The annual diocesan convention provides a snapshot look at the diocese and a map for the journey forward. I start by thanking our preacher and chaplain, Bishop James Tengatenga. I also want to warmly welcome our new assisting bishops, the Rt. Rev. Barry Howe and the Rt. Rev. Michael Garrison. It is also my pleasure to welcome our old friend, the Rt. Rev. Julio Holguin, the bishop of the Dominican Republic.

This past year has seen some tremendous strides made in our diocesan life. It would be too lengthy a process to remark on all of the accomplishments and committee and commission functions, so I will comment on a restricted number of them.

Briefly, or as a snapshot, the plans for the new diocesan house at Dayspring are underway. We will have a ceremonial groundbreaking on Tuesday, November 8 at 1:00 pm. Actual construction will begin relatively soon afterwards and completion is expected by June of 2012.

Last year I stated that the Dayspring Steering Committee would produce a survey to be sent to the various constituencies of Dayspring. The survey would consider our conference centers programmatic and facilities present and future. That survey has been completed and the results are under evaluation at this time.

The diocese has through the work of various task forces, the finance committee and the diocesan council, developed clear financial practices, policies and tools regarding loans and endowments for diocesan planning, decisions and actions. These are held up as useful and helpful models for the use of our congregations and are available on the diocesan website. I am very proud of diocesan staff and the diocesan council for all that they have accomplished on our behalf.

The diocese has had a greater engagement with the Latino/Hispanic community in the past year. At the parish level, we have two mature congregations in Sarasota and Hillsborough counties, one startup congregation in Pinellas County and three congregations desirous of serving these communities in DeSoto, Manatee, and Charlotte counties. These congregations serve the Latino/Hispanic communities through worship, food ministries, health screenings, vacation bible schools and after school programs. At the diocesan level, this past year we have held two workshops with the Episcopal Church’s Latino/Hispanic Missioner, established a strategic
planning committee, and developed traveling clergy teams to celebrate major feast days to create ministry presence and serving impact.

I know that we are all proud to recognize the leaders and members of Iona Hope and the excellent work of Fr. John Adler. This morning we will have the joyful opportunity of celebrating their achievement of attaining Parish status.

I am pleased to announce the work of the Episcopal Charities Fund. First, various monies were collected and distributed by the Episcopal Charities Fund during the past year as “pass through” payments equaling $55,361 for the Dominican Challenge, Nets for Life, and Japan Tsunami Relief. The First Annual Grants recommended by the Deacons Council utilizing the grant application criteria and approved by Diocesan Council are:

- St. John’s, Clearwater: $1,000 for a Youth Mission Trip working with people living in extreme poverty.
- St. David’s, Englewood: $1,000 for a program called Back Pack for Kids
- Hope for Justice, Tampa: $5,000 for a community training organization founded by St. James House of Prayer
- Haitian Congregation of St. Paul’s, Naples: $1,000 for a children’s literacy program
- Cornerstone Kids: $5,000 for an after school education program for at risk K – 2nd grade at St. James House of Prayer
- Amazing Love Healing Ministry: $3,125 as a matching fund for scholarship requests
- St. Georges Food Pantry, Bradenton: $3,855 to replace appliances for their work with Manatee County food distributors
- St. Mary’s, Palmetto: $2,500 for an After School Tutoring program
- All Saints, Tarpon Springs: $1,000 for their Grace Chapel Homeless Daycare

A total of $23,480!

I thank all who participated in the first Bishops Annual Appeal. I also specifically thank Canon Chris Gray and the Diocesan Finance Committee for building up the Episcopal Charities Fund so as to make these grants. We began the asking at diocesan convention in 2008 for the Episcopal Charities Fund to be developed. I have said that I will keep asking to make this ministry endowment fund strong. We have reached a milestone year. There will now be more grants made every year!! Thank you for creating this legacy.

The theme for this 43rd annual convention of the Diocese of Southwest Florida is “Walk in Love.” The phrase is from the letter to the Ephesians and reads, “Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” The phrase “live in love” is literally “walk in love” and is an exhortation to God’s Household, the
Church on how our individual and corporate character is to be intentionally shaped and directed by God’s character in Christ. Congregations and their members are then to be intentional in the giving of their lives as a living sacrifice to God.

