I greet you gladly as we gather from all corners of our diocese for this 180th annual convention. May the grace and love of our Lord be with us abundantly as we renew our life and ministry together and engage the work God calls us to do.

We are grateful to Saint Luke’s Parish for their most warm welcome and yeoman labors for us. This is our shorter, parish-based model for convention and Saint Luke’s has graciously let us take over the whole place for these two days and again in June. Thank you dear friends.

I am glad that our brother Ted Gulick, the recently retired Bishop of Kentucky, is here to nourish us from the riches of Christ’s grace. Ted, Barbara, Becky and I have shared closely the journey of the episcopate in this province for many years and I hold Ted in the highest esteem as a friend and colleague. They have recently moved from their old Kentucky home and been ‘carried back to old Virginy’. We welcome you warmly.

I am accustomed to addressing you first thing in the morning and this early afternoon time slot reminds me of a favorite story I heard Archbishop Robert Runcie tell about a time he was to speak after a meal. As the hour drew near for him to speak the lady sitting at table next to him noticed that he was acting strangely. “Are you alright, your Grace?” she asked. “Yes,” he said, “but I have to get up in a moment and my leg has gone to sleep. Rubbing it isn’t helping.” Blushing she replied, “That’s because it is my leg you are rubbing.”
I chose the theme “Gospel Hospitality” for this my final annual convention as your diocesan for several reasons that will become apparent in the course of this address. It is a theme close to the soul of Christian community and our mission in God’s world.

Jesus Christ came among us to reveal the gracious hospitality of God for all the world. In words that echo throughout Epiphany John the evangelist wrote, “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” Another translation says, “made his home with us.” The Incarnation is God’s homing among us. Our word hospitality derives from the Latin word for guest and for receiving guests with generosity. So the Incarnation is an act of supreme hospitality wherein God makes his home with humanity and receives us as beloved guests.

The famous Russian icon on our convention booklets is an image of the Holy Trinity, based on the story of Abraham and Sarah’s welcome to their three visitors by the oaks of Mamre, strangers who they later recognized as a revelation of God. It is sometimes called the icon of hospitality. The icon depicts both the three angelic visitors and the three persons of the Holy Trinity. Each is distinct but all have the same face. They bow humbly to one another as they sit at table, forming an image of the dance of love and mutuality in the being of God. Here is an image of the communion at the heart of reality and of the generous hospitality of God that saves us and gives us life.

The church’s task is to show this same hospitality to the world. “Welcome one another… just as Christ has welcomed you,” St. Paul exhorts us (Romans 15:7). Just as Christ has welcomed you, he stresses. We must welcome one another with the same mercy and unconditional acceptance that we have received. This is our timeless mission, to invite all people to feast on the infinite generosity of God.
An African-American spiritual sings of sitting at the welcome table: “I’m gonna sit at the welcome table. I gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days, Hallelujah! All God’s children gonna sit together…one of these days.” Springing both from the African American experience of not being welcome at the table and from the vision of God’s inclusive grace in Christ, this old spiritual invites us to radical hospitality. The altar of this church – and of all our churches - is the welcome table, where the bread of life is shared and where all are meant to find the unconditional welcome of God.

When I reflect on these nearly fifteen years as your bishop, the word hospitality captures much of what I feel today. Becky and I are deeply grateful for the gracious hospitality you have shown us during these years. We have shared life and faith and ministry together in extraordinary ways. We have rejoiced together and struggled together, laughed and sometimes wept together, sung praises together and put our shoulder to the plow together. We have been greatly blessed by our diocesan staff and no one is more grateful for their excellence and dedication than I. Becky and I will always be profoundly thankful for the privilege of being with you and serving God together. “Sweet home Alabama” has become our home and we will always be proud to have been grafted onto the fruitful vine of this great diocese.

