

FOURTEENTH

ANNUAL ADDRESS OF THE BISHOP

The Right Reverend Gordon P. Scruton

at the

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTH ANNUAL MEETING

of the Convention of

THE DIOCESE OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

held at

THE SHERATON HOTEL

SPRINGFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

October 24, 2009

“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 may feel free to use excerpts from this address as they deem most helpful. It will be printed in full on the Diocesan Web Site www.diocesewma.org

I encourage making copies to be distributed in the parish and discussed in vestries and small groups.

Bishop's 2009 Address to Convention and the Diocese

This past year, Robert McConnell Hatch, the beloved 4th bishop of Western Massachusetts, died on July 16th, ten days after his 99th birthday. He was called by God to be a bishop at a very difficult time in history. He led this diocese through the tumultuous 1960's, with the divisive Vietnam War, with racial tension and the struggle for civil rights, with the revision of the Book of Common Prayer and with increasing pressure for including women in both lay and ordained leadership of the church. During this time of extraordinary change and conflict, and throughout his life, he was a Christian gentleman whose words and actions were constantly respectful of all. His scholarly mind thought deeply and creatively about the many changes and conflicts of his time and he helped this diocese to respect each other amid differences and to look at the conflicts of the time in the larger perspective of God's vision for the church and the world.

Bishop Hatch did not want the diocese to have a separate Memorial service for him. He asked that we remember him before God when we gathered for Convention after his death. So our Convention Eucharist will be our Diocesan offering of Thanksgiving to God for the life and ministry of Bishop Hatch.

At this Convention we will also thank God for the extraordinary life and musical ministry of Horace Boyer who died this past year. Horace was a member of Grace Church, Amherst, a professor at UMass, Amherst, an author and composer and a major contributor to our Lift Every Voice and Sing II hymnal. Through his national ministry of sharing gospel music from his African-American heritage, Horace helped people experience the spiritual transformation of music and learn to appreciate the value of racial reconciliation in our daily lives as well as our worship life. We will have a diocesan celebration of the life and ministry of Horace Boyer at Grace Church, Amherst on Feb 28th.

This past year we experienced the most significant financial crisis since the Great Depression. Greed and selfish desire for more money and things took priority over the common good. The poor in our nation and around the world have suffered most. This crisis continues to impact the jobs and retirement savings of people in our country and diocese. Some have reflected deeply on the lessons of this collapse and are changing their life-styles and values. Others simply try to perpetuate the priorities that led us into this economic crash without recognition that our American life-style is not sustainable. God has a message for the whole world in the economic collapse if we will pay attention and learn from it. The future God invites us to embrace will require letting go of many habits and things we have treasured. It will also involve discovering new and more sustainable ways of living as Americans and as congregations and dioceses.

Many of our congregations and our Diocesan budget, that depend on income from endowments, experienced significant financial losses this past year. As a diocese we had to cut 10% from our balanced Diocesan Budget passed at the last Convention. Early in the year, under the leadership of Steve Abdow, we began to cut spending. These early actions were extremely important in helping us live within our diminished budget. We tried to keep our focus on the mission Christ has called us to fulfill as we made decisions about budget cuts. Four groups of clergy and laity, including our clergy conference, made prayerful recommendations about what areas of the budget were essential to keep and what areas might be cut with the least impact on our mission. A clear consensus emerged from all the groups identifying areas where there should be no cuts and areas where cuts could be appropriately made without damaging our mission.

As we move into the coming years of ministry, we will need to continue to discover new patterns of ministry that can be sustainable and effective in the midst of continuing economic limitations. God's generous grace empowers Jesus followers around the world to carry on effective ministry in the midst of severe economic limitations. God's generous grace is certainly at work among us in Western Massachusetts. God will guide us to discover new patterns and structures of ministry so that we can live the Gospel of Christ faithfully in this generation.

For several years we have been investing heavily in Bement Camp and Conference Center, seeking to maintain this holy place where young people and adults have experienced transforming Christian community for over sixty years. After Convention last year, we held a Bement Summit in November to outline the challenges and to brainstorm possible options to maintain that ministry.

Unfortunately, changes in government regulations, the continuing cost of deferred maintenance, the changing expectations of campers and the decline in attendance led the Diocesan Council to recognize that we cannot maintain the ministry of Bement as we have known it. In June, after years of prayer, study, investment and effort, the Council, made the decision that we can no longer maintain a diocesan camp at Bement. On October 3rd we gathered to give thanks for the memories and celebrate all the good that God has done in the lives of so many people in that holy place.

