

Bishop's Address  
193<sup>rd</sup> Diocesan Convention  
November 14, 2009  
Trinity Cathedral

Two weeks ago yesterday, Bishop and Mrs. Bowman, Bishop Williams, Bishop Grew, and I gathered in Marquette, Michigan with Martha Burt, her four daughters, and their families, to bury John Harris Burt, the Eighth Bishop of Ohio. It was both a sad and joyous celebration of a long life sacrificially lived, a life committed to equality and justice and the betterment of others, a life generously given to God in service to God's beloved. Some of you have written or spoken to me of your connection to John as the bishop who confirmed you or ordained you or made an important contribution to your formation as a Christian. Today I want to gather together in our prayer all of our remembrances and gratitude and offer this Convention Eucharist in thanksgiving to God for the life and ministry of John Burt. To that end I also ask that the offertory gifts from this service be given to High Rocks, a year-round ministry to adolescent girls in West Virginia, founded by Bishop Burt's daughter, Susan, and currently directed by his granddaughter, Sarah. I urge you to be generous in your giving.

Bishop Williams, in his funeral homily, quoted from Bishop Burt's 1977 Convention Address, ten years into his episcopacy. It was a time not unlike our own. You will remember that the United States had faced a serious energy crisis resulting from the OPEC oil embargo levied against this country in response to our rebuilding of the Israeli military. We had suffered a concurrent stock market crash. As the Church looked towards the 80s and a new decade, Bishop Burt urged the Diocese of Ohio to spend the coming three years discerning what kind of church it needed to be to meet what seemed an uncertain future. The concluding words of that address challenged the congregations and communicants of the Diocese to give themselves on behalf of others in this way:

*When people see a church that is more concerned for its "fabric" than for its "mission"; a church that is more fearful of "making mistakes" than "making an effort"; a church that is more willing to "rusticate" than to "dedicate"; more willing to "risk its money" than to "risk its life"; – then you have a noncontroversial, nonirritating, doughy ecclesiastical residue, incapable of communicating the mighty Gospel of her Lord – and content to be an anesthetic to the "best impulses" of questing men.*

*Let it never be said that we in Ohio have settled for that kind of Church.*

There is no question that Bishop Burt's legacy is borne out in the many dedicated, controversial, irritating, life risking (read status quo risking) ministries of blessing, justice, and care currently being carried out by the congregations and communicants of the Diocese of Ohio and The Episcopal Church. It is borne out in successful mission efforts, both at home and abroad, and perhaps equally has been manifested in those that have failed. John Burt's conviction about churches being willing to risk their lives, not just their money, points to a church that is willing to make mistakes, even fail, as it moves from the status quo to the new life in Christ. It is witnessed, for instance, at St. James Church, Boardman as it celebrates this year its bicentennial,

marking two centuries of willingness to risk what *is* in order to become what *is not yet*. I would argue that the same conviction is borne out by the parishioners of churches like Grace Church, Galion, Trinity Church, Bryan, and St. Andrew's Church, Canfield who have quite literally given their parochial lives, choosing to close as parishes of this Diocese, to cease spending their energies and God's resources in the pursuit of a vitality that was not forthcoming, and giving themselves to the possibility that God may have something new to offer them as Christians, both in terms of venue and ministry.

John Burt's hope for the Diocese of Ohio is manifested at parishes like St. Paul's, Marion, and Christ Church, Shaker Heights, at St. Paul's, Ashtabula, and St. Mark's, Toledo, at Grace Church, Mansfield, and Christ Church, Warren, and in every Episcopal Church food pantry and soup kitchen where people are given the daily bread for which Jesus taught us to pray. It is manifested in Trinity Church, New Philadelphia, St. Paul's, Mt. Vernon, and every parish building where homeless people are being given shelter from the elements and a safe place to sleep. It is manifested at St. Luke's, Cleveland, and St. Paul's, Cleveland Heights, and in each of our church buildings where neighborhood children are given educational support and encouragement in afterschool programs. It is manifested in these shirts given off our backs, thousands of T-shirts collected today from all across the diocese, so many that the Cathedral staff is having to move them into the basement to make room for our convention activities. And it is manifested whenever Episcopalians in this diocese stand up for the rights and needs of the disabused, discounted, disaffected, and oppressed. It is manifested every time the people of this diocese give *themselves* to God that God might use them in God's mission.

