

195th Convention of the Diocese of Ohio
November 11 & 12, 2011
Convention Address

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

I want to preface the body of my address this morning with a word of remembrance and thanks for an extraordinary colleague and companion, the late Chancellor of the Diocese of Ohio, Richard T. Watson. From the moment I arrived here, Dick was for me a source of wisdom, calm, challenge, comfort, guidance, and profound companionship. There was nothing I could not bring to him, vocational or personal, and that seemed to have been a two-way street. He was a great gift of the church to me, and I miss him tremendously, as I know some of you do.

Dick served three Bishops of Ohio, and while it is impossible for you to know the volume of challenges and quandaries he wrestled with after those bishops and the rest of the diocese had gone to sleep, I can assure you it was huge. He was awarded the Bishop's Medal by Bishop Grew, which he wore with a distinct humility as a reflection not of his accomplishment, but of his profound love for the church. That deep love for the church, whose frailties and flaws he knew as well as any, remains a singular inspiration to me.

At the time of Dick's death, William A. Powel III, general counsel for Summa Health Care in Akron, life-long Episcopalian, and long-time lay leader at St. Paul's Church in Cleveland Heights, stepped in to help me with some specific situations that Dick and I had been intensely working on. His generosity in doing so and his diligence in quickly getting up to speed on complicated matters have been a blessing to me and to the Diocese. In the course of this baptism by fire, Bill's counsel has proved invaluable. I am grateful to report to you today that he has agreed to continue to serve in this capacity, and after having consulted with the Standing Committee as canonically required, I have appointed him Chancellor of the Diocese of Ohio. It is a privilege to introduce him to you and welcome him to this convention in his new capacity.

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Last year, in concluding my address at the 194th Diocesan Convention, I invited you to explore with me what might be the vocation of the Diocese of Ohio to camp and retreat ministry, and I asked you to imagine what such a ministry might look like if it were to be formative to our congregations and their communicants not just now, but twenty-five and fifty years from now. In that address, I reported a number of learnings that had resulted from my sabbatical study of such facilities and programs across the church, and I offered a variety of images and possibilities that had emerged in my own exploration and in conversations with a growing range of people experienced with these ministries. Perhaps you who were delegates to that convention may remember some of those images and the subsequent reflections you shared in table conversations about your own church camp and retreat experiences. Some of you have continued those conversations with me over

the last twelve months. And some of you may have further engaged those explorations yourselves, in your prayer or in conversations with others. For all of this I am very grateful.

Today, I want to report to you, and through you report to your congregations, what I have learned since we last gathered in convention regarding camp and retreat ministry and its potential in this diocese, and offer for your deliberation a concrete vision for the future. In doing so, let me begin with the conclusion, so that you will know where I am going: I believe this is the time for the Diocese of Ohio to do a bold, new thing for our youth, for our adults, for our future, for those who will arrive long after we have departed, for the strengthening of our community as a diocese, and for a rekindled spirit of hope. I believe that now is the time for us to build together a new camp and retreat facility, a common and holy place to foster our spiritual and mission vocations as Christians and Episcopalians, a facility and program through which we can be exposed and challenged to lives of spiritual growth, social justice, and environmental fidelity.

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Children and youth.

Young people are quick to correct us when we describe them as the “future” of the church. “We are the church’s *present!*” they proclaim. And they are right. They actively bring to the church energy, enthusiasm, challenge, hope, and ever-evolving models of how to be community. They are networked – socially and spiritually. They are natural evangelists, “friending” one another and just about anybody else. And not only are they the church’s present, they are *facing forward*, toward the future, looking ahead to what awaits them as the body of Christ.

Perhaps one of the reasons they don’t always seem to stick around long is that we don’t tend to stand with them and look ahead. We too often tend to look back at what we used to have or be, and despair about what vibrancy and security we’ve left behind, rather than enthuse about what novelty awaits us. A young priest in our diocese recently described what it was like for him to be ordained in his mid-twenties, excitedly facing the potential of four decades service in parochial ministry, and hear over and over, from this parish or that and from the mainline church in general, how they feared they would not be in existence ten or twenty years hence. Imagine what it would have been like for him if someone had said, “We have no clue what our church will be like 25 years from now, but we are sure excited about getting started down that road with you today!”

