

+G. Porter Taylor  
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Convention Address 2012

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. It is an honor and a privilege to address you as your bishop, but most of all, it's an incredible honor and privilege to be your bishop. I give thanks for the ministry we share and for your faithfulness and your love of our Lord and our Church and our diocese. I am inspired and encouraged by your example of discipleship in these times, and I am humbled by the trust you put in me.

I am in my ninth year as your bishop and I feel the push of time—to paraphrase the poet Mary Oliver, I wonder “What will we do with our one wild and precious life?” I’d like to be clear about the direction I have been trying to give the diocese for these past eight years, and I’d like for us to dream together about our future. Broadly speaking, I want us to be more intentional yet more innovative---Clearer yet creative—or perhaps focused yet funner.

So—first intentional, clearer, focused.

Here’s the context for this. I am very pleased, proud and yes relieved to announce that our Freed for Ministry Campaign has been very successful. I don’t want to steal the thunder from the full report tomorrow but last year we were in the suburbs of our goal and this year we are walking up the front walk.

I would not say that we have been consumed by fund raising, but I would say it has taken much of our time and attention. The benefits are that we have a mission statement; we have adopted four priorities for our future financial growth; and frankly we have built more relationships across the diocese. In all my lunches and dinners, I have talked to Episcopalians about their hopes and dreams and concerns about our Church. I have heard a renewed commitment to our mission. That commitment includes being more intentional, clearer, focused about our interior life, our life together, and our life as an institution.

First, our interior life. We are called to demonstrate what it means to be Church in a secular, contentious, individualistic age. We have just lived through a very ugly political campaign, but it’s an illusion to think the conflict and division and name calling are limited to our television screens. This infects us and, unless we are intentionally inoculated by the grace and love and mercy of our Lord, it becomes us.

I am increasingly concerned about the amount of conflict in parishes. I have come to see this as a call, for all of us to go deeper in our prayer and our work for the betterment of the world.

Remember what we promised in our baptism?

“Will you continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?”

Prayer is the most radical act we can take in 2012 and 2013. Prayer is the way we remember who we are. It’s the primary vaccine for the disease of division.

One of the Desert Fathers said, "The cure for all the problems of the world is to sit in quiet with God."

The truth is we cannot give away what we don't have. The only way to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ is to experience it and to be transformed by it. It's what our Protestant brothers and sisters call "a personal relationship with Jesus" except our word for this is "holiness." Above all else, we are called to live holy lives and this begins with a living connection with the living God. If we do not start with prayer, then we will end up being an ecclesial form of Fox News or MSNBC—we will have a cause but not a holy gracious center.

I was fortunate enough to attend Cynthia Bourgeault's Wisdom School and I am pleased to say we are making Valle Crucis Conference Center a permanent site for this. We need more of these experiences. Otherwise God becomes some distant relative we talk about in the Third Person instead of the HOLY ONE who is closer to us than our own breath.

Our life of prayer and then our life together. Let us remember how our Lord began his ministry: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*

We must balance the journey inward with the journey outward. When we cannot talk about our "issues," we can always work together. We can always feed the hungry and give shelter to the homeless and be agents for God's reign.

I am so proud of the work the Human Hurt and Hope Fund is doing to change lives in Christ's name. My intention is to focus more of my energy on structures in our culture that keep the poor poor and to push our diocese to work even more in this direction. I am privileged to be on the NC Justice Center Board as well as the North Carolina Council of Churches, but I have largely kept these activities separate from my episcopacy. I plan on erasing that line—not because I am bored or I like to irritate people, but because it's our calling in our Baptism---*Will you strive for justice and peace among all people?*

The world needs us to strive right now.

According to the N. C. Budget and Tax Center, in 2010 1 in every 5 North Carolinians lived in poverty. 1 in 4 African Americans lived in poverty. And 1 in every 3 Latinos lived in poverty. In 2010 40% of African American children in NC lived in poverty. This has an dramatic effect---in North Carolina statistically African Americans live 6.5 fewer years than whites.

It's not about politics. It's about food and shelter and having what God intends for all God's people. My first Convention I talked about the difference between Charity and Justice. Many people in the diocese have made enormous strides to move towards justice, but they have done so largely without me. However, now that I am almost done having lunches with people to ask for a campaign gift, I plan on engaging this and leading you to engage these important issues.