Yesterday more than one hundred fifty of us, representing fifty congregations, gathered here at Trinity Commons to give ourselves to God in the service of others at a number of sites around this city. Thanks to the Canon for Mission Mark Robinson's planning and guidance, together we were the hands of Christ ministering to God's beloved. It was an inspiring act of giving, after which some two hundred of us shared a simple meal here at Trinity Commons and reflected with one another in small table groups about how such self-giving changes us, how God transforms us when we give who we are and what we have back to God, from whom each and all have come, and how that giving informs our sense of purpose and forms our relationship to God in Christ. That is the kind of giving that builds the church to which Bishop Burt challenged this diocese thirty years ago.

Sacrificial giving, the spiritual surrender of self to God that we proclaim in our diocesan mission statement, is a comprehensive act. It is carried out in our service of others, in our financial giving to parish and diocese, in our participation in the life of the church, in our leadership as Christians in the world, and in our prayer. It is this last, giving ourselves to prayer, that I want to focus on this morning. As we gather in this convention Eucharist, giving thanks for the life of John Burt, we do so on the feast day of another noteworthy bishop, the first Bishop of Connecticut and first bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, Samuel Seabury. It seems particularly appropriate that the gospel lesson appointed for this day recounts Jesus' directing the disciples about how to give themselves in response to the great needs of the world. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Matthew 9:38) In this story, the first act of giving ourselves to God is *prayer*. "Ask the Lord." My image of this scene is that Jesus expected the disciples to do just that. To

pray, right then and there, together. With each other. Not to wait for him to pray on their behalf, nor to go home and kneel alone in prayer, but to launch right in together, in that very moment. Jesus knew, doubtless from his own prayer discipline, that asking God to send out laborers would itself transform the disciples' own labor.

There is some evidence that this didn't come easily to the disciples. Prayer doesn't appear to have been the default response to the considerable challenges of their lives and ministries. Remember how they reacted to the hunger of the multitudes and the storm at sea. It was not with prayer. Remember how in Luke's gospel, after they had seen Jesus praying, one of the disciples asked him, "Lord, teach *us* to pray." And remember how in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus instructed them, "Pray then in this way: *Our* Father..." (Matthew 6:9) Pay attention to the pronouns. It is significant that the prayer Jesus taught the disciples uses only plural pronouns – give *us* this day *our* daily bread, forgive *us our* trespasses, as *we* etc. He taught them to pray *together*. "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything that you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or more are gathered together in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:19-20)

There is similar evidence that this sort of prayer doesn't come that easily to all Episcopalians. We pray in church, or go along with what is being prayed on our behalf, and we "say our prayers" privately, with varying degrees of discipline. But I observe that many of us struggle to pray with one another for the everyday concerns and needs of our and each other's lives, and for the things we either fear or yearn for in our own lives, in our faith, and in our congregations. Twenty years ago a colleague and I started a monthly Saturday morning men's group in the parish where I served as rector. We had a dozen or more faithful participants, guys whom I had watched white knuckling it through church on the average Sunday, who rarely said aloud the word "God" unless it was followed by "damn it." Some months into our meetings, one of them became ill and was hospitalized. When he recovered, he reported to the group at our monthly meeting how calm he had been in the hospital, and how he had felt our prayers for him. A few minutes later, another member of the group offered thanks for our companion's recovery, and quite awkwardly confessed that he, in fact, had not been praying for him. I noticed that somewhat self-consciously heads were nodding all around the circle. It was in fact a general confession. The man who had been ill was not hurt by this; the comfort and confidence he felt in the hospital had been genuine and the bond of companionship among the group was strong. But together they began to face in a new way both their limited experience with prayer and their common reticence to give themselves to it.

Their confession reminded me of Annie Dillard's description in [Teaching a Stone to Talk](#) of the Christians' general lack of consciousness about and confidence in the power that Jesus said can bind and loose on earth and in heaven. She writes:

*On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us*

*to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.*

Crash helmets, life preservers, and signal flares. Being drawn out by the “waking god” to where we can never return. That is the church I want to serve. A church that gives itself to the power of God’s love in ways that change everyone it touches – the members, the community, the beloved of God it serves, the world. And I am persuaded continually that it begins with our giving ourselves to God in prayer. “Ask,” instructs Jesus. “Get together and ask together.”

