

SIXTEENTH
ANNUAL ADDRESS OF THE BISHOP
The Right Reverend Gordon P. Scruton
at the
ONE HUNDRED TENTH ANNUAL MEETING
of the Convention of
THE DIOCESE OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS
held at

THE SHERATON HOTEL
SPRINGFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

October 29, 2011

“Whereas it is of great consequence that the Annual Address of the Bishop of the Diocese be presented formally to the congregations of the Diocese, Be it resolved: that the clergy of the Diocese be advised if it be agreeable and convenient to them, to read to the respective congregations, on the Sunday following the Convention, every year, the Address of the Bishop.”

NOTE FROM THE BISHOP

Clergy, please make this address available in hard copy and by email communication to the members of your congregation. It will be printed in full on the Diocesan Web Site www.diocesewma.org

In the last six months, we have had a tornado, a microburst, an earthquake, a hurricane and floods within the borders of our Diocese. Several people have asked, is God trying to tell us something? This is always a good question to ask, even though it is not easy to discern what God might be inviting us to learn.

The dramatic, shaking changes in our country and around the world over the past decade are jolting us out of our familiar assumptions and comfort zones. The illusion that we can control our nation and world and make things better is crumbling. We are discovering that our standard of living is not sustainable. The realities of a growing world population and limited natural resources are forcing us to face our limits. We are polluting the very environment that is essential for our survival as a human race. We have more people than we have jobs. The gap between rich and poor is growing in our country and around the world. All this has happened gradually and yet fairly rapidly.

What will the future be like for the global village and for us in this country?

One view is that, with some austerity decisions by government and business, we will soon be back on track with a growing global economy, just like we have in the past.

Another view is that we cannot and should not go back to the way we were. We are living in a time of seismic change on many different levels. We will need to make significant adjustments to our life style and to the way we do business so that we become more sustainable, less destructive of the environment, and healthier in our relationships with each other and with our global neighbors.

We hear many conflicting views of what needs to be changed and what our future will be like because we are now living in an in-between time, wandering into an uncharted wilderness. This cultural environment of Great Disruption, of anxiety and uncertainty about the future is the context in which Jesus Christ calls us to live the Gospel in the five western counties of Massachusetts.

As people of God, we have a long tradition of walking through wilderness seasons. In fact, it is in the wilderness that God's people can be drawn into a deeper awareness of their need for God and to discoveries of how God wants to birth a new kind of life in the middle of the wilderness of transition.

Through Isaiah, God spoke a word to the people of Israel in a time of wilderness and transition:

“Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.” (Isaiah 43:18,19)

Brian McLaren echoes this same theme in describing our time of transition. He says: “the bad news (is): the Christian faith in all its forms is in trouble. The good news (is): the Christian faith in all its forms is pregnant with new possibilities.” (A New Kind of Christianity, p. xi)

Whether we recognize it or not, God is in the process of doing a new thing in our generation, in the middle of this tumultuous season of change and disruption. When we become anxious and discouraged because of the changes and losses we see around us, we can re-explore the many Biblical stories of God visiting people and guiding them in times of wilderness, confusion and transition.

For example, when the Roman Empire had been controlling Jerusalem for over sixty years, squeezing the life out of people through military power and high taxes, the people of God began to be discouraged. They did not see any hope for their future. In this time of wilderness transition, God took the initiative to bring help in a most unlikely way. God sent an angel to a small village to talk with a young girl named Mary, to announce that through her, God wanted to birth God's Son Jesus, who would be the savior of the troubled world.

God did not choose to work through the political or religious experts and power brokers. God chose to change the course of human history through a young girl. Mary could not comprehend what was going on. How could this be? Yet, as she listened deeply to God's extraordinary invitation, she heard the angel say that nothing is impossible with God. So she said yes to God's invitation. God's initiative and Mary's costly yes opened the door to new life in the middle of a wilderness time for the whole world.

In every generation, God visits us, looking for people who will say yes to God's invitation, and allow Jesus to be born through them in fresh ways. God is looking for clergy and lay leaders in Western Massachusetts who will be willing to let God birth fresh expressions of Christian living and mission outside the walls and current patterns of their congregations.

Notice God birthed Jesus through young Mary and God also birthed John the Baptizer through old Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were supposed to be too old to give birth. It may be that God will again birth new life in our generation through the young people and the elders in our congregations.

