

191<sup>st</sup> Convention of the Diocese of Ohio  
November 9 & 10, 2007  
Convention Address

Preface

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

As a preface to my address this afternoon, I want to say a very few words about the larger Church. The challenges of being in relationship to one another in The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion are important ones with real consequences to real people on all sides of every issue. They involve people of genuine faith and calling as Christians and Episcopalians, some of whom feel left out, left behind, and unvalued, and whose place in the Church feels to them threatened. This is equally true of dedicated Christians on opposite sides of the issues of the day. It is important that we never cease seeking to find ways to be reconciled to one another as the children of one God, sisters and brothers of the same Christ. It is equally important that we not allow these challenges to distract us from the mission to which we are called as Christians. Far too much time, money, and energy is being spent on internecine struggles over property and assets that ought to be employed in the godly service of healing the creation. Too many diocesan conventions are focused on whether and how to relate to the rest of the Church, or how to position themselves for or protect themselves from some future division or dissention.

I want to assure you that I am doing everything available to me to be engaged productively in these issues, at diocesan, denominational, and communion levels, on behalf of each of you and your congregation, regardless of where on the theological or ecclesiological spectrum you may stand. With the wise companionship of the Assisting Bishops and the invaluable support of the Chancellor, I continue trying to carry out my fiduciary and canonical responsibilities as Bishop of *all* of the Diocese of Ohio, at the same time seeking to avoid expensive, unnecessary, and hurtful solutions if at all possible.

In that same spirit, it is my intention that this address and this Convention focus on what we *can* do as a diocese to strengthen the body of Christ and attain the unity which I believe God is offering us, a unity of reconciled people undeterred by irreconcilable differences, who, like our spiritual forbearers in the Gospels, are not expected to be of one mind on all things but to be of one heart serving on behalf of all people. I am not unaware of the realities facing ours and other denominations at this time in the life of the Church, but neither am I afraid of them. And I am committed to being responsive to but undistracted by them as we move forward into all of the opportunity and possibility that our infinitely generous God puts before us.

So I invite you to join me in these next two days and beyond, exploring together all that we can do to build up the Church that we all love, to the end that we might help Christ heal the world, as God dreams for us to do.

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From the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

*Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Mt 25:37-40*

and from the Baptismal Covenant:

*Celebrant* Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?  
*People* I will, with God's help. BCP p.305

Two weekends ago I spent part of Saturday afternoon at the Diocesan Youth Event held at Christ Church, Warren, listening to the participants reflect on their day of volunteer service at eight sites in the Youngstown Deanery. I was quite privileged and inspired to hear them talk openly with me and one another about the experiences they had shared that day, especially as they spoke of where and how they had experienced God in that service to others. These teens and adults had spent the better part of the day visiting with residents in nursing homes, constructing a public art gallery at a mall, building a Habitat house, organizing great quantities of food for distribution from a central warehouse to area feeding centers, learning about epilepsy, and other projects. And when they described the product of their efforts they spoke not so much about how it benefitted others, but about what it did for them, how it changed them, how it made them more whole. They talked about how, in rolling up their sleeves on behalf of others, they were knit together as a more intimate and distinct community themselves. They described how, in collaborating on common tasks, the things that had previously differentiated them from one another seemed to disappear. They spoke quite unselfconsciously about the feeling that when they worked together God was moving among them, and their reflection reminded me of Jesus' promise that where two or three are gathered together in his name, he will be in their midst. They described how the people whom they served, whether individuals physically with them that day or folks they never met but on whose behalf they were working, helped them see themselves more clearly, gave them a greater self-awareness. They talked with me about the Baptismal vow in which we promise with God's help to "seek and serve Christ in all persons," and how, when we genuinely do that, the Christ in those persons heals us and makes us whole.

Though they were tired from their work and from sleeping on a church floor the night before, they explored with a patient and generous companionship the things that God had been offering them in their service on behalf of others, in their companionship with one another, and in their relationship with God. They talked about what it means to be the Body of Jesus. When I asked them how important this sort of day was to them, they, in their own quite practical terms, talked about how servanthood heals and makes whole both the servant and the served. They are natural theologians, and theological reflection came quite naturally to them, once they found that their own vocabulary was sufficient and their experiences not unique.

For an hour these servant leaders talked about service and theological reflection, and how both are disciplines essential to our being disciples. Their message to me and to all of us was clear. These are two things that the Church ought to be about: working together to heal the world through our service to others, and helping one another explore what God is making of us in that service. When I asked them what they would have me pass along to this convention regarding service and reflection, they replied as only the Nike generation would, “Tell them, ‘Just do it.’”

