

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

Acts 1:1-9; Psalm 121; Luke 10:1-9

Last week, The Episcopal Church held its second *Everyone, Everywhere* conference on the Church's mission. Folks from all over the world came together at Estes Park, CO, to discuss God's mission and the Church's place in it. The thrust of a couple of the presentations was that the Church has fundamentally misunderstood the nature of God's mission. We have thought of it as something the Church **does**, rather than something the Church **is**. But mission is not outreach. Mission is the Church's identity. Or to use an old line, God's mission has a Church, and not the other way around.

The core, therefore, of God's mission is not a program - as important as programs may be. The core of God's mission is relationships - both within the body of Christ, and through the body of Christ with God's world. We need to get beyond our comfort zones and engage with people who are very different from ourselves.

Several of the speakers at the conference were missionaries who spoke of beginning their work in far places and of their preparation to share their training and their expertise with those in need. They discovered upon arriving in those places that God was already at work everywhere, and learned of their need to work in partnership with the people they met. It is not that they didn't have something important to offer. They did indeed bring important skills and training to the table. It is simply that they discovered many others who also brought skills and training to the table, and who represented the dignity and integrity of the people they served. The world is not full of people waiting for our help. The world is full of people waiting for God's justice and for friends who will work with them to achieve it.

Another way to say this is that mission is not done by patrons on behalf of those who are incapable of helping themselves. God's mission is done by brothers and sisters in partnership, who work together for the benefit of all.

Our readings for this service are drawn from the Propers for a Missionary, and they offer some insights into the nature of God's mission.

And the first is simply that - it's God's mission. Our help is in the name of the Lord. The mission does not belong to us. We belong to God's mission. And our hope is not based

on what we can accomplish, but on God's faithfulness. The God who created everything still looks after us, morning and night. Still shields and protects us. God's mission will be accomplished because that is what God chooses.

So despite what may be happening in our communities, God is not absent. Indeed, God may be calling us away from things that no longer serve, no longer work, and inviting us to consider new possibilities. Is there no one left who will volunteer to teach Sunday School? Are there too few attending such a Sunday School to make it viable? Is there no one who will attend adult Bible study? Perhaps then God is inviting us to look at new opportunities for Christian formation, whether that might be in small house groups or at the food pantry.

Second, it is clear that mission is our primary purpose. We are sent. Some of us call our Sunday worship the mass. And the source for that word comes from the dismissal at the end of the Latin mass: *Ita missa est*. "Go, you are dismissed." Each week we are sent from worship to do God's mission.

Jesus sent the disciples out two by two. So, mission is not Lone Ranger work. It is something we do together. But it is clear we are meant to go out. The disciples were told to enter fully into the life of the communities they served. They were to make themselves dependent on those communities, dependent on them for food, clothing and housing. They didn't invite people to come to them. They went to the communities. They were sent to proclaim, "The kingdom of God has come near you." And they represented that kingdom.

Our primary work is not to invite people to join our church. It's to go to them with the good news of the kingdom. The hospitality we offer in our congregations is not something we do because we want new members. Hospitality expresses our participation in the kingdom of God. We are hospitable because God is hospitable. And more important than hospitality is solidarity - the recognition that our neighbors are God's children and our partners in ministry. It is by going to meet them that we turn strangers into friends. Our call is not to invite others to be like us, but for us to be more like Jesus and to go where he goes.

Third, the timeline for God's mission is not up to us. It belongs to the Father. It is not for us to know the times or periods the Father has set. We have received the Holy Spirit who has empowered us to be witnesses for the kingdom of God. And that is enough.

I suspect this is the most difficult matter for us. We don't know when God will restore the kingdom to Israel, and we are invited to labor without knowing that. The changes

that have hit the Church in the last two decades are simply overwhelming. All the cultural supports we used to enjoy seem to have vanished. We want to know when all this will end. We want to know when God will restore our church. But we don't know. And God doesn't seem much interested in telling us. Rather God invites us to continue our witness.

Is the period we are in an aberration that 100 years from now we will recognize as such? Or in 100 years will we recognize the situation of the postwar period as the aberration? I don't know, and I don't think it matters much. Because the task before us is the same: to witness that God is among us, that each of us is loved by God, and that God invites us to work together for the well being of all. That's God's mission and it is, I believe, the only growth strategy we need.

The kingdom of God is a kingdom of resurrected people, people who understand that beyond all appearances God is working God's purposes out. God's kingdom is born out of the death of this old world. And that dying and rising includes our beloved church. A way of being church is dying - and we can't stop it. But a new way is being born - I do believe it! Death is not something we seek, but when it approaches we meet it with faith, confident that God is up to something for our good; confident that life will rise from death.

Like the missionaries of old, we are venturing into foreign territory. To be effective we're going to need to travel light, to be flexible, to immerse ourselves fully in a new and often strange world. We do not know, probably cannot know, how effective we will be. We don't know if the seeds we plant will grow. But we do know that God will bring new life. There will be resurrection. May we go about our work, go about God's mission, in such hope. *Amen.*