

197th Convention of the Diocese of Ohio
November 8 & 9, 2013
Convention Address

Sisters and brothers in Christ.

Good morning.

It startles me to think that this is the tenth time I have stood before you to address the annual Convention of the Diocese of Ohio. In many respects it seems only a short time ago that I headed west from Boston, the home of the once again World Champion Redsox, west to root for the Indians and the Mud Hens, and to begin working together with you in the service of God's mission. Most Sundays, when I visit your parishes and see the photograph of our family on the day of my consecration nine and a half years ago, I recognize that it must be so. Our children were so young. I was the tallest member of our family then. Now I am in the middle.

Of course, when I stop to reflect on the challenges we have met together over these years, the mission initiatives we have undertaken in local communities and abroad, the varied political struggles of the larger church, the reconfiguring of congregations and common ministries, the people I have had the privilege of baptizing, confirming, receiving, and ordaining, the more than two thousand clergy birthday calls, the hundreds of visitations and vestry meetings, the dozens of youth events and clergy gatherings, and the unmeasured gift and painful loss of treasured friends and colleagues here, I recognize that almost a decade must have passed.

And some days I am particularly aware of it. Next Thursday, for example, when once again we will make our way to the fifth floor of Cleveland's City Hall for the fifth meeting in the last two months with the Landmarks Commission petitioning for a permit to demolish the Church of the Transfiguration so that the land beneath it can be used for a new and fruitful purpose, I will remember that we have been at this together for some time. I will recall again how long ago it was that Bishop Williams and I met in that church with its small group of communicants to discuss the overwhelming challenges they faced.

Yet in many other ways it feels like we are just at the beginning. It feels that we are on the verge of something new, just starting out. My suspicion is that often, when we perceive time has flown by, or that, even after a long period, it seems like we are just getting going, it is because there is a new wind blowing. It is because God is doing a new thing, and rather than our being focused on what lies behind us, on what we *have* been doing, we are facing forward, straining to see what lies ahead. To be sure, God is always doing a new thing, but our perception of it often depends on which direction we are facing.

The theme for this 197th diocesan convention, *See, I am doing a new thing*, is taken from the 43rd chapter of Isaiah, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” As I mentioned in last night’s homily, these words were offered to a people facing an uncertain future. Uttered in a period of political, social, and religious upheaval, to a people many of whom were living in exile, dispersed and oppressed by a newly emerging power, they are words proclaiming that God was fully present and actively involved in what was to come for them and what was to *become of* them. They are words that invite, encourage, and expect engagement. And they require something of those to whom they were spoken. “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, *do you not perceive it?*” They pose a rhetorical question, and assume an active response. They say, “Move forward. Come with me. Be the new thing.”

There can be little question in anyone’s mind that Americans in the Christian church, and no less in The Episcopal Church, are similarly living in a period of dramatic change, at both a global and individual level. Societally, institutionally, technologically, economically, politically, morally, indeed in almost every aspect of our lives, not only is the quantity of change experienced in this age staggering, the rate of change is unparalleled in history, and ever increasing. Because time moves forward into novelty, the norm has always been change. And in spite of efforts to hold on to the present, it inevitably slips through our fingers to become the past. Time only moves forward. So we ought not confuse stability with inactivity. To be stable does not necessarily mean to be still. A stable system can be one that accommodates change and adapts to newness in ways that preserve or increase its vitality. And systemic stability very often requires change that is difficult.

A recent article in the Huffington Post pointed out a number of realities that you and I know from our own experience in the Diocese of Ohio. While more than 40% of Americans claim to go to church, less than 20% actually show up on Sunday. The ratio of our baptized membership to average Sunday attendance bears this out. Recent research estimates that 8,000 to 10,000 churches will close in the United States this year. In the Diocese of Ohio we have experienced parish closings in a number of the last twenty years. In 2010-2012 over half of the churches in the United States did not grow in membership, not by one person. That, too, is true in a majority of our congregations.

As we have discussed in previous conventions, winter convocations, leadership roundtables, and other gatherings, this is the context in which we serve, and it invites us to listen anew to Isaiah’s prophecy and to Jesus’ call to *new* life. The church never moves into the future intact, it always must adapt and be transformed to the changing world it is created to serve. In that sense some of it is always dying, and perhaps in times of accelerated change, when we may be most tempted to hold on to the familiar, we are most challenged to seek the new thing and give ourselves to it boldly. In that moment we are met by the good news that in Christ Jesus there is always new life.

In uncertain times, the words of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews are especially powerful. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8) Powerful, but not always comforting. At least they shouldn’t be, because Jesus, the same

yesterday, today, and forever, consistently calls us into newness. In our changed and ever-changing context, God in Christ says with absolute reliability, “I’m out here. Pay attention. Come forward.” “See, I am about to do a new thing.”

To connect to our changing context, we are invited by God to adapt. Across the Diocese of Ohio, I observe congregations experimenting with adaptation in response to the change around them, exploring a broad range of new things God may be doing with them. They are going outside of the traditional and the familiar, even outside their buildings, with Ashes to Go, outdoor coffee hours for the whole neighborhood, collaborative ministries with adjacent parishes to serve specific needs and demographics, and regional youth groups. Later today we will decide whether to move intentionally toward a new camp and retreat facility and program. To that end, dozens of lay and ordained leaders from across the diocese have for many months been exploring what new thing God might be doing with us in that regard, and inviting you and your fellow communicants into that discernment.

