Remarks to 44th Annual Convention

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It is a deep privilege for me to say what an honor it has been to serve as your bishop diocesan, which reached the five-year anniversary last month. My love and affection for you is profound and shaped by gratitude to God for you. Thank you.

It is clear to me that my gratitude for you and our diocese is shaped by multitudinous personalities, events, and circumstances. Most profoundly though is the care that I have received and continue to receive from you surrounding Mary Ellen’s illness and death and my grief.

I bring this up because I want to personally thank you again for your loving care, and to give you a glimpse of what I have learned. I did not know the import of the words “to love and to cherish till death do us part” when I expressed them in the midst of the Holy Matrimony service at the age of 21. I learned that the gift to me of caring for my wife in her last days was the honor of servant hood.

As you will recall, Mary Ellen died in Lent and was interred during Holy Week. The powerful liturgies of Holy Week and Eastertide were almost overwhelming to me. I found myself hanging onto every word of the readings during Easter week anxious for them to be true. I found myself in the place of faith and uncertainty desperately desiring resurrection power in the midst of crushing questions of God and reality. The passage from John’s Gospel became a living reality for me. When some of Jesus’ disciples turned away from him, “Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.’” (John 6:67-69) Lord, to whom shall I go? became my question. There is no one else or nowhere else to turn. Although my questions are deeper, my faith in Resurrection is strong, and my gladness in serving our Living Lord in the Diocese of Southwest Florida is unassailable.

I am pleased to note some helpful accomplishments in our diocese over the past five years. First, through the diligent efforts of the Chief Financial Officer and Diocesan Council’s Finance Committee we have a clear and transparent budgetary process. Five years ago this diocese did not have a Dayspring Endowment Fund or an Episcopal Charities Endowment Fund. Now each endowment contains over half a million dollars. Neither is where they need to be in terms of full impact for ministry within the diocese, but with clear and firm endowment fund policies they will remain as ongoing legacies and are already having some impact. I continue to thank you for making these funds a reality. I continue to ask you to fund them for stronger ministry for generations to come. I thank our Diocesan Council for their efforts in creating responsible policies for maintaining and governing fiscal health for present needs and future possibilities.

Next, I want to thank our diocesan staff for continuing to achieve the ongoing aspiration for servant-hearted leadership for our congregations. I specifically want to thank our assisting bishops, Bishop Howe and Bishop Garrison for their generous participation with us. Finally, it is with celebration that I say we have a debt free new Diocesan House at Dayspring. This applaudable action is a wonderful accomplishment for our shared diocesan life. Thirty years ago at the 14th Annual Diocesan Convention our second bishop, E. Paul Haynes stated in his address, “It should be abundantly clear to everyone that we are at a crucial point in the development of our Diocesan Conference Center. We must move forward with greater vigor, which mostly means at this time, with more fiscal support, for the completion of this facility which I have described as
being the potential spiritual nerve center of the Diocese of Southwest Florida.” I suspect he would be pleased!

At that 14th Convention in 1982 a legacy of good budgetary habit was established. In the time in which congregational assessments to the diocese were in the range of 10% at the low end to 23% at the high end the practice of setting aside $100,000 as a Mission Trust line item in the diocesan budget began. This line item has continued over the past thirty years and been used in various ways for congregational establishment and mission support. The past decade saw the practice evolve into being called the 20/20 Fund and was increased to $200,000 a year. It has helped bring into fruition both St. Monica’s in Naples and Iona Hope in Fort Myers. This same practice is now re-titled New Mission Investment in the 2013 Budget. The new title for this habitual line item is reflective of the need to not have the purpose seem restricted to the calendar. Thirty years of a good habit have given this diocese a legacy of accomplishments and the financial resource of the Missions Endowment.

I now want to speak of directing the use of this resource for our day. Three years ago I stated in convention that “we need pay heed to the emergent church desires expressed in a new generation, and pay heed to specific demographic shifts primarily in the Latino populations in multiple areas of our diocese” and to other models of congregational life. Over the past several years the Congregational Development Committee has worked hard in developing a recommendation to me and the Diocesan Council for a Diocesan Missioner and for the targeting of areas for new church plants. They have recommended a job description, offered demographic specific target areas, and urged the use of existing resources to accomplish the task. I am a proponent of using the canons to our advantage. Our own Diocesan canons give us the flexibility and maneuverability in establishing Associated Worshipping Communities. I am not going to read the entire section but in part the canons state:

“*The Bishop shall be in charge of and have the primary responsibility for oversight over all Associated Worshipping Communities, with authority to appoint a member of the clergy or a lay minister to serve them*” and “*the stipends and other compensation of a person appointed to serve an Associated Worshipping Community, as well as any other financial assistance deemed advisable, shall be established by the Bishop and approved by Diocesan Council in consultation with the Congregational Development Committee.*”

The Diocesan Council has received and discussed the comprehensive work of the CDC and received a report on models for the emerging church in our diocese. The bottom line is this: we will transition to flexibility in mission fund usage rather than continue with a fixed, rigid pattern of fund usage for land, bricks and mortar. We will begin using the new mission investment line item in 2013 to position a missioner to begin establishing new worshipping communities in innovative ways in our diocese.

The missioner’s approach will include the recruiting and training of new leadership among young adults to start a movement in three target locations: Tampa/St. Petersburg; Sarasota/Bradenton; and Fort Myers/Naples based on the data indicating that these areas have the greatest concentrations of 18 – 34 year olds and 35 – 54 year olds.