A considerable number of Episcopal congregations struggle to mount an active Christian formation program or youth ministry beyond the grade school years. A surprising number have minimal or no Sunday School at all. The reasons are many and understandable: the absence of young families; too much Sunday morning competition from school commitments and municipal sports programs; a lack of adults who feel equipped to lead; the inability to fund a paid youth minister. These are not realities that are likely to change overnight. They may reflect some of the current parochial challenges and limitations to

servicing our children and youth, but they need not define the limits of how we support young people in the church. It may be that in this era we need to rely more on things we can do as a larger body, as Mission Areas and as a Diocese.

Last June, twenty young people from ten parishes in our diocese attended the Episcopal Youth Event in Minneapolis. They constituted one of the largest delegations in attendance, and in their deep blue *Love God, Love Your Neighbor, Change the World* T-shirts, they witnessed to the benefit of doing youth ministry as a diocesan function. What was not available for them to experience in their parish settings they received by gathering with peers from across the diocese, and across the church. The result was increased connection and companionship, a deepened sense of place in the church, and especially in The Episcopal Church, new inspiration for how to serve, and renewed hope both for the future of the church and their role in it. You will hear this directly from them later today, and can find them as the cover story in the most recent issue of *ChurchLife!*

Youth and young adults in the Diocese of Ohio tell me regularly that they are most inspired and transformed by mission experiences, that the most meaningful experiences they share are service-based experiences. Building houses for others. Serving the hungry. Visiting the elderly and infirm. Making a difference. They also explain, as do their parents, that their congregations are not well equipped to provide such opportunities for them, and that they have too few peers in their own parishes to arrange and carry out such endeavors independently. They need the companionship of others and a shared organizational structure to provide these opportunities. And, they value highly the opportunity to be the church with other young people from beyond their own congregation and community.

All of this challenges us to ask what can we offer to meet these high and enthusiastic aspirations. Is there a new model in which our young people can engage regularly and consistently on an extra-parochial level in the adventure of spiritual growth and service to others? Is there a context in which they, beginning at an early age, can develop the disciplines of prayer, service, stewardship, and leadership that will form their faith, meet their yearning for God, and reward their search for meaning in substantive ways? It begs us to wonder whether a diocesan facility that integrates learning, worship, service, and recreation, that feeds body, mind, and spirit, might help us address our responsibility to them.

I want to remind you of some figures I shared at last year's convention that may give some definition to our priorities. Our roughly \$30 million diocesan endowment includes some \$7 million for support of the elderly, sick, and needy, \$4.8 million for loans and grants to congregations, \$4 million for clergy education and support, \$1.5 million for hospital chaplaincy, \$1.4 million for mission, and less than \$71,000 for youth. According to our 4% spending rule, that generates less than \$3000 a year. The numbers tell us that we expect the formation of our young people to be carried out almost exclusively at the parish level in the context of Sunday worship. Our young people and their families are telling us, both directly and too often by their absence, that this is an unrealistic expectation.

I believe this is the time for us to do a bold, new thing for the children and youth of our church.

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Future leadership.

In spite of our young people's claim to be the church's present, they are also indeed her future, or potentially her lack thereof. This fall I held a number of focus groups with clergy to hear their insights and reflections about camp and retreat ministry. At every one, the clergy of our diocese reported from their own experience what is borne out in study after study, that church camp and retreat experiences for children and young people produce more lay and ordained leaders in adult life than any other experience the church offers. They gave example after example of young people they knew as campers who grew up to active lay leadership or ordination as adults. And of course it makes perfect sense. If the church is where we find meaning and purpose in our early years, it will be where we live out meaningful and purposeful leadership in our later years.

