Seeds of Hope


I greet you in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ and welcome you to the 131st Annual Convention of the Diocese of East Carolina.

One year ago, on Tuesday, February 4, 2013, I was interviewed in a telephone conference call by a special committee appointed by your Standing Committee to explore whether I might be nominated to serve as your bishop provisional, following the resignation of the seventh Bishop of East Carolina, the Rt. Rev. Clifton Daniel, who left last February to become Bishop Provisional of the Diocese of Pennsylvania.

Later in February 2013 I was notified by the Standing Committee that my name would be submitted to the Diocesan Convention for election as bishop provisional. Kristy, my wife, and I were travelling in England at the time, so on Thursday, March 6, 2013, I left the Isle of Wight in the English Channel, and by taxi, ferry, and private car, went to Gatwick Airport and flew across the Atlantic to Charlotte, then to Greenville arriving on Thursday afternoon. On Friday, March 7, I met briefly with the diocesan staff in Kinston, had dinner Friday night in Greenville with a group of diocesan leaders, met with the Standing Committee Saturday morning and later that morning was elected your bishop provisional. I was installed that afternoon at St. Paul's, Greenville. The next day, Sunday, I flew back to England, arriving in a snow storm and retraced my journey back to the Isle of Wight. We spent another ten days in England and France because we were invited to participate in the installation of the new Archbishop of Canterbury in Canterbury Cathedral on March 21. We returned to the United States on March 23 and I began ministry as your bishop provisional on April 1. Since that time I have visited twenty eight of our congregations and have received a gracious welcome in every place. Thank you for your welcome.

So my range of experience with the Diocese of East Carolina is a little more than ten month’s duration. Most of you have much more experience than I do with the Episcopal Church in East Carolina. Next Tuesday is the 30th anniversary of my election as bishop coadjutor of Virginia, so I bring to this ministry we share nearly thirty years as a bishop. I hope that experience can be a gift to you.

The Diocese of East Carolina is in a time of transition. At the end of this convention, we will receive the report of the Search Committee for the eighth Bishop of East Carolina and, after two weeks allowance for any names added by petition, we will have a complete slate of nominees. They will return to the diocese from April 27 to May 3 for public meetings across the diocese and this convention will reassemble at Christ Church, New Bern, for the election on May 17. The consecration is scheduled for Nov. 8 in Greenville.
The Diocese of East Carolina has known transitions in the past. Exactly one hundred years ago, the second bishop of East Carolina, The Rt. Rev. Robert Strange was seriously ill. He had transferred ecclesiastical authority to the Standing Committee in 1913, and while he returned to preside at the 31st Convention in May 1914, his illness was such that he died on Aug. 23, 1914 at the age of 56.

Two days after the Bishop’s death, the Standing Committee met and called a special convention of the Diocese to meet on Oct. 7 and 8, 1914 at St. Peter’s Church, Washington. On the second day of the convention, Oct. 8, 1914, The Rev. Thomas Darst, rector of St. Paul’s Church, Richmond, VA, was elected on the 20th ballot as Bishop of East Carolina. He was consecrated as the third bishop of the diocese at St. James Church, Wilmington, on Jan. 6, 1915, the feast of the Epiphany. Bishop Darst served for thirty years as diocesan bishop, retiring in 1945. Between his consecration on Jan. 6, 1915 and the first day of the diocesan convention on May 15, 1915, Bishop Darst made 70 visitations, preached 127 sermons and confirmed 368 people. I am amazed at his energy. In his address to the convention in May 1915, Bishop Darst reported: “Almost everywhere I have seen marked signs of progress and have been made to realize that our people are catching a wider vision of the Church’s place in the community and the Church’s blessed obligation to the world; and as a necessary result of this wider vision, they are realizing, and proving they realize, their individual responsibility, by taking their rightful place and part in the carrying out of the great purpose for which The Church was founded.” (Journal of the 32nd Annual Convention, p.62, 1915)

The 1915 journal reports that the Diocese of East Carolina had 32 clergy, 39 parishes, 54 missions and 94 church edifices. They kept records then of the seating capacity of churches because so many depended on rented pews and in 1915 the churches of the Diocese of East Carolina had a seating capacity of 18,972.

As of January 2013, The Diocese of East Carolina reported an average Sunday attendance of 7015, so since many of those churches that existed in 1915 are still with us, there is plenty of room for newcomers. Some of our churches are in communities that are losing population, and our Historic Properties Committee is doing valuable work in finding responsible uses for these properties.

Like Bishop Darst in 1915, I have found the churches of East Carolina to be welcoming and abounding in hope. The theme of this convention is “We are casting seeds of hope.” Certainly, our hope is focused on the process of electing the eighth bishop of East Carolina. But our diocesan wide ministries make our focus on hope a fruitful context for our new Bishop as he or she begins leadership among us.

One of the most hopeful ministries among us is the Episcopal Farmworker Ministry. This convention has before it a resolution, which if adopted, commits us to participate in Harvest for Hospitality, a campaign to raise $400,000 from the Dioceses of East Carolina, North Carolina, and Western North Carolina to benefit this important ministry. I’m grateful for the leadership of
the Rev. Ron Abrams, rector of St. James, Wilmington, who chairs the board of the Episcopal Farmworker Ministry.

