Address to the 41st Annual Convention

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Fifth Bishop of the Diocese of Southwest Florida

There are three elements in my life that I hold in the highest regard. The first is being married to Mary Ellen. The second is being a grandfather to the best grandchildren ever. The third is being bishop of the Diocese of Southwest Florida. The first two are self-explanatory. I will offer some comment on the third.

I count myself as blessed to serve among you as bishop. I have experienced multiple occasions to have my memories awakened here of priests who remember serving with my priest father, and of both childhood and collegiate remembrances of life in the church in this diocese. Being bishop here is, in a sense, being home.

I believe we have exciting and demanding days ahead in this diocesan home of ours. We have much in which to rejoice.

This year, including last night, we have ordained seven people to the priesthood and diaconate. We have six people currently enrolled in seminary.

The School for Ministry Development is in its second year, and some students will undoubtedly be engaged in the ordination process for the diaconate. This diocese is currently hosting three Cursillo weekends annually. We have 15 Episcopal schools in this diocese, of which two — Berkley Preparatory School in Tampa and St. Stephen’s at Christ Church in Bradenton — are undergoing extensive renovation and new construction. Those two schools, along with St. Mary’s and St. John’s in Tampa, and St. Paul’s School in Clearwater, all assisted in hosting the biennial National Association of Episcopal Schools in Tampa since our last convention.

Ten congregations have new rectors or priests-in-charge, and seven congregations have new assisting priests or deacons. Nine of our congregations — St. John the Divine in Ruskin, St. Monica’s in Naples, St. Andrew’s in Tampa, St. Paul’s in Naples, St. James in Port Charlotte, the Cathedral of St. Peter in St. Petersburg, St. Nathaniel’s in North Port, St. Mary’s in Bonita Springs, and St. Andrew’s, in Boca Grande — have recently completed or are in the midst of renovation or new construction projects. And St. Andrew’s, Boca Grande, will be received as a parish today.

On Oct. 13, 1892, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church established the Missionary Diocese of South Florida, and the House of Bishops elected William Crane Gray as its first bishop. In his episcopal travels he landed on Boca Grande and purchased land for a church in 1908. Bishop Gray held the first service on Boca Grande in March of 1911 in the railroad depot. He recorded in his journal, “All who could crowd in were there, and many on the outside. I raised the tunes, and the singing was hearty. It was an inspiring service. Great improvements are going on, and I believe Boca Grande has a future before it.”

Well, I believe it does too. Some transitions just take longer than others.

We have much to celebrate. Like in any home though, it is, of course true that all is not celebratory. There are times of weeping as well. Some of our congregations have suffered internal conflict. Some congregations are suffering intense financial constraints and uncertain futures. As St. Paul informs us, “We rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.” We experience wonderful vitality and times of significant pain just like in most homes. And we are all in this together in our diocesan home.

After last year’s diocesan convention of 2008 I began to solidify some of my own thinking regarding some operational and mission issues in the Diocese of Southwest Florida. I decided that I did not want to wait until this 41st diocesan convention to inform the diocese of my thinking, so I presented these thoughts to the spring deanery convocations after discussions with the Diocesan Council, deans and Standing Committee. The presentations were not intended to be detailed plans, as much as directions I thought we needed to go in for the long-term life of the diocese.
At the conclusion of the spring convocations, I formed a temporary task force to begin addressing the questions to transform these directions into plans for the future. Its purpose was to think out loud and identify issues and concerns for putting into action these vision and mission directions. Out of these conversations emerged a vision statement around which to organize my and our thinking and energy. It is “Honor our Tradition, Build for the Future, Mercy in Mission.”

The congregational and diocesan topics do not just neatly divide into these three areas. There is much obvious overlap. But for the sake of presentation I will present issues in three distinct segments.

**Honor our Tradition**

We have a particular history in this diocese and particular ways of institutional and canonical practice in the Episcopal Church. One institutional model is in how congregations exist. Our diocese has many healthy examples of the traditional congregational model, which includes facilities, ordained and lay staff members, ongoing program, and self-sustaining operating budgets. We need to be about the business of planting more congregations like these.

However, our diocese also has the need to try different and creative approaches for congregational life, which may include congregational clusters or team ministry models so as to make available the shared resources of people, funds and materials.

One approach we are currently involved in is a partnership with the congregations of St. John’s, Pine Island; Epiphany, Cape Coral; and the Diocese of Southwest Florida. The intention of this collaborative effort is to share resources and maintain two healthy congregational systems. This is not a new idea. The diocese, St. Boniface and St. Margaret of Scotland have been involved with St. Edmund’s in a shared mission approach for some years now.

In these times we will continue to explore additional regional shared mission approaches. It is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of working together, sharing our resources and mission opportunities in this diocesan home. We need also pay heed to the emergent church desires expressed in a new generation, and pay heed to specific demographic shifts primarily in the Hispanic/Latino populations in multiple areas of our diocese.

