Annual Convention Address  
The Rt. Rev. Dabney T. Smith  
At the 46th Annual Convention of the  
Diocese of Southwest Florida  
October 18, 2014

Welcome to the 46th Annual Convention of the Diocese of Southwest Florida. It is always a joy to gather in this community of diocesan leadership. Thank you for your service to the Church. It is always good to rekindle cherished friendships, create new abiding relationships, and conduct our business for the healthy governance of the Church. We do so by gathering for convention. Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously said about Anglicans that “Anglicans meet.” We meet and gather in churches, in conventions, and at baseball!

The most recent gathering of Episcopalians for Baseball with the Bishop saw close to 900 of us from 40 of our congregations cheering on the Tampa Bay Rays. As you know the Rays contribute back to the Diocese a portion of each of our tickets for Episcopal Charities. This year the check was $3664.00 and over the past six years the total contributed for our mercy in mission purpose equals $15737.00. I now challenge us to target next season and hope to have more than 1000 Episcopalians attend the game. Baseball with the Bishop has been a fun way to enjoy each other and build up the Episcopal Charities Fund. What you may not know is that the entire Baseball with the Bishop concept was the brainchild of my late wife Mary Ellen. She did all of the legwork in getting the program organized with the Rays and this last game was played on what would have been her 59th birthday. Her great idea continues to help and influence our diocese. And we have this treasure.

The House of Bishops met in Taiwan in September, a point about which I will later say more. During the meeting, one of the presenters was the Primate of the Philippines, the Rt. Rev. Edward Malaccan. The bishop spoke about how the General Convention of the Episcopal Church established the Episcopal Church in the Philippines in 1901; and spoke with deep appreciation of the first Missionary Bishop of the Philippine Islands, Charles Henry Brent. My ears perked up at this, as Charles Henry Brent Ordained my grandfather in the Diocese of Western New York 100 years ago today. In my family there has been someone active in ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church for the past century, and now my oldest daughter is a first year seminarian at Sewanee. We have this treasure!

You may have noticed that the theme of this convention is “We have this treasure.” Last year the presiding bishop was with us for our 45th annual convention. You will recall that our theme then was “Christ is Made the Sure Foundation” a theme which really seemed to take hold. I noticed that practically every other congregational visitation during the past year we sang that beautiful hymn. As we were lined up for the convention Eucharist procession last year, the presiding bishop turned to me and asked, “How did you pick your theme?” I relayed that my new bride said to me that she rarely heard “The Church’s One Foundation” anymore and I thought, well I can fix that. So I began to think of last year’s convention theme as “The Church’s One Foundation” but in thinking about it, the idea transformed into a better idea of “Christ is Made the Sure Foundation.” The
Presiding Bishop thought, “That’s nice.” But I think of my new wife persuading me and think to myself, we have this treasure!

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, a scriptural and euphemistic way of describing God’s incredible power working through our fragile, mortal lives. I invite you to consider the saintly earthen vessels that have revealed God to you in your lives. I ask you to quietly look around this convention room right now and know in the depths of your hearts: We have this treasure.

At last year’s convention I set out a series of goals for our continued diocesan vitality having to do with a number of topics. I do not have the need to rearticulate all of them or to repeat the presentation from September’s Deanery Convocations which described the decision making process that set them in motion. However, being mindful of the need of the archival nature of the Bishops convention address, I will simply state the primary points of the goals that are represented in my decisions, planning, and budget. They are: continued Clergy and Lay Leadership Development via a Dayspring and Clergy Events Planning process; Dayspring Master Planning and Capital Development; the need to increase two of our endowments being the Episcopal Charities Fund of Southwest Florida for greater capacity in mercy; and The Dayspring Endowment for healthier consistency in capital upkeep. The goals also included targeted congregational development; continued efforts in young adult ministries; the redevelopment of the diocesan website; and diocesan staff reorganization with enlarged and enhanced responsibilities for the Canon to the Ordinary and the Canon for Finance and Administration. One brief aside comment: I serve on the Presiding Bishop’s Council of Advice. Due to that responsibility I had to review a diocesan report from a decade ago from a diocese in deep turmoil. The report acknowledged significant mistrust, discouragement, and anger over a number of things, but the one I speak of was the mysterious, inaccurate, and sloppy state of the finances in this particular diocese. I said a prayer of thanksgiving for Anne Vickers and the accuracy and clarity she has brought us! Returning to the goals, in addition, the staff reorganization includes seeking a church planter, a new and enlarged youth ministry professional, and greater ministry development with pioneering ministries in Fresh Expressions.

I take this opportunity to also thank The Reverend Michelle Ortiz for the fine work she offered us in diocesan youth ministry. As I said in a message to the diocese this past summer: “The plan will be successful with an internal evolution of management structure within the bishops staff and the continued creation of a culture of accountability and data-driven decisions. I seek to operate at the highest levels with technology and personnel to support all areas of mission and ministry in our diocese.” Our own Canon Durning, a man for whose ministry I am constantly grateful, asked at the Convocations this helpful evaluative question, “Is the system responding to the vision?” I believe it is; and our goals are moving forward.

