INTRODUCTION

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Greetings and welcome to all who gather here for this 128th Annual Convention of our beloved Diocese of East Carolina. It is an honor and privilege to stand before you as your bishop for 14 years and to preside. I give thanks to God always for you and the ministry God has entrusted to us as a diocese.

I’ve thought a lot about borders and frontiers this year. Part of the work of being a bishop is to serve as a connection between the diocese and the life of the larger church and world. This past fall, some of my travels as your bishop have taken me to the border between the U.S. and Mexico and, just several weeks ago, to the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Both of these borders are places of tension, suffering and desperation. They are unfriendly places. The season of Epiphany proclaims Jesus as the light of the world. The tense borders I visited this year are at least two places where the desperate midnight of human life is found. It is difficult and painful to listen to people on both sides of the U.S./Mexican border tell their stories of parents separated from their children, of the anxiety of wondering if your child or spouse is one of the 500 or so who will die in the desert this year trying to cross the border into the U.S. It is difficult to stand in the no-man’s land between the poverty and suffering of earthquake-ravaged Haiti and the relative security of the Dominican Republic and meet a group of teenagers who live marooned in the no-man’s land, unable to enter either the Dominican Republic or Haiti.

Borders are often desperate places where the tragic results of the divisions in human existence can be seen most clearly: steel fences, armed soldiers, homeless children, families, races and nations separated. Borders often mark the line where hope and despair come face to face most clearly, where hunger stares across the fence at plenty. The border is where victims of oppression struggle to reach across and touch human dignity; the steel fence that proclaims the line where exclusion trumps hospitality. The border is the dividing line where most often the “…huddled masses yearning to be free…” simply remain huddled and excluded. It is often at the border where human issues of life and death, plenty and scarcity, hope and despair come into clear and sharp contrast. Borders are not friendly places.

We began the season of Epiphany with Jesus standing in the Jordan River, the traditional border that separated the chosen people of God from the taint of “the outsider.” It is no mistake that Jesus was baptized in a river that marked a border, since Jesus himself is that place where human weakness and divine strength are joined. Jesus is himself that border where God’s holiness and human sinfulness meet. Jesus is himself the border where divine love meets human hatred in a way that wells up to eternal life through God’s ocean-depths of love.

But for Jesus and his mission of proclaiming God’s mission, the River Jordan was not just a border. Jesus’ ministry began as he stood in the watery divide. Borders can also be frontiers. If it is indeed at the border that the issues in human life can be seen most starkly, the border is also marks a frontier from which ministry begins. At least that is what the account of Jesus’ baptism shows us. It is as we stand in the waters of baptism that the frontiers of ministry emerge.

I wonder what frontiers of ministry we face here in our own diocese at this moment. When Jesus was asked to define exactly what he meant when he used the word “neighbor,” Jesus answered without hesitation: Your neighbor is whomever God places in your path. In other words, you and I don’t get the opportunity to choose who our neighbor is. Neighbors come from God for the simple reason that it is not we who choose God. It is God who chooses us. Christian hospitality isn’t about my wants, but the needs of my neighbor. Outreach in the name of Christ is not about doing something that simply makes me feel good about myself. I wonder just who might be in our path as a diocese today. I wonder what kinds of hospitality we are called to extend and to whom. I wonder what outreach looks like in our context. I wonder what frontiers in ministry are before us as a diocese today.

FRONTIERS OF MINISTRY IN THE COMING YEAR

Jesus is calling us today to move beyond our traditional, comfortable boundaries of thought and action; calling us to the frontiers of ministry, to new and renewed perceptions and actions. Here are some of the frontiers in ministry that I believe lie before us and to which we are called to respond to in the coming year: the future of Trinity Center and a capital funds drive; Ministry among Hispanics; mutual responsibility and interdependence within our own diocesan family; ministry among those who serve our nation in the military and their families; a renewed and expanded vision for ministry among youth, college campus and young adults; caring for the health and well-being of lay and ordained employees of this Church – the Denominational Health Plan; supporting the smaller congregations of our diocese.

1. SUPPORT FOR THE LIFE AND MISSION OF SMALL CONGREGATIONS
Our fellow and sister Episcopalians are, after all, God-given neighbors as well. Small congregations are defined as having fewer than 75 people for Average Sunday Attendance (ASA). I use this benchmark since it takes an ASA of roughly 100+ to financially support a full-time rector and parish life and program. By this count, about 45 congregations in our diocese (out of 75, or about 60%) fall into the category of being a small congregation. It is for these congregations that the active support and involvement of bishops and diocesan staff becomes more direct and critical. We have made much progress in this area with the appointment of Bishop Marray to work directly to support and nurture small congregations, and I thank God for his ministry among us.