The stories are endless. Young adults who have had formative experiences at church camp return there to serve as counselors, directors, and supporters, as living resources for the future. They gather there for reunions to be spiritually replenished. They get married in the chapel. And they take what they have received there over the years of their youthful participation and apply it as leaders in their parishes.

The first half of this week I spent at a conference entitled the "Building the Continuum" Episcopal Church Summit. Participating were some 80 people from across the church who represent diocesan camps and retreat centers, Episcopal schools, Christian formation programs and resources, seminaries, leadership development programs like the Episcopal Service Corps, a variety of agencies of The Episcopal Church, and the Episcopal Church Center staff. The focusing question of the summit was, "How might Christian lifelong faith formation over the next ten years affect the renewal and transformation of The Episcopal Church in a 21st century world?" Most interestingly, it was designed and sponsored by the Episcopal Camp and Conference Center board because they know that camps and retreat ministries are essential to that renewal and transformation.

I believe this is the time for us to do a bold, new thing for the future leadership of our church.

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Adult life-long spiritual formation.

Across the Diocese of Ohio and the larger church, adults tell me that they long for shared experiences of spiritual inquiry and learning. It is not that they don't have the time to invest in these, rather that they seldom find the opportunity. And many don't believe that they have the numbers and resources in their own congregation to offer one. They, too,

need the companionship of others and a shared organizational structure to provide these opportunities. They seek a place that is conducive to the ongoing formational work they long to do. A quiet place for contemplative practice. A simple place that also accommodates basic adults needs for privacy, accessibility, and freedom from other distractions. A natural place that connects them with the goodness of God's creation. A healthy place that offers good nutrition, good exercise, and good sleep. A place that points them toward the future, their future with God in Christ.

Lay and ordained leaders speak to me about setting time aside as vestries, bible-study classes, book groups, and spiritual companions, for daylong and overnight retreats. They articulate a desire to get away, not *from* the important issues of their lives but *with* the important issues of their lives and the people the church has given them with whom to grow and serve. They even speak of the church providing a place where they could bring non-church bodies – educational, business, and not-for-profit boards, for example – to do the kind of in-depth planning that requires a place apart for gaining distance, perspective, and clear thinking.

The vitality of our congregations and the model of lifelong learning we offer to future generations are dependent upon our developing venues, programs, and personal disciplines of spiritual growth. A viable retreat facility and program has consistently proven essential to building that vitality across the church. It would doubtless do the same here.

I believe this is the time for us to do a bold, new thing to support lifelong Christian formation and adult leadership in the church.

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The more I listen to hopes like these, the more clearly I see the opportunity and need for a facility that provides opportunities for learning, spiritual exploration and growth, and making a difference in the world. Just as mission trips to other geographical and cultural contexts offer transformational experiences, it seems equally possible that a diocesan place of mission, where we gather to make a difference in the lives of others, can offer equally transformative experiences. In response to the over-scheduled busy-ness of our lives, we can offer a place of respite and reflection where we can practice the disciplines of Christian living and get better at them, where we can regain perspective, where we can deepen our relationship with God and with one another, where we can explore more intentionally our faith journey, where we can roll up our sleeves, let down our hair, work together and play together and worship together and serve together. Those of you who heard or read last year's address will understand how this resonates with the image of a camp and retreat facility centered around a working sustainable farm raising produce for the feeding ministries of our parishes.

Last summer, with the help of Katie Ong-Landini, former Senior Warden at Christ Church, Shaker Heights, I visited a number of camps, retreat centers, and other facilities, both church-related and secular, that are connected in some direct way with a sustainable

farming operation. None of these is doing exactly what in last year's address I had suggested we might consider, but each had one or more elements of what was imagined. The great benefit of these visits was that they gave me the opportunity to see how real buildings and programs might fit together to create a place for camp and retreat ministry in our diocese. They also helped define, through the experienced perspective of others, what is essential and important to the creation of such a place.

The result was a vision of a camp and retreat facility that we could lay over a range of properties in our diocese to see what such an operation might look like in northern Ohio.