With Gayle Catinella’s encouraging leadership, the clergy are collaborating to provide daily, online, seasonal meditations for Advent and Lent. (You can sign up to receive them on the smart device of your choice at the diocesan website.) Diocesan youth events are growing each year as young people find that peer companionship is available to them regardless of the number of young people in their own congregation. The Commission on Ministry, Diocesan Council, Diocesan Staff members, and our parish priests have begun to explore what new thing God might be doing in congregations whose resources do not provide for ordained clergy presence every Sunday, exploring anew how to be a Eucharistic community, vibrantly providing the witness of The Episcopal Church, when Holy Eucharist is not available with the frequency we have become accustomed to in the last thirty years. Is there a new thing God is offering us in this time of change that could revitalize us in those communities?

Partnering with the Episcopal Church Foundation, the staff of the Episcopal Church Center, and other entities, lay and clergy leaders have been exploring inspired liturgical expression, renewed congregational vitality, and models of Christian leadership that respond directly to the world outside our church walls. Three intentional communities for young adults have been established through Trinity Cathedral’s Urban Service Corps, the Church of the Ascension’s Ascension House, and St. Alban’s Church, where participants live together and explore their spiritual vocations. Our diocesan companionships with the Dioceses of Tanga and Belize continue to grow, witnessed this week by a third container of medical equipment and supplies being sent to the hospitals of Tanga and the presence of Sue Harris, Sandra Arnold, and Bishop Wright here with us from Belize.

All of this is evidence of the new thing God is doing and your courageous willingness both to perceive it and to be changed by it.

Not all of these things will pan out, of course, certainly not exactly the way we imagine them, and most of them, like most everything in the church except Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and always, will not last forever, at least in the forms they exist now.

But through each of these initiatives and ministries, we as the body of Christ are looking forward, paying attention, and engaging God's new thing.

To be fluent with the changing world, we are challenged by God to learn new languages. To understand the needs and aspirations of those we are given to serve, we are beckoned by God to adjust our hearing, so that we can listen clearly to what God is doing with them and for them. In our diocese we have no Hispanic ministry or congregation. Yet in a country where the fastest growing demographic is Spanish-speaking, we might do well to consider somewhere broadening the language of our ministry and worship to include Spanish. In the majority of our communities, young adults are both absent from our congregations and yearning for spiritual companionship and resources. If we have a word for them, which I believe we do, we might do well to consider learning how to tweet it. I know that a few of you already have, but this won't be easy for me, I assure you. I have had a Twitter account for a couple of years, yet I have tweeteth never. I am certain that my 23 stalwart Twitter followers are on the edge of their seats in anticipation of my inaugural tweet. And I expect that Ashleigh Johnson, our new Director of Communications, may in time draw out my social media voice and reward their patience. But it will change me.

To be responsive to the practical demands of a changing culture, we need to continue exploring new governance practices in both our parochial and diocesan structures. Participation in diocesan governance is continually being challenged by the increasing demands on the busy lives and schedules of our communicants. The annual overnight commitment for convention delegates, for example, precludes many gifted leaders from sharing in the councils of the church. Likewise because of distance and scheduling many of our communicants are unable to serve on any number of diocesan committees and commissions that would benefit much from their participation. Perhaps we might profit from adjusting some of the ways we do our work. Is there a new thing that God is doing that might lead us to adapt better to the changing demands of our time?

These are but a few of the things I observe us doing, and imagine we might do, in response to the divine invitation to perceive and join the new thing God is always doing. More important, of course, are the things you observe and aspire to, for your parish and for the diocese. This morning in table conversation, I invite you to share with one another what those things are or might be, as a way of priming the pump of creativity for the work of the coming year. Remember that the boldness of God's action in our lives deserves an equally bold response.

As we make our way toward our 200th Convention in three years, at which time we will commence our bi-centennial year, I invite you to turn with me toward the next century of our common life in Christ as a diocese of the church, with a spirited openness to new possibilities. That has always been the hallmark of this the first diocese established beyond the original thirteen colonies.

I have great confidence in our church, in its breadth of theology, ecclesiology, and politics, in its deep commitment to God's mission, in its embrace of difference and its

inclusive heart. I have great confidence in our church's polity, in its representational governance and in its commitment to wrestling with difficult issues, trusting that while the issues may separate us, the unity of the Godhead will hold us together. I have great confidence in our church's willingness to take risks on behalf of others, in its commitment to social justice, and in its dedication to speaking truth to power. And I have great confidence in you and in all our colleagues who together make up the 86 congregations of this faithful diocese. We are richly blessed with gifts of every sort, with faithful lives of prayer and service, and with vibrant ministries to and with those whom God has given us to serve.

Most of all, I have great confidence in God, in the fidelity of God's love, in the ceaseless offering of divine possibility, in the new thing God is always and already doing for us, and in God's patient mercy, awaiting our perception of it and our faithful response.

In this tenth year of our ministry together, it remains a singular privilege to serve with you.

The Rt. Rev, Mark Hollingsworth, Jr.
Bishop of Ohio