

The Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane
Address to the 190th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine
October 23, 2009
Bangor, Maine

Whatever else one might say about an organization that is celebrating its 190th annual meeting, in the United States, it's an old organization. There are not many groups that have a longer history. And to last 190 years, such an organization would have had to demonstrate a capacity for flexibility, the ability to adapt to changing times and circumstances. Things have changed a lot since 1819, and yet the Episcopal Diocese of Maine is still here, still providing ministry to the people of Maine.

Our long history gives me hope as I take this opportunity to begin a conversation with you, the leaders of the diocese, that I expect will continue over the next several years. I want to begin today a conversation about how the Diocese of Maine will become the Episcopal Church for the 21st century.

The Episcopal Church as we know it today was shaped by the economic and demographic trends that followed World War II and continued through the early 1980's. Many of us came of age in that period, and we remember full pews, active youth groups, and not infrequent building campaigns. Life in our communities often revolved around the church, and we looked to the church not only for worship, but for fellowship and recreation. Perhaps our scout troop also met at the church, and we played in a church softball league.

Here in Maine, our resource based economy was flourishing. We were making paper and shoes, growing potatoes, and hauling in fish and lobsters. Millinocket was the richest town per capita in Maine, and the Episcopal Church built there in that era shows it. No one could imagine a time when the world wouldn't want our timber or our shoes, a time when the fish might be gone, a time young people wouldn't be able to find work.

Yet even in those good days, change was beginning to take place, subtle at first, but real nonetheless. Family income began falling in the 1970's and stay at home Moms, the backbones of our church programs, went to work. In 1978, when I began my ministry in Christ Church, Corning, my boss sent me out to visit three households a week. I did my visiting diligently, and often visited with mothers and children at home in the afternoon. By 1981, there was no one at home during the day save retired folks. Everybody had gone to work. Visiting, when it was possible, had to move to the workplace or the evening. Today nearly every able bodied family member works in order to keep up with the bills, and many are forced to work more than one job. Real income, adjusted for inflation, continues to fall.

Our resource-based economy has seen increasing competition from others around the world. China now gets most of its timber and paper from western Canada. Overfishing has forced us to greatly reduce the catch we take from the Atlantic. No one in Maine makes shoes any more.

One bright spot had been lobstering. Maine fishermen have done a wonderful job preserving the stocks of lobsters and have regulated their annual catch. There are plenty of lobsters. But the recent crash of the credit markets caused the processing plants in New Brunswick to close,

greatly limiting the available market. Now lobster is cheaper than beef some days, and the whole industry is tottering.

The hardest thing to find in Maine for many these days is a decent job, and young people often have to go elsewhere to find one. The largest source of income in our state is retiree incomes.

And, how have our churches fared during these times? Well, in many ways, quite well. The great majority of our churches are still here, still ministering to our communities. The Aroostook Cluster will celebrate its 20th anniversary next year, successfully preserving five worshiping and ministering communities – and a Lutheran one as well. And we're still doing many of the things that we think we should – worship, education, youth ministry, community service.

Many of our congregations are smaller, to be sure, sometimes much smaller. And we've had to be very creative about financing. The diocese now makes grants-in-aid to more than half the congregations. Nine new congregations asked for grants during Budget Year 2009. Many who had full time clergy now have part time clergy. Since the summer one congregation has cut its clergy position from full to half time. The money that comes from the diocese to many congregations often comes back to the diocese in the form of apportionment payments, balancing the diocesan budget and keeping those congregations in good standing. We are fully habituated, as Episcopalians, to a parish life of constant struggle, stretching every penny, and recirculating money.

As an example of this reality, let me cite a family-sized congregation north of Bangor. Two decades ago, there were several major employers in the community. Now there is only one. Fifteen years ago the congregation had a full time resident priest. When that priest left, the congregation decided it could not afford a full time priest. Because of the distances and the employment situation it has been very difficult to find any priest who would do much more than offer regular supply. There have been a series of short term priests. Reflecting the community's economy, the congregation has gotten smaller. Now more than half the income comes from a diocesan grant. The grant helps pay the salary of the priest and allows the congregation to balance its budget. A deacon was ordained several years ago, and that person has enabled some important ministries to continue and has provided some relief in terms of Sunday worship. The current priest's time of service is drawing to an end, and the congregation is wondering how to find a new priest.