We came to see that on a modest property a diocese like ours could have a camp for children and teens that can accommodate one hundred campers and the required staff, living in groups of cabins, platform tents, and yurts, participating in all aspects of farm life, food production and preparation, spiritual formation, environmental education, and, of course, recreation. It would include a central dining facility with both indoor and outdoor feeding capacity for 250 people, serviced by a licensed community kitchen in which food preparation and preservation could be taught, perhaps someday even incorporating a culinary job training program. It would need appropriate farm buildings for livestock, poultry, education, workshops, and, of course, bicycle repair.

As a retreat venue, it would need to provide simple and comfortable overnight accommodations for adults, in single and double rooms, connected or adjacent to multi-purpose meeting space. It might include a small number of individual hermitages for those on contemplative retreat, desiring to get away for study, prayer, and rest. And it would have a variety of worship venues for all seasons, both indoor and out, for varying sized groups and events.

As a place equipping us for the future, it would need to be built using such alternative and "green" resources as straw-bale and cob construction, like this barn seen under construction and this new multi-purpose building at a camp and retreat center in the Diocese of California. It would need to exhibit the full range of alternative energy sources: geo-thermal heating, photovoltaic solar systems, solar hot water systems, and wind turbines. It would need to employ rainwater harvesting systems and grey-water reclamation. It would need to compost all allowable waste, including using composting bathroom facilities. It could be a showcase of green technology for northern Ohio and a destination for school fieldtrips, and set a standard for energy sustainability in our church buildings and homes. It would practice and teach sustainable farming, and perhaps on a Community Supported Agriculture or "CSA" model, partner with parish food and feeding ministries to supply their fresh and preserved produce. And it could be a source of training and resources for parish gardens and urban agriculture, helping us live into the faith mandates of food for all and a stewardship of the earth.

As a ministry to the world beyond us, it would need to be connected to partners of all sorts, particularly educational, technological, industrial, and philanthropic, so as both to serve the world and witness to it the shared values that shape our lives.

If we are to answer fully a calling to camp and retreat ministry, we will need to build a facility and program that prepares our young people today for the leadership responsibilities they will shoulder 25 years from now, in both the church and the world. We will need to build a facility and program that challenges adults to understand how the “new life” Jesus offers is often a life of radical change lived today for the benefit of tomorrow. We will need to create a “thin” place, a place of spiritual sensitivity and intimacy with God, where together we can develop those spiritual disciplines that connect us to God and to the world God loves and make us better fit to serve both. We will need develop a diocesan center for healthy living, growing and serving healthy, local foods, engaging in outdoor work and recreation, learning modest exercise practices, and modeling a stewardship of our own bodies for a society in which 2 out of 3 adults are overweight or obese, as is one out of every 5 children and teens.

I have no doubt that it is eminently possible and well within our capability to do this. Vast quantities of our diocese are in fact farmland. We have the geography for it. I have visited properties, centrally located in the diocese and accessible to air transportation and likely partner institutions such as colleges and green technology industries, that are naturally conducive to just this sort of ministry and program. For instance, what you are seeing here are photos of a 130-acre farm in Huron County that combines cultivated fields, a five-acre lake, woodland, is bordered on three sides by the Vermillion River, and is adjacent to a 132-acre nature preserve given to the State of Ohio by Gussie Olsen, the widow of a retired priest of our Diocese, Bill Olsen.

Some of it we can build together, physically, just as our young people have taught us with the house building mission trips they have done. Some of it we can develop over time, as our mission understanding develops and our future needs emerge. And some of it we would want to have built for us in order to get a solid start.

I believe this is time for us to build something new together, as a way of meeting new needs, as a vehicle for building stronger interdependence as a diocese, and as a way of proclaiming our conviction that God has a future for the church and for us as the body of Jesus Christ.