One of the functions of diocesan program is to be a resource for the congregations so that intentional “walking in love” living may be generated and matured. We have been working recently within the broad topic of leadership development through the Fresh Start offerings, the annual vestry retreat, and clergy conferences. The clergy have concentrated recently on the topics of life long Faith Formation and Strategic planning. Ask them about the book “Holy Conversations” for strategic planning.

Today I want to provide multiple resources to each congregation to spark richer holy conversations to generate mission planning and implementation.

Last year I noted that we are positioned well to do a new congregation plant. The Congregation Development Committee is energetically exploring that purpose. The first necessary material needed in clear decision making for Congregation development strategy is comprehensive demographic information. The first resource to provide then, is the Mission Insight website, as of today now made available to all the congregations of Southwest Florida. You will find the registration material on www.missioninsite.com. The diocesan agency account number will grant access to predefined reports and the ability to create custom reports for your congregation. You will have access to support videos, documents, practical ministry application suggestions, and the ability to plot your members and visitors for current and future ministry analysis.

The next resources are two simple planning tools, one of which I briefly showed the gathered leaders at May’s vestry retreat. They are both available on our newly designed diocesan website formally launched for this convention. You will find them under congregational development. The first is a simple energy life-cycle tool to assist in thinking about any and all congregational ministries. Its purpose is to seek and state where energy is and where energy is not in any congregational activity. For example, St. Jude’s may have once been very energized about youth ministry and they still keep putting their resources into it. The problem is St. Jude’s’ is now surrounded by retirement communities and the congregation is energized by health faire ministries. Ask: “Where is the energy in my congregation?”

The second simple planning tool is a vision planning reality check tool. It simply asks you to think about what you would like to do by first stating fearlessly where you really are. Then consider the steps necessary to close the gap between present reality and desired future.

As a final point, at each congregation’s table is a book titled Church Wellness. I ask each congregation to designate a lay leader to read it first and then pass it around to other leaders, clergy and lay. The book does not provide the answer to every
congregational issue and it is not comprehensive. The book does, though provide helpful categories for congregational life observation, thinking, planning, and implementation. The categories include membership development, young adult ministries, spiritual development, communications strategy and others. Probably, no congregation should do everything in here. But every congregation could do one or more things mapped out in *Church Wellness* to improve, change, grow, and be mission minded, to walk in love. I urge all of you to do something to not only energize your own congregation, but also use the new diocesan website as a reporting tool to inform and inspire your sister congregations in the diocese.

I am challenging all congregations to grow in mission and ministry. I once said at an annual meeting of a congregation where I was rector that our goal for the next year was to add 52 new households. Over the course of the next year we missed the mark. We only added 48 new households but they added immensely to the rich dynamics of that congregation’s life. The goal though was realistic, measurable and achievable. I urge you to use these resources set before you to become more vital, more purposeful, more energized, more healthy ‘walking in love’ congregations.

My family had the surreal experience some eleven years ago of rejoicing in gladness at our daughter Ashton’s wedding and then experiencing the despair of my cousin Alicia’s (my youngest daughter’s namesake) funeral the next day in the same church with many of the same people. I discovered something about the Church on those two consecutive days. Not only is The Church where we seek God. The Church is the community where supreme happiness and profound sadness have the capacity to dwell together in spiritual joy.

Recent months have been a terrible journey through the valley of the shadow of death for my family. Even as the future lies as an uncertain mystery, I am reminded of the power of the Church to help people walk in love through the trials and triumphs of life. The Church across this diocese, nationally, and internationally has consistently been there helping us walk in love through the valley of the shadow of death. One bishop wrote Mary Ellen, “a community of love and strength continues to surround you.” Another friend wrote me about his own family tragedy and stated, “I discovered how good and noble and kind and generous and loving Christians can be.” Those sentiments are, indeed, my discovery in this time and one I hold up to this conventions gathering of Christian leaders. You are a community of love and strength that is needed in each local congregational expression for every member and every seeker in whatever they must endure or enjoy. The Baptismal community is the Household of God that we welcome people into, and is the community of love and strength.

We have the resources, the spiritual gifts, the skills, the people, the purpose and the mission of God. We are needed. You are needed to continually choose to function as the community of strength and love. You are needed to walk in love. I say this not just as your bishop. I say this to you personally.

Thank you.