Last Sunday my visitation was to the Church of the Redeemer in Lorain. As some of you know, the rector, Steve Sedgwick, is leaving there to serve as Interim at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Lyndhurst. Tomorrow is his last Sunday. The congregation, not unlike the city it serves, has suffered financially and is unable to afford full-time clergy presence. I confirmed five high-school students who are deeply committed to their church and showed remarkable spiritual maturity for their ages.

In my sermon I told the congregation that the two things I hear week after week from communicants and vestries in the parishes I visit is that they need more people and more money. This sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Yet never, not once, have I heard people praying explicitly for those things during the intercessions. After the prayers for the candidates last Sunday, during the silence for which the rubric asks before the concluding collect, I invited the congregation to pray aloud to God for those things they know they need moving forward. There were prayers of thanksgiving for family and friends and for the parish and the rector. Prayers of gratitude. Important prayers to pray, but not the ones that put us or God much on the spot. And then Evan, one of the teenaged confirmands, prayed that they would be bold in inviting other people to come to their church. That did it. The cat was out of the bag, the lid was off the worm can, and the conversation with God shifted. Then a man, perhaps the oldest in the congregation, someone I learned later seldom says much at all, prayed in a steady voice for new members and new ministries and new direction for this parish in which he had spent his whole life. It was a powerful moment. Not quite crash helmet time, but surely on the way toward it.

Now, I recognize that a few prayers on a bishop’s visitation are alone unlikely to change the life of a parish, but I am certain that a sustained life of praying together will. Jesus tells us so. “Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” “Ask.”

This morning I want us to do just that. You and I are God’s elect and the Diocese of Ohio’s elected leaders, and Jesus has repeatedly instructed us to pray. This seems a good place to start. So this morning, and throughout the convention, I want us, the elect and the elected, to pray together and to ask God for the things that we think we need to have, the things we suspect we need to do, and the church we believe we need to be. I want us to ask God what God wants us to have, what God wants us to do, and what God wants us to be, and then ask God to help us strive for those things. I want us to pray for one another, for those who share in ministry with us, and for those who do not yet know God in Jesus Christ. And I want us to pray in a way that will have us scrambling for crash helmets and life preservers!

In order to do this, I ask you now to pair up with a person next to you. That means in twos, the way the apostles were sent out. If you end up solo, find another solo close by. If there is no other option, you may make a threesome, but a pair is best. If you do not know each other, introduce yourselves. Now, each of you take thirty seconds or so and pray aloud for this convention, first one of you, and then the other. I know that for some of you this may feel awkward, but I'm only talking about a total of one minute. I'll tell you when thirty seconds is up and you ought to switch. When your partner is praying, don't just listen, pray along with your heart. Ask God to hold us together in God's love and to bring us to wise decisions. Ask God to lead us to the things that God wants for us. Ask God to direct the ways we speak with and listen to each other. Ask God to surface among us the ways we most need to give ourselves to God and to the world, as God's church. Pray for each other, pray for this day. Ask God whatever comes into your heart for this convention. Go ahead and pray.

(Prayer time)

We have worthy challenges ahead of us as a Church and as a Diocese, and a few of those I want to mention at this time. Having met in General Convention this summer, The Episcopal Church has undertaken an administrative restructuring and reallocation of resources resulting from a considerable budget reduction for the upcoming triennium. The practical effect on the Diocese of Ohio will be a slight reduction in what we are asked to give to The Episcopal Church in 2011 and 2012, and a number of changes in the resources offered us from the Church Center staff.

The General Convention also articulated its continuing and unfailing commitment to be a full participant in the Anglican Communion, recognizing that that means participating as the comprehensive and complex body that God has called us to be, leaving out no one whom God has invited in. Resolution D025, entitled *Commitment and Witness to [the] Anglican Communion*, affirms our participation in the Communion and our fidelity to this Church's legislative and ecclesial history of lay and ordained leadership being open to the all the baptized.

Resolution C056, entitled *Liturgies for Blessings*, calls on the Church to gather theological and liturgical resources to help explore how we might serve and support the growing numbers of partnered same-sex couples in our congregations and communities. To meet that call I will appoint a task force to gather such resources from our congregations, clergy, and communicants, in order that the Diocese of Ohio might play a constructive and leadership role in the larger Church's carrying out of this endeavor. So now, I ask you and your prayer partner each in turn to pray aloud for The Episcopal Church and its leadership, for our commitment and witness to the Anglican Communion, and for fidelity to our vocation to serve and be served by all of God's beloved. Ask God to lead us into new ways that offer the world models of living together with difference. Ask God to bring our church growth in mission and lead us into all truth.

