

DIOCESE OF WESTERN MICHIGAN CONVENTION ADDRESS
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I remember my first visit to this white haired woman I now visit twice a month. I arrived at her office on the lower level of the Nazareth Center in Kalamazoo and knocked tentatively on the partly opened door. She was already standing and greeted me with a smile. I had been in spiritual direction for many years before, so I knew what I was looking for.

After greeting me, she invited me to sit and she lit a candle to signify the beginning of our spiritual direction session. “Would you like to pray or should I?” she asked. What would become our pattern was established. I always allow Elizabeth to pray, but she continues to give me the choice.

My first words to her were something like this: “I’m not looking for a director to hold my hand. I can’t stand to be coddled. That just keeps me from examining myself. It lets me rest in my sinfulness. I’m looking for a director who is not afraid to challenge me; someone who won’t let me get away with things. I propose we try this for a few sessions and then we can both decide whether or not this is working.” Elizabeth agreed. That was five years ago.

I still tentatively knock on the partly open door. Elizabeth is genuinely glad to see me. She laughs and gives me a hug. “I’ve read about you in the paper this week, I’ve been praying for you. – I saw the diocese in the news again, I been praying for you. – I’ve read an article that connects with your issue. Here’s a copy. I’ve been praying for you.” The candle is lit. Elizabeth asks whether or not I want to pray. She prays, and following the moment of silence after the prayer, the challenging begins always tempered with true concern for me or for the Diocese of Western Michigan. She is a gift to us both. Her white hair, a symbol of spiritual wisdom she has accumulated over the years, her easy laughter, a tribute to the joy of knowing God intimately, walking with the Jesus of the Gospels, and listening intently to the Spirit.

A recurring theme for me in spiritual direction is wanting to fix things. It is my nature, like wanting to fix the diocese by willing change to happen. One of her gems of wisdom in response to me is, “Don’t feed it. Don’t fix it. Don’t fix it. Just name it.”

This convention address is an opportunity for me to name what I observe in our life together. My naming is based on my role as bishop – the one who visits every parish and is available to any who have questions for me to answer and observations for me to hear. With God’s grace, and the voice of Elizabeth in my ear, I am slowly but surely moving away from feeding, fighting, & fixing and moving toward just naming things for you to do with as you choose. I will name some things about our life together as a diocese, and some things about me that you should know.

First, about our life together as a diocese. As a diocese we have lived into the following signs of health:

- Continued financial transparency.
- Bishop’s pilgrimage with youth.

- Vocational Discernment program.
- Oakerhater School and its expansion
- CoM working on gifts discernment.
- CoM listening hearts retreat – discernment for people in parishes – life changes
- Vocare program – Cori Phillips, president of Vocare International.
- MDG's in budget
- Stewardship in September.
- Parish leadership Workshops (Feb. 2 and 9 next year).
- Ministries in Education gathering and Sabbath retreat for those whose ministry is working with children and youth. The Dioceses of Michigan and Eastern Michigan joined us for this event.
- Camp attendance continues to increase.
- Gennie Callard serves as Province V youth ministries coordinator. Mary Perrin in a leadership role in Province V childrens' ministry
- Holy Spirit is growing and going well – new people and new opportunities for ministry keep presenting themselves – Holy Spirit is becoming self sufficient.
- Living Stones helpful to them and us.
- Ordination of deacon and priest for Grace Sudanese.
- Deacons' Camp scholarships to underserved children (deacons discern in community, name the diocesan outreach and lead us into it.)
- Increased giving to the Episcopal Church 1%/yr until we reach our goal.
- Setting aside money for Lambeth and General Convention.
- Not using investment principle for the first time in a decade and a half.
- Child care at Convention enabling young parents to participate.
- Consulting team joining with the consulting team of Diocese of Michigan for mutual training.
- Living into full communion with Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by using ordained Lutheran pastors for priestly ministries in our parishes.
- Staff visitations – help you to know us and us to know you.
- Dedicated staff overworking on your behalf.
- Majority of our parishes are growing and engaging in important gospel ministries.
- Each staff meeting begins with each of us naming those things for which we are grateful in the diocese (often you and your supportive efforts are named).
- Bill Fleener, Jr. gives selflessly of his legal expertise in his role as my chancellor. He willingly and generously extends his gifts to the diocesan community.
- Ken Ried continues to offer himself as a counselor to Episcopalians who choose to use his gifts.
- Committees and commissions which are up and running and working for our common good.
- The Parishes in Partnership committee carried out your charge to them with great dedication and passion visiting Vestries throughout the diocese seeking your feedback and answering your questions. A tremendous amount of work under the able leadership of the Rev. Pam Miller.