More and more, what we have come to accept as the norm of one priest for every congregation is becoming more and more financially challenging. Therefore, I have asked Bishop Marray and the Department of Mission & Development to begin work to see how congregations might be configured to share priestly presence as well as to develop lay leadership and ministry for pastoral, sacramental, educational and missional purposes.

One way is for larger congregations, “Magnet Churches,” to share clergy and other resources with smaller congregations. St. James, Wilmington, is one example of this in its relationship with St. Mary’s, Burgaw, and the results have been energizing for both. Another way is to begin clustering congregations somewhat along the lines of Coalition 16 when Lay Readers from one congregation travel to lead Morning Prayer in one of the churches of the cluster while the priest is celebrating Eucharist in another congregation.

In the coming year, our diocesan staff will offer (on Sundays at a central location) two areas for special training of lay leaders in organizational leadership. One, the Parish Leadership Institute, will focus upon lay leadership development and training opportunities for all congregations of the diocese. The second such program, "New Dreams, New Visions for Lay Leaders" will provide development training lay leadership skills particularly focused on the needs of the smaller churches of this Diocese. All ministry, lay or ordained, is always rooted in interdependence; in demonstrating that we are here for one another, for the whole people of God.

2. MINISTRY AMONG HISPANICS

The population of Hispanics in Eastern North Carolina continues to grow and to settle as a permanent part of our region. Several congregations such as St. Peter’s, Washington, and St. Francis, Goldsboro, have services in Spanish as an addition to their life and ministry. By Average Sunday Attendance, the second largest congregation in our diocese is Sagrada Familia in Newton Grove. This congregation, which numbered over 600 in attendance the last time I made a Sunday visitation, worships outdoors because they have no building. I believe that this growing Hispanic population represents a great evangelistic challenge for us in this generation. Our goal must be, in the spirit of Christian neighborliness, to reach out to, encourage and welcome Hispanics into the life and worship of our congregations. What might be some simple beginning steps in this area? Perhaps an after school program for Hispanic children like La Casa at Christ Church, Elizabeth City. How about some English as a second language classes taught by parishioners in the parish hall? Might clergy and lay readers learn how to read a service in Spanish? Perhaps some Forward Movement pamphlets extending a welcome to The Episcopal Church in Spanish in your church narthex below a sign that says “Bienvenidos!” A free dental clinic such as held at St. Thomas, Ahoskie; St. Peter’s, Washington; St. Andrew’s, Goldsboro. A sense of being invited and cared for is a universal language, and Hispanics (who, contrary to popular belief, are not all Roman Catholics) are a large group of neighbors God has put in our path. How might we serve them intentionally and more effectively? I call on every congregation to practice hospitality and to say, “Bienvenidos!”

3. MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE IN OUR DIOCESAN LIFE

John Donne (Anglican priest, poet and Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London) noted, “No man is an island…” It is also true that no parish in this or any other diocese is an island. We are Episcopalians, not Congregationalists. The basic unit of the church for Episcopalians is the diocese, not the individual congregation. This is so because it is the diocese that creates congregations. And before there was an Episcopal Church in this country, from the first English settlements on these shores, the Anglican Church in these colonies was under the authority of the Bishop of London. There is no congregation in this diocese that has ever existed independently of a diocese, whether the Diocese of London, or North Carolina or East Carolina. As part of a diocese, indeed, as part of the living Body of Christ, daily we rely on our mutual accountabilities and interdependences. In terms of canonical responsibilities, each deacon, priest, bishop at ordination and each vestry person is called on yearly to affirm in writing loyalty to the doctrine, discipline and worship of The Episcopal Church and promise to obey the Constitution and Canons of this Church.

Our diocesan funding for mission depends mainly upon the percentage of each parish’s operating income as determined by Diocesan Convention. Diocesan Convention has affirmed our will to maintain voluntary parish pledging to diocesan mission. The conundrum this leads to in our diocesan life is this: If every vestry pledged for 2011 at the level of its operating income called for by this Convention, the proposed budget could have been fully funded.