We have extraordinary assets in buildings, finances and human resources to manage in this diocese. We do so within the context of particular institutional practices in which we can honor our tradition in creative, coherent and responsible ways. I call upon the Commission on Ministry, the Congregational Development Committee, the Diocesan Council, the Standing Committee, the deans, the clergy events planning committee, the clergy, the vestries, the ECW and all of the delegates to this convention to think and plan creatively and strategically to honor our tradition for the growth and health of our congregations and diocese.

**Build for the Future**

**DaySpring:** The process of planning has begun for the return of the major operational aspects of the diocesan office to DaySpring. The diocese already owns DaySpring, and having the official diocesan presence at DaySpring will positively influence the ongoing operation.

DaySpring is important in the life of the diocese as a gathering space that is beautiful and central. It is a place where multitudes meet Jesus and each other. Preliminary conversations have started with the Manatee County Planning Department. It is essential that we proceed with an approach that is thoughtful and responsible. I have no need or desire to rush things. I want the decisions to make sense for us and for generations to come.

DaySpring should also have a larger and beautiful worship space for the needs of our multiple diocesan activities held there. The most important thing we do when we gather as Christian community is worship God through Jesus Christ. Again, it is essential that we
proceed with an approach that is thoughtful and responsible. Let me stress that the conversations for planning purposes are in the preliminary stage. I do not want to make decisions that will simply be reactive or that we will regret.

I am furthermore convinced that DaySpring needs an endowment fund to deal with its ongoing capital depreciation and improvement issues. A very modest amount has been contributed for this purpose but, again, we need to pay continued attention to this need for the long term.

If the Diocese of Southwest Florida ever sold DaySpring we would never recover it. I believe we should use this gift to our greatest advantage. We need to be intentional about program development, asset improvement and diocesan operational presence at DaySpring. The development of a DaySpring endowment fund will only enhance these purposes.

The diocesan office move will include creating and maintaining an official presence at our cathedral in St. Petersburg. This aspect is more readily available due to the construction already underway at the cathedral. Conversations are currently in progress regarding some designated diocesan office space, shared meeting space and School for Ministry Development functions. We will keep addressing these issues more specifically as the particulars become more available.

Mercy in Mission

Episcopal Charities: I presented this concept and need at the October 2008 diocesan convention. I noted that an Episcopal Charities Fund is an immense resource in many dioceses. I asked for 2009 Episcopalians to each contribute $1,000 to establish this fund for outreach.

I hoped that we would generate approximately $2 million by this invitation. It has not yet succeeded in a mature fashion. However, the current activity is in simply raising funds to build an Episcopal Charities Fund endowment so as to have monies available for outreach within and beyond the diocese.

The fund has been established and is now in the building stage. It is not yet significant, but by paying continued attention to it, the fund will develop into an important instrument for community services and outreach.

Last week, about 20 congregations participated in the “Baseball with the Bishop” night at Tropicana Field. About 700 Episcopalians gathered, and the Tampa Bay Rays will now contribute $4 per ticket to the Episcopal Charities Fund. I would like to thank everyone who participated to help build up the fund. I thank all congregations and individuals who have specifically contributed to the Episcopal Charities Fund thus far and thank those who will in the future.

One particular present reality for mission is the need and opportunity in many of our congregational communities across the diocese for Hispanic/Latino mission. Today you will find a church bus and commercial-type van that have been contributed to the diocese for these efforts. These efforts will include medical team collaborations, delivery of food, clothing, and other resources, and making worship available to our Hispanic and Latino brothers and sisters in Christ in targeted areas across the diocese.

This represents an Episcopal Community Services shared effort between Church of the Redeemer, St. George’s and the diocese. It is our hope to continue to identify existing Episcopal churches in Hispanic communities and to establish a network of locations in which to develop a ministry circuit. The vehicles will be blessed at lunch.

Many of our congregations are dealing with issues of domestic poverty, food kitchens, refugee resettlement, homeless ministry and more. The Episcopal Charities Fund will aid in mission initiatives and collaborative efforts for cultural issues and circumstances that are chronic, critical or catastrophic. The financial resources are modest in the fund at this point. I now recognize that the development of the Episcopal Charities Fund will probably take years to become a mature asset for mission in the diocese. But I will continue to address the need. One day it will help us have mercy in mission and then will continue to do so. I ask again this day. I will continue asking.
I am pleased and grateful to be in the Diocese of Southwest Florida. God willing, I hope to be your bishop for a long time. We are in our 40th-year anniversary. I would be grateful to celebrate our 50th anniversary together. The directions I offer are ones I believe we need to more actively engage in the next decade and beyond.

It is a personal joy being bishop here, although it is not always fun. There is an intensity attached to the office that is revealed in the fact that I do not have the power to make everyone happy, or to make believing Christians agree with each other on cultural and theological issues.

No, it is not always fun but the joy gives the gift of encouragement.

When I was a young man I went through a desperate time of spiritual self-assessment flavored by deep fear. I came out of it upon reaching the conclusion that Christianity is true, that Jesus Christ is alive, and that I was now free. It is true! I’ve never looked back. This is the life to which I have been called and where I will faithfully remain. Our faith in Jesus Christ is true.

I invite you to join me in committing for the long term in this diocese. We need to strengthen our resources because we have been called to serve here. I believe we are called to Honor our Tradition, Build for the Future and have Mercy in Mission.