I am very much persuaded that they are correct. And the good news is that across the Diocese of Ohio we *are* doing mission work, and doing a lot of it. The Commission on Global and Domestic Mission compiled this summer a voluminous Mission Inventory that catalogues the work of congregations and communicants reaching out in service to others, locally and afar. In it you are able to find parishes who are doing mission work similar to what you may be doing or wanting to do, who can provide support and expertise, and perhaps even collaborate as mission partners. By it we can observe the movement of the Holy Spirit and discern how to improve our mission work by doing more things together. My favorite revelation of the Mission Inventory was finding that three mission projects – undertaken by St. Michael’s in the Hills, Toledo, St. Paul’s, Akron, and the combined effort of Harcourt Parish, Gambier and St. Paul’s, Mt. Vernon – have made substantial contributions to work in Liberia, and not one was aware of the other two! In addition, I serve on the Advisory Council of the Friends of Cuttington College in Monrovia. In a tangible way this constitutes a diocesan relationship of a grassroots sort. I have since learned that parishes in the Diocese of Southern Ohio also have current mission work in Liberia, opening up for us opportunities for mission partnerships we have yet to explore.

Six weeks ago the same Commission on Global and Domestic Mission sponsored a diocesan Mission Summit, hosted not far from here at Grace Church, Sandusky, at which more than a third of our congregations presented displays of their mission endeavors and a number of communicants gave personal examples of the service in which they participate. We talked in small groups about the transformational power of servant ministry and the spiritual conversion it brings us. And we began to make connections, finding ways to work together across parochial boundaries, identifying companions to help with work we are doing, and finding programs already underway where collaborative support would make a significant contribution. In effect we found that every mission effort has the potential to be truly a “diocesan” mission, involving more than one parish and weaving strong the fabric of the Diocese.

This past summer at least eight Youth Mission trips were undertaken by parishes partnered in mission. More young people from our congregations were engaged in mission than ever before. The 2006 Bishop’s Bike Ride, from Columbus to Cleveland, was successful in raising enough money so that any young person desiring to go on a mission trip would be able to, as long as the group included participants from more than one parish. This year, the twenty cyclists travelled more than 270 miles along Underground Railroad routes from Xenia to Hudson, and again we raised funds to ensure the participation of all interested young communicants of the Diocese in mission trips in the coming year. Next summer we will ride the width of the Diocese, from Defiance to Alliance (Can you beat that? What a great metaphor for the Church!), to fund youth mission efforts for 2009. The Bike Ride itself is a mission effort that serves to bring together congregations in common service, through riders and the parishes that host us along the way, and the funds raised further knit us together in mission as they require congregations to collaborate as

partners in order to receive support. From Alaska to Kentucky the young people of this Diocese rolled up their sleeves in the service of others, and in so doing the differences that may have otherwise differentiated them or the congregations from which they come disappeared so that God's work could be done without obstruction. They provided a lesson for us all, and they will report on their work tomorrow.

Later in this Convention you will hear the report of the Commission on Global and Domestic Mission guiding us in mission service that knits us together with others and with one another. As well you will hear from the Mission Strategy Task Force, whose hard work over the last 18 months has brought them clarity about our common life, as they describe in four areas: Congregational Vitality, Parish Collaboration, Diocesan Collaboration, and Discipleship. It is significant that two of these address our collaborative service as the body of Christ. The Task Force will challenge us to a deeper commitment, both by specific missional relationships and by proportion of budget allocation in the coming years.

The Diocese of Ohio has an instructive history in mission partnerships. As I wrote after visiting this summer with Bishop Burt, more than 30 years ago this diocese collaborated with what was then the Diocese of Zanzibar and Tanga to build the St. Barnabas Center, at the Cathedral in Korogwe, Tanzania. It is a wonderful privilege to have with us at this Convention the Bishop of Tanga, the Rt. Rev. Dr. Philip P. Baji. I look forward to hearing him later this afternoon describe the history and impact of that collaboration over the last three decades and its role today in the life of the Diocese of Tanga. The Diocesan Council at its last meeting affirmed the recommendation of the Commission on Global and Domestic Mission to commit a portion of our 0.7% Millennium Development Goal allocation to the mission projects of the Diocese of Tanga, to which we will add half of the offering at tomorrow's Convention Eucharist. Meredith Bowen of St. Paul's, Cleveland Heights, and our eldest child, Sophie, visited a number of these projects last summer with Bishop Philip. There they found ministries of great mercy that might benefit much from a renewed companionship as mission partners. (You may be interested to know that the city of Tanga in the Diocese of Tanga is a sister city to the city of Toledo, Ohio. Bishop Philip will be spending a couple of days in Toledo following this convention, getting to know better that part of our diocese.)

