

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN MAINE

196th Annual Convention 23-24 October 2015 Portland, Maine

Address by the Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane, Ninth Bishop of Maine

We are God's Dwelling: Rooted in Scripture and Nurtured by Grace

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. Eph. 2:19f

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I want to begin this evening with a word of thanks to all of you. This is my eighth Convention as your bishop. I continue to be grateful each and every day for your call to serve the people of Maine. Gretchen and I continue to be surprised by the amazing beauty we encounter routinely in our beloved state and encouraged by the spirit and devotion of the Episcopalians and Lutherans in every congregation. During this last year of illness and surgery, we have been overwhelmed and uplifted by the love and support which has come our way from you. Thank you for this ministry and for your care.

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Too often, I think, we look at our lives as Christians as though the life of the church was our responsibility. We forget that the Christian community, to which we are invited, is given to us by God. Our role is to respond faithfully to the invitation we have received. But the life of the community is not in our hands. It is in God's hands, and it is secure. The form of our life in Christ may change, but the fact of it cannot change. God has called us in Christ into relationship with one another and into service to God's world, and that remains, eternally, the challenge and the vocation of our lives.

Last week I had a conversation with several clergy about the work we do and the rapid pace of change we are experiencing. The world is changing so quickly that it's hard to stay abreast of things, let alone get ahead of them. The cultural challenges to our beloved church continue unabated. We are now facing a rising generation that, in increasing numbers, has not been raised in a faith tradition, that doesn't know the church well enough to come back to it. Even the folks in our pews are often new to and not schooled in the Christian faith or our own Episcopal tradition. The need for evangelism and for formation has never been greater.

Many Americans continue to distrust large institutions, including the church. Churches are sometimes viewed as partisan organizations interested mostly in pushing their own causes and getting money from as many donors as possible. We are not viewed as having the interests of

non-church members at heart. We are not viewed as safe places for people of differing opinions or beliefs. Our need to function with integrity and transparency is urgent.

It might be easy to despair over the current situation, to think that God has abandoned us. Yet I think that God is actually behind all this change, that God is pushing us out of our comfort zones and inviting us to take our faith into the world. God is inviting us into a spirit of experimentation where we are willing to try new behaviors for the sake of God's mission. I believe God is asking us to trust that we are, in fact, built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ, our chief cornerstone, and secure on that foundation we can try new ways of being.

I'm happy to say there are lots of experiments, large and small, underway in Maine. Let me offers some examples:

Nearly three years ago we began a conversation in the Kennebec Valley among the five Episcopal Churches near Augusta, four of which were facing severe financial difficulties. After about a year and a half, they were joined by Prince of Peace Lutheran Church. The conversations went on, month after month, year after year, with periodic check-ins with vestries and members. Enthusiasm waxed and waned. But folks kept at it. Two congregations decided to continue on their current path. Last fall St. Mark's, Augusta, determined to worship with Prince of Peace after Christmas and to try it out. This past spring, St. Mark's decided to stay. And this fall, St. Matthew's, Hallowell, and St. Barnabas', Augusta, have decided to join the experiment. In addition, a Sunday afternoon Christian Education program called Mustard Seeds has emerged which now has some of the features of a congregation. Prince of Peace has graciously welcomed all these possibilities (and all these Episcopalians) and, together, the Church at 209, as we call it, for 209 Eastern Avenue, is facing a new future. We don't yet know what it will be - no structural decisions have been made yet, and the authority to do so remains in the hands of the Vestries - but the default future of inevitable decline is being replaced by possibilities for vitality and service.

Other congregations are collaborating in ways we wouldn't have considered in the recent past. St. Ann's, Windham, and St. Alban's, Cape Elizabeth, have created a full time position for a Christian Education director, who is working with teachers in both communities. St. Alban's and St. Peter's, Portland, are sharing a priest assistant, as are St. Saviour's, Bar Harbor and St. John's and St. Andrew's, Southwest Harbor. These two assistant positions recapture positions lost during the Recession.

We're beginning to see the development of new ways of working together. While the old style, institutionally-oriented committees are harder to populate - it is sometimes difficult to recruit for establishment bodies like the Diocesan Council, Standing Committee and Commission on Ministry - we are beginning to see the emergence of networks of passionate people who collaborate because of the value they see for their work at home.

Youth ministry is now being carried on by a collective of folks who care about young people and do the work for youth weekends and for BION camp.

The Christian Education Collaborative is made of up of teachers and trainers who share best practices for their own work in their churches.

We're hoping to develop a similar network of parish musicians and a network of wardens and vestry members.

We have received a \$30,000 grant from The Episcopal Church and will soon launch the Maine Episcopal Network for Justice, a public policy advocacy network for Maine and, eventually, for northern New England.

A number of our congregations have applied for and received new initiative grants for new mission work.

Mustard Seeds, the Sunday School at Church at 209, is sustained in part by work done on a lectionary curriculum developed by St. Bart's, Yarmouth, supported by a new initiatives grant.

The most recent grant is for an outdoor labyrinth and prayer garden sponsored by St. Luke's, Wilton, to be used by church and community alike.

