



THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN MAINE
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Address by the Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane, Ninth Bishop of Maine

The Way of Love

Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. Mark 2:13-14

The Episcopal Church recently released the annual *Fast Facts Report*, statistical information based on the Parochial Report for 2017. The Report told the now familiar story of the slow, but steady, decline of The Episcopal Church. Average attendance dropped about 2.4% since 2016. Total membership dropped about 2%. And we're losing congregations at the rate of about 2 per month. The only really good news was the continued increase in giving across the church, up about 1.7% over 2016. The average pledge in TEC is now \$2,873. Despite that, the *Fast Facts Report* is fairly gloomy reading.

Contrast that bit of news with the news from General Convention. I've attended General Convention since 1988, and this was by far the most energetic, the most unified, and the most public, the least contentious, best feeling GC I've been part of. We dealt with tough stuff: the #MeToo movement, the detention and splitting of families seeking asylum, gun violence in America, the revision of the Book of Common Prayer, Israel and Palestine, and much more. Yet despite this, there was greater harmony, greater focus on God's mission, on the work of evangelism and reconciliation than I'd seen before.

Part of this, no doubt, had to do with the passing of the Baby Boomer power block. The General Convention is a seniority system, and the Baby Boomers have led the church for long time. My generation has done much good work, and we have also fought the by now too familiar battles over human sexuality and public policy. Two-thirds of the deputies at this Convention were either first or second-timers. The Baby Boomers did not control the votes at this Convention, and that made a difference in the substance and the tone of our conversations. Part of it also was the report of the Special Task Force on Sexual Harassment and Abuse, which called us to a new awareness of the misuse and abuse of power in our church. Part of it was the heightened tension related to the separation of refugee families which dominated the news when we met last July.

But most of it had to do with Michael Curry, our Presiding Bishop.

Michael transformed the General Convention from a party for church geeks to a celebration of the Jesus Movement. There was a large public witness remembering the mass shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School of Parkland, Florida, and a caravan of 40+ buses to a nearby ICE Detention Center to offer support to the asylum seeking women held there - both, I would note, in full and public cooperation with the local and federal authorities. There were three joint sessions of the HOB and HOD educating us on the PB's priorities of Evangelism, Racial Reconciliation and Environmental Stewardship. There was a service of repentance and reconciliation for women and men who have experienced sexual abuse in the church. And there was, finally, *The Way of Love*, a program designed to help Episcopalians re-center their lives on Jesus. The *Way of Love* is the theme for this Convention, and will be used throughout the coming triennium in the congregations of this diocese and the whole church.

What a contrast... the *Fast Facts* and *The Way of Love*. The *Fast Facts* are important. We can't be naive. The downward cultural and economic pressures the church faces continue unabated. The rising generations are deeply suspicious of large institutions, including the church. We continue to wrestle with the fallout of aging congregations and a wobbly economy.

Yet, as Michael Curry pointed out to us over and over again, the true test before us is neither cultural nor financial. The true test before us is spiritual. Will we follow Jesus? Will we make The Way of Jesus the center of our lives? Will we treat others with the love and respect Jesus offered to everyone he encountered? What matters, says our PB, is our faithfulness. That's the measure that God cares about. Ours is a resurrection faith, and if God is calling our old church to die so that a new one may be born, then so be it. Our task, wherever we are, is to remain faithful and to follow the Way of Love.

As our PB notes, the Way of Love is Benedictine spirituality recast in contemporary language. Benedict, you may recall, was a 6th century monk who wrote the first widely adopted rule for monastic life. It is characterized by moderation and flexibility. It has been the root for many rules of life ever since.

The Way of Love invites us to contemplate seven practices for bringing Jesus into the center of our lives. It invites us to consider what we are already doing, how we might undertake new practices, and, most importantly, whom we would invite to accompany us on our journey. Christianity is not a solo practice. It's community-based, and the participation of at least one partner, who will accompany us and keep us honest, is critical. How can we make walking the *Way of Love* the primary shape of our lifestyle as

Episcopalians and Christians? We're going to explore *The Way of Love* program later this morning.

