

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

I welcome you to this 196<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Diocese of Ohio and thank each of you for the leadership you provide to your parish, the Diocese, and The Episcopal Church. The leadership gift you offer is a generous one, and I don't take that generosity for granted. I know what it costs you in time and energy, as well as what it can bring you in terms of spiritual challenge and growth. I know that it can be stressful and hard, as well as energizing and renewing. And I know that God inspires us to leadership and offers us the opportunity to serve as parish and diocesan leaders, not in order that we might save the church, as good and lofty a goal as that might be, but that we might be saved ourselves, drawn deeper into relationship with Jesus, deeper into God's relentless love, deeper into the complex dialogue of faith with one another that changes us and makes us each more godly. As much as we might think of leadership as something *we* offer to the *church*, lay and ordained leadership in the church is something that *God* offers to *us*. It is *given* to us as a vehicle for the one thing God most wants, to be more and more intimately connected with each of us.

We tend too often to think of leadership principally as an exercise in decision-making. Indeed, we often think of the Diocesan Convention in terms of motions and votes, making decisions for the larger church according to the canons that govern us and the rules of order by which we engage as a legislative body. But in fact, only a part of leadership is decision-making. As a diocese, for instance, we meet once a year in convention, and depending on the year, may make only a few legislative decisions. The largest part of leadership, whether at the parish level, the diocesan level, or in any other sphere of our society, I believe, is modeling, modeling to others how we are called to live, as individuals and as a body, modeling it in a way that others can identify and thereby choose to participate.

In our churches, when the vestry members and clergy of a parish model Christian values in the way they work together *and, just as importantly*, in their individual disciplines of prayer and outreach and stewardship giving and study and worship and inviting others to come with them to church, they provide leadership that gives to the communicants they serve something far more beneficial and transformative than good decisions alone. And this is true of all parish leaders, not just vestry and clergy, but acolytes, teachers, choir members, lay readers, Eucharistic visitors, stewardship callers, Episcopal Church Women, outreach participants, altar guild members, confirmation sponsors, ushers and greeters, chalice bearers, and convention delegates.

One common attribute of congregations that are vital and growing in God's mission is that they work to develop leaders in *every* area of ministry who model the joy of their relationship to God, the hope they have for a world reconciled by love, the confidence they place in Jesus' companionship, and the commitment to reach out as Christ's body to all those who need the joy, hope, and confidence we have to share. In short, they lead by modeling and manifesting their faith to others. In the "new

commandment” to love one another, Jesus spoke directly of leadership by model: “*By this* everyone will know you are my disciples.” (John 13:35) As we approach the end of the Season after Pentecost, I am aware of how important the Pentecost gift of God’s own and holy spirit is to our leadership as Christians. We continually need to access it as an integral part of our spiritual discipline, that we might quite literally be *spirited* in our lives and faith. We need to kindle anew the holy fire within us, to explore and reflect regularly with one another just what God *is* doing with us and with the church, and thereby to learn the words by which we can share that with others.

David Lose, the Lutheran theologian and preaching professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, wrote a poem that well describes how in each of us the Pentecost fire meets the challenges of life. Some of you will remember this YouTube video of it, created by his colleague Ben Cieslik:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmweXyEeoBw>

For Christians, every day is a day of Pentecost, filled with the potential that all we do may be fueled by the Holy Spirit. My prayer is that this 196<sup>th</sup> Diocesan Convention will be just that, for each one of us a time of emerging leadership, increasing intimacy with God, and exploring with one another the fire God is lighting in us, individually and collectively. Our ability to do this is essential to fulfilling the great commission that we “go and make disciples of all nations.” There is no better place to begin that exploration than with one another, in our congregations and in our diocesan gatherings, like right here.

I hope that in these two days we will feel encouraged to think in a fresh way about familiar challenges, and to draw upon the companionship God has given us as sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus to provide mutual encouragement in entertaining adventurous and even sacrificial possibilities. To get us started, I want to use this address to help us name and accept some aspects of the context in which we are called to lead, and then prompt some exploration and discussion of how we might do so.

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In each of the last three years I have invited all those who serve on diocesan committees and commissions to gather together in the spring for a Leadership Roundtable, an opportunity to look at the realities and opportunities facing our denomination and our diocese, and explore how the particular ministry groups in which they serve might work together in new ways to build the church of the future. Last April when we met, I reported to them some of the current statistics provided by parochial reports from across the church, in order to get a sense of who we are and where we have been going. This afternoon I would like to share with you some of that data and pose some questions that might engage our table conversations and

inform our leadership. For those of you who participated in that Roundtable, some of this may be familiar, but I trust still useful.

