

**The Episcopal Diocese of Maine**  
**193<sup>rd</sup> Annual Convention    26 October 2012    Northport, Maine**  
**Convention Address by the Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane, Ninth Bishop of Maine**

This address is a bit of grab bag, consisting of two parts: Part 1 will address a couple of important pieces of information for the benefit of all in the diocese. Part 2 will talk about an invitation and a challenge I wish to place before the diocese. (For clergy who are thinking about reading this address tomorrow, Part 2 will probably suffice.)

Part 1

We are completing ten years of a **Companion Relationship with the Diocese of Haiti**. Such relationships usually end after ten years. I think ours has been an extraordinary relationship with the development of some 16 parish partnerships. I anticipate that many of those partnerships will continue. On the other hand, there are many congregations in our diocese who have not been actively involved in the Companion Relationship in any meaningful way. I believe that it's a good idea for us to take the time to evaluate our relationship and to see if we should extend the relationship for another five years. I've invited the Haiti-Maine Committee to assist in this evaluation, and to reach out to all the congregations of Maine for your input and suggestions. Haiti is the largest diocese of the Episcopal Church and remains one of the poorest countries in the world. The need is immense. Is there more that we could do? Are there better ways for us to work with the Diocese of Haiti? Is the Diocese of Maine committed to this work and will you stand behind it if we decide to continue for another five years? These questions have suggested themselves to me because we did not embrace as a diocese the *Buy a Brick* campaign designed to rebuild the Cathedral complex in Port au Prince. Before we simply sign up for a new term, I'd like us to sit down and consider God's call in relation to this important commitment.

Turning to another subject, I want to say a word about the **health care coverage** provided to clergy and lay employees of The Episcopal Church in Maine. The Compensation Committee has recommended, and I have accepted, that we make no changes in our current health coverage for next year. The changes made last year required every employee and congregation to do something new during the current year. Nonetheless, health premiums increased 5% for next year. The path we're on is clearly unsustainable.

The General Convention looked closely at this issue, and the Church Medical Trust continues to work diligently to reduce costs. Much of what will happen depends on who is elected President in November and what aspects of the Affordable Healthcare Act are actually implemented. Nonetheless, we in Maine will need to look after the best interests of our

employees and our congregations. Therefore, I will ask the Compensation Committee to engage in further study of health insurance coverage and costs to help us make the best decision we can next fall for 2014.

Before moving on to Part 2 of this address, I want to offer my very deep thanks to the devoted members of your diocesan staff. Since my arrival in Maine, the Loring House staff has lost four staff positions, approximately 3 Full-Time-Equivalents. In addition, we have reduced the time of the Assistant in the Youth Office and cut two part-time Portland area hospital chaplains. We've done this without any substantial reduction in the workload.

I hope you will join with me in expressing your gratitude to the faithful efforts of the Loring House staff on your behalf. Despite the difficulties of our time, I think they do any outstanding job of serving the people and congregations of the diocese. (Applause)

## Part 2

This past spring, I undertook, with our diocesan Standing Committee, a **Mutual Study of Ministry**. This was the second MSM of my episcopate. The first was undertaken after two years and focused primarily on my relationship with the Standing Committee and the extent to which I was responding to the profile of the Diocese of Maine used in the Episcopal Election process. This second MSM was much more expansive and sought responses from the diocese at large and from a group selected by the Standing Committee for face-to-face interviews.

The MSM sought to evaluate two things: 1) the extent to which the diocese at large understands the work of adaptive change; and 2) perceptions about the relationship between the congregations and the Bishop and his Office. The feedback was very positive. Most respondents felt they understood and were ready for adaptive change. Moreover, they appreciated the openness of the change process. They liked to be consulted and taken seriously. They believed that the Bishop and his Office are responsive and helpful. Indeed, Loring House is usually so responsive that, on those occasions when it is not, the lack of responsiveness is noted.