At the same time, the Rev. Collins Asonye has recently returned from another trip to Aluu, Nigeria where he has overseen a second stage of developing the Christian Education building and retail stalls at St. Paul's Church, supported by our parish contributions and funds from the diocesan MDG allocation. On the projection screens you can see a photograph of the Sunday School building in 2005, when Collins and I visited Aluu. It is a makeshift building of corrugated tin that hardly protects from either heat or cold, behind which you can see the abandoned attempt to build a proper facility. Here is how it looks today. The new education building, now outfitted with windows and doors, can securely house educational materials and other resources, protecting them from the weather, as well as provide safe classrooms for learning. The retail stalls now rent space to two hair salons, a small market, a seamstress and dress-maker, a land survey and building design office, and my personal favorite, a motorcycle repair shop. Thus, the stalls both provide modest income to the church and support the small industries of the village.

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While the focus of this year's Diocesan Convention is serving, it is not at the neglect of growing and giving. In order to live a full life of service as congregations and as a diocese, we will need to continue to grow spiritually and to give sacrificially.

### Spiritual growth

Having this summer completed a full, three-year visitation cycle, I have had the opportunity now to talk with lay leaders and candidates for confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation in every parish of the Diocese. One of the things that has struck me, and has been affirmed by both Bishop Williams and Bishop Bowman, is how seldom I find that our communicants have a discipline of prayer and, equally alarming, a context in which to talk about their prayer lives with others. Too many of us lack a practical guide for our prayer life, and we don't feel comfortable asking someone else how it's going for them.

It seems to me essential that Christians have some sort of daily discipline to their spiritual lives, and with it the companionship of others with whom to check it out, and I have wondered what sort of common practice might encourage us to develop these. To that end I have asked Susan McDonald, whose responsibilities now include Christian Formation and Lifelong Learning for all, to work with three or four others at my invitation in developing a simple, diocesan rule of life. This could serve as a baseline for us, a beginning practice that any and all could do, a daily formula for listening for God that we could undertake and explore together. Such a rule or common practice would break through the spiritual isolation that so many experience and, because all would be sharing the same discipline, we might become less inhibited about talking to each other about it.

My hope is that we can develop and provide such a diocesan rule of life by Ash Wednesday, and offer it as a common Lenten discipline throughout the diocese. Should it prove beneficial, it might become a shared discipline for Inquirers' and Confirmation Classes, and for vestries and commissions and other leadership groups. I tell you about it now in hopes that you will look forward to it, commit yourself to trying it, and exercise leadership about it in your congregation when the great fast of Lent begins.

### Sacrificial giving

At the same time, it is critical that we continue to develop the financial health of the Diocese in order that we can sustain our missional and spiritual growth.

Through a strategic restructuring of the Bishop's Staff we have been learning to work effectively with a smaller team, employing fewer program staff members and redistributing support staff.

Two examples:

- Where we once had two full-time bishops, each supported by an administrative assistant, we now have only one, who shares the extraordinary support of Eva Cole with the Executive Officer. It is important to point out that this would not be possible without

Alan and Eva's exceptional gifts, nor without the invaluable companionship of our two Assisting Bishops. To Nancy, David, Lynette, and Arthur I offer ceaseless thanks.

- As well, not long before I arrived here, the Finance Office had two program staff and four support staff positions. It now has one program and two support staff, whose exceptional work is attested to by the Trustees, Finance Committee, Council, Treasurer, and our annual auditors.

Across the staff we are working to do more with less. A half dozen years ago the diocesan staff totaled 20 – 11 program and 9 support. Today it totals 15 – 8 program and 7 support. The 2008 Budget which will be presented to you tomorrow accommodates a personnel budget for the Bishop's Staff that is less than 1% greater than that of the 2003 Budget, five years ago. That is particularly remarkable when you consider that our health insurance premiums have increased by between 91 and 95% over the same period of time - almost doubling - and now account for 14% of the personnel line item. Maintaining this level of spending on personnel in order to increase funding for program can only be accomplished by continually expanding capacity through the work of committees, commissions, and volunteers, the benefits of which for mission and community building you will hear articulated in the Mission Strategy Task Force's report.