We serve in a time of dramatic ecclesial change. While interest in spirituality and the spiritual life is increasing, involvement in religious communities is decreasing, especially mainline denominations with heavy “institutional” overhead. Active baptized membership in domestic dioceses of The Episcopal Church dropped below the 2 million mark in 2010, down 23% since 2000. In 2011 it dropped another 2%. The Province of the Midwest, Province V, comprises fifteen dioceses in the states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Missouri, with the Diocese of Ohio being the second largest. From 2000 to 2010, the Diocese of Ohio declined in both number of baptized members and average Sunday attendance by roughly 28%, above the Province V average of 25.4% and just below our neighboring dioceses of Central New York, Western New York, Northwestern Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh, Michigan, and Northern Indiana.

This is who we are as Episcopalians: 68% of the congregations of The Episcopal Church have an average Sunday worship attendance of 100 or less. The median average Sunday attendance in our denomination is 65 (i.e. 3400 congregations have fewer than 65 in church on Sunday and 3400 have more than 65 in church). Only 5% of Episcopal congregations have an average Sunday attendance of 300 or more. Clearly, we are predominately a denomination of small congregations. Across The Episcopal Church, however, large congregations tend to grow and small congregations tend to decline. We are also an aging denomination. Yet, across The Episcopal Church young congregations tend to grow and aging congregations tend to decline. And in 2010, we in the Diocese of Ohio buried 25% more people than we baptized. Across The Episcopal Church, congregations and dioceses that are actively engaged in ministering to their communities, whose ministry and mission is turned outward, they are the ones that grow in vitality, spirituality, and, sometimes, number of members.

As leaders in the church, it is important that we read these realities truthfully. They are facts. The power of evil wants us to be discouraged and depressed by them, so that the vibrant ways we proclaim and live the Gospel will be obstructed and diminished. It wants us to be paralyzed by them, or to live in denial of them, so that instead of changing, we will keep trying to address them with technical fixes, preferably the same ones we have employed before. And it wants us to spend our time and energy being judgmental, finding fault, even assigning blame. But God needs us to embrace them, to own them as our reality, and to adapt courageously to them by experimenting and taking risks, by being willing to fail and learn from mistakes, and ultimately by becoming a new vehicle for those things of divine value that make us a vibrant people of God. Peter Faass, president of the Standing Committee and Rector of Christ Church, Shaker Heights which will host us tonight for dinner and worship, noted recently that what we define as decline may equally be understood as the deconstruction of the church so that God can rebuild us into that which the world most needs us to be now and in the years to come, that which

God imagines long before we can understand, yet to which we commit now on faith. In short, however we come to define it, this is our reality, the time and context in which God has offered us the gift and responsibility of leadership. It is *for this reality* that God has raised us up as leaders. And we are singularly equipped for it by God's grace, because the risen Christ is with us always and his gift of the Holy Spirit continues to burn brightly within us.

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We are a diocese and a denomination increasingly engaged in God's mission of service to others and reconciling all of creation to God. Where we have congregations, communities benefit. The witness of The Episcopal Church is valid and important in the communities we serve, and its absence constitutes a loss to communities we don't serve.

One significant challenge is that we are not well equipped to make that witness in places where the size of the congregation and its resources, both human and financial, are decreasing. In county seat and ex-urban towns across the Midwest, for instance, a growing number of parishes struggle to afford their buildings and their clergy, and subsequently have diminishing resources for mission. Yet we continue to insist on living in a way that requires both, i.e. with models that are not sustainable, expecting that some other factor will change and make all familiar things possible again. This often leads to extinction; witness Lima, Bryan, Bellefontaine, and Canfield, to name a few. The same is likewise true in urban areas. Of the five parishes that originally came together to form the West Side Shared Ministry in Cleveland, only one of them is left: St. Luke's. Not surprisingly, it is the one that most radically adapted to the needs of its community. Given the traditional models we cling to, it is hard to imagine that we will be able to sustain all nine congregations remaining in the greater Toledo area, even after the recent closing of St. Mark's in the Collingwood neighborhood. If we respond to these challenges only by making limited adjustments to what we have traditionally done in the past, the result will be predictable.

My hope is that today, randomly seated at tables with leadership colleagues from other parishes, we can begin to tell our own Pentecost story to one another and explore anew what being transformed by God for the future might look like for us in the Diocese of Ohio. What might that look like in your congregation, in your Mission Area, in my role as bishop, in how we invest our resources as a diocese? What would it cost in terms of the familiar ways in which we have habitually operated? What would experimenting mean in terms of our norms, both cultural and canonical?

So here are some "What ifs?" offered not as solutions, or even as proposals, but simply as questions to prompt your lively and creative thinking.

