

Address to the Diocese of Southern Ohio
136th Convention

By the Rev. Tom Ehrich

Bishop Breidenthal, Bishop Price, Bishop Rivera, delegates and friends, thank you for giving me an opportunity to come home to the Midwest in its finest season of the year, also known as Big 10 Football.

This has been a strange year in many respects, from midterm elections of surpassing tawdriness to a jobless recovery of the American economy to the vast expansion of my friendship circle to 1,300 “best friends forever” on Facebook. But nothing has been stranger than the ups and downs in college football. I even watched a game last week being played on a bright blue field in Idaho, of all places.

I am grateful for the opportunity to think aloud with you about the “changing Christian enterprise.” I am convinced that we are in the early stages of a vast sea-change in the Christian enterprise. I think it will be a time of great excitement and great opportunity. If we can get our act together, this will be our time.

If we handle it right, we will be growing congregations, starting new congregations, worshiping and studying and serving in new and energizing ways, and our agonies of the past five decades will be seen as preparation. We will see that God formed us in that wilderness, and now we are poised for an exciting adventure.

The “if” in this moment is unmistakable: we must get our act together. We cannot keep on keeping on. We cannot spend another decade like the past five decades. Perseverance, as the Bishop called it, or “endurance,” as it says in Luke, cannot mean grimly hunkering down in hope of surviving. If that's all we do, we won't survive it. We'll be out of business. Literally, one-half to two-thirds of our congregations will close their doors within five years if we don't get our act together.

We must learn humbly from the past fifty years. Having learned, we must let go. Having let go, we must move forward. Having started to move forward, we must not look back but keep pressing on.

Those who cannot abide change will need to stand aside. Those who are fearful of moving forward will need to find courage or let others take the lead. This new day won't be about money. It will be entirely about will and faith – the will to move on, the will to change course, the will to try new things, the will to let new people lead, the will to serve without guaranteed outcomes, and the faith to do so with full trust in God.

Forget what worked in former days. From this point on, it's all new, or it's over.

Let's start with Episcopal History 101, as I see it. In 1930, we had 1.55% of the American population in our pews. In 1964, we were up slightly to 1.67%. By then, of course, the US population had almost doubled to 200 million, and our share was 3.3 million members. That growth, especially after World

War Two, was an exciting time. This was the golden era that so many remember. We opened new churches and filled their pews. We expanded existing churches. We had overflow Sunday Schools, filled our seminaries and seemed poised for more. What could hold us back?

It all turned south in 1965, when the Baby Boomers began to graduate from high school, went away, and weren't replaced. We didn't notice it at the time, but our membership peaked in 1964 and began a relentless slide that continues to this day. Even though the US population continued to grow, our share got smaller and smaller, until now it stands at barely a third of what it was, and we count slightly under 2 million in our ranks. If we had held our own, we would be a church of 5 million members.

What happened? By the time we updated our membership rosters and got honest about our parochial reports, it was 1980 or so, and we were in the throes of ordaining women, adopting a new Prayer Book, wrestling with racial integration, testing out charismatic renewal, and moving toward acceptance of gays and lesbians. Those who opposed those changes shouted, "Aha! It's the women, it's Rite 2, it's Cursillo, it's Gene Robinson. Change is killing the Episcopal Church!"

That was partisan nonsense, of course. For one thing, the downslide began in 1965, not in 1976 or 1979 or 2003. For another, every other mainline denomination was declining at the same time and at the same rate. Today even the Southern Baptists are in decline, the Crystal Cathedral has filed for bankruptcy, and some observers think the evangelical boom of recent years is ending.

If anything, we didn't change enough. Not that there was one more change that would have stopped the bleeding. What we needed to do was get over being afraid of change. We needed to get nimble, flexible, able to adapt to the world around us without going into institutional paralysis. We needed to be an incubator of fresh ideas. We needed to celebrate clergy who dared to be change-agents and to be good stewards even when we weren't getting our way. We needed to develop boldness.

Instead, we did drift into institutional paralysis. The House of Bishops basically shut down, the House of Deputies degenerated into shouting, diocesan conventions and parish meetings turned to bickering, and people headed for the door.

