

135<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Diocese of Western Michigan, 2009

Convention Address

I want to begin by getting the obvious out of the way by simply naming that the budget you will receive at this convention is inadequate to fund our mission and hopes. This is nothing new for us as the people of God in Western Michigan, and while I must name *what is*, I also want to name what *can be*. Most of you heard *what is* from me at the pre-convention meetings throughout the diocese. So at this time I only want to flesh out a few things.

Over the years that I have been here diocesan staffing has taken a hit. We have eliminated a communications and technology position, we have reduced the diocesan secretary position to half time, in 2006 we reduced the business manager to half time (fortunately this position was reinstated as full time following that), we reduced the Canon to the Ordinary's salary in an administrative restructuring, and staff was not given a cost of living adjustment in 2005 and 2006, for half of the year in 2007, and for this year the COLA will begin for staff in August. The total amount saved because of the staffing cuts is \$131,407.89.

When I spoke to you at the pre-convention meetings, I told you that when the staff does not receive a cost of living adjustment, they are donating that amount of money to balance your budget, and I watched many of you nod in agreement. At this time I want the following staff people to stand:

Bill Spaid

Anne Reed

Gennie Callard

Tammy Mazure

Mary McGuire

The total amount the staff has contributed to your budget so far is approximately \$50,000. Please join me in thanking them.

Again, this year, the Finance Committee of the Diocese, recommended to the Executive Council cuts in program and support. At the pre-convention meetings many of you asked that the budget begin to reflect what could not be funded, and some of you made suggestion about ways to format the budget to give us a clearer picture of finances. However, time did not permit us to make those additions and changes to the budget, but let me give you some examples of what we can look forward to as we live more fully into the apportionment canon: We will begin to be able to respond to requests for assistance and to develop relationships throughout the world. – Bishop relationships were built at the Lambeth Conference last summer. Those relationships have resulted in invitations to ministry – cries for help.

- Bishop Martin Breytenbach, Diocese of St. Mark the Evangelist in the Province of Southern Africa – Church is growing, need is great, unemployment at 60%. Please come and see so you will know how your brother and sister Anglicans are suffering, and yet are able to grow the Body of Christ.
- Bishop Mark van Koevering (Grand Rapids native), Diocese of Niassa, Mozambique, Province of Southern Africa, new congregations being formed – people knocking on the bishop’s door asking him to establish congregations in their towns and farming communities, a great deal of the population with HIV/AIDS, poverty, not nearly enough clergy. Join us in ministry to the people of Mozambique.
- Bishop Bijaykumar Nayak, Diocese of Phubani, CNI (India) – churches being burned, Christians being killed, 13 from his diocese. We need your prayers and support. Come see what is happening and tell the world.
- Bishop Julio Holguine, Diocese of the Dominican Republic, Province of the Episcopal Church. (More about that later in this address.)

As we live into full participation by giving, we will be able to more fully subsidize

- Our Vocational Discernment Program.
- Deacon aspirants in our diocesan Oakerhater School for Ministry.
- Seminary and other costs for those studying for the priesthood.
- More fully support struggling parishes in their journey toward greater health.
- Provide incentives for parishes to experiment with creative and innovative ministry.
- Establish a more formalized way of training lay leadership for service in mission and the Church.

- Domestic and foreign mission trips.
- Save an appropriate amount of money for your next bishop search.
- Give our full 21% to The Episcopal Church, for the support of programming, providing resources, having a voice in the worldwide Anglican Communion and providing for mission and missionaries to proclaim the Gospel as we have received it.
- Live into the dreams we can dream for the sake of God's mission in Western Michigan and the world.

In order for us to accomplish all that we can for the sake of the Gospel, we must be able to develop "community eyes." That is, eyes which see the bigger picture. Eyes which look beyond our individual parishes and focus more clearly on how we are the Body of Christ in the largest sense of that concept.