Another ministry of hope in our diocese is the Interfaith Refugee Ministry, headquartered here in New Bern, an affiliate of Episcopal Migration Ministries, which assists newcomers from overseas to find employment, education and settlement in North Carolina.

Several of you have been planting seeds of hope in the Dominican Republic, our companion diocese. Teams from East Carolina are working to build a playground for a church school near the border of the Dominican Republic and Haiti that served both Dominican children and the children of Haitian immigrants.

Nowhere is our focus on hope more vibrant than in the ministry of Trinity Camp and Conference Center on the Crystal Coast. This 62 acre facility nestled in the maritime forest between Bogue Sound and the Atlantic Ocean is a restful, beautiful place of serenity where lives are transformed. Our summer camps for young people, our year round sound-to-sea environmental education programs for young people contribute to our strong hope to be a people of faith committed to care for all of God’s creation. Our Trinity and Beyond campaign has raised more than one million dollars to address immediate repair issues in the challenging coastal environment and we are now poised for a longer term, steady process to raise $5 million to endow the maintenance for generations to come. Penn Perry, the director of Trinity Center, is a persuasive advocate for its transforming ministries and I hope you will invite Penn to speak to your congregation. And I hope you will use Trinity Center for vestry and other group retreats.

We participate in casting seeds of hope with our ecumenical and interfaith partners in the North Carolina Council of Churches. The churches are an important advocate for those at the margins of society. Some of our members have been led to join in the Moral Monday advocacy programs to give the voiceless a voice.

One force that has contributed significantly to the seeds of hope cast by the church in East Carolina has been the inclusion of an emphasis on radical hospitality in all we do. Our doors are open to all. Our anti-racism workshops are valuable tools to assure that even unconscious racism is identified and eliminated from our life. I hope your parish participates in these workshops around the diocese.

We have a new campus minister at UNC Wilmington and an ongoing partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the campus ministry at ECU in Greenville. Emily Gowdy Canady of our staff is a wonderful resource for helping our churches cast seeds of hope among our young people.

Our diocese is blessed with a small effective staff of eight people whose mission is to support the ministries of the churches of the diocese. We have made some significant changes in the work of the staff, reinvigorating a personnel committee and encouraging the finance
committee of the Executive Council to develop transparent and effective reporting systems. I’m particularly grateful to Tess Judge, our volunteer treasurer, and Teresa Osborne, the assistant treasurer, for their wide ranging work to assure transparent and effective financial management. They provide direction to and receive support from Bonnie Holton, our loyal and experienced director of finance.

The experienced and very effective Jimi Paderick provides administrative assistance to Canon Matthew Stockard, the Canon to the Ordinary and Secretary of the Convention and to me. Chanda Platania and Hannah Jarman are reliable, cheerful and effective administrative assistants and Beth Nagy, our newest staff member, is the voice of welcome and hospitality at the reception desk and also assists Bonnie Holton.

Matt Stockard, who as secretary is essential to the working of this Convention, works on my behalf to assist churches seeking clergy and clergy seeking new positions. Nearly half of our churches rely on retired and bivocational clergy to sustain their ministries. As time goes on, increasing numbers of smaller churches are likely to find it difficult to secure full-time clergy leadership. I believe we should see this reality as an opportunity to refresh the ministry of all the baptized. The ministry of a priest is primarily pastoral and sacramental, empowering the people of the congregation served to take the lead in most of the parish’s mission.

The expanding nature of lay ministry will require knowledgeable church wardens. I will ask the Executive Council to work with me to plan a conference for church wardens at Trinity Center scheduled when our new bishop elect can attend, to focus on the leadership wardens give to their congregations.

We have twenty deacons, active and retired, and we need to identify, train, and ordain more deacons if we are to have the robust ministry of servanthood to which we are called by our Lord.

The Episcopal Church is currently exploring more effective ways to organize itself for effective mission. Our current structure of a triennial Convention and numerous commissions and committees is too cumbersome and expensive.

A task group is currently working on proposals for restructuring the church to be presented at the next General Convention of The Episcopal Church in 2015. Late in 2014 or early in 2015, those proposals will be presented. Also at the 2015 Convention a Presiding Bishop will be elected. At this diocesan Convention, we will elect four lay persons and four clergy to serve as deputies to the 2015 General Convention. So I hope you will be prayerful and discerning as you elect wise and visionary deputies to what could be a transforming convention in the history of The Episcopal Church.

I anticipate that this is my last address to a convention of the church where I am the presiding officer. For me, the ministries I have experienced since resigning as Bishop of Virginia in 2009 have been invigorating and have nourished my own hope in the future of the church. As interim
dean of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, I saw the promise of interfaith and ecumenical ministry, typified by a dragon with human feet joining the procession on Chinese New Year. The sixteen months I served as interim dean of the General Theological Seminary in New York City exposed me to the hope of urban ministries in a variety of settings. Right before I came to you, at the American Cathedral in Paris, I experienced the church as an international, interracial community of hope where people of all sorts and conditions found life in the richness of our Anglican tradition.

I am full of hope for our church. Our welcome to all, our commitment to justice for all, our liturgy and spirituality that are traditional and transforming, make us an attractive community of faith for questioning and seeking people.

So to my thanksgiving for you, let me add my appeal to nourish hope and confidence. The writer of The Epistle to the Hebrews puts it this way: “Do not abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.” (Hebrews 10:35)

Cast, then, your seeds of hope and trust that they will grow.