

Convention Address

October 8, 2010

I want to begin this morning by expressing my gratitude to a number of people.

First, thank you to the people of St. Paul's on the Plains for your gracious hospitality, especially to Jim Haney, JoAnn Griffin (the Chair of this convention), and her assistant, Bobby Rodgers. And congratulations on celebrating 100 years of ministry in Lubbock and beyond.

I would like to publicly thank my office staff. This is a great team – talented, dedicated, professional, and fun. They understand that their role is to facilitate ministry within and beyond this diocese. They do it well. I am very fond of them.

Thank you, Carolyn Hearn, Anna Mora, and Nancy Igo.

I want to acknowledge and recognize those who lead some of our diocesan supported ministries: Jamie Goldston, Director of Quarterman Ranch; Renee Haney, Director of Youth Ministries; Pat Russell of Lubbock and Gary Sanford of San Angelo, campus ministry chaplains; Bernardo Martinez and Josie Rose, Hispanic Ministry missionaries; and Katy Hoskins and Todd Baxley, who direct our Outreach Camps.

Several people have finished their terms on committees and boards: Bobby Crues, after 5 years on the Board of Trustees; Allan Conkling, Linda Kelly, David Mossbarger, and Jim Brown after 3 years on the Executive Council; and Dede Ballou and Leon Swift after 3 years on the Standing Committee. Let's express our gratitude for their service.

Lots of people make sacrificial offerings of their time and talent in and through this diocese every year. There are a few that I would like to recognize. First, you may be aware that a number of canonical changes will be presented to you tomorrow regarding Title IV. I know the canons are not exactly inspirational, but putting this together took hard work and good judgment on the part of two people in particular: Betty Gilmore and Tom Choate.

Second. Quarterman Ranch has spent the last year in two separate discernment processes for vision: one involving diocesan wide supporters, and the other involving Amarillo civic leaders. The same person chaired both processes. He is the same person who chairs the Quarterman Board. He is committed to the mission of the Church, and he knows how to exercise leadership: Cliff Craig.

And finally, the bull rider. It goes without saying that a bull rider needs to recognize instantly what needs to happen next. A bull rider needs to anticipate what might happen two or three moves down the line. Perhaps that explains why the President of the Standing Committee is able to offer such wisdom as he does; he was a bull rider. Now one might assume that his political instincts are driven by survival (stay on top the bull for 8 seconds). But that would be wrong. He is guided by his faith: Leon Swift.

A year ago at our diocesan convention, I named a few “initial priorities” for the year 2010. One priority was to establish a visioning task force to discern the vision and mission of this diocese for the next few years. Eighteen people were chosen to participate in this process, selected primarily from elected positions in the diocese. I chose a consultant to facilitate our process, an experienced consultant from Atlanta, Georgia – a friend of mine, named DaAnna Stringer. We met on four Saturdays over the course of 6 months.

Today I would like to report on the work of this visioning task force beginning with what we determined to be our Core Values. We determined four Core Values – principles that we will not give up or violate.

Liturgy and Sacred Space. Worship is at the top of the list. Reverence, Music, Beauty, Mystery, a sense of the Sacred, Common Prayer – these are the images and experiences which surfaced as we discerned the core values of Episcopalians in Northwest Texas. All ministry, all outreach, all program, all we do flows from our worship of God.

Scripture, Reason, and Tradition. We value the historic Anglican understanding of discernment and authority. We read the Sacred Text, using our God given reason, in the light of our Tradition.

Sacramental Expression. Mindful that sacraments are outward, visible signs of God's grace, we encounter God's grace in the Sacraments of the Church, as well as in God's creation.

Community. Episcopalians in Northwest Texas are relational people. As living members of the mystical Body of Christ, we value the community and connectedness expressed in the Holy Eucharist, within the diocese, and within our respective communities.

There are four other areas where we would like to stimulate progress – four areas we would like to claim as core values, but are reluctant to claim so by consensus. We have named these as part of our Envisioned Future. Our Envisioned Future includes the following (in no particular order):

Diversity. It is true that historically our tradition has been characterized by diversity of theological perspective and spiritual expression. From our beginnings we were more inclined to common prayer than we were to agreed-upon doctrine. It is in our Anglican DNA. And it remains true that in our diocese we see a range of theological perspectives; in that sense we are diverse. In fact, we value it, and consider it to be a gift – not a problem. However, we cannot yet claim ethnic diversity (nor can many traditions). Having said that, I can remember a banner outside an Austin Presbyterian Church which read: “Intentionally Diverse.”

Spiritual Formation. The Book of Common Prayer, the pattern of life it offers, weekly celebrations of the Holy Eucharist, practices from prayer, to study, to hospitality, to stewardship, to outreach – all fall under the heading of Formation. Last year at this annual convention I suggested that there is a deep hunger in the world for some spiritual connection with God, and that there is a desire to move from academic classes about God to practices leading to awareness of God's presence. And we were introduced to such practices as art, and Taize music, and writing icons, and praying with icons, and Sign Chi Do, and Centering Prayer.