This year our theme for Convention is "Living into Wholeness: Healthy Bodies." Of course we all know what that means for us as individuals. Our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, and therefore God calls us to provide a healthy place for the Holy Spirit to dwell. I will not presume to speak for you, but as I step out of the shower every morning I catch a glimpse of this person whose face I recognize, but whose body, I'm sure belongs to someone else. – I know it's my own fault - the result of choosing to eat what I *want* and do what I *want*, rather than what I *need* to be the healthiest temple of the Holy Spirit I can be.

I need you to be able to see with "community eyes" how we are the Body of Christ and *collectively* the temple of the Holy Spirit. I need you to look beyond the individual parish body to the larger Body of the Diocese – the Church in the world. When you break a bone, or cut a finger, or are stung by a bee, your whole body recognizes the pain. When you are elated because you accomplished something, or engaged in something pleasurable (like convention), your whole body recognizes the joy – the pleasure. We are told by St. Paul that it is the same with the Body of Christ.

But the whole of the Body of Christ cannot be healthy if the individuals or individual parishes choose what they *want* over what is *needed* by the larger Body. When that happens it is like catching a glimpse of ourselves in the mirror and recognizing the face of the Church on a body other than the Body of Christ. In order for us to be the healthiest Body of Christ – Temple of the Holy Spirit, we must begin to develop "community eyes." - Eyes which see us as related – eyes which can focus beyond your place of worship to see the need in other parts of

our diocesan Body of Christ and the Body of Christ in the world, and also to see the joy and accomplishment in other parts of the diocesan Body of Christ and the Body of Christ in the world.

I have been working at changing the culture of this diocese from a culture of parochialism to a culture which sees with “community eyes” who we can be if we move from wants to needs – if we understand we can accomplish so much more together by combining our people, talents and financial resources than we can by choosing to work separately and even in opposition to. To call you to unity for the sake of mission and ministry is my job as your bishop.

As a diocese we are moving in that direction. – I rejoice in that because our belief that we are the Body of Christ demands it of us. Rejoice with me in looking at the decisions made, which prove we are developing “community eyes:”

- We agreed that we would participate in cutting world poverty in half by the year 2015 by passing a resolution that each individual Episcopalian, each parish in Western Michigan, and our diocesan budget would give 0.7% to the Millenium Development Goals. – “Community eyes” seeing our sisters and brothers throughout the world and desiring to work at eliminating poverty and all that goes with it. (This diocese gave \$86,400 to Episcopal Relief and Development in 2007, and \$101,400 for the 1<sup>st</sup> nine months of 2008. Out of the 15 dioceses of the Province of the Midwest, we are the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest provider of funds to E.R.D, with only the Diocese of Chicago giving more.)
- We have begun to organize mission trips to Mississippi and New Orleans as a diocesan community. – “Communiunity eyes” seeing the need and the Body responding to the needs of fellow citizens in the U.S., bringing us together with each other and Episcopalians from around the nation.
- The Bishop’s Mission trip bringing youth together from around the diocese to join forces for mission work. – “Community eyes” – young people expanding their view of the Body and serving that Body at the same time.
- The community’s decision to pass an apportionment canon to ensure resources for all of the Body as a diocese. – “Community eyes” seeing that appropriate giving to the diocese is a way of providing for those among us who cannot afford staff, need intervention, want help in various aspects of growth, mission, and ministry and provides funding for

the larger Body of the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Communion, and mission to those who have not heard the Good News.

- The community's decision to pass a canon to restore congregations to health. – "Community eyes," able to provide a mechanism through which I and the Standing Committee can intervene in the life of a congregation and restore it to health, so as not to lose its presence in the community in which it was founded.
- Cooperation in reviewing, as a larger Body, Confirmation, Reception, and Reaffirmation and ways that we can come together as the larger Body to provide opportunities for the People of God in this diocese to experience God's transforming love and be commissioned for missionary work in the world. "Community eyes" – seeing that our people need to see and experience the larger Body beyond their parish.
- Through deployment, new clergy bring new eyes to assist us in seeing the church differently and bringing us a new perspective.

We are on the move, but we have more moving to do in order to live into being a diocesan community. We will have opportunities to practice using "community eyes" at this convention as I call for a resolution to begin developing a partnership with the other Episcopal Dioceses of Michigan and the Diocese of the Dominican Republic. I will get to that.