Most of all today I want to salute you - salute you for being who you are and for your dedication to Christ’s ministry of reconciliation and renewal in so many ways. Together we have rounded the turn into the third Christian millennium and a new century together, and joyfully celebrated the 175th anniversary of this diocese. At the same time these years also have included some unusually challenging times in our society and some fractious seasons in the life of our church. Among them the shock of 9/11 and global
terrorism, the wars of the Middle East, Katrina, the Haitian earthquake, severe economic swings and a Great Recession, and, of course, the on-going debate about sexual ethics in the churches. “May you live in interesting times,” says the Chinese proverb. Well, we have.

Through it all you have kept your focus on worship and mission, have reached out generously to many in need, and have shown deep spiritual maturity. It has not always been easy, but we have largely kept our balance and maintained “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

During these years we have established six new parishes and shared in the significant renewal of several others. We have built two new campus ministry centers and the beautiful St. Francis Chapel at camp. We have helped develop ministry centers and support clergy in Brazil and helped build schools and medical and nutrition clinics in Haiti, while at home starting new outreach centers and acquiring land for future church growth. We have extended our outreach by re-establishing the permanent diaconate and have committed ourselves to serious environmental stewardship. It has been good to see our youth ministry grow in grace and strength, to see Sawyerville expand and blossom, and to see Hispanic ministry take root among us in several forms, including La Gracia, our first Hispanic church. The ACTS 2 Campaign has moved us forward in mission in important ways, and will continue to bear fruit for years. It has taken all of you to make these things happen, and I am very proud of you.

I was heartened to discover recently that I have had the privilege of consecrating 14 new church buildings since 1996 and dedicating 7 major parish additions. This is remarkable and speaks volumes about the vitality of the Diocese of Alabama. During a
time when many dioceses have been mired in internal conflict and retrenchment, we have continued to expand our ministry. At a recent reckoning we were one of the four growing dioceses of the Episcopal Church (which is both a happy thing here and a reminder of the challenges facing us nationally). Most important of all, the Gospel has been preached, lives have been transformed by the love of Christ, and God has been joyfully worshipped and faithfully served.

All of this has been accomplished because of your vision and generosity, your faithfulness to the comprehensiveness and moderation of our Episcopal/Anglican heritage, and your good sense of humor and hospitality. Even as I salute you, we say with the psalmist, “Non nobis, domine,” not to us, but to God be the glory.

I believe that we are well-positioned to take in stride the diversity of this church. Change is inevitable and being in communion is always far more important than being in agreement about everything. We will inevitably have different views on issues such as committed same sex relationships. Our dioceses and parishes will not always be completely in step with each other. That is the nature of the church. “There’s wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea.”

In our often fractious times we must not succumb to the seduction of polarization, which seems to be the hobgoblin of our day. At the welcome table there is room for different points of view within the catholic faith as expressed in our creeds and Prayer Book. It is my fondest hope for you that this diocese will continue to be a place of welcome for all sorts and conditions of people in God’s varied family and a beacon of unity in the midst of diversity and of balance in an age of extremism. As I have said to you in the past, I say again ‘God needs us all and needs us together.’
It has been said that healthy transition in leadership enables us to give thanks for what has been good, to acknowledge what has not been perfect, and to enable everyone to move on. Much has been good during these years. Not all has been perfect, to be sure, and it is well to remember that ‘God’s strength is made perfect in weakness.’ God is not finished with any of us yet, thankfully. We are grateful to the Nominating Committee for their dedicated work and discernment in helping to raise up the 11th Bishop of Alabama to continue the journey, and I trust that the transition will be both orderly and life-giving.

It is not appropriate for me to look very far ahead now, but I do need to sound a few notes toward the future. I very much hope that you will give serious attention to financial stewardship in the days to come. The Alabama Plan for Stewardship Education needs renewal among us. It is still the best approach to Christian stewardship that I know. Concurrently we need to make our covenant giving for diocesan ministry more adequate and equitable. I applaud you who are wonderfully faithful in meeting our agreed covenant guidelines; but the reality is too many still do not. Thus, recently we have had to cut two full time staff positions from your diocesan ministry and reduce outreach to balance the budget. We have not given any increase in compensation to your diocesan program staff, chaplains, camp director, and bishops for two years now. I know well that these are economically stressful times for us all. But please always remember that your diocese is not overhead; it is ministry. It is your ministry. We all need to give our fair share.