1) We are a Eucharistically centered community of faith. Increasingly over the last two generations, as manifested in the 1979 BCP, we have identified ourselves

liturgically as altar-centric. We understand Baptism and Eucharist to be essentially connected. This is a good thing, and has deepened both our baptismal authority and our spiritual lives. It has also further formed our identity. We are increasingly a people gathered around the Table. At the same time, it has cost us some things. Some argue that it has changed the place and quality of preaching in our church, and influenced our ability to hear and participate in the homiletic experience as active listeners. Likewise, during the same period in which we have worked to dismantle clericalism in the church and restore the ministry of all the baptized, we have become more clergy-dependent in our worship on the principal day when we gather as the people of God, and all of this at a time when we are struggling to afford the provision of seminary-trained clergy in many congregations. Is it possible, however, to be a Eucharistically centered people without celebrating the Eucharist every Sunday?

What might that look like, and what might it cost us in terms of giving up some of what we are familiar with and have come to value? Could we imagine in some places being fed by something other than the Eucharist on some Sundays, not simply as part of our practice, but as part of our identity? Could we imagine requiring of our Bexley Hall seminarians, after their year of Field Education, a year of supervised peripatetic preaching responsibilities in some of our congregations? Could we imagine a diocesan team of trained lay ministers, under the direction of a priest or licensed lay preacher, delivering a provided sermon and perhaps leading congregational reflection on it in the absence of a priest? Or could we imagine a separate team of trained lay ministers, in addition to the aforementioned, sent out at the direction of the Bishop, to provide the reserve sacrament to congregations on Sunday mornings in the absence of the Eucharist (i.e. providing communion as opposed to celebrating the Eucharistic liturgy)? What would that require in terms of educating our communicants, in terms of adapting our expectations and practices? Is this a time to explore anew the potential role of mission congregations or preaching stations, storefronts or house churches?

2) Today the average age at ordination in The Episcopal Church is back up to 46 years old. "Late vocation" ordinands are gifted and faithful servants and many make fine clergy, to be sure. Yet the church continues to lose two things when the average age at ordination is this high: young ordained leaders it would have the chance to develop and form over a long career, and the young people and families who identify with them. By the time I turned 46, the church had had a couple of decades to try to make something of me, and it has had another dozen years since then to continue that process. As well, when I was a young parish priest, my peers outside the church saw a place for themselves as communicants and lay leaders in The Episcopal Church and in the parishes I served. Do we need to recruit and develop candidates for ordained leadership who begin that formal process upon graduation from college? Is that a beneficial and reasonable goal? What strategies might contribute to such an intention? What resources would we need to develop? How might your parish or the ministry you serve participate in such an endeavor? At what age does that formation and discernment begin? Is the model of an educated

priesthood still viable and valued, and if so, what norms do you feel are required to provide it? How does this inform the role of residential seminary training or a diocesan training program for priesthood, like our current diaconal process? Most important, how does this influence your own expectations of clergy presence and leadership, and your image of the ministry of the baptized?

3) To my mind, issues of leadership development lead inevitably to the spiritual formation of young people. Many of our congregational leaders tell me they don't have enough of a critical mass of children or youth to mount a vibrant and inviting program. Limited programs for children and youth result in limited young families being attracted to the parish, limited leadership development, limited vocations to lay and ordained ministries in the church, and a limited future. In too many Episcopal congregations we have lost a generation or more of young people, and while we know we need to invest in children, youth, and young adults if we want a future, we have in many parishes few resources to invest.

So what might we do as Mission Areas and as a diocese to address this? Is this a time when, in the majority of our congregations, we need to focus creatively on extra-parochial programming and resources for children and youth? What forms might that take? Is the increasing participation of young people in regional and diocesan events telling us something? Ought we to articulate expectations for young people who are preparing for confirmation that engage them in church-wide programs? No doubt many of you know that I believe a renewed camp and retreat ministry would make a substantial contribution to the Christian development of future generations, and we will have time to explore that further tomorrow. But how else might we address the spiritual yearnings of the youth and young adults of northern Ohio? For those of us who are not so young, what do we wish *we* had as young people, or could have now as adults, in terms of support, teaching, and encouragement? What do we long for still that we could begin to provide to succeeding generations *now*?

4) Congregational challenges often seem dominated by real estate challenges. Some of our church buildings are in excellent shape and in the right places. Others are not. Too often the questions around what we need to do *to* and *with* our buildings come before questions addressing what we are called to do in ministry. As a diocese, we are often so distracted by the parochial challenges of existing buildings that we do not explore the needs for establishing the witness of our church where it does not already exist.

As we close some parishes and divest ourselves of their treasured yet ultimately unsustainable buildings, is this a time to explore establishing new communities in strategic settings and with alternative models for building design and use? What might it be like to think in terms of "ministry centers" rather than liturgical spaces? How might a congregation be formed differently if the space it occupied was primarily a feeding program, an adult day-care, or an after-school program, and secondarily a place for worship? How do our perspectives and strategies change when we remember that St. Paul did not instruct the earliest Christian communities

to build worship spaces, but to care for widows and children? Is this an opportunity to experiment with planting a congregation with a preferential eye to housing mission services instead of church services? What might the parish church of 2030 or 2040 look like, and how do we begin to build that community now?

