

The Rt. Rev. J. Scott Mayer
Bishop's Address to the 55th Annual Diocesan Convention
Lubbock, Texas
October 4, 2013

I would like to begin this morning by expressing my gratitude to the good people of St. Christopher's Lubbock for hosting this event. Special thanks goes to Father Edson Way and the two co-chairs of this Convention Planning Committee – Carole Wolf and Nancy McReynolds. St. Christopher's is one of those congregations I'm referencing when I say that I've seen resurrection – something more than resuscitation (which also is a very good thing). A few years ago this congregation went through the valley, and by God's grace, they now have new life as a new body.

We are grateful for their ministries within and beyond the Episcopal Church, to and with the children of their neighborhood, to our diocesan outreach camps, and to St Benedict's in Lubbock. We see outward, visible signs of their love for the Church and their commitment to God's mission as we explore the St. Christopher's campus: the new nursery, the landscaping, the columbarium. We are grateful to be here with St. Christopher's and we thank you for hosting the diocese this year.

I would like, now, to recognize and thank my gifted and dedicated office staff: Carolyn Hearn, Anna Mora, Deacon Nancy Igo, and Canon Mike Ehmer. This is an outstanding staff. I am blessed by their talents, their service, their presence, and their friendship – and the diocese is blessed, as well.

Several people have completed terms on various diocesan committees and commissions. I would like to recognize those who have served the Executive Council – Loretta Fulton, Conrad Bratton, Amanda Watson, Patti Nabors, Bob Taliaferro, and Vice President, Kirk McLaughlin; the Board of Trustees – Rick Chambers; the Commission on Ministry – Jim Walker; the Disciplinary Board – Les Jackson and Louise Cummins; the Missions Committee – Dennis Bosley, Barbara Kirk-Norris, and Annelle Cockrell; our diocesan coordinator for EFM – Katy Hoskins; and the Standing Committee – David Veal and Frank Deaderick.

I was so grateful when David Veal – a retired priest and former Canon to the Ordinary agreed to stand for election to the Standing Committee. We had no Canon to the Ordinary at that time, and David brings that knowledge, corporate memory, intellect and wisdom to any place he serves. Thank you, David.

As I've said before, the closest position which resembles the Senior Warden or Bishop's Warden in a congregation is the President of the Standing Committee, which is the bishop's council of advice. I would like to recognize and thank the person who has served this position. He is kind, gentle, compassionate, and wise. He has run a big business (an outstanding business) and he's a civic leader in Odessa, so he brings business experience into the mix. He loves this Church. He offers himself sacrificially. Thank you, Frank Deaderick.

We have two priests retiring from active ministry this calendar year. Dennis Bosley has served St. Stephen's Sweetwater and All Saints Colorado City for 15 years. Dennis has served on various committees, commissions, and task forces within the diocese, including Chair of the Missions Committee and deputy to General Convention. He is an advocate for and has a heart for small congregations. I have valued his grounded perspective which I could trust, and his friendship. He and Jackie are moving to Salem, Oregon. Thank you, Dennis.

Pat Russell served this diocese long before she was ordained; since ordination she has served as Chaplain for our Canterbury campus ministry in Lubbock. Lubbock college students know that when they enter Seaman Hall near Texas Tech they will be greeted with total acceptance and unconditional love by Pat Russell. Through her leadership this campus ministry has become a growing community of support and friendship. We are grateful for Pat's support – and her husband, Bill's support – of this ministry. Thank you, Pat.

At our diocesan Clergy Conference this year we were privileged to have as our speaker, Doug Travis. Doug is the recently retired Dean of the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin. I think I can speak for the clergy when I say we were quite moved by Doug's grace-filled presentation regarding the measurement of success in the Church.

Doug told a story about a pastor he has known his entire life – a Presbyterian minister who served small congregations all across the Panhandle and West Texas, but primarily in Tulia, Texas. If one serves a small-town pastorate for long, one becomes a pastor to many outside and beyond the congregation – as did this particular pastor. He became a civic leader. He started a number of non-profit social agencies which served the poor and under-served. Town-people sought his pastoral care and counseling when they couldn't take their problems to their own church pastor.

And now some of the congregations he served have closed, which might cause one to wonder about their effectiveness. The pastor in this story is Doug's father. And Doug asks, "Are we going to suggest that this pastor was less successful than a cardinal rector or a bishop?" How do we measure success in the Church? And Doug reminds us of a familiar prayer in the Book of Common Prayer – the General Thanksgiving. We give thanks to God ... "above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ." Immeasurable love. God's love is immeasurable – not measurable.

So I get a little nervous about measuring success or failure in the Church – especially since we are in the business of proclaiming death and resurrection; not declaring failure and success.

Having said that, I do believe we are called to grow, and furthermore, we are seeing growth in membership and in budget. We are seeing signs that pride is being restored in the Episcopal Church. We have a significant increase in members exploring the ordination process, which more typically occurs when people are enthused and inspired, rather than when depressed or conflicted. So while reluctant to suggest measuring success, I believe these things point to signs of health and hope, and that we are seeing the revitalization of congregations.