Now none of this is news to any of you, I'm sure. You could all add your own illustrations or offer particularly egregious examples. You know the truth of what I'm saying. We know that we are in the midst of massive change both economically and culturally. We know that 1959 will never come again. We know that the economies that built and supported our communities are gone or going. We know that the things that we keep trying to do aren't really working, haven't worked for a long time... but we keep wishing it weren't so and keep trying to make them work. We keep thinking that if we could only do it right, then we'd get back on top of things, and our congregations would flourish again.

What we're trying to do, what we're really good at, is what folks who study change call Technical Change. What we're always trying to do is tweak the system, tweak the budget, so it works a little better, a little more efficiently. We're always trying to build a better mouse trap or give

ourselves a little more breathing room. We're trying to make the old system work as well as it possibly can work.

But what if things have changed so much that the system itself no longer will serve? What if we've squeezed every penny out of every dollar? What if, instead of tweaking the system, we have to adapt to the change? What if we have to build a new system? What if we have to learn a new way to be church? That work is called Adaptive Change.

Every congregation I visit is engaged, to some degree, in Technical Change. And we at Loring House are engaged in it as well. It's what we know, and we do it well. But I think we've about run out the string. We can't continue for long with over 50% of our congregations receiving grants-in-aid, at least, we can't do that and also fund mission programming at the diocesan level. For the first time in a decade, next year's diocesan budget will be smaller than this year's budget. Many of our congregations are struggling with buildings that need a great deal of work and cost far too much to heat. The average age in many congregations continues to rise and the average attendance continues to decline. And people ask me every week, why don't my children come to church? How can we get young families back to church? How can we bring teenagers into our church? How can we find a new generation to take the load off our backs? How can we get our old church back so we can retire in peace with a good conscience? I think the answer to our questions is beyond a technical fix. I think we need to be a new church.

This past spring, I invited a number of accomplished clergy and lay leaders to a conference at Living Water to talk about the Diocesan Development Plan. My hope for the overnight was to roll the plan out, tweak it, and recruit these good folks to serve as consultants. The conference wasn't entirely successful. The "wise heads" gathered for the conference weren't fully satisfied with the plan and didn't know if they wanted to volunteer for the work. A number of them decided not to volunteer. It's one of the reasons some of you are still waiting for consultants.

But what did happen at the conference was a sort of extended conversation about what Episcopalians need to be the church. What is that minimum, the base line, for being the Episcopal Church? And the answer, at the end of two days, was: worship according to the Book of Common Prayer, and mission. We are, after all, the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church. That's the bottom line. That's the minimum we need to be who we are.

And the question they raised for me is, how are we going to see to it that these things, worship and mission, continue in the 21st century? What will we do to secure the next 190 years? That's the question I bring to you today.

The mission strategy for the Diocese of Maine has been "The Episcopal Church for everyone in every place." I like that statement. It says we will maintain an Episcopal presence in every place we can, all around the state. But it doesn't say what we will do in all those places. It doesn't say what our mission is. And it doesn't say how we will do it. It doesn't say what our strategy will be or how we will pay for it. Those are the issues we need to address.

What I challenge you to begin at this Convention is a process that will help us adapt to our changing times and be a church adapted to the life and culture of the 21st century. I'm not suggesting that we should change our core beliefs or change the message Jesus gave us.

Rather I'm inviting you to begin a process that answers the questions of what we will do and how we will do it. How will we be church in this world? How will we connect with the people of the 21st century? I'm asking you to be part of Adaptive Change.

We haven't been asked for a while to answer such hard questions and to do it together. Technical fixes take technical expertise, but not a lot of thinkers. What we need now are a lot of thinkers. All of us need to be engaged. I have some ideas about some answers, but I imagine you do as well. And you are the experts about your own communities. You are the ones who know if a proposed solution has the chance of a snowball in a hot place of working. The answers we come to together will be much better. And our total commitment to any solution is required if it is to work. We need to build our capacity to work together, to think hard, to make hard choices, if we are to adapt to a new world.