In his book *New Monasticism*, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove says, "Almost everywhere I go these days people agree that something is wrong in American Christianity. Whether I'm talking to Pentecostals or Presbyterians, Democrats or Republicans, academics in a coffee shop or neighbors on their front porch, there seems to be a consensus on this: the church in America isn't living up to what it's supposed to be. Somehow we've lost our way." (p. 1) Wilson-Hartgrove's statement that somehow we've lost our way" rings even more true following my mission discovery trip to the Dominican Republic with the other bishops of the lower peninsula of Michigan. Pictures from that trip have been appearing on the screen.

Deacon Beth Tomczak accompanied me. We were there for a life-changing six days. I came home from that trip saying to myself, "I want what they have." And, while I believe that "the Church in America has somehow lost its way," I even more firmly believe, after my experience of the Diocese of the Dominican Republic, that we can find it again by reclaiming the radical message of the

Gospel of Jesus. I am witness to the Church alive and well and living fully into a radical Christian life – a life in the world, but not of the world.

I believe that the truth of Wilson-Hartgrove's statement does not have to be true for us as the Diocese of Western Michigan. I believe we can be pioneers in finding our way again in reclaiming and living the radical countercultural message of the Gospel. I know this because we are in the Easter Season, alleluia!, and, "Even if the church is the dead and broken body of Christ, God can resurrect it." Sometimes "It's hard for the church to remember God's resurrection power." (p. 20)

And yet, in the midst of the truth that somehow "we have lost our way," God presents us with opportunities, with adventures for the sake of God's Mission to reconcile all people to each other and to God. I believe God is presenting us with such an opportunity – such an adventure. I believe God is calling us to community beyond individual parishes, and beyond our diocese. I believe God has been preparing us for resurrection in this moment in our history as a people who are the Body of Christ.

I am going to ask you to participate in this call and moment in history – in this opportunity and call to an adventure – in this gift of relationship which can bring us more fully alive in Jesus, by passing a resolution which will start us on a journey which will help us to focus less on our individual wants and more on the needs of the world, by partnering with the dioceses Eastern Michigan, Michigan, and the Dominican Republic as a way of seeing with "community eyes" the larger Church as the risen body of Jesus, and as a way of giving and receiving gifts from one another.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The more genuine and deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us." (p. 25) The kind of partnership I am talking about can move us more genuinely and deeply into community, the Body of Christ, and move us more clearly into the work of Jesus, the only thing that is vital between us. I believe it is time for us to do this.

After years of focus on internal matters and crises, we are at the wonderful place of deciding how to live the rest of our lives as a diocesan community.

The book, *New Monasticism*, which I mentioned earlier, describes the way that God has called people in all times to create communities living lives of prayer and study, living with and engaging in ministry with the poor. It is going on today as people come together to dedicate their lives to Christian community and the poor. Wilson-Hartgrove comments on monasticism through the ages when he states: "... sometimes you have to relocate in order to really see the world and reimagine your role in it. That's why Anthony went to the desert and Francis took to the streets. They knew something was wrong with the church, but they couldn't see any alternatives from where they were. Their location blinded them, holding their imaginations captive. The monastics needed to see the world from a different place if they were going to see it anew. So they moved. And when they did they started movements. The renewal of the church depended on relocation." (p. 77) "Patterns of life we learned (in the places we know best) hold us captive, making it harder to imagine other possibilities." (pp. 81-82)

The Diocese of the Dominican Republic is part of the Episcopal Church. Our Presiding Bishop is their Presiding Bishop. And while they are part of the Episcopal Church they are an emerging country, struggling to provide for the basic needs of their people.

Beth and I visited about 25 locations while we were there. I was impressed mostly by the joy of the people in the midst of poverty. I was overwhelmed by the welcome we received everywhere we went ("this is your house," they would say), and I was touched by the hospitality offered by people who had hardly enough for themselves. I also noticed how the Episcopal Church in the Dominican Republic looked to the future. "This is what we're doing, this is what we are going to do."