Mutual accountability and interdependence is not just about money; but also about fulfilling promises and commitments. Diocesan canon also requires that each vestry submit an Annual Parochial Report; conduct an annual Audit; make a financial pledge to the diocese; and send delegates to the annual convention. I wish that I could tell you that all these commitments and responsibilities have been fulfilled in a regular way, but sadly this is not the case. Even if these requirements are not fulfilled, the basic accountabilities to this Convention and the Canons of this Church remain.

Therefore, as a way of strengthening these minimal accountabilities called for by this Convention and its Canons, I must tell you that as of this convention, before a congregation can begin a search for a new rector or assisting clergy, several requirements must be first
met: there must be a current Annual Parochial Report on file; there must be a current annual audit of parish finances on file; and the Deployment Officer must certify that the congregation is currently pledging at or above the current level determined by Diocesan Convention or present in writing to Executive Council a plan by which it will meet that goal within a defined period of time. We are a body. We depend on one another. None of us is an island. Mutual accountability and interdependence is at the heart of what it means to be part of The Episcopal Church for the purpose of pursuing our baptismal mission as bearers of the light of Christ.

4. MINISTRY AMONG MILITARY FAMILIES

Of the 110 dioceses of The Episcopal Church, our Diocese of East Carolina has more military installations within its boundaries than any other diocese of this Church: Camp Lejune Marine Corps Base in Jacksonville, Marine Corps Air Station New River, Jacksonville; Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, Havelock; Fort Bragg US Army Post, Fayetteville; Pope Air Force Base, Fayetteville; Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, Goldsboro; US Coast Guard Air Station, Elizabeth City; US Coast Guard stations in Wilmington and Fort Macon, Atlantic Beach.

In total, there are more than 260,000 active military and family members in our diocese (not including civilian employees or retired military members.) Here are 260,000 neighbors God has placed before us in our path. I give thanks for the congregations located near military installations who exercise a good ministry to military personnel and their families.

I believe it is also time for us as a diocesan family gathered in mission, begin to undertake a more intentional ministry among those who venture much on behalf of the safety and well-being of our nation and among their families. I am asking the Rev. Gerry Blackburn, recently retired as the Director of Military Ministries for The Episcopal Church and a priest of this Diocese, to call together a group to help give shape and direction to our efforts in this area.

5. YOUTH, COLLEGE CAMPUS AND YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY

We are fortunate to have engaged Emily Gowdy Canady to lead our efforts as Program Officer for diocesan ministry in the areas of youth, college campus and young adult ministry. Since her arrival last July, she is already giving new shape and direction to our efforts in these important areas in our ministry as a diocesan family. In addition to giving diocesan leadership in these areas, Emily also serves as a resource to parish ministry efforts on the local level and is currently forming the East Carolina Youth Council. (Let me also give thanks for St. Andrew’s Nags Head for its leadership in planning and hosting the Acolyte Festival last spring and for making plans to host acolytes from all our parishes for a weekend this coming May.) I note that if each parish in our diocese had pledged at the 10% level as intended by Diocesan Convention, the Finance Committee and Executive Council would have been in a much stronger position to fund college campus ministry at its full prior year level without having to make hard choices and staff cuts in this important area of our diocesan mission. There has also been a growing awareness that our traditional efforts in college campus ministry have been focused mainly on two campuses. All of us give deep thanks for these ministries through the years and for the ongoing support of the local congregations, St. Paul’s, Greenville and Church of the Servant, Wilmington. Coupled with this awareness, however, is a growing energy to spread college campus ministry into other areas as well: Fayetteville, for example, which has two colleges; Elizabeth City and its two colleges.

There is also the frontier of ministry in the growing community college system. A Young Adults Commission is being formed to envision and develop ministry across the spectrum of campus ministry opportunities throughout our diocese. The Commission will be called on to determine how the funds designated in our diocesan Foundation for college campus ministry might be most effectively used and shared among the five Deaneries of our diocese. Each Deanery should have a role in exercising stewardship over the resources available to minister among college students in order to carry forward our efforts in this important frontier of ministry for our diocese.

6. DENOMINATIONAL HEALTH PLAN

The 2009 General Convention of The Episcopal Church, after several years of study and consultation throughout our Church, voted to adopt a Denominational Health Plan. This health plan is intended to achieve a variety of purposes: First, to keep health insurance premiums for parish and diocesan lay and clergy employees at the most reasonable level possible; second, to make health insurance available equally to lay and clergy; third, to require that all employees of this church who work in a full-time way be offered coverage.

As we all know, the crisis in the rise of health care costs and the lack of coverage for many people is at the forefront of our life and conversation as a nation. The Denominational Health Plan is in the process of being implemented and will take full effect on January 1, 2013. Our 2012 diocesan convention will have to make several key decisions regarding insurance coverage for employees, as will all diocesan conventions.