Ministry with young adults needs attention and new creativity. We are an aging church and must be attentive to the needs of young adults and children. In the age of Facebook, U-tube, and Twitter, and other emerging social patterns and networks we must find new ways to connect with young adults and their hunger for God.
Our society is growing more diverse each year, and we need to reflect this diversity more adequately than we do. One of the most repeated commands in the Old Testament is ‘welcome the stranger’. Diversity is a beautiful gift and if we are to continue to grow and make disciples we must embrace it.

We need new models for sustaining our smaller churches and support lay ministries. I am delighted to see partnerships developing between some of our larger parishes and smaller ones, which are very beneficial to both. We need more of this.

Our communications effort and strategy led by Deacon Dave Drachlis is proving to be highly effective in spreading the message of our church. I have learned how essential it is today to have a staff person who is proactive and strategic in this area, and I pray that you will continue this after the ACTS 2 funding ends.

Finally, never forget how important the Episcopal Church continues to be in this state as a leader in social responsibility and open-mindedness. We may be a comparatively small church numerically, but we are able to make a big difference for compassion and for the poor and for progress in our communities. Society looks to the Episcopal Church for enlightened leadership.

These are a few of the ways we need to move into God’s future in 2012 and beyond. They all mean some change. They all promise greater vitality.

When I hand the crozier to my successor on January 7, 2012 I will recall the words of Francis of Assisi to his successor, “I have done what was mine to do. Now you must do what is yours to do.” This is the way that the church continues to grow and expand and be faithful from generation to generation. No one will be more eager than I to
see what God has in store for you – and what you have in store for God - in the years to come!

Retirement as your diocesan does not mean retiring from the vocation of bishop. As I gather up the fragments of many years of full-time ministry, travel and spend time with family and friends too often neglected, and do some intentional fishing, I will be eager to see how I might be useful to the church in new ways. We have been enormously blessed since going to seminary nearly 41 years ago and have been led on vocationally in ways that could never have been imagined in my callow days at the General Seminary. “Vocation keeps making more of you,” wrote Gail Godwin. Indeed it has, and I expect it will continue to.

When Paul writes about the ministry of bishops in the Pastoral Epistles he lists a number of criteria. A bishop should be “above reproach, sensible, not a lover of money, gentle, have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy,” among others. In both of his lists the word “hospitable” prominently appears. A bishop must be hospitable – what a splendid thing for us to think about as we prepare for an episcopal election.

We can easily think of hospitality as denoting good home cooking, rocking chairs on the porch, and sweet tea and congeniality. We Southerners know about such hospitality, don’t we? And it is a good and gracious thing, as far as it goes.

But “Gospel Hospitality” goes farther. It is much more robust and radical. Jesus’ hospitality extended not just to his friends but to the sinners and outcasts of his day. He shared table fellowship with those on the margins and those considered unrighteous, to the unending consternation of the Pharisees. He spoke about the feasts of God’s kingdom where everyone was welcome, not just the invited guests but those from the highways
and byways. Jesus said “love your enemies, as well as “love one another” (which sometimes can be harder than loving our enemies!). On the cross we beheld his life-transforming love as he stretched out his loving arms to all, even those who crucified and rejected him - and indeed to the sinful and broken ones of every time and place. To even the likes of us. The cross is God’s ultimate hospitality, a saving embrace of mercy and loving kindness for the whole world.

Desmond Tutu once described it this way:

There is a movement at the heart of things to reverse the awful centrifugal force of alienation, brokenness, division, hostility and disharmony. God has set in motion a centripetal process, a moving toward the Center, towards unity, harmony, goodness, peace and justice; one that removes barriers. Jesus says, ‘when I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to myself; as he hangs from his cross with out-flung arms, thrown out to clasp all, everyone and everything in cosmic embrace; so that everyone, everything, belongs. None is an outsider, all are insiders, and all belong in one family, God’s family, the human family.