5) From time to time I have asked the Diocesan Convention and the Diocesan Council to imagine what the church might need *to be* 25 or 50 years from now, so that we can begin to live into that image today. When you do that sort of imagining, when you open yourself to God's dream for us, what do you see? Do you think we have the right leadership infrastructure to undertake that process? Is there a responsibility we are not structurally equipped to handle? Are we organizationally too complex or not multifaceted enough? Are we burdened with a structure that focuses too much on ways of being the church that are not as efficient or necessary as they once were? Are there ways we might be more nimble and less encumbered, in order to travel the next phase of our journey more responsively to the changing needs of this broken world?

While these may not be precisely the questions that arise in your prayer, I offer them to encourage your own exploration and elicit the creative leadership you bring to this convention and the church.

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In the Diocese of Ohio we have a sound mission statement that defines our intention as the body of Christ to build healthy communities that grow, give, and serve.

At the same time, many of us have come in the last couple of years to identify with our billboard and bumper sticker proclamations:

Love God,

Love Your Neighbor,

Change the World.

Welcome,

...regardless.

and

God Loves You.

No Exceptions.

There is something important here, I think. In these simple statements we make a big claim, that Jesus Christ defines not just *what we believe*, but *who we are*, and not just *how we act in church*, but *how we live in the world*. I believe that these simple signs articulate our faith and our spiritual identity, and offer inspiration and direction to meeting the opportunities that lie ahead.

We are not like “big box” churches. We are to them what local hardware stores are to The Home Depot, what farmers’ markets are to Costco, and what independent bookshops are to Amazon. So replicating what they do and how they do it does not make a lot of sense to me. At the same time, the dynamics that gave rise to “big box” religious communities compel us to ask, “What is it that this changing world *needs from us*?” Not “What do I need from church?” but “What does the world need from *us*, The Episcopal Church?”

In order to ask that question, let alone to answer it, we need to get past our fear of losing even those things we have come to identify as essential to our survival. We need to give our all and trust that, if we are transformed, God is at the heart of that transformation and will recognize us still, in fact may already be imagining us in that way. We need to move from fear to hope, from a fear of losing what has defined our past to a courageous hope for that future to which God is already challenging us. That means taking up the hope-filled confidence that God wants to use us *now* to build the church of the *future*.

Recently a member of one of our smaller congregations asked me how to present stewardship to fellow communicants who are afraid that their parish can only afford to continue on for a few months more. She said to me in desperation, “Nobody is going to invest in that.” How true. We rarely invest our lives in that which we fear. Investing is an *act of hope*. And hope is kindled by the flames of Pentecost that move us to tell the personal story of our faith.

As Pentecost people, it is time to tell our stories. It is time to articulate, in the simplest and most straightforward of terms, what God is doing with us, as individual Christians and together as the body of Christ. By telling our stories with one another around these tables and in our home parishes, we will learn how to do it with all those who so desperately need what we have. So let’s begin with each other in this convention. Stick with the basics: “What is God doing with me?” and “What is God doing with us?” If we can speak to those questions, we can speak to anyone about our Lord, our faith, and our baptism. Today and tomorrow, at every turn, share your story, during breaks, at dinner tonight, and in each of our table conversations, the first of which we will have now.

For the last four conventions we have practiced these table conversations, so we should be getting good at it. For the next little bit, get together at your tables in groups of three. (If you need to, you can have one or two groups of two to make the numbers work.) Taking turns, briefly tell each other one thing that God is doing with you that excites or scares or delights or confuses you. Or share a brief story that



describes why or how Jesus matters to you. And then, share the outrageous thing you imagine God may be doing with the church, with all of us, in transforming us for the future and making us what God needs us to be in order to meet the needs of the world. As Christian leaders, what do we, the church, have a new opportunity to model?

Be succinct and specific. Share and listen for the next 20 minutes, taking turns. I will then interrupt you and we will take a few minutes in the same groupings to pray aloud for one another.

Questions:

1. What is one thing God is doing with you that excites or scares or delights or confuses you? or: What is one way in which Jesus matters to you?
2. What is one thing God might be doing with the church, and how might we become vehicles for that?

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Let us pray:

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated unto you; and then use us, we pray you, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen. (A Prayer of Self-Dedication, BCP p. 832)*

It remains a privilege to serve with each of you, and I am grateful to God for your companionship.

The Rt. Rev. Mark Hollingsworth, Jr.

Bishop of Ohio