We did beat up on promising young clergy. We did cave in to change-resisters with money. We did have failures of nerve and leadership. We turned inward and lost our confidence. We got lost in competing ideologies. A few churches thrived, but the vast majority dwindled and deferred maintenance. We clung to stale ideas and poured our hearts into replicating the 1950s, and when it didn't work, we had no Plan B.

What was happening, you see, was the world around us was changing. The context was changing. Our culture was changing. Life as we knew it in the 1950s simply went away.

No more women at home and available for church work, no more blue laws protecting Sunday morning from competing activities, no more close-knit neighborhoods, no more neighborhood stores, no more long-term employment. Many moved to the suburbs. Our children left home. To keep up with stagnant income and rising aspirations, parents were working harder than ever. Who had time for

church meetings? Who wanted to drag the kids to church on Sunday morning? Why go at all if all they did there was fight and fuss?

As a Presbyterian pastor in Georgia told me, “The world around us changed, and we didn't change with it.”

The changes we made weren't the changes we needed to make. I'm not arguing against any change we made. We are a better church for having embraced gender equality and standing for inclusion of all. But there was more we needed to be doing, and we didn't. We made symbolic moves, ideological moves, easy moves, but we didn't do the harder work of listening to the marketplace and realigning our enterprise to fit radically different times.

We needed to let go of neighborhood churches and build more efficient facilities in the suburbs. We needed to let go of a culture of smallness and let those suburban campuses be large. We needed to let go of Sunday worship as our reason for being and do what successful churches did, go 24/7, in what I call multichannel church: doing ministry on-site seven days a week, off-site and online. We needed to let go of trying to be destination churches. We needed to consider letting go of property altogether.

We needed to be radically open to young adults in leadership, even though they would lead us in new directions.

We needed to stop fighting. Just stop fighting. I don't know what we thought we were doing with our endless bickering over right-opinion and control. But we have depleted our financial and emotional resources and accomplished little, except to convince people out there that we are stodgy, stuck and stale.

We needed to listen to the world around us. Our neighbors haven't lost interest in God. Their desire for faith is as strong as ever. They just aren't buying what we are selling. Sunday worship isn't the big draw we think it is. Church isn't that easy. People want connections, they want worship that stirs them, they want family activities, small groups, mission work. They want newness of life, not bickering over a new hymn. Sitting in a pew on Sunday morning just doesn't cut it.

Okay, that is Episcopal History 101. It is a tragic tale of self-defeating behavior, addiction to control, mounting fearfulness, weak leadership, institutional paralysis, and loss of momentum. We are a shadow of what we once were – and a shadow of what we could have been – and we did it to ourselves, all of us.

Why, then, am I excited about our future? Why do I see this as our time?

Many reasons. First, we have stopped wanting to go back to Egypt. In my consulting work, in responses to my writing, in conversations with church leaders of all ages, I sense a strong desire to move on. As one pastor wrote me, It isn't about “criticism of the past, but a desire to move forward into a new future.”

Second, I think we have figured out that change is necessary and good, that nimbleness is a lot more valuable than steady-on-course, that frozen traditions don't serve a God who is out front leading us on. In our work and parenting, we have seen that the world out there is new, it's different, it's unfamiliar, it uses tools we don't fully understand, it's filled with challenges, and it's fun and exciting and disrupting. I think we get that now, and we're okay with it. Modernity isn't the enemy.

Third, the world out there needs us. Our nation is going through a rough patch, and worse days lie ahead. The progressive voice that we represent needs to be at the table, not that we are right and everyone else is wrong, but that the national dialog on culture, ethics, politics, justice and human rights is impoverished if we aren't part of it.

Fourth, our communities need us. Our society is creating victims and outcasts at a rapid clip, and we have a heart for bringing them in. We have been on the margins for so long that few can even remember being the "country club at prayer." Our hearts go out to the marginalized and suffering. We are they.

Finally, it's a plus that we can't throw money at our problems, because we don't have any money. Except for a few endowments not yet spent, we are broke. All we have to give is ourselves. All we can throw at problems is people power. That is a holy place to be.

I think we have made three discoveries:

First, we need each other. I doubt that we need doctrine, fussy traditions, hierarchies of power, or extensive infrastructure. I doubt that we need "beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God." What to do with our inherited buildings and traditions will be as wrenching a question as we have ever faced. But we are ready to face it. We are getting over property management as a primary Christian calling.

