The Rt. Rev. Santosh K. Marray’s Address to the
The Episcopal Diocese of Alabama
183rd Diocesan Convention
February 21-22, 2014

Theme: *Hold Fast to That Which is Good, Sing to the Lord a New Song*
Year II: *Invite, Inspire and Transform*

Diocesan Convention is on the second tier of the overarching three year focus on the theme *Invite, Inspire and Transform*. Last convention we were challenged to reinforce the practice *invite*, one of the fundamentals of evangelism, as a critical component of Episcopal formation. This year’s focus is *inspire* and the related question before us is “What inspires me about the Episcopal Church as an Episcopalian?” As I was preparing this address I was prompted to look up the gospel according to Wikipedia to get some inspiration on how the world perceives the term *inspire*. As expected, I discovered that it’s a universally acknowledged word applicable to several disciplines. However, in the ecclesiastical domain according to Wikipedia it means, “to guide or arouse by divine influence or inspiration, to infuse or breathe life into or upon”. I find this definition particular exhilarating because it’s somewhat synonymous with the Hebrew word *ruah* in the Creation narrative, which means *breath of God or Spirit of God*. So it may be safe to launch out by locating this sampling of reasons for what inspires or breathes life in us, Episcopalians, from this optimum spiritual place.

Let me begin with a defining statement which I believe sets in context the biblical/historical shape and grounding of the Episcopal Church. In August 2013, the House of Bishops Ecclesiology Committee developed a primer on the government of the Episcopal Church and its underlying theology. The opening two sections of this document state:

Our Episcopal roots extend back a long way. Indeed, one could say that the Episcopal ethos can be found at the very beginning of Christianity, in a city called Antioch. There, an “encouraging” newcomer-turned-church leader named Barnabas and his bold apprentice, Saul of Tarsus, helped form something connected to, but distinct from, the church in Jerusalem. In the latter, Peter and the other apostles preached and healed, but did so always in the shadow of the Jewish temple. Their group, “the Way,” as it was known, was an inspiring, Spirit-filled community, but it was still a Jewish sect and its leaders still went daily to the temple where sacrifices were made.

Antioch was something else entirely, where Greeks as well as Jews heard the Good News proclaimed and formed a faith community entirely separate from temple and
sacrifices, and intentionally diverse yet unified community. It was in Antioch, not in Jerusalem, that the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11). And it was from Antioch that Barnabas and Saul (now Paul), a new breed of apostolic missionaries, were sent forth to plant communities of faith, love, and hope wherever they went. Again, these churches would be marked by diversity as well as unity: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ.” (Gal.3: 28) It was rarely an easy task, for diversity is a nice word to say but a hard reality to appreciate. In places like Corinth, for example, the wealthier church members did not want to wait for those field workers and others on the lower socio-economic level before having their communal meal. The battle over recognizing the uncircumcised may now seem quaint, but then was quite grim.

This for me is one of the more if not the most inspirational statements locating our Episcopal/Anglican faith within the body of early church heritage. Our history is rooted in the canons of Scripture, and similar to the history of the Church through the ages, it is no secret that the Anglican/Episcopal tradition has had its fair share of turmoil, tribulation and conflict, and yet has emerged out of them stronger, more agile, better equipped for mission and ministry, immensely humble and grace filled than before. This character speaks to the inherent resilience of the faith community, saints like you. How much our culture of prophetic witness has relied on the work of the Holy Spirit to shape our destiny is a remarkable testament to the providential love of God so richly bestowed on this Church! The 100th Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey (1961) was clear that Anglicanism is “not a system or a confession but a method, a use, a direction” so that “its greatest credentials are its incompleteness, with tension and travail in its soul. It is clumsy and untidy; it baffles neatness and logic. For it is sent not to commend itself as ‘the best type of Christianity’, but by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church wherein all have died” (The Gospel and the Catholic Church). This reinforces the belief that the Communion we share is God’s gift, not something to be shaped or divided up according to our own preferences, but rather expressed through generosity and mutual responsibility.

I am inspired in the fundamental notion baptism that grounds our call to fellowship with Jesus in the very nature of his call to “be the beloved of God…” Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan calls us Episcopalians into a similar relationship with God. Baptism is the primary initiation into the household of God. What does this invitation into the baptismal community represent? It is the defining moment in a person’s life and a gracious and powerful act of God: the summoning of the new people of God to gather around Lord Jesus Christ. It also demands
radical discipleship and missionary responsibilities amid a hostile world (Matthew 5:1-16; Romans 12:1-2).