(Prayer time)

As was announced this week, the Diocesan Council and the Vestry of Trinity Cathedral have come to the difficult decision that the bookstore here at Trinity Commons is no longer able to be afforded. The economy, the construction and consequent traffic changes to Euclid Avenue, and the cost benefits and convenience of Internet book buying have conspired to make independent

bookselling unsustainable. This is a loss to the ministry of the Diocese and Trinity Commons, and especially to those who have found it to be a practical and spiritual resource of great value. There have been only a couple of years in which the bookstore has been able to break even, and that is with the unaccounted annual support of rent-free space and bookkeeping services totaling some \$40,000. In addition, the cash deficits covered with diocesan funds have run from \$10,000 to \$40,000 annually. And yet, it is very difficult for many of us to let it go. For everything that it has provided us since its opening, we are all indebted to those whose tireless efforts have sustained it for this decade, especially Katherine Pinard, and May Targett, Jim Bolce, Marilyn Taylor, Michael Lawrence, and Nan Hunter, among numerous others.

I want to say a particular word about Katherine. As founder, manager, volunteer, and patron saint of Sacred Path Books and Art, she has modeled for all of us the passionate commitment and personal sacrifice that lie at the center of our vocation to be Christian. For countless visitors to the bookstore, she has been the hands and heart of Christ, providing not only books, but the care and encouragement they sought. For her ministry on behalf of this Diocese, it is my privilege to award her the Bishop's Medal.

In the next year we will come to the point of having to make clear decisions about Cedar Hills and its ongoing role in camp and conference center ministry. This year's diocesan budget reflects a \$30,000 reduction in the line item support for Cedar Hills, and Pete Nielsen has again done an exceptional job in adjusting the program and hospitality offerings to accommodate this funding change. The reality is that Cedar Hills provides valuable space and ministry, but to an ever decreasing number of our own congregations and communicants. It is not a property that can simply be closed up and left alone for months at a time. At the same time, it may not be something the Diocese can continue to subsidize for the decreasing use of our own parishes and the increasing use of other institutions. Last summer I appointed a Task Force, chaired by Chet Bolling of St. Paul's Church, Norwalk, to research and imagine the needs and possibilities for Camp and Conference Center ministry in this Diocese, looking at the range of such ministries across the Church and the types of facilities used to accomplish them. When their work is completed next spring, the Diocesan Council will be in a better position to assess the future of both Camp and Conference Center ministry in the Diocese of Ohio, and Cedar Hills. Now, I ask you to pray aloud with one another, sharing a minute as before, and ask God to support Pete and the ongoing ministry of Cedar Hills, and to support Chet and the Camp and Conference Ministry Task Force in their work. Pray for those who serve and are served by the programs and hospitality of Cedar Hills. Ask God what God is dreaming of for us and for that place.

(Prayer time)

Last month, Brad Purdom, who with Vincent Black leads the Office of Congregations and Christian Formation, presented the Diocesan Council with some informative data on Average Sunday Attendance in this Diocese and parishes' perception of their own vitality. The Average Sunday Attendance data is not perfect as it depends on annual parochial reports that have lapses in reporting, but the numbers reflect what you might imagine. In the last decade, about a quarter of our congregations have grown in average Sunday attendance and three quarters have decreased. Since 1999, the total diocesan average Sunday attendance has dropped by about one third. While this is in keeping with many mainline churches over the same period of time, it

reflects the hesitance and even reluctance to invite, share, and evangelize that seems to be in our DNA as Episcopalians.

The other data Brad has provided reflects how congregational leaders assess the vitality of their parish, and it is markedly positive. The majority report an increase in energy and ministry involvement, with a shared sense of hope for the future. Of that majority, a large number have engaged in the Natural Church Development process, about which you heard an extensive description at both last year's Convention and Winter Gathering. There is emerging evidence that the shrinking of some of our congregations has resulted in their communicants taking a focused look at who they are and making intentional efforts to explore their strengths and weaknesses as communities of faith. That exploration has led them to live in ways that open them to others and to the possibilities of vitality that God wants for their congregation.