Mary's childhood innocence was gradually transformed into awareness of both the significance of her role and the costliness of her role. As we seek to allow Christ to be born in and through us and our congregations in fresh ways, we will also experience both the strategic importance of the mission God gives us in this generation and also the costliness, the pain that will be involved in birthing God's New Creation.

We can't yet imagine what God's future will be like for our nation, for each of us, or for our congregations. But God's angel keeps coming to us and saying, "Don't be afraid. God is with you. The Holy Spirit will lead you. Nothing will be impossible with God."

Like Mary, we can say yes to allowing the creative Holy Spirit to nurture God's new life in and through us by engaging in daily spiritual practices of prayer, reflecting on Scripture, meditation, commitment to learning conversations with other followers of Jesus. We can say yes to allowing the Holy Spirit to inspire in us a deeper level of commitment to living a Jesus-life style, simplifying our lives, focusing on loving God and our neighbors in daily practical ways. We can develop small mission circles in congregations with people interested in going deeper in prayer, study, and mission actions through relationships in the local community.

Not every Episcopalian is ready for this deeper level of engagement with God's mission. In fact some, frightened by the rapid changes in the world, will move into denial and passionately resist any change. We need to relate compassionately with those who are not yet ready for change. And we need to intentionally nurture the few people in each congregation who sense God's call to a deeper, more holistic life of discipleship with Jesus in this generation.

The question is: will you, will anyone in your congregation be willing to say a costly "yes" to allowing God to birth a new community among you, seeking to live a fresh expression of the inward/outward journey of mission?

On a global level, we can see God birthing new life in the Christian Church and the Anglican Communion, in the midst of great challenges. We have been blessed in this diocese to have a long tradition of active relationships with God's people throughout the world. We will hear more about our mission partnerships during this Convention. Our Friendship Partners in the Diocese of Kumasi in Ghana, West Africa are rejoicing that, with our help and support they have been able to finish their Guest House at the Mampong Babies Home. Four members of our diocese have visited Kumasi in the past year. Deacon Jane Griesbach is hoping to lead a small group on a pilgrimage to Kumasi, Ghana in the coming year. Annie Ryder and friends will be returning to continue our partnership with the Mampong Babies Home. Rebecca and I have been invited by the bishop to come next April to Dedicate and Commission the new Guest House at the Babies Home in honor of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts. Meanwhile, we have parishes across the diocese with growing partnerships with Sudan, Haiti, Tanzania, Liberia, China, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and the Ukraine. In the body of Christ, we need each other as a global church and as the Anglican Communion. We continue to be enriched and challenged by the courageous faith and signs of God at work that we experience in our sisters and brothers in Christ around the world.

The devastating destruction from the 2010 earthquake in Haiti continues to beg for our help. We, as part of the whole Episcopal Church, have committed ourselves to helping rebuild the Cathedral and the many educational and health ministries of the Diocese of Haiti.

In December I will join with the Bishops of New England to visit Haiti and seek to support the clergy and congregations of that suffering diocese. During this coming year, I ask that every congregation take a special initiative to raise funds for Haiti recovery. You may do this as your parish Lenten Offering or you might have a special event to raise money for Haiti. I look forward to announcing at our Diocesan Convention next year the amount that we have together raised to support the rebuilding in Haiti.

As an Anglican Communion, God is birthing among us a call to change our life-styles so that we can care more practically for the gift of God's creation. Many Anglicans who live in the poorest countries are most impacted by the negative results of global warming and climate change. This year, every parish in the Anglican Communion is encouraged to engage in a Lenten Bible Study titled: "AND IT WAS GOOD...". It is available on line and will help us explore what the Bible says about caring for God's creation, including insights from around the Anglican Communion. During this Convention, Stephanie Johnson, our Province 1 Missioner for Energy Stewardship, will help us reflect on specific ways we can change our life-style to contribute to caring for God's creation. The future of our planet depends on our stewardship of God's gift of Creation.

God is birthing new initiatives in the Episcopal Church. You will hear about some of these from our General Convention Deputies in the coming year. Our General Convention next July will continue our conversation about blessing the relationships of same-gender couples. In 2009, the General Convention charged the Standing Committee on Liturgy and Music to develop a theology for same-gender blessings and to collect examples and develop a rite for same-gender blessings. I appointed Rob Hirschfeld to lead a committee from our diocese in making contributions to the work of the Standing Committee and they have sent feedback from our diocese.

