

**The Address of the Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane
to the 192nd Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine
October 22, 2011
Sunday River, Maine**

Our grief is real, but so is our hope.

At Christ Church, Biddeford, there aren't many worshipers present on a Sunday morning. But during the week, hundreds of folks flow through the building for the Seeds of Hope Jubilee Ministry. They come for food, for a warm place to rest, for help finding jobs, or to consult with the priest. Some of these folks volunteer to help with the work. Some have been baptized or married at Christ Church. Most of these folks aren't what we would call members. Seeds of Hope doesn't always look much like what we would call church. Yet surely Christ is present. Surely this is his body.

What is the Church? According to our Catechism, the Church is the community of the New Covenant. What is the mission of the Church? The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. That's what theologians call the *Missio Dei* - God's Mission. How does the Church pursue God's mission? The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worship, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.

There's a blog post making the rounds in church circles that argues that the mainline church is in danger of dying from grief. That is, the church is so grief stricken over the fact that the world has changed, so frustrated that things that once worked well no longer work, that it spends much of its time bemoaning its losses and lashing out in anger against those who propose even minor changes. Why, asks the author, would anyone from the outside want to hang around a bunch of sad people? People - young or old - are attracted by joy, gladness, welcome, vitality! The church, he says, needs to shake off its sadness, embrace the world as it is, and set about the work of God's mission.

Now as all such essays are, this one is a bit over-drawn. And I think it dismisses too easily the depth of grief many of our communities are facing; grief not only over changes in the church, but changes in the economy and the culture of community life. This ain't your grandfather's culture any more... and we all feel it.

But the blog post does raise a matter worthy of our deep consideration and that is, *how do we move forward in this new time? How do we proclaim the love of God in a new world?*

Two years ago in my address to this Convention, as we began this process, I noted that I had asked a group of diocesan leaders, 'What is the minimum, the base line, for being the Episcopal Church?' And the answer I received 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. I believe that's still the bottom line. That's the minimum we need to be who we are.

And so the questions for us in each of our congregations are: What elements of our life are essential and life giving, foundational to who we are as the body of Christ? And what elements are time-bound accretions, matters of style and taste, and not essential to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? What must we affirm? What might we let go? Do we need to maintain and populate the committee structures that dominate our organizational charts? Do we need to continue the festivals and fund-raisers we've done for years that leave us exhausted? Do we need to continue the programs and classes that everyone thinks are important, but no one attends? Are there ways to form children and adults that don't involve graded classrooms and boring curricula? Are there ministries and projects right outside our doors that await our time and attention? Are there neighbors and partners we might join to do good work together in the name of Christ?

The Study Groups that have labored on our behalf have developed and presented position papers and resolutions that outline how we as a diocese might reform our common life and put more of our energy and resources into mission. If adopted by this Convention, the resolutions will authorize the Diocesan Council to establish new priorities for mission and new ways of funding that mission. The Compensation Committee has already presented, and last year's Convention adopted, new ways of thinking about part-time clergy ministry and new standards for employee health insurance. The Diocesan Council has crafted budgets that have permitted us to move in the direction of new ways of being church without prejudging the decisions of this Convention. For this current budget year, the Council set aside funds for new initiatives that have been used for stewardship work and for several innovative projects around the diocese. (You'll hear about some of these projects during this Convention.)

All of this is, I believe, very good work and essential to the future health of the diocese. I am grateful for the commitment and creativity of the Study Groups, the Compensation Committee, and the Finance Committee. I want to thank again all the members of these groups for their hard and faithful labor. It remains for us to decide what we will do.

Doug Mayer, Chair of the Finance Committee, in his address to the September Council meeting, noted that we haven't yet made any fundamental changes. What we have actually done has been to accommodate ourselves to reduced resources. We have found ways to make do with less; we're very good at the technical fix. We have not made the structural changes

necessary to move forward and, even, to thrive in this new environment. We have not invited our members into a deeper realization of their Baptismal commitments: to proclaim good news by word and deed, to seek Christ in every person, to be advocates for justice and peace. We have not asked our vestries to lead our congregations in discerning God's call to mission in our communities. We've not solved the problem of priestly leadership in the far-flung regions of the diocese. We have not found ways to fully utilize and incorporate the presence and skills of the retired priests in the diocese. We have not enlisted the skills of our deacons in leading us to new mission. All this work now lies before us.