For the past three years it has been a diocesan priority to strengthen our congregations. Congregations have received support for development from outside consultants, as well as from diocesan staff—namely Nancy Igo and Mike Ehmer. Congregations have seen their apportionments reduced so they can pay their clergy and staff more, or call additional staff. We are ordaining more bi-vocational clergy to serve small congregations and assist larger congregations.

We are one of approximately ten dioceses that joined the Diocese of Texas and the Seminary of the Southwest in developing a new program for the formation and education of clergy (both priests and deacons, and primarily bi-vocational). It stems from the Iona School for Ministry at Camp Allen, and in this diocese we have named it the School of Ordained Ministry. Deacon Melissa Wafer-Cross is the Dean, and Father Jim Haney V and Father Robert Pace serve as mentors, as they meet monthly at the Hulsey Center in Lubbock. Our first class has nine students. Melissa will say more about that later today.

In addition, two congregations partnered with the diocese to call two new seminary graduates to serve as Curates. A generous gift from one of our families afforded the diocese the financial ability to pay a significant portion of their compensation for two years. Susanna Brosseau and Jared Houze will be mentored by faithful rectors in healthy congregations; and the congregations will have gifted, youthful assisting priests who know and love our culture.

If we are honest, this has been a season of mixed blessings. There were two disappointing developments which were announced this summer.

First, as you likely know, Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in San Angelo is living in the seventh year of exile from their church home – enduring a long legal battle. The Texas Supreme Court recently remanded the case back to trial court. We did not lose the case. It does appear that this case is not going to be settled as soon as we hoped, and that is disappointing. Our chancellor, Tom Choate, will speak to this convention later in the day

In the meantime, this wonderful congregation continues to be faithful, to endure, to give sacrificially, and to live. They share a joint ministry with Christ Church Lutheran – sharing worship with the Lutherans in their nave, as both congregations share the same pastor and priest. The combined gathering celebrates the Lutheran liturgy one week, and the Episcopal liturgy the next. The leadership here is outstanding – both lay and ordained.

At this time I would like to recognize their priest and pastor for her faithfulness, leadership, endurance, persistence, and her perspective; one who reminds me and reminds us all that “God’s vision for His Church far exceeds our own.” Thank you, Celia Ellery.

The Bishop Quarterman Conference Center (Quarterman Ranch) has been the home of countless ministries and events, including youth camps, outreach camps, Episcopal Church Women retreats, Clergy Conferences, and special events for 58 years.

After a three year study, a talented and dedicated Task Force has not been able to discern a sustainable future for Quarterman Ranch, so operations closed on September 30. This has been a painful decision – one that includes a consensus of the Task Force, the Standing Committee, the Board of Trustees, the Executive Council, and me.

It is true that baptized people are the living members of the Body of Christ, the Church. We learn that in Sunday School. We know that church buildings are not the Church. But it's true, also, that buildings matter. Place matters. There is grief anytime we close a congregation and sell the property; grief anytime – as we know – a church building burns; grief anytime a congregation is exiled from its place of worship; grief when we close a camp or conference center.

Places become for us outward, visible signs of God's grace. They become sacramental, sacred, "thin places." Quarterman Ranch matters. I'm not going to gloss over that. There will be a liturgy at Quarterman Ranch on Sunday afternoon, November 17, to celebrate this place, its ministries, our memories, and that lives changed here.

As I've said, at this point there are more questions than answers. There has been no decision regarding the property, but I am confident that the Board of Trustees will be good, discerning stewards. We don't know yet where we will host retreats, clergy conferences, or camps. Renee and Jim Haney have been exploring our options; we will hear from Renee later today. I think you will see a commitment to youth ministry and camps reflected in her report and the proposed budget.

At this time I would like to express my gratitude to the Quarterman Ranch full time employees – Jamie Goldston and Rodney Houck; all part time employees, all volunteers, benefactors, counselors, the Task Force including Mary Emeny, Cliff Craig, Leon Swift, and Jo Roberts Mann, and the Quarterman Ranch Board – Carolyn Perry, Meredith Maharg, Dede Shuler Ballou, Renee Haney, David Williams, Kara Wischmeyer, Linda Kelly, Carole Wolf, Michael Pelfry, and Chris Wramplemeier. Thank you.

Let us pray. "Lord God, in your great goodness you once accepted to your honor and glory the Bishop Quarterman Conference Center: Receive our praise and thanksgiving for the blessings, help, and comfort which you bestowed upon your people in this place. Continue, we pray, your many mercies in your Church, that we may be conscious at all times of your unchanging love; through Jesus Christ our Lord." Amen.

Saint Francis – best known in our culture as a lover of creation, as every year on October 4th the local television stations send a reporter and camera to report on the Blessing of the Animals at the local Episcopal School or Church. And I'm glad they do. We bless every creature from bird dogs in Texas to elephants from the Bronx Zoo at the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York. I think it's great.

But Francis was more than a lover of nature; he loved God and God's people. The son of a wealthy merchant, Francis has a conversion experience (more of a conversion process than a conversion event – very Anglican). He became a preacher, and gained a following, devoted to a life of poverty. Francis served and lived among the poor, the outcasts, the lepers.

