

226th Convention of the Diocese of Delaware

Bishop's Address

Dover Sheraton Convention Center

Saturday, February 28, 2011

As we gather for the 226th Annual Convention of our diocese, I would like to share with you a few remarks from my perspective as Bishop. Thank you for your good spirit and for your support through the years and especially over this last year. The uncertainties and economic challenges we have faced as a nation, as communities, and as families make us all realize how essential such blessing can be. Thanks for your Good Spirit and your Generous Support

From Selbyville and Delmar to Claymont and Newark in Dover, Smyrna, and Wilmington we are doing well. The Sunday parish visits that I enjoy so much, recent Parish Lay Leadership conferences, the Winter Priests retreat, and Deacon's meetings all confirm this positive sense.

Your generosity is sign of all this – and because of your support, we, as a diocese, will be able to meet our commitments and present a balanced budget to this convention. This is impressive, and compared to other dioceses maybe even exceptional. Thank you!

Four years ago we put the finishing touches on a Diocesan Mission Study. Changes in the economy made it necessary to wait before moving ahead with aspects of the study. Our diocese first and foremost is a source of stability and strength for the Episcopal Church in Delaware. We do not want to jeopardize this long tradition. Today we are in the position of re-focusing our attention on the opportunities for mission outlined in the Diocesan Mission Study.

The First Priority is Ministry to Our Young People Thanks to Teri Valente and the Diocesan Youth Council for the work they are doing and for the congregations that are making ministry to young people a priority. Many of our young people are here today participating in the 30 Hour Famine. If you haven't invited Teri to visit your congregation or encouraged your young people to attend diocesan and regional youth events – I hope you will do so. This coming summer youth from around our church will attend the national Episcopal Youth Event. We anticipate that the largest delegation ever from Delaware will attend. Your support of the 2010 Bishop's Mission Fund helped make this possible. Thank you.

A Second Priority is Camp Arrowhead Few dioceses are blessed with such a beautiful and wonderful resource for ministry to children and families. When the recession began we were concerned about how it might impact our camp. In fact during 2010 attendance at camp and support for camp was up. Thank you for sending your young people to

Camp Arrowhead. Thank you for the scholarships you provide to make Camp Arrowhead affordable for every family.

This coming summer we will take important steps toward seeking full accreditation of our program by the American Camping Association. This assurance of best practices is important to all of us. At the same time a sub-committee of the Diocesan Council is beginning to develop a plan to tackle needed capital improvements to Camp Arrowhead. Stay tuned. We will need your support to make these plans a reality.

The Third Priority is developing opportunities for training and fellowship for our parish lay leaders and lay ministers. Six years ago we began a program to recruit and train deacons to serve here in Delaware. The success of that program makes me hopeful as we pursue this new opportunity. I am happy to report that the Jessie Ball DuPont Fund has given us a seed grant to begin planning this project. You will be hearing more about this in the coming year.

Our diocesan mission is not limited to the boundaries of Delaware. At our last Annual Convention we welcomed Bishop Martin Shaw and his wife, Elspeth, from the Diocese of Argyll and The Isles in Scotland. We thanked the Shaws and our many friends in the Scottish Episcopal Church for the many blessings of our Companion Relationship over the last eight years. With that relationship now concluded, we turn toward future possibilities. Next month a committee of the Diocesan Council will begin to explore a new companion relationship. That committee hopes to report on their work at our next Annual Convention.

We all know that one year ago Haiti was rocked by a devastating earthquake. Many do not realize the important role that the Episcopal Church plays in Haiti. The Episcopal Diocese of Haiti has over 50,000 members, 80 parishes, schools, clinics, and associated ministries. The impact of the earthquake on so many good things has been very severe. Our Presiding Bishop has asked every diocese in the Episcopal Church to help the Diocese of Haiti rebuild. With the support of our own Diocesan Council I am happy to tell you this year's Bishop's Mission Fund will be dedicated to this good cause. Every dollar contributed to the 2011 Bishop's Fund will go toward rebuilding the Episcopal Church in Haiti. To make this opportunity even better the Diocesan Council has voted to match the first \$7,500 raised this year. Later this spring you will be asked to contribute. I hope you will consider a generous gift.

I also want to talk with you about a challenge facing one of our congregations. Over the last years the Cathedral Church of St. John's has found it increasingly difficult to support the day-to-day cost of ministry and the upkeep of a large facility and grounds. This problem is not unique to the Cathedral, to Wilmington, or to the Episcopal Church. It is a phenomenon experienced by many mainline congregations – especially in urban areas. In other places such problems have been ignored leading to a crisis that no one wants to face. We do not want that to happen here in Delaware.

So, over the last years the diocese and the Cathedral leadership have collaborated in a series of studies with the hope of developing alternative sources of funding and other possible uses for the facilities. I admire the hard work and faithfulness of the congregation, appreciate the pastoral leadership of interim Dean, Bill Lane, and other clergy who have served the congregation. This process has required much patience and good will on all sides.

Late last year the Cathedral Vestry concluded that the best path forward would be to request financial support from the Diocesan Council to sustain and develop the Cathedral's ministry over the next years. The Council received the request and has met with the Cathedral leadership several times.

This is a significant matter. It touches upon the historic commitment of our church to the ministry in the City of Wilmington – the largest city in our state. It causes us to ask what might be the role and ministry of a cathedral in our diocese. It raises questions about how we could fund such a project.

Because this is a significant matter I promised the Diocesan Council that I would talk with you about it here at Convention. And, in a few weeks on behalf of the Council I will be writing every vestry in the diocese. In my letter I will be sharing more information and asking for your thoughts and input. The Council and I both believe that we will make a better decision when we have heard from you. Thank you for your involvement and support.

Finally, I want to speak to you more as a citizen of the State of Delaware than as a bishop. Later this year a bill to authorize civil unions between couples of the same gender will be introduced in the General Assembly. I am concerned that the public debate surrounding this bill will become a source of heated theological debate, disagreements, and even conflict between religious groups in our state. I hope this doesn't happen.

We know from our experience in the Episcopal Church that the theological conversations about gender, identity, and relationships have been going on for a long time. There continue to be significant differences and agreements about these matters among people of good faith. In the Episcopal Church there is room for everyone at the table even for those who disagree. The source of our unity is found in our love for Christ.

The public debate about civil unions has a different character. It is about fundamental human rights. It is about the rights of children and families. It is about basic things like caring for a sick partner or sharing an inheritance from one generation to the next. A civil union law makes certain that all couples have the rights that most couples take for granted. Our long experience in America teaches us that when fundamental human rights are extended and strengthened we grow as a nation and as a people. This is our goal.

Now every year I have ended my Convention Address with the same phrase "God has given us another good year, let us use it well." These words are not mine. They were

actually first used by Bishop Alfred Lee – our first bishop. It was the way he ended his Convention addresses many years ago. Since that time much has happened and so much has changed. But, what he said then is still true today. We have been given another good year – haven't we? In so many ways this is, as Brian McLaren said, an Episcopal Moment, the Episcopal Moment. Not so much because of anything we have done or are doing, but because of Jesus, the Risen Christ living among us in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are surrounded by blessings and opportunities – the fruit of God's graciousness – a field ripe for the harvest. Now as Jesus' disciples having been given so many good things, we ask the disciples' question. How will we use them? "God has given us another good year, let us use it well."