Now, the Bement Property Discernment Group is working to develop a recommendation for the wisest stewardship of that resource. We have the opportunity to do something overtly positive with the property. LandVest, our land use consulting group, has provided the Discernment Group with a number of possible alternatives. The goals of the Discernment Group are: 1) to honor the legacy of Mary Bement and 60 years of Camp Bement; 2) Find new use for the land that is consistent with our faith and values; and 3) invest the resources generated by the sale of the property or a conservation easement into creative Christian formation opportunities for new generations of young people and adults of our diocese. It is hoped that by early next year, the Discernment Group will make a recommendation to Diocesan Council about the best way forward with the Bement property. It may take two to three years to reach these goals.

At the same time we have recognized that we could not afford to maintain the Bement property, we have also had to face the reality that we are not able to maintain all our church buildings. "The Church has far too many buildings that have ceased to serve a useful purpose. In the last century, before the days of the automobile, many churches were built too close to one another, and today they are struggling for survival. Often one would suffice where two or three now exist because they are only a few minutes apart by automobile. We must begin to think in terms of combining such churches, having team ministries, or, in cases where budgets are small, having them staffed by clergy who during much of the week are engaged in secular employment. All of this is going to involve some bold and farsighted re-thinking in the near future."

"I would urge all of our people to get over the idea that the Church is a building. It is not a building at all. Instead, a Church is people, and it exists whether they meet in an ecclesiastical structure or in a storefront or in somebody's home. The place of meeting is not all-important and the sooner we accept this the freer we shall be to plan constructively for the future. Small struggling churches located not far from other Episcopal churches, will have to be combined....It is very important that we face this realistically and prepare now for an orderly change instead of drifting planlessly into a future that we are afraid to confront."

These comments about church buildings are a direct quote from the 1969 Convention Address of Bishop Hatch. We continue to face the same issues that Bishop Hatch outlined forty years ago. This past year, we began to talk more openly about the reality that we have more church buildings than we can support.

In January we celebrated with the people of St. John's Worcester as they completed 125 years of faithful ministry in Worcester. Through a prayerful and courageous yearlong discernment process, the people of St. John's came to recognize and accept their lack of energy, money and people to carry on the ministry of the congregation. We grieved with them as they acted on God's call to let go of trying to maintain their congregation and chose to end their ministry and close St. John's.

Now the legacy and ministry of St. John's lives on in the lives of its members who have scattered as apostles, sharing their gifts and experience with congregations they have embraced in the surrounding area. Soon the organ of St. John's will provide music for St. Michael's in Worcester. The people of Grace Church, Oxford sing their hymns every Sunday out of St. John's hymnals. St Luke's Worcester uses the dishes from the St. John's kitchen for their celebrations. Prayer Books and altar hanging from St. John's inspire worship in congregations in Liberia. Hand bells from St. John's ring out at St. Francis, Holden and at Wachusett Regional High School. Neighborhood churches carry on the food pantry that was begun at St. John's. The Iglesia Cristiana Natanael continues to worship at St John's. There is strong likelihood that another congregation will soon be renting the St. John's building with the possibility of purchase. We have seen how the grace of God can work through the ending and redeployment of congregations. God is doing new things and providing streams of hope in the desert of change and loss.

We also learned that closing a congregation requires an enormous amount of time, energy and money on the part of a congregation and diocesan staff. It is expensive and time consuming to maintain empty church buildings when there is no congregation there to oversee those responsibilities. The architecture and real estate market make it difficult to sell church buildings. In the future, closing a congregation will impact all the parishes of the diocese through shared expenses in our diocesan budget.

The closing of Bement and St. John's and the impact of the financial crisis raised strategic questions about the future of our ministry in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts. In May, I sent a Bishop's Pastoral Mission Letter to our diocese inviting us to reflect on the sobering challenges we are facing and at the same time inviting us to explore the creative new opportunities for ministry that God's Spirit is opening for us in our new situation. The letter has generated much discussion across the diocese.

Berkshire County wardens and clergy have gathered for three Summits to explore moving from isolated ministry to cooperative ministries. Churches in the South Berkshires are experimenting with new creative ways of working together. The Adams and North Adams congregations have entered into a covenant to discern how God is calling them to walk together. They worship as one congregation twice a month. In North Worcester, clergy and wardens have also held three Summits to explore possibilities of sharing ministry in that region. Other congregations across the diocese are beginning to initiate conversations about ways of sharing ministry. These conversations are a grass roots movement of the Holy Spirit. We will need to keep nurturing these regional conversations and creative partnerships as the context out of which God will guide us to new configurations of ministry in this new mission situation.

This past year, nine of our congregations (along with three congregations from the Diocese of Connecticut) embarked on a three-year mission discernment process with Church Innovations called a Partnership for a Missional Church. Already the congregations involved are beginning to discover new perspectives on their ministries. The learning from the Partnership process is impacting the way we do ministry across the diocese. Other congregations are exploring Fresh Expressions from the Church of England. Still others are developing their own creative approaches to ministry in our changing situation. Again, the Spirit of God is doing significant new things among us.