I am inspired by the thought of how deliberate and intentional we are in acknowledging and embracing the fact that, the risen Lord Jesus Christ before he ascended to heaven gave the apostles the Commission to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything (he has) commanded (them)” (Matthew 28:19-20). He entrusted them with his authority to evangelize and communicate to the whole humanity everything he had commanded them. The Episcopal Church has, therefore, always understood that the training and instructing of the faithful are inseparable from the evangelistic task. The process of becoming a Christian – the imparting of the essentials of the faith – is a chief concern of the Episcopal community from its earliest beginnings. The process of discipleship has evolved over time to represent a critical part of discipleship formation ministry. The Catechism, an orderly outline of the faith (BCP p. 845), is foundational capturing the wide breath and comprehensive orthodoxy of this tradition. It embodies doctrine, discipline and worship and aims to recommend a framework for making disciples, that they would be faithful followers of Jesus Christ in today’s world. There is beauty and grace even as we nurture believers into disciples. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic masterpiece, “The Cost of Discipleship” said, “Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ”.

To enable the community of faith to respond to Christ’s call, God has given to this Church the charism (gift) of ordered ministry: the episcopate, the presbyterate, and the diaconate. The ordained ministry is exercised with, in, and among the whole people of God. The calling of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church, to bear witness to him wherever they may be and according to the gifts given to them, to carry out Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world, and to take their place in the life, worship and governance of the Church. The complementary gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit on the community are for the common good and for the building up of the Church, and the service of the world to which the Church is sent. Each is a disciple and an evangelist gifted to share the good news of the Gospel beyond the walls of the building. One related aspect of our catholicity is this seamless transition from “altar to street”. Every Sunday the deacon or priest or a designated lay person sends us out into the world with these words or words similar, “Let us go forth into the world rejoicing in the power of the
Spirit …” Our worship is both an ingathering and sending out fashioned in the words of Hymn 528 “Lord you gave the great commission…for the work of ministry”.

By far there isn’t a more inspirational book complementary to the Bible than The Book of Common Prayer. The prayer book paradigm was a byproduct of the response from a Church under extreme persecution. Tradition has it that when monasteries were pillaged by rampaging zealots determined to eradicate Christianity, the monks in their wisdom, led by the Holy Spirit, codified sacred Scripture into forms of prayer for the believers to carry upon their hearts and profess with their lips; part of the oral historical paradigm. This strategy later gave rise to different editions of Payer Book used by various worshiping traditions within Christianity. Ours is the Book of Common Payer whose architect was Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (69th Archbishop of Canterbury-1533). It is safe to say that between the Bible and Prayer Book are contained all things necessary for salvation. The Prayer Book is the crucible of our ordered worship life from the Daily Office to The Great Thanksgiving to spiritual formation including ordinals for the administration of the Sacraments of the Church and occasional prayers. These two sacred texts is the chalice from which I drink each day.

When we think of how intimate we are with Christ, our Lord and Savior, because we participate in his sacramental life, I am mindful that his Spirit breathes in each of us, inspiring us to be bold in our conviction, knowing we are undergirded by power from above. We are sacramental people proud to espouse these characteristics. The Sacraments (7) are seen as means of salvation and function as outward signs of inward and invisible grace and transformation. We have come to trust in them to the extent that they tend to occupy the whole sphere of Christian life.

The second half of the Eucharistic liturgy is called the “Holy Communion.” The word “communion” (Greek koinonia) is one of the richest terms in the New Testament. It means sharing, participation, fellowship, belonging, togetherness, solidarity, unity, reciprocity, and mutuality. Communion is the reconciliation of differences into a common life. It means the opening up of self to others in a shared sense of identity. It brings together things that were once estranged. Communion describes not only what takes place in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, but also the heart of God’s own life and love for the world in the Trinity, in whose image we were created. Louis-Marie Chauvet said in her book, (The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body: p. 54), “Christ must be announced primarily as the sacrament of God. As
a sacrament, that is to say, as the gratuitous gift of God and, more precisely, as Savior. He is our ferryman to God’s shore. We do not have to desperately run after him to join him: he himself comes toward us, as at Emmaus, and takes us in his boat to carry us to the other shore. It is, before all else, this truth that the sacraments are witnessing to us: a pure gift from God deposited in our hands (The body of Christ-Amen”). It is fitting that any attempt at beginning our rediscovery of Episcopal inspiration and identity begins there.

I am inspired by this Church that lives as an intercessor to a broken world scared by sin interceding for the individual and corporate community, local and global, in the neighborhood and beyond, including her gathered and dispersed family known and unknown. The Prayers of the People is inclusive intercessions that remind us, in the midst of joy and happiness there is also pain and suffering, and we come before Almighty God for forgiveness, and strength to overcome inherent shortcomings visited upon our mortality. The power of the presence of believers on the person who suffers must never be underestimated. Often, members of the community minister to those who are suffering most effectively simply by being present. God has created a world that is profoundly relational. And the practice of presence is rooted in the relational character of our world.