This initiative will include the empowering of new and younger church leaders to share the Gospel message with those who have not experienced it. This diocese is already experiencing the gift of having younger adults in the discernment process. This initiative will hopefully expand that potential. This approach will furthermore seek to offer Christian community within contexts of rich diversity; provide multiple models for being church; and create service opportunities in the tradition of Jesus seeking to serve those on the margins of society. Some of these innovative church plants will bloom and grow. Some may, of course, later on require bricks and mortar. The point will be to gather and develop the people first!
Last year I noted the greater engagement with the Latino population within our midst in the diocese. That work continues to bear fruit. As we further develop our ability to focus on mission opportunities both as a diocesan exercise and with in local congregations that Latino population engagement will continue to emerge as a positive initiative. The Congregation Development Committee in its report to Diocesan Council stated, “As part of our work of church planting, our committee is also committed to the development of Hispanic congregations within our diocesan community. National research has shown that the most successful Hispanic congregations are those planted within Anglo congregations.” This is an approach of using our exiting bricks and mortar as assets for mission.

Regarding ongoing congregational vitality concerns, the Congregational Development Committee remains available to consult with or coach in our congregations in these areas: Congregational systems and relationships, Demographic study with the online Missioninsite resource, Conflict Management, Visioning God’s call, Spiritual practices for congregational spiritual growth, size transition, and Appreciative Inquiry training.

You will also note in the 2013 budget an increase in Mission Congregational Aid for targeted assistance to existing congregations for reasons of crisis and/or extraordinary assistance. These vitality concerns and budgetary moves are important for congregational health. Healthy Congregations make healthy Christians.

Last year the book “Church Wellness” by Tom Erich was distributed to each congregation to stimulate ideas and creative conversations within our congregations’ leadership. Some basic tools for visioning and planning were also put on our diocesan website. I now want to deepen that congregational leadership process by offering some points made in a report to the House of Bishops in 2010 by the Rev. Dr. James B. Lemler.

He offered some helpful Signals of Vitality that I encourage you to use for your own congregational health advantage.

**Signals of Vitality:**

- **Mission Clarity** – The congregation knows its mission and purpose and has given time and effort to its clarification. Decisions are made in relation to the congregation’s mission. There is awareness of the congregational missions history, present values and context, and future potential.

- **Spiritual Transformation** – The congregation is a community where people experience spiritual growth and transformation. Various styles and practices of spiritual life help people to become closer to God and to each other. The climate of the congregation is one of spiritual seeking and renewal.

- **Awareness of Context and Congregational Dynamics** - A wide circle of congregational leadership is aware of its social, demographic, and religious context. Modes of learning about the surrounding community and its needs and characteristics are in place. The leadership has utilized congregational size and life cycle frameworks to understand its present situation.

- **Learning Opportunities and Environment** – There are opportunities for learning for people of all ages and a congregational environment that highlights learning as a way of growth and transformation. Formation in faith is available for all ages.

- **Evangelism: Plan and Action** – The congregation has a commitment to the invitation, welcome, and incorporation of people into the life of faith. Leadership has identified
those responsible for the ministries of evangelism. There is an intentional plan and real action.

- **Transformational Worship and Preaching** – Worship is alive, inviting, and exciting, using many resources. Music lifts the human spirit to God. Preaching is hopeful, biblical, and related to daily life.

- **Lay and Clergy Leadership Development** – There is a plan and opportunities for the development of the leadership of the congregation. External sources of leadership development are employed. Clergy are committed to their own learning and spiritual/professional development. Lay people experience empowerment in their exercise of leadership.

- **Dealing Directly with Conflict** – Conflict is not avoided or denied when it emerges in congregational life. Honesty, reconciliation, and negotiation are employed when facing moments and issues of division. When necessary, outside assistance for conflict negotiation is employed.

- **Hopeful Climate and Flexible Attitude** – A spirit of hope and potential permeates the congregation. Leaders name the good and build on the strengths of congregational life as they envision and plan for the future. There is a respect for tradition and flexibility and openness for trying new things.

- **Caring Community** – People know each other, and there is a spirit of care and support in the congregation’s life. Both clergy and laity share responsibility for pastoral ministry, and there is education for and recognition of lay pastoral ministry.

- **Compassionate Service** – The congregation embodies Christ’s spirit of compassion and servant hood. There is a plan and action for ministries of outreach and service in the larger community involving a good representation of congregational members. Advocacy is a part of the ministry of compassion for the congregation.

- **Faithful Stewardship** – Faithful stewardship is modeled and encouraged in the congregation throughout its life and the entire year. There are opportunities of stewardship reflection and learning. Leadership, both lay and clergy are clear about the call to stewardship and their own commitment.

The theme for this 44th Diocesan Convention is Come Holy Spirit. I chose it not only because it is good theology but simply because I like the hymn “Like the murmur of the dove’s song” which says “to the members of Christ’s Body, to the branches of the Vine, to the Church in faith assembled, to her midst as gift and sign, come, Holy Spirit come.” Praying for the presence of God’s Holy Spirit is a continuous activity of the Church. Another favorite hymn text informs us, “Holy Spirit, ever living as the Church’s very life…ever striving…ever forming…quickening, strengthening, and absolving, setting captive sinners free.” I came across a personal journal entry recently from a time years ago when I was on a retreat at Canterbury Conference Center in Orlando. It said, ”The cleaning lady just came in to give me fresh towels. She told me about how she was told three times in one day about Mt. 21:22. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She finally looked up the passage of scripture, which read, ‘Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.’ She has no cancer – thanks, as she put it, to “the Man upstairs.” She related to me that she was baptized this past January by Paul McQueen. She said with excitement...
in her voice – ’42 and all my sins washed away!!’ I loved her fervor. She said she wished she
could be as good as me. I’m not good. How humbling. Thank you Lord for her witness.” I believe
that this gift from God to me cleaning woman had the same realization that I had – “Lord, to
whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!

He is why we are here at convention. He is why we are doing all of this business and all of
this parliamentary process. He is why we are here! Come, Holy Spirit, Come!