility to serve our community and protect our community from illness and disease.

Hopefully this will pass quickly and we will return to worshipping together maybe by the spring; God willing, at Easter time or Pentecost, we will be able to gather together again. Differently, but we'll be able to gather together again. How I long for the moment when we can sing together. How I long for the moment when we can hear one another, lifting our voices in song and praise to God.

But we do it apart for now. We are the Church in a moment of exile. There will be a restoration and we will return to one another. There will be singing and laughter and feasting in the land, because that is always how it is with God. God is with us in the moments of difficulty and God restores us to joy and laughter. Hold fast to that hope in these coming months. Grieve but anticipate. Long and dream.

Remember that we have demonstrated a capacity we didn't know we had, and that we are responding in ways that people did not expect us to be able to do. You should be very proud of that. I'm so proud of you. And I'm so grateful to be walking this journey alongside you.

May we see God evermore truly and evermore profoundly in our midst as we walk into this future together.

Amen.