In the midst of the 13th century Church – a church proud, triumphant, and characterized as greedy and corrupt – Francis and his followers more resembled a Servant Church, a Cruciform Church.

That contrast may sound familiar to us, as we recall last year's annual convention. Theologians, historians, and sociologists are telling us – in one way or another – that we live in a new day now, and the so-called Triumphant Church of old is being transformed into the Cruciform Church. And the Cruciform Church, the Servant Church, will enter more deeply into the places where God seems most absent – among the abandoned, the marginalized, and those who suffer – perhaps following the example of St Francis.

We acknowledged at last year's convention that something new is in the wind, and then behold, a new Pope was chosen. And he has the courage to take on the name, Francis – the first ever. And he lives into it (as much as possible). You've heard the stories. As he is presented as the new Pope on the balcony, he declines to wear the expected fine apparel, reportedly stating, "The carnival is over." He declines the Papal Palace as his living quarters. Breaking custom, on Maundy Thursday he washes the feet of women and Muslims. Practically overnight he has shifted the focus from internal problems to mission, and he has inspired millions of people within and beyond the Catholic Church.

It's probably too early in the game to call him SAINT Francis. Certainly they have their problems, and just as certainly North American Episcopalians are not going to agree with the Pope on everything. But, I would suggest that Pope Francis has recognized this moment in history, and he is leading his tradition through the transition from a Triumphant Church, a Christendom Church, to a Servant Church, a Cruciform Church.

The theme of this year's diocesan convention is taken from Saint Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel at all times; when necessary, use words." I interpret Francis to mean that there are effective ways to proclaim the Gospel beyond speech; that it's best to live out the Gospel, to embody the Gospel; and that talk can be "cheap," as we say. And the Body of Christ is called to embody the radical grace of Jesus, the mercy of Jesus, the unconditional love of Jesus – not simply talk about it.

And I think we Episcopalians like this quotation from St Francis. We are drawn to Francis, one who loved creation and beauty; one who had an incarnational theology, and saw the presence of God everywhere and in all people; one who experienced a conversion process; one who said, "Preach the Gospel; when necessary use words." Surely, Francis was born to be an Episcopalian.

We like that quotation, at least partly because, we tend to be an introverted tradition led by introverted clergy. We are drawn to the contemplative, the mystical, the sacramental. We have a history of understanding mission as service to others, while other more evangelical traditions emphasize evangelism. The more extroverted traditions give testimonies and share their faith with words (and service, too).

I love our tradition. I love who we are. I'm drawn to it, and choose it, and believe I am called to it. But St Francis does say, "when necessary, use words." And I wonder if it's necessary, now.

We all know it's a new day – whether we call it Post-Christendom, or Post-Constantinian, or Post-modernism, we know the day is gone when any tradition can hang out a sign and let the sign do the talking. Long gone are the days when everyone knew the beliefs and practices of Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, or Episcopalians. We live in a new context – one that doesn't know our jargon: not “gospel,” not “New Testament,” not “grace,” not “eucharist,” and not “Episcopal.” It's necessary, now, to use words.

Tom Breidenthal, Bishop of Southern Ohio, has made the observation that evangelicals are good at talking, and now they are discovering sacraments and church seasons, and they are scared. And the opposite is true for us. We love sacramental worship and the Book of Common Prayer, and we are discovering the unpredictable power of the Holy Spirit, and we are scared. And he speculates that God is up to something.

We are going to do something different this year. Two years ago the Diocese of Texas gathered in homes to share dinner and to share faith. The whole diocese was invited to gather on the same day. Last year, the Diocese of West Texas joined them, and both dioceses gathered around the dinner table on the same day and shared faith. It has been well-received by people in both dioceses. In 2014, I'm inviting the Diocese of Northwest Texas to join them, as we share faith on the same evening – Thursday, May 15, 2014.

After lunch today, Nancy Igo and I will introduce this event to this gathering of diocesan leaders. If you're like me, you have bad memories of being pressured to testify or “get saved” as a visitor at a summer revival. So, trust me; this is not that.

I love the Episcopal Church. I love the way we worship. I love the Book of Common Prayer. I love our history as a tradition perceived as non-judgmental, tolerant, and open. I love that we don't duck the tough questions or challenges of our times. I love that we are more likely united by common prayer than common doctrine. I love that we confess our sins together. I love that we honor other faith traditions. I love our Wednesday night healing services, our pot-luck dinners, our outreach camps, our food pantries, our ministries to those on the margins.

And I love the privilege (that we as clergy have) of hearing your stories, and watching lives change, and witnessing sacrificial self-offerings that are humbling.

We have a gift. We are part of a beautiful tradition, a tradition which witnesses to the counter-cultural message of God's radical grace and unconditional love. And there are people in the world hungry for that message – starving for it. And we need to share it – we want to share it – not so we can maintain our budgets and keep doing business as usual, but because God's love saves, liberates, restores, heals. So, let's preach the Gospel, and let's use words.