The first step is always to be honest about people's lives right where you live. As I have said in the past: to engage the community, to collaborate and to transform.

We journey inward, we journey outward and we journey together.

In our journey together, we are called to be our best for God's work. Being our best for God's work means being a Church people can trust, and that means having standards. I know some of you get tired of receiving emails from The Bishop Henry Center reminding you of what needs to be done. It's not because we want to make your life harder; it's because we want our diocese to flourish.

People in the pews need to have confidence in the finances, safety, and governance of the Church. It's why we have a Clergy Manual and a Vestry Handbook. It's why we insist that parishes follow the Business Manual. It's why clergy and leaders of parishes have Sexual Misconduct Prevention Training and Dismantling Racism Training. It's why we have Fresh Start and the Wardens/Treasurers Day. It's why we have a Transition Ministry Manual. It's why we have Audits.

If that comes off as the Bishop being a bean counter, I am proud to wear that moniker because when we insist on standards, we are saying that what we do is important. It's important that every Episcopalian in the diocese has confidence in their Church. Sometimes these requirements come off as legalistic or impersonal. We can work to change this perception, but not the requirements themselves.

Being our best for God's work means being good stewards. If you do not have a Planned Giving Program, then the other 1.5 million nonprofits give thanks because they will ask your parishioners to put United Way or UNC Chapel Hill or the Heart Fund in their will instead of your Church. Before the end of 2012, every parish needs to ask their people, "Have you put the Church in your will?" If we don't, some of our parishes won't be here in forty years.

One final word about stewardship. Last year we passed the 10x10x10 resolution. I am very grateful to the parishes who are giving at or close to the 10% diocesan asking. While I am still not pleased with the last 10---which lowers our giving to The Episcopal Church, 10x10x10 only works if the first 10% comes in. Tithing would give us an abundance of funds to do God's work on local, diocesan and Church-wide levels.

Okay. That's all the Tom Sawyer good boy stuff—intentional, clearer, focused. Now here's the Huck Finn side—innovative, creative, and funner.

Remember the promise: "will you continue in the apostles' fellowship?" We live together; we die together, but we are always together. Togetherness is not only who we are; it's our gift to a world addicted to isolation and division.

Have you ever wondered why it took Moses and the Israelites 40 years to walk through the wilderness to the Promised Land? (Yes, it could be because they wouldn't let the women ask for directions.) It's because they travelled together.

Being the Body of Christ has never been efficient or time saving. When I was a parish priest, my administrator had a sign on her wall that said, "*It really is easier to do it yourself*" because it is. It's easier to make decisions without a committee or a vestry or a diocese or a denomination. The truth is, it's easier to be the Church of me or the Church of people who think like me.

And it's tempting. Decades ago, the social critic, Harold Bloom wrote a book called American Religion. He asserts that the religion of America is individualism. The lone hero. The solitary person at Walden Pond. Our society is becoming smaller; we divide and divide and divide until it's just me and my screen.

I am very concerned about a creeping congregationalism---an ecclesial Tea Party mentality. I often hear Episcopalians talk about "The National Church" as if they were speaking of the "IRS" or "Washington DC." I hear these terms used about the Diocese as well. It's fashionable to use the word "subsidiarity"—which means important ministry happens on a local level---but if the local parish is completely self-contained, then they are Baptist, not Episcopalian. Being connected to the diocese is not an obligation, and it's not something the Canons make us do; it's what it means to be Church. As Paul says, "If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is there are many members but one Body" (1 Corinthians 12:19-20).

To this end, we have restored the Diocesan Picnic in 2013, and I am moving my Days with the Bishop around the diocese so the people in the corners—Murphy, Gastonia, and Sparta—aren't always the ones to drive so far.

Our relationships matter because to walk into the future means we walk together. It's not about my parish's ministry; it's about the ministry of the One Holy Apostolic Church---our ministry together. I care more about who than how. There is nothing sacred about deaneries or committees or commissions, but there is something sacred about working together.

Friday and Saturday we will engage in exercises to connect people with their common interests and passions and hopes. We are fortunate to have David Isaacs from World Café lead us in a conversation tomorrow afternoon and Saturday we'll connect parishes around their passions with a simple exercise.