I do not ordinarily report on the House of Bishops meetings, simply because the Episcopal News Service does so with great clarity and timeliness. However, I do want to say some more about the recent House of Bishops meeting in the Diocese of Taiwan. I do understand why we met there. The Diocese of Taiwan was celebrating its 60th anniversary of being established by, and included in, the Episcopal Church after the onslaught of communist China and the escape of Chiang Kai-shek. Members of the American military essentially got the Episcopal Church going there in Taiwan. I
understand why we went, but I have to admit that I went with grumbling in my heart. I didn’t want to travel for that long, or that far, but went in a state of grumbling obedience. I, however, had some things to learn and I want to share some of those learning’s and insights.

The President of the government of Taiwan came to address the Bishops. It was interesting being under the watchful eyes of the Taiwanese secret service at our own meeting. After President Ma Ying-jeou read the information about the Episcopal Church that had been provided to him as a report he just began speaking extemporaneously about his country. He talked about all they had received from us in terms of support over the years and then spoke of the Haitian earthquake of several years ago. He spoke about how Taiwan immediately contributed people, finances, and other resources half way around the world to alleviate this tragic crisis. Then he addressed their change in mindset by describing how they had previously, been importers of compassion but now wanted their identity to be understood as exporters of compassion. It was a powerful statement and one I thought the Church, and its congregations, need to reflect on and act upon. The Church: Exporters of Compassion!

Earlier I mentioned the Primate of the Philippines. We also heard from the Primate of Japan, the Primate of Korea, and, of course, the Bishop of Taiwan, my friend, David Lai. A striking and provocative similarity of these last three is that they are all first generation Christians. Each had to deal with the pain of being considered a betrayer of family. Two thoughts struck me: One, it made me consider anew this question: What is it about the Gospel of Jesus Christ that is so compelling that it would invite one to go against the grain of their own cultural and familiar normalcy? Remember, this reality is so strikingly different from my 100 years of family activity in ordained ministry within the Episcopal Church. Each of them discovered the Gospel as so compelling they sought new life. The second thought that struck me is this. In our own culture; in our own communities; in our own neighborhoods, there are many, many people who are now, for all intents and purposes, potential first generation Christians. The Gospel is compelling; are we?

The last illustration of this visit to Taiwan is this. A number of us visited a congregation that takes care of senior citizens and a large kindergarten school. The congregation was established by American military personnel in the beginning of Taiwanese diocesan life and has now grown into one congregation of both English and Mandarin leaders and worshippers. The congregation is called the Church of the Good Shepherd, a name that five of our congregations in this diocese bear. When it was established by the English speakers it had to be translated into the Mandarin tongue. When it was translated, the noun, Good Shepherd, became a verb. Translated it is “The Church of Shepherding Love.” Shepherding Love is that which makes the Gospel we love sharable. The assisting bishop of Alabama, Santosh Marray, also a first generation Christian said to me, “The superiority of the Gospel is our ability to love gracefully.” It’s unfortunately no surprise that for many people in our world, receiving love gracefully, is a shocking surprise.

It is my conviction that we, the Church have two main purposes: to strengthen, challenge, and nurture the faithful in all aspects of Christian living; and to seek, invite, welcome, and incorporate the not-yet-believers into lives of faithful, believing relationship with Jesus Christ. John’s Gospel calls that life the abundant life. Inviting
people into that abundant life is called evangelism. Evangelism has been helpfully
defined as “the presentation of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, in such ways
that persons may be led to believe in him as Savior and follow him as Lord within the
fellowship of the Church.” Clearly, our evangelistic efforts are of merit when we love
gracefully. We are better able to love gracefully when we live the Christian Abundant
life. Christian love is reasonable, appealing, strengthening, healing, hopeful, real, and
compelling. When people really witness it, they choose to give their lives to Jesus. This is
not the time to do a full teaching on Evangelism but permit a few thoughts.

The Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayers presumes that we pray for the
mission of the Church every single day! Every day when I say my morning prayers I pray
for one of our congregations in this diocese. Pray for your own congregation every day,
for its mission, for its leaders, for its members, for its visitors. Pray for it every day!

There are plenty of resources available to help a congregation achieve better
practices in hospitality, newcomer incorporation, and service in the community. Be the
leaders in your own congregations by learning and then leading to equip your faith
community for growth.

Finally, there really are people in your personal spheres of influence that do not
know really who Jesus is or what it means to understand the Church as the Body of
Christ. Reflect on why your own personal Christian faith is compelling to you. Then
don’t be afraid to share it with someone you know and care about. You are surrounded by
potential first generation Christians. Remember, it is about the Abundant Life that you
have to share.

We have this treasure. It is humbling. It is overwhelming. It is life giving. It is
compelling. Thank God for this mercy. We have this treasure!