In needing each other, we need the probing questions that people ask each other, the shared quest for understanding, the glimpses of God that we afford each other, and the encouragement to keep at it, even as the world offers easier ways.

We need to be cared for with the unconditional love that is the hallmark of God's nature. We cannot be fighters for justice, or agents of mercy and forgiveness, or lovers of souls unless we join hands. If we try it alone, the world will pick us off one by one.

Second discovery, our neighbors don't much care what we do. Other than providing talking points to politicians chasing ideology, Christians are on the margins of public consciousness. People don't want us back on center stage, because we don't handle center stage well. When Christians have power over people's lives, our worst instincts tend to come out. We get too enamored of the "truth" we think we have found, the moral absolutes, and our call to impose our truth on others.

When societies go secular, as the Province of Quebec did a generation ago in its "Quiet Revolution," it isn't because people have lost faith in God, but because they value freedom and modernity and they see Christianity as oppressive, medieval and fragmented over trivialities.

Our way forward isn't to hang on until people invite us back to center stage. The Christian enterprise is about knowing God – not “the truth,” not “moral absolutes” – but God in all of God's richness, ambiguity, loving kindness, mercy, justice, wisdom, compassion, commonness.

We seek God's story, not as a pathway to power, but to make sense of our stories. And then to live decent and responsible lives, in love and charity with our neighbors, making the world better by who we are, not by right-opinion.

Third discovery: We are no longer in the business of providing safe enclaves in a dangerous world.

As a child, I had two places of safety. One was my home, where healthy parents encouraged me to dream. The other was my church, a hushed enclave where people knew my name and were nice to each other.

Then I grew up, and safety vanished. My work took me into dangerous places. Even as my wife and I fashioned a safe place for our children, it never became a child's cocoon of safety for me.

My Christian world became a war zone. People fighting for control turned viciously against each other, dropping all masks of politeness, eventually embroiling me in insane power struggles over shreds and shards, until those conflicts seeped into my home, my marriage, my every waking minute.

So, I have learned to live without safety. It's confusing at times and draining. But living on the edge and in the open feels great. I know that what Jesus said is true, that nations rise against nations and life is filled with famines, plagues, portents and signs. I don't need to escape them. I need the courage to venture into the world, but I don't need my faith community to be an escape.

So here we are: depleted but not exhausted, a major or-else hanging over our heads, ready to move beyond the easy road of Sunday worship, ready to leave behind a history that probably wasn't what Jesus wanted anyway, needing each other, our communities needing us, no longer in the business of proclaiming moral absolutes, no longer providing safe escapes, ready to move forward, ready to move on, ready for a fresh day, and getting ready to think about letting go of property.

Here, in closing, a parable about the journey forward.

My journey yesterday was going smoothly.

Flight to Columbus arrived early. Rental car was waiting. Open road beckoned me to this Appalachian town known for collectible glass.

Then the 18-wheelers ahead of me stopped. Eastbound Interstate 70 froze. Truckers turned off their diesels.

I did e-mail for 20 minutes, then decided enough of this. Without any plan other than to exit this congestion, I drove the breakdown lane to an on-ramp, drove wrong-way up the ramp, and asked an emergency worker for directions.

His route through Ohio countryside took me beyond the accident and back onto I-70.

Sometimes “endurance” means changing direction. Leave the paralysis, get onto a new road, follow fresh advice, see new things, keep moving.

That's what Jesus did. When a way forward seemed blocked, he took a new road. He abandoned one plan after another, until finally, at the moment of departing, he told his followers to feed the hungry, care for the sick, keep telling the story, don't fight each other, and trust in God.

And keep moving. We are nomads and pilgrims, not property owners and money managers. We cannot sit still and wait for someone else to restart an old engine. Soul-saving endurance doesn't mean waiting for old ways to work again. Endurance means standing strong against evil. Endurance means running the race and not losing heart. Endurance means giving away treasure. Endurance means touching many lives. Endurance means facing up to your fears and breaking through your doubts.

Endurance means changing direction, going new ways, following new guidance, taking risks.

Endurance means letting go. Letting go of even our dearest treasures and memories, so that we can live and move and have our being in God.

Thank you, my friends, for sharing this time with me.