Tomorrow you will also hear from the Trustees of the Diocese about an aggressive commitment to increase the invested assets of the Diocese by both growth and gift – reducing the spending rule, engaging superior investment management, and working with me to increase the corpus with current and planned gifts. I have initiated conversations with other dioceses exploring the possibility of pooling investment funds in order to enhance our combined investing power and attract exceptional management at lower fee rates. If we are successful in these strategies we will substantially improve the Joint Investment Fund performance for individual parish investments.

However, we cannot achieve financial vitality as a Church by lean staffing and sound investment alone, and we cannot support a vibrant mission life on yesterday's resources. Our common life of service requires of us continued growth in giving, both so that we have the resources to accomplish the ministries we yearn to do, and so that we exercise the sacrificial muscles by which we give our whole selves to God, becoming increasingly fit for the mission of Christ.

I am heartened by the response of so many to the Bishop's Annual Appeal. As of today we have had some 600 participants contribute over \$21,000 or 84% of our hoped-for total. Next week the end-of-year mailing will go out, the brochure for which is included in your convention packets. I have confidence that we can reach the \$250,000 goal. The Bishop's Appeal funds the Episcopal Community Services Foundation's grants to parish-based ministries to the poor and disenfranchised, and underwrites critical initiatives like college work, internships for high school and college students, seminarians, and recent ordinands, and youth mission trips. It is the only vehicle by which individuals can directly contribute funds to the annual work of the Diocese. I personally sign each letter of thanks sent in acknowledgement of a gift to the Appeal. It is a practice that allows me to hold every donor in prayer, and I am awed by the discipline of giving that is reflected by all who join this effort. I ask that, as clergy and elected lay leaders in your congregations, you go home from here and offer encouragement and companionship to your fellow communicants in responding to the Appeal. There are almost 24,000 baptized members

in the Diocese of Ohio, 40 times the number of Bishop's Appeal participants to date. Imagine what we could do if each of us gave something!

Likewise am I inspired by the number of people who have joined the Sterling Newell Society by making a planned or endowment gift to the Diocese of Ohio. A considerable amount of the ministry we do today in formation, congregational development, and mission programs across the Diocese is made possible by people who died generations ago and had the foresight to invest in the future of a Church they would not live to see. By gifts of every size, they prepared to give some of their treasure over to God just as they were preparing ultimately to surrender their lives to God. You and I have the opportunity and responsibility to do the same, and I believe that such gifts are calisthenics for our everyday giving of ourselves to God, contributing immensely to our spiritual development and fitness.

The culture of giving in the Diocese of Ohio is growing every day. While in some places attendance and numbers of pledges may have decreased in the last ten years, the amount pledged in parish stewardship campaigns has increased well ahead of inflation and the cost of living. I am counting on your leadership to continue growing that culture of giving with me so that our spiritual descendants generations hence will benefit from our faithful investment in their future.

### Serving others

When I read the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel I am always struck that those whom Jesus describes in his parable of judgment as "the righteous" have no such self-awareness. "When did we do that to you?" they ask. "Whenever you did it to anyone," Jesus answers. In Jesus' eyes, the righteous are not people of moral or ethical certitude, they are people of mercy, of action on behalf of others, people who become whole and holy by taking others into their care, into the work of their hearts, into their very selves, people who become whole because those others, whoever they are, are always Jesus, "... as you did it to one of the least of these..., you did it to me."

That is at the heart of the penultimate vow in the Baptismal Covenant. "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" When we promise, "I will, with God's help," we accept that the help of God will challenge and stretch us, that it will push us to embrace people we find it difficult to tolerate, and to make ourselves open to those who may even threaten and anger us. But it is through them, Jesus promises, that we will be made whole. They will make us bigger people because, as unlikely as it may sometimes seem, they are Christ-bearers to us. The reign of God breaks into this world whenever we seek Jesus in all others and serve him through serving them.

The life of faithful service is one by which we are reconciled to God and to one another in Christ. It requires of us an active seeking of Jesus in all others, and an opening up of ourselves to them as an opening up of ourselves to Christ himself, indeed to the Christ in them. Serving Jesus in others, we are made one as servants and served, and together we grow into "the full stature of Christ." In Jesus' prayer for this, no one is left out. We are all made one as he and the Father are one. May that be always our prayer as well, and may it guide us ever deeper into that unity with all of creation for which the Trinity yearns.

It remains a great privilege to serve you and serve with you, as together we serve all of God's beloved as the heart, hands, and voice of the risen Christ, to whom we give glory and honor, now and forever. Amen.