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Grace Church, Bath, and St. Philip's, Wiscasset, have just begun a new partnership. The rector of Grace is now the priest-in-charge of St. Philip's, and the two congregations have called an assistant, a recent seminary grad, to serve in both congregations. Both congregations will benefit from the strength of a team, and the diocese develops a placement for a recent seminary graduate.

Every Tuesday morning in Portland an interesting community takes shape at St. Elizabeth's Essentials Pantry. As early as 7 a.m., new immigrants, homeless people, and poor folk begin to cue up for the pantry. Volunteers arrive from several churches and set up the supplies and clothing that will be distributed. Often clients join the volunteers in preparing. Prayers are offered. A priest sits to hear spiritual and physical concerns. Clients and volunteers inquire about family members and children, illnesses and new jobs. Gifts of soap and toilet paper and clothing are distributed. The body of Christ is made visible.

St. Patrick's, Brewer, and St. James', Old Town, have concluded a long process of negotiation to call a priest together. Both had experienced calling processes that fell short. Both struggled with their relative proximity and their separate cultures. Both struggled to create a new "we" from the former "I." Now together they've called a priest who will coordinate ministry between the congregations and be present on Sunday mornings on an alternating basis.

And these are but a few of the stories of bold steps taken by our congregations to be a new church for a new day.

I believe it's time for us to begin to look at our geography with true seriousness. We are too large and too far flung to try any longer to maintain free-standing priestly ministries in every community. We need to develop and support regional ministries composed of several congregations and a regional ministry team. Congregations would not merge, but would join in partnerships for the sake of God's mission. The heart of the effort would be local ministries discerned by the local leadership. The regional team would work to provide liturgical and

pastoral support, education, and coordination. Specific funding would depend on the congregations involved in each region, but rather than recycling funds from the parish to the diocese and back, a specific funding plan would be developed to sustain each region.

We must also take a regional approach to leadership development. One of the consistent themes that emerged in the Study Group process was that local leaders often do not know how to do the things they are asked to do. Leadership training for ministry discernment and ministry development, for worship leadership, for pastoral care ministry, among other things, is essential if we are going to make our way forward. One proposal I'm considering is to create and fund a diocesan leadership development team, made up of four trainers and to employ four of our part time clergy in different regions of our diocese to work with congregations.

Whatever the ultimate shape of this regional approach to ministry, every congregation will need to address its sense of God's call to mission. What is the work of reconciliation that God is asking you to do, now, in Aroostook, in Houlton, in Dover-Foxcroft, in Rockland, in Rumford, in Bangor, in Portland, in Sanford? What is the essential work that you are doing that must continue for Christ's sake?

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All of this is a reminder that we have work to do of far greater importance than preserving what is comfortable and comforting. Our job is to bring Christ's love to all the poor and suffering persons in our communities and to claim that love for ourselves in our own poverty and suffering. It is to work with our neighbors because they are God's children and our brothers and sisters, without regard to their denomination or affiliation. We are to be places of welcome and refuge where every person will know that he or she is loved and safe - just as they are. Just as we are...

I do not believe for a moment that God is finished with us yet. I do not believe that body of Christ is dying, except, of course, to be born anew. The institution we dearly love is struggling mightily and will probably continue to do so for some time. But the ministry of reconciliation goes forward unabated. Our task is to claim our part of that ministry, to discern God's call, to travel light, to look for new forms and new opportunities, to be flexible, and, above all, to trust that God is with us. God's mercy never fails. It is new every morning.

Our grief is real. But so is our hope. I invite you to trust with me in God's mercy as we embrace God's time and God's world.

Amen.