

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN MAINE

197th Annual Convention 22 October 2016 Portland, Maine

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

Living Local: Joining God

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' (Mark 1:14-15 NRSV)

Welcome to this 197th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine. This is the final convention of the seven year tour we began in 2010, meeting first at Sunday River in Newry, then Point Lookout, Northport, then UMPI, Aroostook County, and these last two years at USM in Portland. We have toured our diocese, seen places many of us had never been before, and experienced the many contexts for our ministries. Thanks for taking part in this pilgrimage.

A diocesan convention is an important event in the life of any diocese. It is the one time in the year when all the representatives of the local Episcopal church - all the clergy who belong to the diocese, representatives of each congregation, and the bishop - the whole church is gathered together in one place to take counsel and make decisions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

But the leisurely and expensive weekend format of Convention we are used to fits the modern world less and less well. Our Convention has required a day off from work or school and, often, two nights in a hotel. Young adults and working people are, therefore, very much under-represented in our ranks.

This one-day Convention is an experiment in accessibility, in making our gathering more accessible to a greater number of Episcopalians. In any democratic system, accessibility is key. That's why we are rightly concerned about things like poll taxes and voter IDs. We've changed our structure so that people previously excluded can start to take part. At your upcoming annual meetings, I hope you will make a concerted effort to invite new folks to represent your church at next year's Convention - and to stand aside so they can do so.

We will experiment with this pattern for two years and evaluate as we go. The Convention Planning Committee is eager for your feedback. I hope this experiment will bear good fruit. I know that this Convention will be quite different from what we're used to, but I hope the gains will outweigh the losses.

I'm using the language of experimentation deliberately because I believe our time cries out for a willingness to try new things. There is only one thing that is certain in this life: the presence and love of our God. Everything else changes. We're in a time that requires learning. And learning requires we try something new.

There are lots of experiments going on. Many of you are trying new things with worship, with education, with mission, with social media. There are striking commitments to working with the poor, with immigrants and new Mainers. Congregations are coming together in new ways to worship and share resources and clergy. We now have four congregations or clusters of congregations where Lutherans and Episcopalians are working together. And we have three situations where two or more Episcopal congregations are working together. I commend you for all that, for the many ways you are working to enhance your vitality and viability.

Yet, it seems to me that the ways we relate to our surrounding communities remain largely unchanged. Our focus continues to be on our lives as institutions. We're still concerned mostly about the number of people in the pews and about pastoral care for our members. The questions we give the most energy to continue to focus inward on the life of the congregation. Our relationships with those who are outside the church are tenuous. The poor and needy are still mostly clients rather than friends.

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, reminds us that Christianity is not about preserving institutions, but is primarily a movement, a movement of those who, in baptism, have committed themselves to follow the Way of Jesus. It's a loving, liberating, life-giving movement. We are, he says, the "Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement." Following Jesus is the most important thing. What is required is a fundamental turn toward Jesus - toward becoming the hands and feet of Jesus at work in our neighborhoods and communities.

In Maine, one of the ways we are trying to follow Jesus is through our participation in *Living Local: Joining God*. We will invest two years and a significant amount of resources in an effort to help our faith communities discover new ways of discerning God's presence and of joining God's work with those around us. Our conviction is that God is already present, in the church - yes - but also in God's world outside the church doors. We want to learn new ways to recognize God's presence and join in.

What will that look like? *Living Local: Joining God* will help us learn how to behave as Christians in a world now quite different from the one we grew up in. We'll gather together to listen to God through Scripture; we'll discern how God might be at work in the communities around us; we'll try new ways of connecting with those communities; and then--and this is the most important part--we'll gather again to see what we learned, and based on those insights, we'll keep seeking new ways to connect. If we are to be God's people, we need to look beyond ourselves. The Good News is that God is out ahead of us doing God's work of restoration and renewal. We are called now to the work of discipleship: of going where God is, and learning how we can join in God's work.

Since last spring, many congregations have attended one or both of the preliminary meetings of *Living Local: Joining God*. They are now discerning whether or not to commit to the adventure over the next two years. *Living Local: Joining God* will provide coaching and peer support as lay leaders try out new behaviors. The leadership of lay people is critical: clergy will support but not direct the participation of their congregations, and clergy will have their own peer group to help them reflect on this role.

Canons Michael Ambler and Jane Hartwell are organizing this work with a large number of collaborators. We're taking this journey in company with three other dioceses: Connecticut, Southwest Virginia, and East Tennessee. There's still time to join in; even if you haven't been able to participate before now, either Michael or Jane can help you begin the work of discerning whether or not to take part. The train leaves the station at Christmas, so now's the time to get on board.

Any effort to do something new carries within it a critique of the old. There is, I think, a fear that we are abandoning the church. So I want to be clear: we are continuing the work of the church as we know it, even as we try out new behaviors for the future. *Living Local: Joining God* is meant to work alongside the ministries of your faith community. The work of the Body of Christ is to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ, to form disciples in the apostolic faith, and to send them out in witness to the love of God. That has not changed. But the forms in which we engage our work in the world must and will change to meet the realities of our day.

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As a diocese we continue to develop and enhance networks of best practice. These collaborations include one for youth ministry, one on Christian formation, one for parish administrators, one for musicians, the Maine Episcopal Network for Justice, a Task Force on New Mainers, and a newly-emerging spiritual practices network. Unlike

program groups, these are not committees designed to promulgate programs for churches to use. Rather they are groups of practitioners and advocates who help and support one another, sharing ideas and best practices. The energy for the group comes from the folks doing the work. People are present because they want to be, and they bring their passion and experience to the group. It's a different way for us to do programming, but the vitality of these groups suggests that we're on the right track. And there is no need to repeatedly populate a free standing committee. The networks will last as long as people are interested, and then fade away.