There was not a consensus on the Task Force that Spiritual Formation is a Core Value yet, but more so, a key part of our Envisioned Future. I would like to note that this Fall YOU initiated separate retreats with Jane Tomaine, and Brother Abraham Newsome (both operating out of the Benedictine tradition), and a Centering Prayer retreat with Deacon Art Goolsbee, as well as the Icon Workshop next month with Peter Pearson.

Outreach. This is another category which is highly valued – some would say a core value. It's difficult to measure this. As a parish priest, it did not take long for me to learn that individuals in the parish were giving sacrificially of their time, talent, and resources – outside the Church. As living members of the Body of Christ, I suspect they consider it outreach. And the community of faith offered numerous outreach ministries in the name of the Church – some labor intensive, and others, monetary offerings. Along with that, a significant portion of Apportionment goes to outreach. So outreach is more than a line item on the budget. The Episcopal Church in Northwest Texas is practicing outreach.

Having said that, there are two visible ministries which we expect to initiate or expand – two ministries which I anticipate will both unite the diocese in purpose, and take us beyond ourselves. First, Quarterman Ranch is developing a mission plan which will include significant life-changing outreach in Northwest Texas. And second, the new companion relationship with the Diocese of the Dominican Republic will provide opportunities for mission trips to the Dominican. I will say more about both momentarily.

Stewardship. Out of 100 domestic dioceses in the Episcopal Church, the Diocese of Northwest Texas consistently ranks about tenth in per capita giving. Without question, we have many sacrificial givers within our diocese. It remains true that we need to continue to teach the practice of stewardship.

There was much discussion and energy around the financial resources of our diocese. We do seek to strengthen financially our congregations, to compensate our clergy in line with neighboring dioceses, to afford graduating seminarians, to pay our full asking to the Episcopal Church, to move Quarterman Ranch out of survival and more into mission.

Diversity, Spiritual Formation, Outreach, and Stewardship are areas in which we seek growth – highly valued areas which are part of our Envisioned Future. Now I want to say a few words about the budget which we will present. We strived to align our appropriations with our vision and goals. In other words, the budget is driven by mission; not the other way around.

The Task Force discerned – with consensus – that the most pressing need in this diocese is to strengthen our congregations, and you will see that emphasized in this budget.

After working with the Standing Committee, the Trustees of the Diocese, the Executive Council, and the Budget Committee, we are proposing to this convention a 3 year plan. The Trustees agreed to make contributions from our diocesan endowments in amounts beyond the standard spend rate. \$50,000 beyond the norm will be contributed each year for three years from diocesan endowments, and likewise \$25,000 per year will be contributed to support Quarterman Ranch.

In the 2011 Budget you will see the following. First, we are proposing a reduction in your apportionment to 17%. That is a 4% reduction from 2 years ago. It will be at each congregation's discretion as to how to use those extra funds – whether for increasing clergy salaries, funding youth programs, advertising locally, and so forth.

Second. You will see in the budget that we have made a significant appropriation for ministry development – whether in the form of leading vision processes for vestries, developing community ministries through something like Living Stones, or consulting with congregational leadership. We have contracted someone to the bulk of that development work – no stranger to this kind of work – someone highly respected throughout the diocese: Claire Cowden.

Third. We have appropriated \$10,000 for the education and formation of bi-vocational priests. Already, we have serving in this diocese a number of priests who are bi-vocational. In other words, they have two callings; they are not serving full time in the congregation. Some prepared for the priesthood in the context of community ministry; some read for orders; some took the traditional seminary path. Would the priests here today who are bi-vocational please stand? This is a growing trend in the Church, and one I fully support. It's even scriptural.

We will have, always, full time seminary trained priests. Having said that, congregations large and small can be supported and empowered by the service of bi-vocational priests – whether a small congregation in a rural part of the diocese, or a larger congregation in one of our cities, assisting the rector.

So, these are just three areas in the budget which reflect an emphasis on strengthening our congregations. When the budget is presented, you will hear more, but first I want to acknowledge the hard work which went into this proposed budget. Everyone on the Standing Committee, the Trustees, the Executive Council, and the Budget Committee knows that we need to express our gratitude to one who works hard, and every year works his magic: Carrol Holley.

During one of our Task Force meetings, Canon David Veal had occasion to tell the story of his father's grocery store. With a decline of diocesan resources, combined with a national recession, there was some discussion about cutting ministries and cutting the budget. So David told his story.

He said that during the Great Depression his father had a grocery store, and the natural inclination during those very lean times was to allow inventory to decrease. But he learned from his father that when you encounter the tough times, you don't subtract inventory; you add it. You expand.