I mention these two reports because I think they give us a realistic glimpse of who we are as a Diocese and a Church. We continue to be getting smaller, in part because some leave, and in much larger part because we are not actively sharing with others what we treasure in our relationship with God and Jesus. At the same time, there is a spirit of adventure and vitality in many of our congregations, a spirit that needs to be nurtured and developed, a spirit that wants to grow. Jesus tells us that prayer is an essential characteristic of that spirit. And so I ask you once again to spend a moment praying aloud with your partner, this time asking along with Evan for boldness in inviting others into our relationship with Jesus and our life as Christians. Ask God what God wants us to offer to those we know and those we don't know yet. Ask God for the right words of invitation and the opportunities to use them. Ask God to open our eyes, ears, and hearts to what others are seeking and to give us confidence that we can be their companions in that journey.

(Prayer time)

In the last few weeks, Brad has also given to each actively serving clergyperson and each congregation without a priest a copy of the book, Unbinding the Gospel. It is the work of Martha Grace Reese, formerly a Disciples of Christ pastor and then director of a Lilly Endowment project in congregational revitalization through spiritual leadership. Her book is the result of a four-year study of evangelism in mainline denominations. In it, she gives great insight into the challenges and obstacles to growth that we face, and it offers remarkable encouragement and direction to those Christians in mainline congregations who want to give themselves to sharing with others their relationship with Jesus and their faith in God. It is both a detailed account of what she has learned through her research of hundreds of mainline congregations and a step-by-step how-to book for engaging ourselves in spreading the gospel in ways authentic to each of us, beginning by giving ourselves to a discipline of prayer. I and the program staff are in our sixth week of her process, and we are finding it a great benefit to our personal prayer disciplines and to our work together. Brad has set up conference calls with the author and her colleagues for those who are doing the same in their congregations, to receive coaching and advice from the source. We have scheduled Martha Grace Reese to be our keynote presenter at the Winter Convocation on February 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>.

Some of you may have already begun to explore this rich resource, and I invite the rest of you to pursue with your vestries and fellow parishioners whether Unbinding the Gospel is a program for you. For those parishes whose NCD work has discovered a deficit in Passionate Spirituality or Need-oriented Evangelism, it may be a particularly timely resource. It can begin with just a small group of participants. Brad's office will give you the books and the assistance you need to get going, and any experience of the program will add to our Convocation in February. I commend it to you whole-heartedly.

To be a church that lives boldly, we must be a church that prays boldly. If we are going to live life with God leading, if we are going to be a church that follows Jesus, we need to talk with and listen to God in Christ together. That is the church into which Jesus has called each of us from its beginning, a community that prays for and with one another, that seeks Jesus' direction and encouragement, that allows the Holy Spirit to set our course through whatever winds and waters we face.

The lofty calling of Samuel Seabury's ministry was, as the collect for his feast day recounts, the renewal of the Anglican inheritance in North America. It was the establishing anew of this Church in the emerging culture and society of a new nation. John Burt understood that same call to renewal three decades ago, and urged this Diocese to be a church that communicates the "mighty Gospel" of Jesus. As you and I approach now the second decade of this millennium, I pray that we will answer the same call to renewal as Christians and the recipients of our Anglican inheritance in this day. I pray that beginning by giving ourselves to God in a renewed and renewing life of prayer, in the bold kind of prayer that Jesus required of the first disciples and requires of us, we might come to tell all people of God's love for them and share with them the new life we find in Christ.

In joyful and confident anticipation that, with God's help, we will grow into that generous evangelism that is symptomatic of a vital and vibrant church, I have a present for each of you. It is not another wristband whose message is known only to the wearer. It's a little more exposed, and exposing. Its use will mark our willingness to share with others why we are Christian and what God means to us. It will signal that we are ready to offer God's invitation to anyone and everyone to learn how they are loved and valued beyond their imagining. It will witness to a courageous faith and a humble confidence in God, that together make us tireless doers of justice and advocates for God's beloved everywhere. It may even signal that we need to start looking for a few crash helmets.

The gift is this bumper sticker, which reads: *I am Episcopalian. Ask me about God.*

Put it wherever those whom God is yearning to be close to will see it, and let them know you have an answer. That answer is to show them your life in Christ.

Amen.