Beneath all this positive feedback were some nuances that I believe are important for the work we are doing together at this Convention and beyond. The first is that, although folks in our diocese are glad to be consulted, they are not always glad to be asked to make decisions. That may simply be normal resistance to making hard decisions, but it may also reflect the other nuance: the desire for the bishop to give a stronger sense of direction. Are there things the Bishop might do to shape and move the process that gives a stronger sense of the direction in which we are going and the decisions that need to be made? This question has occupied my attention for much of the last three months.

To put the issue another way, we could say that currently Loring House is a Diocesan Service Center. We provide and perform services that **maintain** congregations. These services include payroll, financial and investment services, provision of supply clergy, maintenance of the deployment system, diocesan youth ministry, etc., etc. The question is: Are these the services and programs the congregations actually need? Do they move the congregations forward in terms of adapting to the new world around them? Rather than providing maintenance services, might it not be better for Loring House to work with congregations in asking what Jesus is calling them to do now?

One of the important purposes of the Bishop's Address is to offer a snapshot of the **State of the Diocese**. As the work we are undertaking at this Convention makes abundantly clear, the State of the Church is **mixed**. We are with great joy welcoming St. Columba's, Boothbay, as a parish of the diocese. St. Columba's has retired its indebtedness, increased its stewardship, advanced its ministries and called a new rector. It has even grown a bit. At the same we are with great sadness bidding farewell to the life and ministry of St. Matthias', Richmond, which fell prey to advancing age, declining membership and a moribund economy, despite the faithful efforts of many to revitalize it. We are witnessing the success of some new ventures, some new ways of working together - for example, the partnerships between Brewer and Old Town, Winn and Millinocket, Bar Harbor and Southwest Harbor, Bath and Wiscasset, and Cape Elizabeth and St. Peter's, Portland - and we are adopting a budget that is nearly \$100,000 **less** than last year. We've attracted some new clergy to the diocese, and we've struggled to place some of the priests we've ordained in the last couple of years. We have congregations erecting new buildings, and congregations that can't afford to heat the old buildings they have. There is an appetite for ministry in nearly every congregation, but the capacity or willingness to convert that appetite to a feast varies immensely. A snapshot of the Diocese of Maine is a very mixed picture.

I'd like to say that we have halted the downward slide that began four years ago - and I think we've done some very good work - but we have not halted the slide. As my Canons and Chair of the Finance Committee have reminded me repeatedly this fall, we're still spending most of our time with technical fixes and not enough time addressing the changes we need to make for the future of the church. We are, even in our most adventurous and ambitious thinking, still deeply wed to the picture and the practices of the church we grew up in.

If I asked you, today, to describe the **default future** of your congregation or of the Episcopal Church, you could describe it to me in some detail. You could describe with considerable accuracy what's going to happen in the next year and the next five or ten years. You could point to the key factors and the critical decision-points that would result in the default future. As I hear clergy and lay leaders talking about the default future of their congregations, it is some version of a story of inevitable decline and loss, of a courageous community of people

trying very hard to sustain important ministries with inadequate financial resources, of congregations succumbing to the losses associated with aging members. We can tell that story because the future we anticipate is always rooted in our past experience, always shaped by the experience we have to date. Even the language we use to describe the future is circumscribed by our experience so that we don't actually have the words to describe a future other than the default future.

What we need, really, is **new language**, a new conversation, that can help us describe a future different from the default future, language that compels us to speak of a church different from the one we know - the one that's in inevitable decline. We need to talk about our life in a different way.

Where's the frontline in your church? Where does your congregation engage with the spiritual malaise, the moral ambivalence, the selfishness and greed of our society? Where's the frontline? Where do you position your missionaries?

Is the line inside the church? Is it at the front door? Is it at the edge of the church property? Is it some place in your community? Where do you meet with the foes of the reign of God? Where do you treat the wounded?

If you know where the front line is, if you can identify that, what would it take to **move** the front line? More important, what would it take for you to **commit** to moving the front line? How would you move the field of operations from inside the building to the people downtown or the people hidden in the countryside?

