Welcome & Thanks

We’ve come now to Saturday morning, the last day of our 133rd Diocesan Convention. For those of you who were able to be here on Thursday, I truly hope that you enjoyed the workshops and found them to be valuable. I hope that you enjoyed the music of St. Augustine’s choir, offered at St. Cyprian’s Church. Yesterday was a very full day, but I hope that you agree with me that it was a good one! We gave necessary attention to the legislative dimensions of our convention, including the hearings yesterday afternoon. We visited the vendors and others assembled outside these doors and reconnected with friends and family. We worshiped together at Christ Church, celebrating the Eucharist and joining our voices together in prayer and praise and then shared a meal and some fine music. Bishop Todd Ousley led us in a consideration of what it means to “equip the saints for ministry.” I am grateful that Bishop Ousley was able to be with us for our convention. Early this morning, he flew out of New Bern on his way back to the Diocese of Eastern Michigan, where he has responsibilities tomorrow.

As I begin, I would like to express my gratitude for some of the ways in which I have experienced the richness of our common life during this past year.

-Each week, as I have traveled from congregation to congregation, you have welcomed me warmly and have shared something of what makes your community unique. By the summer, I will have visited with almost all of our Sunday morning communities. These visits are so important to me as we build relationships with one another and prayerfully consider how God is calling us to be the Church in today’s world.

-Our clergy inspire me with their passion and commitment, and with the wide range of gifts that they offer to the life and leadership of our diocese. I am grateful for them and for their trust and support of me, and I look forward to deepening these relationships in the years to come.

-The generosity of our congregations is inspiring. In spite of the fact that many in our world proclaim messages of scarcity, you have been faithful in your support of the ministry that God has given us. With careful financial management by our leaders, we have finished 2015 with a solid surplus. Your pledges for 2016 have come in about 11% higher than what we actually received from
you in 2015. This commitment, by our congregations, gives our diocesan leadership real confidence in their planning for the coming year. Please pass on to your congregations the thanks of our whole diocese! And please join me in thanking Tess Judge, our treasurer, Teresa Osborne, her assistant, and all members of our Finance Committee for their good work in these last years!

-I am deeply grateful for the efforts of our Diocesan House staff. Without exception, they go above and beyond any expectations we may have of them and it is a real pleasure for me to work with them. Please join me in thanking Emily Gowdy Canady, Hannah Hilterbrand, Bonnie Holton, Beth Nagy, Jimi Paderick, Chanda Platania, and Canon Matt Stockard.

-There are so many others whom I could thank, on my behalf and yours. While there is always danger in naming some, and not others, I am going to single out a few at this time.

-John Gaskill and Sonny Browne each serve faithfully as archdeacons in East Carolina. John has led in the founding of our School for Deacons, while also supporting the deacons of our diocese in their respective ministries. Deacon Katherine Mitchell has now taken over leadership of the school, but John continues in his leadership role with our diocese’s diaconal ministries. Sonny faithfully plans for all of our diocesan liturgies, including last evening’s celebration and our daily prayers here at convention. He also leads the team that hosts our diocese’s Annual Conference on Church Music, attended this year by Episcopalians and others from across North Carolina and beyond. I am grateful to both John and Sonny for their respective roles in our diocesan life.

-Ron Abrams has chaired the board of Episcopal Farmworkers Ministry for the last three years. This board, composed of members from our diocese and the Diocese of North Carolina, oversees a growing ministry based in, and extending out from, Newton Grove. Under his leadership, almost $300,000 was raised through the Harvest for Hospitality campaign. Two of the four vans, essential to the ministry, were replaced. One was a gift of the Diocese of Long Island and the other was purchased with money from St. John’s Fayetteville and from the Harvest for Hospitality campaign. In June, Fr. Tony was recognized for his years of leadership with the naming of the Farmworker Ministry Center in his honor. Silvia Cendejas and Juan Carabana now share the day-to-day leadership of this important ministry. I am grateful to Ron for his faithful leadership of this ministry, and look forward to supporting his successor, the Rev. Lisa Fischbeck of the Diocese of North Carolina.