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From St. Paul’s second letter to Timothy comes the theme for this 195th Convention of the Diocese of Ohio, “Equipped for every good work.” Paul is writing to his disciple and companion, offering encouragement and direction to Timothy and the congregations in his care as they face an unknown and, doubtless, unimaginable future. The passage refers to the importance of understanding and integrating the stories of scripture, “inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, and for training in righteousness, that [we] might be complete, equipped for every good work.” When we turn to scripture, we find countless stories of people not unlike ourselves, facing uncertainties not unlike those we face. What they most have in common is a confidence in God that encourages them to do a bold thing, to live not for their own day, but for a future they may not see themselves, to take bold chances on behalf of those who will come after them, to plant a tree in whose

shade they may never themselves sit. It is that confidence that propels them to commit to a church not yet imagined. Indeed, their confidence in God is what equips them for every good work.

It is prudent and reasonable to wonder whether we can afford to do a bold, new thing like this in our current economic environment and when a number of our parishes are struggling to maintain stability as they are. Yet I wonder whether we can afford not to, whether we can afford not to try those new things that we can do together as a diocese to strengthen the fabric of the church and learn how to be the body of Christ in new ways. I wonder whether we can afford not to invest in our children and youth, and in the leadership they will bring to the church decades from now as a direct result of that investment. And I wonder whether we can afford not to build a dedicated place and program for all of us, God's children of all ages, to explore and practice the disciplines of the spiritual life, a place for restoration and renewal, and a place to play together and recreate in delightful response to the God who delights in us.

So what now? Well, of course I want you to jump to your feet in a spontaneous eruption of enthusiastic applause, as if that alone will assure that such an ideal of retreat ministry and church camp will become a reality. But you know as well as I that what brings the bold challenges of God to life is thoughtful discernment, careful planning, sacrificial giving, and hard work. As our spiritual forbearers teach us, the vitality of the church and the holiness of our lives have a cost. They do not come simply because we show up. Rather, they are the result of our paying a great price with our time, talent, and treasure.

Bold actions of the church do not happen because a few people think they are worthy of undertaking. They happen when the whole body gets behind them and commits to them, when the whole body begins to share a common vision and ownership, when the whole body lives into them and is transformed by them. I believe that this is one of those opportunities for bold action that can vitalize the church and provide collectively for many congregations what they struggle to provide on their own.

This is the 195th Convention of the Diocese of Ohio. In six years we will gather at the 201st Convention to begin celebrating our bi-centennial, two centuries of ministry as The Episcopal Church in Ohio. In 1818, the Diocese of Ohio was formed as the first diocese beyond the original 13 colonies. It was a pioneering diocese, looking forward with bold anticipation to an unknown and unknowable future. When we gather to mark that beginning and celebrate all that God has done with us since then, I want to have embraced with you, at every level of our church, a renewed and adventurous spirit, worthy of Philander Chase and his pioneering colleagues, a spirit and commitment that equips us for a new century of our life as the body of Christ in this place. As with all of the celebrations of the church, the 200th anniversary of the Diocese must be a celebration of what is yet to come, unencumbered by longing for the past and worry about the present, and marked by a preparedness to meet a future eagerly anticipated. I believe that an essential part of our readiness for the next century of life as the Diocese of Ohio must be a renewed vocation to camp and retreat ministry. And to meet that new century with a new piece of holy ground dedicated to the spiritual formation and leadership development

of all our communicants will be a sign that we are equipped and equipping for every good work and have a vibrant hope for the future.

Equestrians explain that in order for a rider to get her horse to jump successfully, she must first throw her heart over the fence. So it is for people of God to move successfully as the body of Christ into the future. We must be willing first to throw our hearts over the fence.

I invite you to join me in working to equip and invigorate the church for the next century of God's mission, with your thoughtful conversation and intentional prayer, in your parishes, your particular ministries, your peer groups, and as the elected and ordained leadership in the Diocese of Ohio. And as we venture into a specific discernment about having the heart to develop a camp and retreat ministry that dramatically equips us in new ways for every good work, I encourage us to be bold in our faith, bold in our hope, and bold in our action.

It is a privilege to embrace with you the future of the church in this place, with renewed confidence in God and a spirit of adventure worthy of our calling in Christ.

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