I believe it is true that fewer and fewer of us are interested in taking part in the standing bodies that govern our diocese. There were few nominees for the several diocesan positions until late in August. And, I know that parishes and missions also struggle to find candidates for wardens, vestries and bishop's committees. In this behavior, we participate in the cultural change that is bedeviling all voluntary institutions - from community orchestras and choirs to volunteer fire departments and boards of selectmen. We value these things, but find they are not a priority when we consider our own time and commitments.

Clearly, our institutions need to change. Our rules are archaic and not in tune with today's reality. Notions of seniority and longevity, of wise heads gathering around long tables in paneled rooms, seem quaint and inefficient. Perhaps we can learn something from our networks about making our meetings more efficient and more accessible. Perhaps we can combine the functions of the Diocesan Council and Standing Committee so as to require fewer office holders who will have more substantial work to do. I don't know, but I suspect the current pattern is unsustainable.

The faith we proclaim - the kingdom of God is among us - was forged in a time very much like ours; a time of immense change and great fear, a time of political volatility, when the Roman Empire controlled much of the known world. It was in a time like ours that God sent God's Son to overthrow the world as it was and declare a new world order, an order based in faith, hope and love - not wealth, power and chariots.

The kingdom of God has come near you. God is here, right here, right now. We are not adrift in an unfriendly universe. We are at home with God. And that confidence - that we are not abandoned, that we are not helpless - is what allows us to face the challenges of our day. We don't know what the days ahead will bring. But we do know that our hope is not rooted in the presidential election about to take place. It's rooted in God's presence with us. We face the changes and the paralysis and the contentiousness of our times with hope because God holds us in her hands. We know the work we do will not be in vain.

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I want to focus now briefly on a few matters before us.

We are now experiencing what we have expected for several years, and that is the retirement of the baby boom generation of clergy. In both the ranks of priests and deacons we have seen a significant number of retirements in the last year - 7 priests and 9 deacons. And there are not enough new priests and deacons coming along to replace them. We currently have 5 people preparing for the priesthood and 2 for the diaconate. Parishes seeking priests are finding fewer numbers of applicants, and congregations seeking deacons may need to raise one up from their midst. The good news is that, with patience, we have been finding good candidates to lead our faith communities, and sometimes have been able to reduce the time it takes to complete the discernment process. At the same time, I am certain we will be wrestling with a short supply of priests and deacons for the foreseeable future.

The picture of diocesan health and vitality is a complex one. First, I am happy to report that the overall financial situation seems to be improving. Total parish income, the sum of all parish income, is up, a fact reflected in our proposed diocesan budget. We are also seeing modest increases in attendance in some places. So, our hard work of renewal is bearing some fruit. At the same time, I will frankly acknowledge that we continue to experience declining income and attendance in many places. Some of our smaller faith communities now find it difficult to support a priest-in-charge or to elect lay leaders in the ways expected by the canons. They are, technically speaking, not in good standing. But they have vital worship, fellowship and ministries. Although there are no simple responses to these dilemmas, my staff and the Diocesan Council are seeking creative ways to preserve and enhance this vitality. These smaller communities may, in fact, be leading us to new ways of understanding faith communities.

As some of you may have noticed, the exterior work on Loring House, our diocesan office building, is nearing completion. The balky, ill-fitting windows were all restored, the dilapidated porches were rebuilt, all four sides of the building were repointed, and the leaking roof was replaced. A secure exterior will now allow us to turn our attention to renewing the interior for diocesan use and, perhaps, in future, for use as office space for the Cathedral or other not-for-profits. The Cathedral has completed its extensive exterior work supported by generous donations from the Cathedral community and many of you. The crumbling East wall and various buttresses and chimneys have been rebuilt, and the Rose window has been gloriously restored. Interior work will also begin in the near future at the Cathedral. In all of this work, I see signs of our confidence that The Episcopal Church in Maine has a solid future.

I want to conclude this report by saying that I have no plans to leave you soon. To paraphrase Mark Twain, the rumors of my retirement have been greatly exaggerated. I am 67 years old, and mandatory retirement is 72. So, there is a time frame. The 2017 Diocesan Budget is beginning to fund a reserve for the next episcopal election and transition process. Gretchen and I will be attending a conference for bishops and spouses next month that helps frame the transition process and educates us about the things to be considered in planning for an orderly transition for the diocese and for us. So I am gathering information. But I have no plan now to retire. That plan will be developed in the usual manner, with the Standing Committee, and will be announced with a call for an election. I also want to be clear - and Gretchen wants me to say this - that the timing of any transition plan will be determined by the needs of the diocese and by my sense of my capacity to serve as bishop, not by Gretchen's illness. I'm happy to say that Gretchen is doing quite well, and we are eternally grateful for the innumerable prayers and support that have come our way.

This is my ninth diocesan convention, and it's been my privilege to serve as your bishop for 8 and 1/2 years. I count my blessings every day. I continue to believe that God has good things in store for us, that God continues to invite us to live as signs of God's kingdom, as signs of God's presence. And though we live in challenging times, with God's help, we are more than equal to the tasks before us.

To say that the kingdom of God has drawn near is to proclaim that God is among us. To repent and believe this Good News means to let go of our fears that we are alone in the world, or that it's up to us to save the world. It means to turn toward God, to live knowing that God can be trusted to draw the whole world to God's self. We are not called to a heroic and muscular faith. We are called instead to a simple and loving relationship with Jesus, walking each day with God, and doing the things we know God expects us to do: to love and care for our neighbors, to be kind, to seek Christ in each face, to respect everyone's dignity, to proclaim the Gospel, to be friends of God and friends with one another. My brothers and sisters, we are the Jesus Movement, the Body of Christ, and God will not let us down.

Thank you.