In our spiritual connectivity being present could mean either physical presence or being present in spirit. By being present, by simply being there for the sufferer, we extend the presence of God. We bring God’s presence into the world of the sufferer. We minister by our presence. And speaking from personal experience, Episcopalians are genuinely sensitive and responsive to the needs of others, rivaling any other faith group I have come to experience. By our apostolic tradition of care giving, we give honor and dignity to every human life, because we see ourselves as part of a larger network of brothers and sisters. Doesn’t that inspire you?

What else inspires me? Our diagram of Christian identity is “structure.” What is the shape of this structure? Simply put, it is a whole of which each component is an integral part and in which each component finds value only by reference to the others. This convention is our synodical way of demonstrating that the decision making process is collaborative, collegial, respectful for each other’s position within the discipline of sensus fidelium in which it is healthy and acceptable to disagree and yet live in community. This practice of governance trickles down into the various councils of the diocese, even at the local vestry. Authority is a shared phenomenon drawing inspiration from the spirit embodied in Benedictine monasticism; actually
the essence of episcopalianism is benedictine. In this discipline, “to share authority means that those who are responsible for the group must arrive at common decisions, share a common wisdom, come to common commitment, and teach together in such a way that the community is united not divided by people chosen to lead it” (Joan Chittister: The Rule of St. Benedict:135-136).

Our present design is rooted in authority that bubbles up from each and every delegate and/or congregation in this structure. Hence, it may be creditable to point that the strength, durability, sustainability, viability and posterity of this Church (our diocese) reside in all congregations irrespective of size, geography or resources. We pride ourselves in being a family of over 93 plus worshipping congregations and faith based communities existing in varying configurations, living out our Christian witness and mission in ‘one communion’ under ‘one tent’, the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama. Our ecclesiology (framework) as a creedal church makes no allowance for parochialism or congregationalism. What this model demonstrates is that when one member of the family is hurting all are experiencing the pain. And, when another rejoices all are joyfully celebrating because that’s how members in a family live. This institutional accountability we hold each other to is the very reason why all our decisions need to be carefully navigated, diligently weighed, prayerfully considered and spiritually discerned.

As a missiologist, I am daily inspired by grace mindful how blessed I am to be in a diocese where mission is driving the message of churches in this vast vineyard of God. The primacy of mission is fundamental to Episcopal ethos. Our understanding is that God has a mission and God has a Church to incarnate this mission. Mission is the work of God – the mission dei - from creation to that consummation when Christ shall be all in all. Mission as an expression of that communion, in its giving and receiving, its coming and going, this is at the very heart of the Holy Trinity. To this end, our robust engagement in the Five Marks of Mission is highly commendable:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptize, and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

With this train of thinking you see why it’s so necessary for us to see ‘outreach’ as an outdated term to describe our engagement in the mission dei- the mission of God. A more
appropriate descriptive could be ‘partnership’ because mission is transformational to both sides of the aisle, the receiver of generosity and giver share the same experience of being ‘moved’. Dwight J. Zscheile, in his book (People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identity: p. 77/78) advocates that as Episcopalians we are trained to offer hospitality to our neighbors but laments, “as followers of Jesus we must learn to be guests, to rely upon the hospitality of the neighborhood”. Just remember that the Word became flesh and moved into or pitched his tent in the neighborhood. After all, the very definition of mission is movement. One of the blessings of travelling the diocese is seeing firsthand how intentionally congregations engage mission. This witness always leaves me breathlessly inspired and proud to be Episcopalian.

Give thanks to God for the faith communities of our diocese where God’s mission is experienced. Such congregations are at the heart of God’s mission in the world. Such congregations have passion for people beyond their borders to be embraced and warmed by the extravagant, prodigal, unconditional, reconciling love of God in Christ. Episcopalians are people of hope sharing hope in a culture of inordinate fear. For Episcopalians, it’s not committee work but community where all gifts are allowed in everyone to help build community life and mission. And do remember, the prophetic ministry of the Church is not telling the future, but living the present.

I end with some insightful words from one of our retired bishops. The Right Rev. Gordon Scruton, former bishop of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts, urged the importance of letting go and trusting that we will be caught in the arms of a loving God; he called it “Trapeze Theology”. I trust we do so. I pray that we joyfully celebrate our historic heritage as anchored Episcopalians; anchored in our historic/biblical/spiritual/apostolic heritage informed by centuries of tested doctrine and faithful witness to Jesus. We do so inspired by our belief in the power of faith, hope and love embodying the hospitality God’s grace offers. Let me reinforce this inspirational gift called Anglicanism/Episcopalianism. Be proud Episcopalians who authentically witness Jesus as reconciled reconcilers of Jesus who is reconciliation. St. Gregory once said, “It is neither what you are or what you have been that God sees with his all merciful eyes but what you desire to be”. If we listen carefully, we may hear God in Christ whispering words of inspiration to us, “I am here and I will never leave you in time or eternity, and feel his Spirit nudging us to greater action!” Amen!!