We could choose to cut some of our ministries, and simultaneously balance the budget, and maintain the value of our endowments. We discerned that that's not a very compelling vision. So we are going to invest in God's mission, and we are going to plant seeds.

The theme for this year's Diocesan Convention is taken from the 13th chapter of Matthew: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed." We are planting what we are calling Seeds of Formation. With the guidance of our consultant, DaAnna Stringer, the Task Force offers the following Seeds of Formation:

Prayer Seeds: we will continue to offer opportunities to explore and discover transformational prayer practices.

Study Seeds: we will be intentional about providing study opportunities for lay and ordained leadership. I will suggest that we read together a book every month or two, and I suspect some of you will make suggestions, as well. Continuing Education will be emphasized.

Tradition Seeds: lay and ordained leaders, alike, will be intentional about restoring confidence in and affection for this beautiful tradition – the Episcopal Church.

Connection Seeds: we will be intentional in offering opportunities for deeper bonds to form within this diocese. One example: earlier this year, Commission on Ministry Chair, Mary Glover, arranged a preaching conference in Pampa – attended by those from smaller congregations seeking a diocesan preaching license. Those involved found the instruction and the practice of preaching to be quite valuable. Even more valuable, I understand, was the opportunity for those facing similar challenges to gather.

And speaking of connection seeds, have you noticed our website. It is terrific. We can thank Russ Tapp, and Rick Land, and Nancy Igo for a professional and effective website.

Quarterman Ranch Seeds: seeds are being planted at Quarterman Ranch – metaphorically, and perhaps, literally. With the guidance and commitment of Cliff Craig, a Quarterman Ranch Task Force has been formed which includes not only Northwest Texas Episcopalians, but also civic leaders in Amarillo. There is enthusiasm coming from local non-profits and foundations as to how Quarterman Ranch can be used even more as a place where lives are changed.

You will hear from them later today, but just for a moment imagine with me the lives that could be impacted by expanding our Outreach Camps (Happy Camp and Promise Camp). [Just one brief story: two sisters came to camp this year for one week. It was, and is, their annual reunion.] “Lives Change Here” – that’s what happens at our own youth camps and our Outreach Camps.

Imagine further that we plant seeds literally on that 240 acres – maybe planting an orchard to provide fresh fruit and produce to the High Plains Food Bank. Imagine the outreach opportunities for the people of our diocese – teaching young people skills in growing and harvesting food for the benefit of others. There is more to come, and this is not yet developed, but seeds are being planted at Quarterman Ranch.

So, we have Prayer Seeds, Study Seeds, Tradition Seeds, Connection Seeds, Quarterman Ranch Seeds, and now ...

Beyond our Borders Seeds: a relationship with the Dominican Republic as a companion diocese. I believe the first scheduled appointment in my office after I was elected to this position was with David Morrow. David wanted to tell me the story about the Diocese of the Dominican Republic. So, the following February I had the occasion to visit the Dominican Republic during their annual convention last February, along with Jim Liggett and David.

I look forward to being companions in mission. Already, mission trips to the Dominican are being planned by Pat Russell at Canterbury, as well as by St. Nicholas in Midland. I believe this relationship has the potential to be integral to our diocesan mission, and not just a ministry tacked on to the periphery. And while it's true that we can make a difference there, and that lives change there, some of those changed lives will be Texans. Beyond our Borders Seeds.

From Matthew 13: "Jesus put before them another parable: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of all shrubs'"

The ancient Roman author (1900 years ago), Pliny the Elder, writes the following about the mustard plant: “Mustard ...with its pungent taste and fiery effect is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted; but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.”

The biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan observes that while a distinction can be made between wild mustard and its domestic counterpart, even when cultivated there is an ever present danger that it will take over the garden.

He says: “The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows to a shrub. It is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like – like a pungent shrub with take over properties. Something you would want only in small and carefully controlled doses – if you could control it.” [Jesus: a revolutionary biography, p64-65]

Any time Jesus says, “the Kingdom of Heaven is like ...,” or “the Kingdom of God is like ...,” or “the Reign of God is like ...,” He is pointing us toward God’s vision. In the last year we gathered a Task Force to discern where God is leading us; to discern God’s vision for us in this time and place; to discern vision and mission for the Episcopal Church in Northwest Texas.

I am mindful that “mission is not a function of the Church, but rather, the Church is a function of the already up-and-running mission of God in the world.”

[Christopher Duraisingh] We don’t have a line item in the budget for “mission.” We don’t have “mission department” on our organizational chart. All we DO is a function of the already up-and-running mission of God in the world: to restore humankind to union with God and one another. I wonder if – in one way or another, or in some form or fashion – what we do is plant seeds.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed. In the words of Pliny the Elder, “...when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get free of it, as the seed when it falls, germinates at once.” Let’s plant some seeds.