So today we begin a process, an urgent and important process that will last several years. The process will require the participation of every congregation and the willingness on our parts to try some new things, to experiment, perhaps to endure some false starts and failures. It may mean some new configurations of congregations. It may mean some congregations seeing themselves as ministry sites rather than worship sites. It may mean new ways of calling and paying clergy. It may mean deeper ecumenical and community partnerships – shared facilities and shared clergy. It may mean a return to circuit riders and house churches. It may mean – probably does mean – solutions I can't imagine.

And the urgency is real. As your bishop, I'm in conversation with several congregations who can no longer afford their budgets or their buildings, who are facing literal bankruptcy. And I need to say that the diocese doesn't have the money to support the buildings or the budgets either.

Following this Convention I will appoint two study groups to begin work on the questions I've raised in this address. The first group will study our Mission Strategy and consider how we will be the Episcopal Church in every place for everybody. Particularly, the group will study the question of how we will continue to support congregations and what the budget process will be for such support. I've asked the Rev. Patricia Robertson, rector of St. Mary and St. Jude, Northeast Harbor, to chair this study group.

The second study group will look at the issue of Mission Priorities. What are the ministries to which we as a diocese are truly committed? What are we willing to pay for? What are the priorities for such spending in relation to other commitments and our mission strategy? What new work should we consider? I've asked the Rev. Tim Higgins, rector of St. Ann's, Windham, to chair this study group.

I've chosen Patricia and Tim because I want their energy, their fresh perspectives, and their organizational skills. I will work with them to choose study groups that are broadly representative of the congregations and the leadership of the diocese. Each group will have approximately ten members.

The two groups will need to be in touch with a large number of you and to consult with congregations and diocesan program staff. And the two groups will need to meet together from time to time to make sure that they do not thwart one another in their work. I'm asking the

groups to report to next year's Convention and to provide opportunities for discussion before the Convention. We'll decide then what we need to do next.

There's also a catch, a bit of a conundrum, built into this process. Obviously, the work of the study groups will impact the diocesan budget, but we will need to prepare the 2011 budget before the work is concluded. I will ask the finance committee to be flexible about the budget process and budget timelines as we build the 2011 budget. I ask for your prayers as we build this plane while flying it.

I will also be appointing a small working group to look at the issues of clergy compensation. We were not able to address that issue again this year as we promised, and the study is now overdue. We need to move beyond tweaking the old salary system as well.

I recently had a conversation with some folks who were feeling that they had failed as a church community. If they hadn't failed, then they would not be in the situation they find themselves in. I said to them, and I say to you now, we have not failed. The world has changed. We are busier now than we've ever been – not because we are lazy or inefficient – but because it takes everybody every minute to maintain our standard of living. The world has changed. People are not failing to come to church because they don't believe in God or don't care, but because they're trying to balance all the things they need to do to care for their families. The world has changed. The Anglican style of prayer and hymnody that we love doesn't always speak to folks raised on the Internet and MTV. The world has changed. The world has changed.

We have not failed, but we need to adapt to the change. And I'm full of hope at our capacity to change. We've done it many times before in 190 years. And God goes with us on this journey. If the heartbeat of the church is mission, then the heartbeat of mission is God. God invites us to share her good news with the world and promises not to leave us comfortless, but to send her spirit to lead us. The tiny band of disciples who ran from the cross founded the church that is now the largest religion on earth. And the difficulties we face in Maine, though great, are not any greater than realities facing Christians across the globe. In fact, in our struggles we may be getting a glimpse of what most Christian people face every day in this world. And that glimpse, that new understanding, can change us.

So, I'm not worried. The word which has gone out from God's mouth will not return empty but will succeed in the purpose for which God sent it. I believe we have the capacity and the faith to address the questions a new world has placed before us. And God will be with us every step of the way. I call you to prayer and I call you to action, to be the people God has created you to be – his people in every part of Maine.

I'd like to invite you to engage in a conversation together. I invite Heidi Shott to the microphone to offer instructions on how we get started. Then let the conversation begin. We'll join again for a brief period of reporting in 45 minutes. [Please move to the tables according to your birthday month. At your tables you will find some three-by-five cards. Take one and jot down your responses to what I've said. Take five minutes to think about this address. And then for about 30 minutes, share with your table companions. Share two things: 1) Your reaction to the Bishop's Address. What struck you? What resonated with you? What troubled you? And, 2)

What gives you hope for the days ahead? Ask one of your members to serve as a recorder of your conversation. Those notes will help our study groups begin.]