These are examples of new ways of being church, and they're encouraging because they seem to have legs, seem to have some staying power, even though the final outcome remains to be seen.

Not all of our experiments have done as well. Last fall I invited a number of congregations to pray their neighborhoods for a year. I'm happy to say a few have, but for others, the bar was too high. They were unable to discern their neighborhood. They weren't sure how they should pray. They weren't able to muster the participants to walk and pray week by week for a year. It was too strange to go outside the church and pray over a neighborhood, too foreign to our Episcopal experience. We found that our foundation needed strengthening, that we need formation in prayer and discernment.

What I think we all need now are opportunities for faith formation and skill training. This past spring, 50 musicians showed up for our first ever conference for parish musicians and song leaders. In June, 50 adults took part in our first adult retreat weekend held at Bishopswood. Both these events will be repeated. Next spring we will offer a diocesan-wide education day, with opportunities for congregational leaders to gather and learn about a variety of topics - from faith formation to worship planning to volunteer development. Treasurers' workshops and other education events will continue. We need these opportunities for growth and development so that we can learn from each other's best practices, firm up our foundation, and step out in faith.

The work of formation is important because adaptive change, as we know, cannot be accomplished from the center or the top. I can't change congregations. I can't make alliances for ministry in your communities. Only the members of congregations can do these things. I can help to make the change a little safer. I can support risk-taking. I can offer staff and other resources to ease the way. The Diocesan Council can provide new initiative grants and funding for experiments. But you must run the experiments. You must discover what God is up to in your neighborhood.

One experiment I can run has to do with this Convention. This annual meeting of our diocese is important to those of us who attend, important for fellowship and conversation, important for the internal business of elections and budget. But its impact on our participation in God's mission is not clear, and it makes almost no difference to the world beyond the church. It requires working folks to use vacation or personal leave time to attend, and it takes entirely too much time and costs too much money to prepare and run. My staff is pushed to the brink to prepare for this event and important work in congregations is neglected.

I've reviewed the diocesan and church-wide canons carefully, and I believe that there are only four required purposes of this Convention: elections for diocesan bodies, the adoption of an annual budget and assessment, the presentation of the bishop's report, and occasional amendments to the Constitution and Canons. Everything else - worship, resolutions, workshops - is optional. In an effort to make this Convention more attractive, we've tried to add value for those who attend by including worship and educational experiences. But trying to make this business meeting be something it's not can only take us so far. It seems to me that the time has come to try something entirely new.

I propose that we deconstruct this Convention by separating out its business, educational, and worship components. To do this, I propose that we reduce the business of Convention to a single day, a Saturday, beginning next year. This should save both diocese and congregations significant time and money. We will simultaneously add to the diocesan calendar the full day of varied educational events mentioned earlier. It will be open to all Episcopalians, not just delegates. The third component will be a major worship event to which all Episcopalians, and everyone else, will be invited. Each of these events will be held at times and in places designed to encourage the broadest possible participation.

To accomplish this, I will not call for the next Convention at the end of this Convention, but will ask the Chancellor and others to work with the Convention Planning Committee to study the canons and outline a plan for a one day business only Convention in 2016. With this work accomplished, I will issue the call for the next Convention no later than April. My intention is that the 197th Convention will meet for business on the Saturday of this same weekend in October next year. The education day will likely be in the spring, and the worship event in early summer. I will ask the diocese' patience and good humor to experiment with this new approach to Convention for two years - and then we'll look to see what has worked well, what has not, and what we've learned.

The work of experimentation is very hard work because we really don't know what things will connect with the culture or serve our intentions. We're learning Sunday service by Sunday service, meeting by meeting, and conference call by conference call. It's too early to say which experiments will be "successful" or what will emerge if they fail. But I think we can take confidence from our efforts. We are not afraid to try to new things. We can screw up our courage and take a deep breath and move out in faith. We know that each experiment will help us learn something for the next one and, collectively, we'll figure out how to be the church in this new time.

As our Presiding Bishop-elect, Michael Curry, reminds us, "We are the Jesus Movement." We are sent to do God's work in God's ever-changing world. We have that capacity. We are survivors, yes. We Episcopalians are hanging on in Maine better than almost anyone else. But we are more than survivors. We are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God - the place where God dwells. We are builders with God of a new heaven and a new earth.

God is faithful. God will be with us as we experiment and fail, take risks and succeed. God will be with us as we move beyond preservation to transformation. God will be with us to secure us as old and beloved things fade away and new and untested things emerge.

I began this address by remarking on your loving care in this year of surgeries for Gretchen and me. And I meant that. But I should also say that God was faithful, too. In the midst of one tough day after another, we discovered hidden treasures of love and care that we did not know existed. Our sense of God's goodness was strengthened in our weakness in ways we would not have imagined. We were reminded that ours is a resurrection faith, that the household of God is built at the foot of the cross, that new life requires the old life to pass away.

That is true for our lives as faith communities as well. My prayer for you is that you will lean into resurrection life, that you will trust that God is with you as you experience loss and grief, that the goodness of God will be evident in the new life you discover, and that you will find strength and confidence to love and serve the world around you.

Thank you...