Conversation and commitment are what matter. Committees and structures don't matter, but the work does matter. It's not good enough to say, "Committees have no place in the Post-Christendom Church" unless you have another way to engage in God's mission for the world. We cannot wait for a new Church to emerge because this day is the only day we have to be agents of transformation. Let's be creative; let's be inventive; but let's get on with walking in the way and widening the walls and waking up the world. Let's be about our core essentials: Christian Formation, Justice/Outreach, Evangelism, Communication, and Stewardship and liturgy. Let us find the best ways to move forward in these areas together.

This togetherness enables us to hang on to one another even when we don't agree. In Advent I will authorize under my specific guidelines the use of the liturgy of Same Sex Blessings passed by General Convention. These are liturgies for provisional use between General Conventions. The Episcopal Church has not sanctioned same sex marriage. As a Church we are going to try out this liturgy for three years and in 2015 come together to listen to our experiences and decide what to do. We have had blessings in WNC for some time. All that this will do is to make the liturgy uniform. Remember "All May, Some Should, None Must." While some will feel as if my guidelines are too restrictive; others will feel as if they are too radical. That diversity is who we are

in WNC. I am confident that we are so committed to our Lord and his Church, that his strong love will pull us through our differences together.

I am pleased to say that our diocese is already creative and innovative and funner. People were not waiting for this address to do new things for our Lord and His Church.

For the first time anywhere in the universe, a Moravian pastor, Carl Southerland, is in charge of an Episcopal parish—St. John's Cartoogechaye in Franklin. We are teaching him about our Book of Common Prayer, and he is teaching us to sing. In addition, Reverend Delmer Chilton, a Lutheran pastor, is in charge of Messiah Murphy—and I am hoping he brings his Lutheran orderliness to our messy Anglicanism. These two parishes join our two existing Lutheran/Episcopal churches--Our Savior Newland and Grace Robbinsville—and are signs of the need to get outside our boxes. We need to hold on to the essentials tightly and hold the rest with a relaxed grip so we can take advantage of new opportunities of being Church.

I want to say a word about the work that Beth Turner, Valori Shearer, Beth Lilly, Karla Woggan, Rob Lundquist, Thomas Murphy, John Simpson, Augusta Anderson, Pattie Curtis, Osondu McPeters and others I forgot to mention are doing with Young Adults. It is creative and also traditional. They are gathering people into the faith through the blessed sacraments and scripture and prayer. They are widening the walls by having the Eucharist in places like Hannah Flanagan's in Hendersonville or The 3<sup>rd</sup> Place on the ASU campus in Boone or in young adult homes. Beth tells me of "flash Eucharist's" on the quad of ASU—and I am relieved to say this has nothing to do with running across the campus naked--and she speaks of the Young Vocations Project that crosses generations. We need more of these kinds of innovations.

Because of the Freed for Ministry Campaign, in the 2013 budget we are doubling Beth's time at ASU and adding a part time chaplain at UNC-A.

I am also committed to us being more creative in proclaiming the Good News. The election on Tuesday reminded us of the changing face of our country. As a Church, we must be about what Jesus was about: unity and diversity. We need to bring in more people of color—especially Latinos—more young adults.

To put it simply, we need to be more flexible in how we do Church. This means I need you to be the ones to initiate creative experiments. We must get over our fear that if we do something new, my parish or our diocese will suffer. Let's let the Spirit work. Emergent Church, Monastic Communities, Wisdom School, Bi-lingual Church, Flash Eucharists, Lectio Divinia—because it's not our Church; it's Christ's Church and he is the bishop of our souls.

So, intentional, clearer, more focused yet innovative, creative, funner. This is my charge for 2013

Let me close with a quote from the Franciscan writer, Richard Rohr:

"I like many of you, am only a disciple of the poor man from Nazareth. He has made me content with mystery. He has made me less afraid of chaos. He has told me that control is not my task. He, like the cosmos itself, is about two things: diversity and communion."<sup>i</sup>

May we be about those things as well.

I am always humbled by this calling and this office. So far this year I drove 31,110 miles and flown 14,271, but I always rejoice when I see our mountains on my way home. I am so lucky to be here doing this work with you for our Lord and his Church. I keep you in my prayers and ask that you keep me in yours.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Rohr, quoted in The Cross in our Context, by Douglas John Hall, 207.