-Others are stepping down from leadership roles in our diocesan life. Jim Horton has chaired the Standing Committee during this past year. Jo Parrot has chaired the Board of Managers of Trinity Center. Blair Both has provided valuable leadership for our Commission on Ministry. Mary Reese has been co-chair of the Anti-Racism Commission with Charles Hannibal. Michael Singer has chaired the Millennium Development Goals ministry of our diocese. We
owe our thanks to Jim, Jo, Blair, Mary and Michael and to all who share in the leadership of our diocesan ministries including those whom I have not named publicly.

- Finally, I wish to thank the members of Christ Church and St. Cyprian’s, here in New Bern, who worked to assist in hosting this convention. Christ Church has just finished its celebration of 300 years of life and ministry. St. Cyprian’s will celebrate its 150th anniversary this year, including a special service planned for Sunday, July 3rd. It has been, and will continue to be, a busy time for the Episcopal churches of New Bern.

“Confession”

Now it’s time for my confession. As I continue to learn about the life and work of a bishop, I must confess that I have regularly overcommitted myself and those around me. At last year’s Convention, for example, I invited those interested in creation care ministries to volunteer to work together, I spoke of my desire to establish a more comprehensive communications strategy for the diocese, and I described what I expected would be the next steps in our Spanish language ministry. But there was a problem. We did not have a plan for moving these ministries forward, and neither our Diocesan House staff members nor I have had time to properly champion these initiatives. And so they largely sit waiting on a corner of my desk, or on a “to do” list somewhere in my computer.

I’m learning that sometimes I say “yes” more quickly than I probably should. Sometimes I’m out of the office for extended periods of time and correspondence builds up. Occasionally those seeking appointments with me must wait longer than they’d like. On a number of occasions, when work has piled up, I’ve had to apologize to others and withdraw from events I had planned to attend. It feels as if I have a long ways to go in learning the rhythms in my work as your bishop.

But let me be clear. In no way do I wish to be heard as complaining. The work of being your bishop is something I enjoy thoroughly. There are times, however, when I become frustrated with my limitations, and with the limitations of our diocesan structures and systems, and become impatient that we are not able to accomplish a greater amount of what I would call the “more measurable” work and ministry. Mostly, I want to apologize to those who have been left waiting too long for actions or responses from me or from our staff. I look forward to becoming more effective and efficient in my work, and I look forward to growing with all of you in our capacity to proclaim the Gospel and be the Church in this beautiful part of God’s creation.

It has been this learning, about my own capacities and ours, that led me to recommend the theme of “Equipping the Saints for Ministry” to our Convention Committee. The rest of my address will focus on the three elements of this theme that I introduced in my sermon last evening … Unity, Alignment and Growth.
As we seek to live “a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called,” we do so in and through many different sets of relationships. I’d like to speak about a few of these sets of relationships, and emphasize the importance of making “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

This past summer, a group of us travelled from East Carolina to Salt Lake City in Utah to participate in The Episcopal Church’s General Convention. At last fall’s series of deanery meetings, some of our deputies shared their experience of General Convention. One thing that was clear to me, whether through the rich worship, the formal legislation, or the hallway conversations, is that the Episcopal Church includes people with very diverse ideas and hopes about the shape of church. It was also clear to me that many of those present were also deeply committed to the unity of the Church. With a group of bishops, I found myself composing a resolution titled “Communion Across Difference,” a resolution that was later adopted by the House of Bishops and from which I draw these words:

“We thank God for the rich variety of voices in our House, in our dioceses, in The Episcopal Church, and in the Anglican Communion, that reflect the wideness of God’s mercy and presence in the Church and in the world.”

“We thank God that in the fullness of the Holy Trinity we can and must remain together as the Body of Christ in our dioceses, in the Episcopal Church, and in our relationships with sisters and brothers in Christ in the Anglican Communion. The bonds created in baptism are indeed indissoluble and we pray that we have the confidence to rely upon the Holy Spirit who will continue to hold us all together as partners in communion through the love of God in Jesus.”
In the work we did here in East Carolina in the months following General Convention, it was my heart’s desire to strengthen the unity of the members and congregations of our diocese as one body in Christ Jesus even as we considered difficult matters. I am grateful for those who hosted and led the deanery meetings held to consider General Convention’s decisions regarding marriage for all people, and to consider the life of our deaneries. I am grateful for those who engaged me directly, sharing their hopes and concerns about the implications of General Convention’s decisions. I am grateful for the small group of individuals, and particularly our Chancellor, Joan Geiszler-Ludlum, who considered an early draft of what was later published as my Pastoral Letter on Marriage. And I am grateful for the full range of responses I have received following its publication. In that letter, I expressed this hope:

“It is my prayer and my deep desire that this diocese will commit itself to being a place of welcome to all persons; to being a community which, while centered in Christ, affirms and nurtures the theological diversity of its people; and to being a Church that actively builds unity amongst its members within and beyond the diocese, in the name of Christ, wherever the possibility for such unity exists. Each of us must welcome, respect, and value those who are different from us, while expecting the same in return.”