Now I think we know what this is about. We've been talking about it for a long time in Maine. This is about adaptive change, about adapting our historic traditions and beliefs into forms and styles for these times. As a diocese we have tried to be institutionally flexible so new forms of church life can emerge. *The Way of Love* provides a spiritual foundation for adaptive change.

Speaking of adaptive change, I thought it might be helpful to share a few stories about how we're doing.

I recently visited St Thomas', Winn, for the celebration of their 150th Anniversary. Winn was a river boat stop along the Penobscot where Bishop Neeley, the second Bishop of Maine started the Penobscot, later the Central Maine, Mission, in 1868. The going was tough. Bishop Neeley travelled by steamship from Portland to Bangor, then riverboat to Winn, and, finally, stagecoach and horseback to Calais. The first rector had nowhere to stay, so Bishop Neeley purchased the house next door to the church as a rectory. And because it had a rectory, Winn became the seat of the Penobscot Mission, the place from which many churches were planted from Brownville to Houlton.

I learned, in preparation for the 150th celebration, that times were always tough in the Central Maine Mission, which continued, by the way, until 1986. There were never enough people or enough money or clergy. Conditions were harsh, and clergy lasted only a year or two. (Winn has had 45 priests in 150 years.) The working population ebbed and flowed with the work in the woods. Congregations were planted and then disappeared. But the desire to follow Jesus remained strong right down to today and ways were found to provide for clergy leadership, even if it meant circuit riding or other patterns of non-resident clergy. The 150th celebration of St Thomas', Winn, gives me hope that we can rediscover old possibilities and patterns for clergy leadership that may be helpful in our day.

At this Convention, we will welcome Emmanuel Lutheran Episcopal Church, a new Federated Congregation, which will become a full member both of this diocese and the New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We've worked closely with the Lutherans in New England for some time now, and we have several collaborative projects in the diocese. This takes things a step further, and is, I think, a sign of hope for the future. Bishop Hazelwood of the New England Synod and I are now talking about doing clergy transition ministry in Maine together. We're also looking forward and considering where we might one day see other federated churches.

Emmanuel Church is the serendipitous outcome of an effort to preserve the ministries that were based at St Mark's, Augusta. That church, unable to support a rector and in danger of going bankrupt, had service ministries that were so valuable that none of us could consider closing them down. So we searched, for years, for ways to sustain the ministries as St Mark's transitioned to a new way of being. We engaged the five congregations of the greater Augusta region in conversation, and, after a couple of years, the Lutherans joined us. Out of that happy circumstance and much, much hard work, Emmanuel Lutheran Episcopal has emerged. It was not something any of us imagined at the beginning, but it is the most fortunate ending. And those ministries - now called *Bridging the Gap* - continue to flourish. (We will celebrate our union with Emmanuel after lunch.)

Our *Living Local: Joining God* program is about to complete its two year run and we're considering a second round for next spring. Of the original twelve congregations, seven have continued, and all have experienced some form of encouragement and revitalization as they have considered how to engage the community beyond their doors.

St Aidan's, Machias, one of the seven, has had a vision for engaging with students at the University of Maine, Machias, for decades. But despite years of patient effort, nothing much worked. However, recently St Aidan's began to provide comfort food and snacks during exams. It was a small matter, but much appreciated. It didn't bring any students to church, but it did catch the attention of the administration. This fall, as new students were being prepared for a day of community service, St Aidan's was asked if it would like students to come and work on a project at the church. St Aidan's, armed with the spiritual work of Living Local, so, "No, but we would like to accompany the students as they go out." I think that's just what Jesus had in mind when he said, "Follow me."