In 2002 we were one of the first dioceses in The Episcopal Church to initiate an Alleluia Fund, in response to a Resolution from General Convention encouraging dioceses to raise venture capital for new mission through an offering during the Easter Season. In the first year, \$61,078 was raised to build a Habitat house in Northampton. In 2003, to support the diocesan commitment to plant a new congregation within our borders, the Council voted to give 90% of the Alleluia Fund to help start a new congregation in Southwick. 10% would be given to mission overseas in the Anglican Communion.

For the last seven years, the generous gifts of 2,005 people across our diocese have given over \$332,000 to the Alleluia Fund. The Alleluia Fund Golf Tournament has raised over \$30,000. All these gifts have made it possible for Southwick to begin and grow as a congregation. Together we have also supported the ministry of our Anglican partners in both the Diocese of Liberia and the Diocese of Kumasi in Ghana.

At our Convention last year, Southwick became a Mission of the Diocese. As the Alleluia Funds have declined the local tithes and offerings from Southwick have grown. Next year, Southwick expects to be a self-supporting congregation. God has been at work in dramatic and persistent ways to bring unchurched people to discover the gift of a relationship with Christ in Christian community through the Southwick Community Episcopal Church.

At this Convention we celebrate all that has been accomplished through the Alleluia Fund over these past seven years. Because the new mission in Southwick has moved toward sustainability and offerings to the Alleluia Fund have declined over the years, Council voted in September to end the Alleluia Fund this year. There is still a need to raise venture capital for new mission projects. Perhaps, in the future, a new vehicle for new mission funding will emerge. Now, we celebrate with gratitude all that God has accomplished through our gifts to the Alleluia Fund.

For almost twenty years we have constantly heard about conflicts and divisions within the Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church. Yet, beneath our public divisions, there are many things we Anglicans and Episcopalians all agree on. Beginning in 1984, the Anglican Consultative Council has continued to articulate a unifying vision of Five Marks of Mission for all Anglicans. The last three Lambeth Conferences have supported the importance of the Five Marks of Mission in the Anglican Communion. At our General Convention last July, conservatives, moderates and progressives voted to affirm the Five Marks of Mission. I believe God is longing for us to work and pray together to live into these Five Marks of Mission that unite us.

The Mission of the church is the mission of Christ:

To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom

To teach, baptize and nurture new believers

To respond to human need by loving service

To seek to transform unjust structures of society

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

It is my hope that every congregation will take time to reflect on these Five Marks of Mission during the coming year. Each congregation is called to implement these Five Marks of Mission that unite us as Anglicans and Episcopalians. Like the Ten Commandments, we don't get to choose two marks and ignore three others. All Five Marks of Mission are reflected in Scripture and in our Baptismal Covenant. We are called to embody all Five Marks of Mission in our personal lives and congregations. None of us will fulfill them perfectly. We will always have room to grow. Christ is eager to work through our living of these Marks of Mission to transform both the Church and the world in this and every generation.

Over the lunch table you will be encouraged to tell stories about how you and each of your congregations are living these Five Marks of Mission.

As the people of Israel lived through a threatening time of political and economic decline, God spoke a word to them: "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) That was God's wisdom and promise through the prophet Isaiah.

In the last verses of the Bible, Jesus echoes the word of Isaiah. Jesus says, "Look, I am making all things new." (Revelation 21:5) In the middle of all the changes we are experiencing as a nation, as a global community and as a diocese, God is at work. Our mission is to recognize the new life God is seeking to birth out of this chaotic time and to courageously follow God's guidance. This is not a new message for our generation, but the call of God to every generation.

The concluding words of Bishop Hatch's last Convention address in 1969 are as appropriate for us today as they were for 1969. He wrote, "As one looks into the future one sees continuing change and conflict. There is really no escape from this because it is part of the context of our time. No institution that has any significance can escape it. Furthermore, no one knows just where we are going or how it will all turn out. This is true of our society and it is also true of our institutions. We are called upon to live in a period of great uncertainty. However, from the Christian point of view, there is good in this. It shows us that we are not the masters of our fate and that we cannot control and manipulate the future. Christian faith has always taught that the future is in the control of God, not man. Too often in the past we have thought of it as being the other way around and we have shoved God into the background as we tried to control the future ourselves. Now we see that this cannot be so. The very unrest in these times, the very conflict and change, compel us to recognize that God is in charge and that the future belongs to God alone....Only with such trust can we enter the future calmly, hopefully, and without fear. Only with such faith can we go about the difficult and often painful task of building a society and a Church that will reflect far more fully the teachings and the spirit and the will of our Lord Jesus Christ." Amen.