<sup>1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup>he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." <sup>5</sup>And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new.'" (Rev. 21:1-5)

The vision of John in the Book of Revelation is not of a **modified** universe. It's not a vision of the default future writ large. It's of a vision of a whole new world where the former things have passed away and new things have come to pass. It's a world where genuine community grows out of shared ministry and shared hope and where there is harmony not only within the church, but with all of God's creation.

These new things are *God* things, not cultural things. We're not talking about taking on the values of the culture; we're talking about adapting ourselves so that we might continue to bring the Good News of God in Christ to the culture. When we began this work in 2009, I remarked that the two things that need to continue for us to be identifiably Episcopalian are liturgical worship according to the Book of Common Prayer and participation in God's mission to reconcile the world to Godself. Nothing has changed my mind about that. How can we bring that worship, that mission, to the world around us?

The Episcopal Church of the future will not be a church of small tidily kept free-standing campuses. Indeed, there may be no campuses at all. The Diocese of Western Kansas is seriously considering what it would mean to be a diocese with no church buildings, just ministering congregations.

The church of the future will be much more deeply related to and responsive to its surrounding community. The frontline will be so far out the door that the place where the church ends and the community begins will be difficult to determine. And the ministry that is carried on will be so essential to the community that the community will be able to name it and to consider itself a part of it.

So what would that look like where you are? What's the ministry your congregation does that is so essential to the life of your community that the community can name it? If I were to walk down the main street of your community and ask a passerby to name the Episcopal Church in the town and what it does for the community, what would that person say to me?

I think that the only way we can address that question is for each congregation to begin a conversation that moves from a description of the default future to an engagement in a ministry of such importance and vitality that every one of us would be willing to commit to it. It's a conversation that must take place around every Vestry table and across every pew. It's conversation that will require the best efforts of local leaders and the full commitment of diocesan staff and diocesan resources. It's conversation that will require education and training, spiritual formation, and leadership development. It's a conversation that I hope we will begin here at this Convention and will carry back to each of our home churches.

My invitation, my challenge, to you is this: that **each of the congregations of the Diocese of Maine host a conversation with the stakeholders in your community** - politicians, business people, service providers, young people, poor people, members of other churches - that you bring them to the table, one at a time or all together, and that you **ask them what it is they need from the Episcopal Church**. What is the essential ministry that they need you to do? I'm not assuming here that the answer to that question is an outreach ministry, a social justice project. It might be the work of worship and spiritual formation. It might actually involve

more than one ministry. But it's work that fully connects the church with the larger community.

This is the work of community organizing. It requires the cultivation of relationships and the practice of deep listening. Each congregation will need to prepare itself for the conversation, to train itself, to consider who should be at the table and to structure the conversation so that everyone can participate.

I know that such work will be very difficult, perhaps the most difficult work you've ever been asked to do. You will need to get to know and to talk with people whom you've never met and do not know today. I believe that the diocesan staff will need to assist you with this work, providing tools and coaching to help you do the best job you can do. I believe that we will need to reconfigure our work at Loring House in order to make that possible. Following this Convention, I will begin work with an organizational consultant to help us restructure the work we do at Loring House.

During the next nine months, I ask you to prepare for the conversation in your community. I ask you to consider who needs to be at the table and what training you need to undertake the conversation. I further ask you begin the conversation in your community no later **September, 2013.**

I believe God is calling us out of ourselves and out of our doors into deeper relationships with God's people. As William Temple once famously said, "The Church exists for those who do not yet belong." Until we are engaged with them, until we hear from them their deepest longings, we will not have the language to move beyond institutional maintenance to adaptive change. We will not know how to describe our own future. Our task is not to get others in here with us, but to go out there with them, and together to discover what God is up to. I believe that God is already at work in God's world, out there ahead of us and waiting for us to join in. God grant us grace and courage to go out rejoicing.

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At your tables now, I invite you to consider three questions:

1. What is the default future for your congregation? If you were writing the history of your congregation ten years from now, what would it say?
2. Where is the front line in your church? Where does your church encounter God's world?
3. What would it take to for you to commit to moving the front line?