Annual Convention Address  
The Rt. Rev. Dabney T. Smith  
At the 45th Annual Convention of the  
Diocese of Southwest Florida  
October 19, 2013

Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation

It is a joy to be with you. What a difference a year makes! Two new  
grandsons, one on the way, and my son married to my beautiful and only daughter-in-law. And, of course, it is a great honor and personal privilege to have my longstanding friend and new wife, Mary Wallis Smith, with us today.

One of the discoveries of a much later in life new marriage is the blending of two households and the conversations of what is expendable and what is necessary. In those conversations and decisions treasures are found. One such treasure was an old magazine that we discovered. It was “The Palm Branch” the publication of the old Diocese of South Florida dated April 1967. It was personally interesting for multiple reasons. On the back was an article about my father, the Rev. Dorsey G. Smith, Jr. then Dean of the Tampa Deanery. There was a brief news snippet about a new three-dollar recording available from St. John’s Tampa, Men and Boys Choir that I was on as a choirboy. More interesting, however, is that this was the diocesan convention issue. St. Andrew’s, Tampa, was the host church for the convention and a primary action of that convention, meeting at Curtis Hixon Hall, was to vote on a report that recommended “that the Diocese of South Florida be divided so as to establish three dioceses, and to request the General Convention of 1967 to grant permission for this to be done.” That convention, which ultimately gave birth to the Dioceses of Central Florida, Southeast Florida, and Southwest Florida, was the 45th Annual Diocesan Convention; and the Keynote Speaker was the Rt. Rev. John Hines, the 22th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. In, perhaps divine coincidence it is a delight that at our 45th Annual Diocesan Convention we are honored by the presence of the 26th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Rt. Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori. Thank you Presiding Bishop!

I have done some reflecting in recent months as I both look back and look forwards from the vantage point of this my seventh diocesan convention with you. In previous years we have been working on diocesan systems, practices and policies - particularly paying attention to: leadership development for healthy congregations; healthy habits for good financial practices; and the provision of teachings on strategic planning and decision-making. These are always necessary and repeatable teaching basics. As I have looked forward I did not want to neglect those normative basics. I do though desire to share these further future focused thoughts.
With no unanticipated changes, we will celebrate our 50th Annual Diocesan Convention in October of 2018. Two conventions ago I presented a model for planning purposes entitled “The Creating Model For Future Planning.” It is still available on our diocesan website. I want to now point towards what I hope to see realized over the next five years in preparation for our 50th year as a diocese as we create our future together.

Last year we adopted a budget that contained a mission minded shift in the budget that created a diocesan missioner to cast Gospel seeds in areas where the Good News of Jesus Christ is not typically expressed, realized, or sought. Since January of this year, The Rev. Eric Cooter has been called into the position of diocesan missioner and has been teaching, coaching, encouraging, and planting seeds - some of which may grow into new church plants or associated worshipping communities; others which may reenergize existing congregations. He has reported to me that we have congregations in the Diocese of Southwest Florida that are beginning to explore Fresh Expressions of Christian Community by forming Pub Theology groups – an initiative to engage unchurched, under-churched, and former churched people in a safe place; and Home Church – a way to invite those on the margins of the Church to a safe place to explore prayer, study, and other spiritual practices. He wrote, “For this movement of the Spirit to take on flesh, it will require our local congregations to take the initiative, to reach out into their local communities, and to engage those on the margins of the Church in fresh and vibrant ways.”

This work also includes the re-visioning and implementation of a new strategy for college ministry in the Diocese by focusing on four core values to develop leadership and support new programs for strong Christian community on our campuses. The Core Values: Spiritual Formation, Sacramental Life, Mission and Outreach, and Leadership Development will provide the foundation and structure for identifying, training, and empowering student leaders for mission and service. We will develop and support stronger ministry partnerships with local congregations. And we will strengthen our existing collegiate chaplaincies. You will see this initiative reflected in the diocesan budget.

We are also teaching, coaching, and supporting young Pioneer Ministers throughout the diocese - both lay and clergy leaders - who have recognized a call to explore Fresh Expressions of Christian Community. The gifts of leadership, pastoral care, teaching, community organizing, and listening are all essential traits necessary in the formation of organic Christian Community in an ever changing culture. We must continue to identify such entrepreneurial evangelists in our parishes, encourage them to take a risk and follow the Spirit, and provide them with the prayer support, training, and resources necessary to go into the world that God so loves.