All of this speaks to our growing in health and community as a diocese. However, there are some factors of dis-ease that I also must name:

- Some of our parishes are in serious trouble: declining attendance, movement from full to part time ordained ministry, supplementing budgets from dwindling investment principle.
- There is either an unwillingness or inability to understand that in a diocese we are responsible for each other.
- Some approach pre-convention meetings and diocesan convention with fear and anger, often based on assumptions not founded in fact.
- Some parishes standing on solid ground have not grasped that from their position of strength they are able to throw the life line to their drowning sister parishes by providing resources through the Diocesan Center.
- Negativity and rumors continue to emerge. Negativity has the power to infect us all and keep us from partnering together for mission and ministry. Rumors, not based in fact, serve the evil one in ways that destroy community.
- We have trouble living into the decisions we make as a convention. Resolutions are passed, often unanimously, without taking them to heart and putting them into action. Word and deed often do not match.
- Diocesan staffing continues to be below par. The greatest loss being Congregational development, at a critical time in the life of many of our small parishes.
- Anxious or warring congregations are sapped of their energy and unable to grow.

We need to build on our health in order to overcome our dis-ease. I believe this can be accomplished by seeing ourselves as interdependent in community and by focusing on the gospel. I live in hope. In the time between this convention and next, I will invite the diocese into conversation about our vision statement and ask for your input into where your passion and energy lie and what you would be excited enough about to put your money into.

Now, I will name some things about me:

- I will continue to see that our giving to the Episcopal Church increases by 1% a year until we have reached our full giving. Your top priority from special convention is my top priority.
- I will continue to confront rumors and investigate incorrect assumptions when they come to my attention.
- I will continue to work with motivated parishes and people. While not neglecting the unmotivated. The staff and I continue to welcome your invitations to extra visitations, retreat leading, etc. I believe it is time and energy well spent.
- I am thrilled by the quality of clergy seeking positions in our diocese. I will continue to seek clergy who are spiritually grounded and centered, and who are able and willing to build bridges between me and my staff and the people of the diocese so that, in partnership, we can move forward. I welcome excellent clergy to join the community of healthy clergy who are already partnering for ministry.
- I will try my best to assign the best motives to parishes and people until circumstances prove otherwise.
- I will continue to be at prayer on your behalf.

- I will continue, along with my staff, to work tirelessly for the health of our diocese because I believe God has called me and them to this work.
- I will continue to delight in your successes as missionary outposts of the diocese as well as our successes as a diocesan community called by God to do Gospel work.
- I will continue to knock on that partly opened door, watch the candle being lit, listen to the prayer, and seek the wisdom of one who is ahead of me in her spiritual journey. It is what grounds me in prayer and gives me the courage to do the work God has set before me.
- I will try my darnedest not to feed, fight, or fix, but to name what I observe in our life together.

You have power, People of God. The power you hold is eternal – of the Spirit. Be in touch with that power, which dispels fear and anger. Keep the Vision and the Gospel on the table before you as you move through this convention. Be who you are and claim who God has called us to be together. I get to name what I see. You get to decide this day, tomorrow, and into the future what you want for our life together. May God bless your efforts.