The mission strategy was to plant churches in the poorest neighborhoods and rural areas. Church buildings were often shacks that were once used as residences, but the people began schools in them to educate their children, clinics to care for the medical needs of the people, homes for children abandoned on the streets, places to meet for people to organize their towns or communities, building homes for people who have no homes.

When my wife asked me to tell her about my trip to the Dominican Republic, as I spoke my eyes filled with tears, not because of the poverty and the fruits of that poverty, but because I saw the Church **alive** – the Risen Jesus working with the poor, healing the sick, and proclaiming the kingdom of God. Like Anthony and Francis, I relocated, if only for six days, and I was able to imagine other possibilities. I was able to see the church differently. -- It was a gift. I want the people I love to have that gift as well. I want you to have the opportunity to see what I saw and experience what I experienced. Not just because of my love for you, but also for the love of the church and her renewal.

Someone asked me to describe the best experience I had there. It was an easy question to answer. It was in a barrio about an hour and a half from Santo Domingo. The name of the town I cannot recall. As our small bus began down the street on which the church we were visiting was located, we could already hear the people singing – men and women, young and old, children joyfully singing at the top of their lungs a song of welcome. They filled the little church and spilled out into the street – all holding candles to invite us in. They parted like the Red Sea to make a pathway for us – toothless smiles, wrinkled hands throwing flower petals over us, the bright eyes of children staring at us, arms extended to embrace us with all sincerity – “this is your house.” We were seated on some folding chairs as the people pressed in and we listened to the songs of children and heard the witnesses of adults telling us what God has done for them – healing them from disease and giving them the gift of joy in the midst of poverty. (When was the last time you heard a witness in your church?) Then we walked through the streets to where they were building a church, the children maneuvering themselves to hold our hands and to hold the hands of the children who were holding our hands, as if some wonderful gift could be received through a handholding chain. -- People excited to show us the progress they have made on building a church; kids excited to show us the school which is not there yet, but will be, and giddy at the thought that they would be getting an education.

Do they need us? Yes! - Medical and dental mission trips, groups to build those churches, schools and clinics, people to teach English, projects for clean drinking water, and all sorts of opportunities.

Do we need them? You bet! Given the state of the church in America, I believe we need them more than they need us.

Therefore, I am calling on the Resolutions Committee to bring before this convention a resolution to form a Task Force under the direction of the Rev. Beth Tomczak, deacon assigned to call our diocese into accountability for the Millenium Development Goals, and Dr. Henry Fulton, lay leader in this diocese and parishioner at St. John's, Mt. Pleasant, to begin to explore a partnership relationship between the Dioceses of Western Michigan, Eastern Michigan, Michigan, and the Dominican Republic. This Task Force will coordinate its work with the mission conferences to be held in our diocese.

There are some practical reasons for the Dominican Republic. First is cost. The Dominican Republic is affordable to reach. The second is organizational. American missionaries already working in the Dominican have everything organized on that end, and have mission work and programs all ready to go when groups arrive. Third, the Diocese of the Dominican is interested not only in partnerships with dioceses, but also in fostering parish to parish relationships. Fourth, they are able to offer safe mission trips for youth. Fifth, they are willing to exchange youth and seminarians, deacons and priests, and groups of laity with special interests. Sixth, they are interested in partnership – in a developing a learning experience. They are looking for relationships which recognize the gifts they have to offer as well as the gifts we have to bring.

This resolution will not interfere with other relationships you may already have developed outside this country and wish to continue. Instead it is an opportunity to help us to focus with “community eyes” on the bigger picture. It is an opportunity to provide us with a way to be relocated and know that God is at work in the people and places that society has given up on. (p. 85) It is an opportunity to renew the Church in this diocese. It is an opportunity to know what it means to receive more than we can give. It is an opportunity to see our own situation with new eyes. It is an opportunity to combine resources and meet needs at home and beyond our borders. It is an opportunity for us to unite for the sake of common mission and ministry. It is an invitation to stop going to church and start being the church.

I'm looking forward to an adventure with you.