To that end, I am commissioning the Committee on Compensation and Benefits to prepare the necessary resolutions and information for delegates to the 2012 convention and to distribute these in a timely and educational way so that all parish vestries and convention delegates will be prepared to discuss and make considered decisions at our 2012 diocesan convention.

7. TRINITY CENTER’S FUTURE AND A CAPITAL FUNDS DRIVE
At last year’s convention, we heard Carl Ragsdale make a dynamic and energizing presentation on behalf of the Trinity Center Board telling us that maintaining Trinity Center will cost about $200,000 each year. With the energy of that presentation, the convention commissioned the Executive Council to undertake a feasibility study regarding raising the large amount of money necessary to put in the Foundation permanently in order to produce that amount, as well as naming other areas of diocesan mission.

The results of the feasibility study were encouraging and the Executive Council authorized the undertaking of such a campaign. Council has determined to proceed slowly, deliberately and with pastoral sensitivity to the times we live in. We are still very much in the planning and preparation stages of leadership development. As plans progress and take shape, there will be more news ahead.

Certainly this is about Trinity Center and its future. But this is also about missional energy and funding for ministry among Hispanics, military families, youth and young adults and strengthening small congregations. The challenge is large. There is energy to accomplish the work God is calling us to in these areas. There is much to be done! And by the grace of God we will do it!

CONCLUSION

A few weeks ago I saw The King’s Speech, a movie about a king who stammers and how his healing began through a relationship with an unlikely healer. In its essence, the movie is not about stammering, but about a healing friendship. Amidst all the darkness, division and disaster in our world, the coming of Christ is supremely about just that: a healing friendship. Jesus comes as a friend to us.

The wonder of the Good News is not that we choose Jesus to be our friend, but that Jesus chooses us to be his friends. Through that friendship between divinity and humanity, Jesus begins to heal our wounds, strengthen our weaknesses, reconcile our brokenness and satisfy the hunger of our soul in a lasting way. As we become friends to the people of the world, not only are those we minister to healed, but we are healed as well. It is only through this divine/human friendship that we can face our ragged world and make bold and difficult choices that are creative, healing, reconciling and liberating.

Facing the raggedness of the world and making difficult choices was precisely the moment Jesus faced “…on that last night with his disciples before his crucifixion and death. Jesus had few options open to him; and none seemed good. He could wait and die or he could flee and be humiliated. Either choice represented failure. Many of us have felt trapped or that we have few options; no human being is a stranger to that feeling. But Jesus acted creatively. He grasped his betrayal and coming death and made it a gift. He transformed the disintegration of his small band of followers into a community rooted in love, servanthood and eternity. Jesus shows us that in friendship with him, choosing is more than hovering between options. With God’s grace invigorating our imagination and our actions, we can choose possibilities of which we have never dreamed and act boldly…”

On that Maundy Thursday and Good Friday so long ago Jesus showed us that bold risk is inherent to being his friend. Easter Sunday is the affirmation of taking bold risk in God’s name even though such risk carries no guarantee of success as the world counts either success or failure.

Most every Sunday, Bishop Marray and I are out and about in the congregations of our diocese, both large and small. We see the variety of problems, joys, opportunities and demands faced by our congregations on the local level. We both know the joys and difficulties you face. We come to you as your friends and bring you the pledge of love and support from your fellow Episcopalians throughout our diocese, for as friends through Jesus, we belong to one another and depend on one another.

Part of our ministry as your bishops is to give encouragement and to strengthen you for mission in Jesus’ name. Indeed, the words we use most Sundays in the service of Confirmation as we lay hands on the head of the confirmand say it best: Strengthen O Lord, this your servant with your Holy Spirit…Empower this disciple for your service…and sustain each of your followers all the days of their life. To strengthen. To empower. To sustain. These are the gifts Jesus offers us in friendship. These are the gifts that we are called to convey as friends to the neighbors God places in our path.

Pray God to give us the will to envision God’s call clearly. Pray God to give us the courage to take risks in God’s name and the openness to receive the grace to pursue the ministries God sets before us. May we be given the strength to accomplish God’s call to us with boldness and confidence in God’s good will toward all people and for the healing of the world in Jesus’ name.

1 Quoted and freely adapted from What is the Point of Being a Christian? by Timothy Radcliffe, OP, Continuum Books, London, 2005