It is likely that the General Convention next summer will give us a Trial Service for Blessing Same-Gender Relationships. As part of the Episcopal Church, this diocese has a long tradition of respecting and following the guidance of General Convention. If next summer, our General Convention provides us with a *Rite for Trial Use*, we will encourage parishes who choose to do so, to use the Trial Rites. The Committee headed by Rob Hirschfeld will develop a process to help vestries who desire to use these Trial Rites to have conversation with their congregation in preparation for making their decision to use the Trial Rites.

We recognize that in most congregations there are people who in conscience support same-gender blessings and also some who cannot in conscience support same-gender blessings. As our church moves forward, we will continue to honor and respect the diversity of convictions on this matter. In the House of Bishops, a group of progressive and conservative bishops are developing a document to guide our whole church in honoring and valuing theological minorities. We have conservatives in progressive dioceses and we have progressives in conservative dioceses. Our desire is to continue to value the comprehensive diversity that has been our character as Anglicans. We have always been a church of liberals, moderates, and conservatives, of high church, broad church, and low church. As we move forward, we seek in the whole Episcopal Church and in this diocese to continue to value the differences of theology, recognizing that none of us and no group among us knows the full mind of God or has the definitive interpretation of Scripture. In humility we focus on Christ and let Christ and God's mission hold us together in our differences, as we kneel together to be nourished at God's altar week by week. In humility we will also seek to maintain close and respectful relationships with those in the Anglican Communion and with our Ecumenical partners who differ from the direction discerned by our General Convention. May Christ hold us together for the sake of God's mission.

Later in this Convention we will hear a report about the June 1st tornado that tore through 39 miles of our diocese destroying homes, business, and trees. The Berkshires experienced devastating floods from the hurricane. Yet, out of this time of destruction, compassion has flowed bringing people together to serve our neighbors in need. We have been blessed as a diocese to be part of living God's good news in the middle of these disasters. We have been blessed that Episcopal Relief and Development has been a partner with us in recovery. And we will be called upon to continue to be part of the recovery in our area.

Since we know that we cannot live God's mission unless we are nurtured by our relationship with God, with Scriptures, and with Christian community, we keep encouraging every congregation to develop opportunities for life-long learning and formation for people of all ages. We are grateful to Jill Williams, Scott Seabury, and Jennifer Gregg for leading us in experimenting with having three part-time Spiritual Formation missionaries, one in each corridor of the diocese.

After a season of re-evaluation, we will be shifting from this model to having Jill Williams be the three-quarter time Christian Formation Missioner for the whole diocese, providing resources for people of all ages. She will begin this new ministry in January. She will be available to work with congregations on Sundays and will seek to initiate more opportunities for young people to learn and practice a Christian way of life.

In the Berkshires, the Servant Leadership School, facilitated by Jennifer Gregg, has provided transformational training for people across the region who want to go deeper in their practice of following Jesus. This coming year, this regional initiative will be shared with the wider diocese in two ways. The potential of developing another regional School of Servant Leadership in the Pioneer Valley will be explored, birthed out of the Berkshire experience. Also, Hannah Anderson, as part of the School of Servant Leadership initiative, will be available to consult with congregations across our diocese who have a particular desire to become more innovative and creative in their ministry. We hope that these initiatives can be a catalyst to help congregations discover the new life Christ is seeking to birth in and through them.

Since communication is so crucial in developing and expanding Christian Formation and mission, we will seek to improve our diocesan and parish communications by hiring a part-time Communications Missioner after the first of the year. We look forward to engaging social media more effectively to communicate the Good News of Jesus to people beyond our church buildings and congregations.

We are grateful to the Standing Committee, the Search Committee, and the Transition Committee who are working to help us discern God's guidance for our next bishop and preparing us for our electing Convention next June. As we pray daily for God's guidance in this process, we need to be clear that our primary hope for the future is not in the new bishop, whoever he or she will be. Our primary hope is in God who speaks to us, who births new life in and through us. We need to keep our focus on God, put our trust in God. With gratitude for the way God has blessed and guided this diocese for the past 110 years we are eager to see what God will birth among us in the next chapter of our life as a diocese.

As we continue to walk with Christ and each other through the opportunities and challenges in this season of global and diocesan transition, St. Paul has a word of encouragement for us to embrace.

“Oh, may the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope!” (Romans 15:13 MSG)

May God make it so among us. Amen