There are other stories I could tell, but there's a time limit to this address. Still, I want you to know that we are striving to be faithful, to love and care for God's people, and to do so moving beyond the constraints of our institutional lives. The key for our future as a church is to follow Jesus.

Let me turn now another matter before us as TEC in Maine.

The election of the Tenth Bishop of Maine is nearly upon us. In just ten days, the Standing Committee will release the slate of those proposed for your consideration. I'm excited about this process. We began with a very strong list of candidates. There were

seven highly qualified participants in the retreat for semi-finalists. I'm anticipating a solid list of candidates from which to discern our next bishop.

With the announcement of the slate, responsibility for preparation will pass from the Discernment Committee into the hands of the voters. That's you... it will be up to you to attend the Walkabout and to visit the Bishop Quest website to learn about the candidates. The Transition Committee will provide ample opportunities for you to be prepared, but you will need to do the work. Later today, the Rev. Maria Hoecker, President of the Standing Committee, will talk about the process going forward and what you can do to be spiritually centered and ready for the Electing Convention.

I believe the Tenth Bishop of Maine will be invited to board a moving train, and not to push one out of the station. The Diocese of Maine is on the move. We are actively engaged in discerning God's mission, and we are seeking new ways to go about our work. I think the new bishop will find a very engaged diocese full of people willing to try new things and collaborate together for the sake of Christ. I think we have our faces turned toward to the future where God awaits, and I am confident we will vote for a leader who will help us follow Jesus.

In this in between time, this liminal space, as we await the consecration of the Tenth Bishop, I must say that we are feeling the change at Loring House. Heidi Shott, our long-term Communications Officer, took a new position with the American Friends of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem in September. Not only did that remind us of the substantial change that we're experiencing, but it has challenged our operational capacity and left us feeling a little short-handed. The new communications people - John Hennessy, Mark Spahr and Lis Ingoldsby - are working well together and coordinating their work, but the learning curve is steep. We've also recently appointed a new youth missionary, the Rev. Sara D'Angio-White, who is helping us adapt our youth ministry to this new time. We're doing our best to stay on top of the work and to respond to your needs, but I do appreciate your patience as our work is reconfigured and we too adapt to change.

I hope you will appreciate that this is a tender time for your staff. We have developed a close working relationship over these last eleven years. We are friends, as well as co-workers, and your staff is facing not only a change of bosses, but also the loss of close friends and, perhaps, changes in employment. Please pray for us and our chaplain, the Rev. Hannah Anderson, as we negotiate the changes ahead.

This brings me to a final comment. I remember the period after I was consecrated your bishop. I was drinking from a fire hose, as they say. There were so many new things to

learn and so many people to meet. I was traveling to places I'd never been and worshiping with people I'd never met - every week. And I was learning to be a bishop. I was full of energy and enthusiasm, but I didn't know what I needed to know. And, inevitably, I made mistakes. The first program I rolled out for our staff didn't work. It was ill-considered and didn't meet a genuine need. You all were kind to me in that period.

So... please remember that your new bishop will not be perfect and will make mistakes. And when that happens, don't get angry... get close. Help that person learn to be the bishop we want and need. We are all shaped by our communities, and you will be the community that shapes the new bishop. Kindness and thoughtful reflection will go a long way to help smooth the days of transition and move us all to the kind of relationship we hope for with our bishop.

I continue to say daily prayers of thanksgiving for the ministry we have shared since 2008. Gretchen and I feel deeply blessed by the beauty of the land and sea and the beauty of the people of Maine. We have begun to make plans to return to Rochester, NY, where we have lots of family and friends, but it will be difficult to leave all of you. With the Transition Committee, we are planning a couple of farewell events in May which will include both a worship service and a reception: a time to praise God for all we have been able to do, and a time for personal conversation. Word about those events will be published soon. In the meantime, let us remember that our lives are all held in God's hands - God who is faithful and will not let us fall. And may we continue to walk in the Way of Love.

Thank you.