That is Gospel Hospitality. It is the deep meaning of the Incarnation and the Cross. We are a continuing part of this great movement of healing and reconciliation. Our churches are meant to live this cosmic embrace and make God’s expansive love real.

In the 1950’s J.B. Phillips famously said “your God is too small.” Today I suggest that the danger is that “your church is too small.” We need to be as large as Christ’s embrace. And that is large indeed.

We see much hostility in our culture today, especially toward those who differ from one another. We need to move from hostility to hospitality, from regarding the other with fear to regarding him and her as Christ. Christ in the stranger, Christ in the poor, Christ in the opposite party and other culture, Christ in those who differ most from us. As Henri Nouwen wrote, “it is obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable
place where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.”

With all due respect, I must disagree with our new Governor. My sisters and brothers are not just those I see at church or those who believe the same as I do. They are everyone who is loved by God.

I felt the welcome of God keenly when I visited Sawyerville last summer and saw the hospitality offered by our youth to Black Belt youth and by them to us. Bridges of hope and love were being built across wide social gaps.

I felt it keenly when Bishop Sloan, Rob Morpeth, Pat Wingo and I visited Christ Church, Albertville on the day after a tornado ripped apart their church building and their beautiful neighborhood. There on the damaged porch Episcopalians and others were serving food and refreshment to their neighbors and relief workers, offering Gospel hospitality in the midst of tragedy. It was an altar in the world.

I have seen such communion vividly in the work of many of our parishes and individuals in Haiti, in medical clinics, in building schools and feeding programs, extending the hospitality of our affluent land to a faithful people ravaged by poverty and crisis. The pictures of the first of many meals for nearly 200 under-nourished children in the mountain village of Crochu made possible by Krik?Kra! were profoundly moving. A welcome table indeed. Thank you Becky and all the clergy spouses.

I feel the hospitality of God as I attend worship at La Gracia with our Hispanic friends, when I see our Integrity chapter seeking to help us respect the dignity of every human being, when I officiate at Cursillo events and witness the unconditional love of Christ transforming many of us, when I see how the ministry of the Camp McDowell
Environmental Center touches the children of our state, and how our soup kitchens and free medical clinics nourish the poor among us.

All these and more are helping many experience the feast of grace. They are the hospitality of God taking flesh, transforming us from fearful people to free people and moving us from separateness to true community. “All God’s children gonna sit together one of these days, hallelujah!”

I believe that this is why St. Paul is so specific about bishops being hospitable. We are called to lead and serve the church in extending God’s welcome table as far as possible, so that all can feast on the infinite generosity of God. We do not just need apostolic succession; we need apostolic hospitality!

This is not always easy. It is ever tempting to worry about the vestments and re-arranging the deck chairs and business as usual. The church is often tempted to turn inward and circle the wagons in fear. And, as I heard the Archbishop of York say years ago, it is easy to get so up to our rears in alligators that we forget that we are here to clean up the swamp!

Nevertheless, apostolic hospitality is the essential calling of the episcopal office, so that we welcome all of God’s people generously and make room for their diverse gifts. This is how Christ “the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls” lived and it is how we must live - in radical hospitality, welcoming one another just as Christ has welcomed us.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the rich life and ministry you have shared with Becky and me since 1996. May you show the same generosity to your next diocesan bishop and may Gospel Hospitality abound in this diocese, making you an even brighter beacon of welcome and hope for the world, today, tomorrow, and always.
Today I do not say “Farewell” That will come later on October 28th. But I do say, in the words of a favorite poet, “Fare forward!” Fare forward in the hospitality of Christ. Fare forward in love for one another. Fare forward in making the feast of God’s grace available to all.

And the blessing of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be with you always.

AMEN