



**Annual address by The Right Reverend Thomas J. Brown, Bishop of Maine, on the occasion of the 202nd Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine, October 23, 2021**

Grace and peace to you in Jesus Christ!

In this my third convention address to you, I come today with a joyous heart for our life together, for your faith, and for the beautiful gift that you give me week in and week out to be part of your life. You add full measures of joy and gratitude to my heart.

I'm excited about what lies ahead and today I'm placing before us four actions that I hope that we'll take together in 2022. They are:

- To listen
- To connect
- To adapt
- To hope

All of us on Zoom and on YouTube and our loved ones in our churches, we have this invitation to listen, connect, adapt and hope.

In this time of great change and uncertainty, there is a key skill that God is giving us right now, and that is to listen, and listen deeply. A vestry member in Calais told me, "people say we're in this together, but I don't see it. We're dividing ourselves, and that aggravates me." I could feel the impulse in me to refute, or attempt to solve, or to ask for more information. But in that moment, our task was to listen to each other and we all did that, honoring his story.

How can we all take that, not jump in to react, or refute, or solve, but deeply listen to each other? I know that when I listen, God's presence seems stronger, I'm less likely to make hasty conclusions, and I literally feel saved. When we listen with the ears of our hearts another dimension comes, light-heartedness emerges, and we're often changed.

As we focus on listening as a charism this year, we have to continue to deeply listen (really listen) to the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. We in the Diocese of Maine have the opportunity this year, alongside the Maine Council of Churches, to support legislation granting tribal sovereignty to the Wabanaki people. Our advocacy in this area has come from decades of listening.



To listen is no passive act, but a bold move that might well be the difference between doing it the way we've always done, and discovering a whole new path. We move toward 2022 claiming the charism to listen.

Second is connect. Last summer the Bishop of Vermont announced a plan for Episcopalians in that diocese to address their current financial reality, which is stark. Her announcement referenced that both the Bishop of New Hampshire and I had offered our support, expressing eagerness to collaborate. This IS connection!

To connect with New Hampshire and Vermont follows from what's happening in dioceses in Michigan, Wisconsin, Northwestern Pennsylvania and Western New York, and Oregon. There is tremendous opportunity for us to share services with Vermont and New Hampshire, while holding fast to what makes our own charisms and personalities. Imagine our faith formation ministries, transition and deployment, communications, financial services—including payroll—imagine all of that being shared. Wider circles of leadership across Northern New England connecting with each other will be an occasion to inject energy across the communities between the Atlantic Ocean and Lake Champlain. You will hear more, and importantly, you will be asked to add your own voice to envisage a broader community.

When we think of connecting in this and other ways, we acknowledge God as the source for how we do so. You know that one of my favorite hymns is "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less" because the refrain rings a clarion call: On Christ the Solid Rock we stand, all other ground is sinking sand. When we connect with Jesus Christ, we affirm his way, his life, his dying, and rising again. Our primary connection with Jesus Christ informs how we answer those missional questions that I am continually asking us: Who are we? Why are we here? What are we doing about it?

When we keep at this work of connecting, we'll discover new ways to proclaim our faith. At Camp Bishopswood, at the end of Summer Finale, a parent said, "if church were always like this, I'd be all in." She was affirming the form—it was relaxed, it was fluid, it was accepting—and proclaiming her truth that faith seemed accessible and lively. This past year we have connected with God during pancake church, evening prayer on Facebook, outdoor worship, and on Zoom.



How will we, a diocesan community, local faith communities, and families deepen existing connections and make new ones in the coming year? Let's keep listening, and let's keep connecting, because those gifts equip us for the daily work of this third thing - to adapt, adapting.

Almost everything for nearly two years has made us adapt. It's been easier for some than others, of course, but every one of our congregations has learned and is learning new things. You adapt daily, and with remarkable grace and resilience; it's beautiful to behold the lasting fruit that all of you are bearing. Phyllis Siebert, is a vestrywoman at Christ Church in Eastport, she was formerly the chef at Blaine House and she served food there at the governor's residence for five governors! She retired to Eastport and turned 90 this past year! Until 17 months ago, Phyllis had never heard of Zoom. Now, she dons her headphones, uses her diminished eyesight to connect. And she says, "It's really good!" It's really good; she feels more connected and engaged in parts of church than she has in several years. We all know that Phyllis's story about adapting echoes stories from each and every one of our churches.

Connecting in the digital realm is one of the ways that we have been pushed to adapt in the last couple of years, and friends, digital life is not only here to stay, but also is now the primary building block for our future. When St. Peter's in Portland worshiped via zoom in the first quarter of 2021 they had people from California, Florida, Vermont, New York, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and from England and from Chile. Every community who is online makes a similar testimony, right? So when St. Peter's resumed in-person worship around Easter day, they were, in some sense, losing their wide reach. I'm not suggesting they shouldn't have returned to in-person worship, only pointing out what all of us know, and need to embrace: when we look to the future, and the future of our church, online connections matter.

Every single faith community in this diocese is responding with fresh expressions of the gospel and meeting people where they are right now. Last year we moved potatoes from Aroostook County to food shelves throughout Maine, energizing us to join what's known as the Christian Food Movement. It's a movement in which I think we should play a key role. Did you know that Maine has more organic farms than any other state? More farms today than we did in 1960? And that our farmers are young, the average age is 37? Aligning ourselves with the Christian Food Movement is another way to listen, to connect, and to adapt, intersecting with our ongoing call to address climate, racism, and poverty, and holds out the promise of further blessing the ties that bind Mainers one to another.



Expect to hear more about our involvement in the Christian Food Movement in the next several months.

Don't you think it's strange that our faith—Christianity—that began with a call to change...is often resistant to change? Some of us are nostalgic for what was just 20 months ago. Yet healthy expressions of any religious practice proclaim that real life is right now, and also in the future. We have to take care not to move backward, or so far into the future as to discount what's in front of us right now. We shall keep at this business of adapting and in doing so we will meet people where they are.

Our convention theme is “Go forth with hope and grace,” so I conclude with this fourth and final action, to hope.

It is the primary, theological premise for our life. The Letters to the Romans and Ephesians - among elsewhere in Scripture - give us gorgeous images: endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Oh friends, all of this is from everlasting to everlasting, because hope does not disappoint. God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, and with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we know the hope to which Jesus calls us, we know the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints. Hope—a living hope through the resurrection—that's what we do and who we are, always ready to provide an account for the hope that's in us. When we sing, “It is well with my soul”...that's hope.

Let's go forth into the mission that God is giving us:

to listen

to connect

to adapt

and to live with abundant hope.

May it be so, in the name of God, Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit, Amen.