Fr. Eric led a workshop yesterday on this ministry and showed this video, which I now share with convention. (VIDEO HERE)
The most recent House of Bishops meeting was thematically titled “Transforming Loss into New Possibilities.” Its purpose was to equip and encourage the Church to not dwell in discouragement and depression about the way the Church used to be, say 45 years ago. The new possibilities for the Church should help us open our eyes to claim the opportunities facing the Church today. The meeting, in my mind, could best be summed up with the exhortation “Go into all the world!” “Go!” Our recent diocesan clergy conference with Diana Butler Bass also held up that charge. Go into the world as it actually exists and be the Church to and with our neighbors. One of my friends and bishop classmates, Tom Briedenthal, the Bishop of Southern Ohio, gave a talk to the bishops on Formation for Mission in which he made a passing remark on the word “outreach.” I asked him about it later for clarification and he wrote me this provocative paragraph.

“My problem with the term ‘outreach’ is that it assumes we are disconnected by default from the world that surrounds us. ‘Outreach’ suggests that we choose to make a connection, sometimes condescendingly so. But in fact we are always already connected with what is around us, whether we like it or not. One of our first tasks as a missional church is to notice who we are connected to by virtue of shared neighborhood. Who are our neighbors, and how are we part of their life, for good or ill? How do we rediscover ourselves as part of that world, rather than thinking of ourselves as making ginger excursions into it? Once we make this shift, it becomes possible to regard our neighbors (other faith communities, people of good will, schools, nearby residents, businesses, government agencies, etc.) as potential partners. Partnership is the opposite of outreach: it assumes connection, understands that the church is firmly situated in the world, invites us to learn from our neighbors how we can best serve them, and opens us to their evaluation and critique.”

I share this statement from Bishop Briedenthal because we have plenty of evidence of the world around our congregations simply ignoring us, disbelieving us, and not trusting us. We also have Biblical evidence that God sends us into that same world. Every congregation represented here has a neighborhood to bless by its presence. Go!

One of the tools we have at our disposal is the Episcopal Charities Endowment Fund established at our 40th convention in 2008. Starting from Zero dollars it now is valued at just over $600,000.00. Since its inception it has sent $159,000 into congregational and diocesan outreach, or better said, partnership initiatives with our neighbors. We have two Endowment Funds for ministry that did not exist in 2008. The other is the Dayspring Endowment Fund. They together total over $1,200,000.00. We have five years until our 50th anniversary. One target for completion I would like to see accomplished by our 50th is that each of those two endowment funds reaches $2,500,000.00 for a total of Five million dollars. This work will continue to bless our grandchildren’s grandchildren. Go!
And speaking of Dayspring... the Dayspring Development Committee will be reconvening soon to reassess Dayspring’s master site plan to particularly examine the potential for a larger and more beautiful worship and perhaps meeting space for the multiple needs we have there. A further conversation will include the ongoing discussion for a pool. Clearly we must and will remain fiscally prudent. The business model and leadership has been keeping Dayspring in the black now for several years running. We intend to keep it so.

What I would like to see over the next five years includes these aspirations: I would like to see us create our future by utilizing diocesan and congregational talent and resources to continue to systemically develop leaders for healthy congregational governance and mission. I propose targeted congregational development to assist at least five mission congregations to achieve or re-achieve parish status. I would like to see us develop and build up at least five new associated worshipping communities and/or church starts. We now have seven people in seminary four of whom are in there 30’s. Over the next five years I would like to see five young adults in their 20’s in seminary and five young adults in their 20’s preparing for the vocational diaconate. I like the number 5. I’m the fifth bishop of this diocese. I am not actually overly concerned with achieving five million, or five parishes, or five new starts, or five young seminarians. I am very concerned with not trying.

In 2006, I wrote in response to a question from the nominating committee that I thought the bishop should be a student of the diocese. That study has evolved for me from finding my way around to knowing the particular features and characters of each congregation. Now being a student of the diocese includes learning more deeply about the mission potential that our congregations can live into. Over the next five years I want to work with the deans to be students together and create at least one collaborative mission partnership with the congregations in each of our seven deaneries. Go into the world in each deanery.

We have what we need to go into the world. This does not mean that we diminish the aspects of our congregational lives that we already do well. It does mean that we add to our menu of options to reach others for and with the love of Jesus Christ. We have what we need: talented clergy and big-hearted congregations, and a world that God sends us into. Be bold in mission. Christ is made the sure foundation and will be where we are going, before we arrive. “For God so loved the world...for God so loved the world.... that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:16-17) Go!