In my understanding, “equipping the saints for ministry” must begin with a commitment to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” There will forever be things about which we will disagree, but I hope and will always pray that we remain committed to being one body in Christ Jesus, through the power of God’s Holy Spirit.

As hard as I hope that we will work to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” within our own congregations and in this diocese, I also hope that we will commit ourselves to finding ways to strengthen the unity of the body of Christ in the sets of relationships that we experience in the life of the wider Christian Church.

Next year, on Saturday, April 22nd, the three Episcopal dioceses of North Carolina will gather in New Bern for a celebration of the 200th anniversary of the founding of the first Diocese of North Carolina, of which we were a part. A leadership group, including members of each diocese, is working to develop the plans for our celebration. Our shared history with the dioceses of North Carolina and Western North Carolina finds expression in historical relationships with such entities as St. Augustine’s University and St. Mary’s School, both in Raleigh, and with Kanuga and the University of the South for whom I am a trustee, by virtue of being your bishop. Do we do these relationships justice by including $1,000 for each in our Diocesan Budget? Or ought we to find appropriate ways of refreshing these historic relationships for our own times?

We have a mission partner relationship with the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of the Dominican Republic. Next week I will travel to Santo Domingo to be present for their diocesan convention and for the ordination of their new bishop coadjutor, and to participate in the meetings of the Dominican
Development Group. Such international relationships are another way to bear witness to the unity of the body of Christ.

In recent weeks, the Internet has been filled with speculation about the gathering of Primates that took place in Canterbury, England. This gathering of the senior bishops of the Anglican Communion, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, was predicted by some to be the time when The Episcopal Church would be cast out of the Communion for making decisions about same sex marriage that set us apart from other churches of the Communion. That did not happen. All of the primates but one stayed for the whole gathering, a time that was centered and upheld in daily prayer and worship. In the end, when the official communiqué was published and the first hand accounts had been shared, it became clear that the primates committed themselves to walking together rather than separately.

For a short period of time, members of The Episcopal Church will not be free to represent the Communion in some official ways but, for the most part, our relationships across the Communion will continue much as they have been in recent years. As I reflected on everything I read and heard about the gathering of Primates, it struck me that we have been given an example of a moment when Christian leaders have demonstrated their commitment to unity in the Spirit as something of greater value than their own personal commitments to their individual differences.

The Compass Rose Society exists for the purpose of supporting and strengthening the work of the Archbishop of Canterbury and of the world wide Anglican Communion. Most days, I wear a Compass Rose lapel pin in my suit jacket. The people of St. John’s Midland, where I served before coming here, were members of the Compass Rose Society as a statement of their commitment to the unity of our world wide church, particularly in the midst of the conflicts and potential division we have faced in recent years. In the months to come, I will take a proposal to our Executive Council that our Diocese join the Compass Rose Society as a practical expression of our commitment to the world wide Anglican Communion.

**Alignment**

*The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*

(Ephesians 4:11-13, NRSV)
Writing in a preaching commentary that I enjoy, Bishop Porter Taylor of Western North Carolina explains that the Greek word translated as “equip” in this passage can be understood to mean something like “the setting of a bone.” Bishop Taylor writes,

“To grow in one’s ministry, therefore, is to align oneself with God’s intention, both individually and corporately, and to avoid being “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine.”

There are several ways that I’m proposing we “re-align” the ministries of our diocese, as we equip the saints of God in East Carolina for the work of ministry.

As many of you have already heard, I intend to realign my pattern of parish visits, at least a little. With the new cycle of visits that will begin this September, I plan to be with every congregation at least once every year. We’ll build this pattern to include:
- an “official” Sunday visit every second year, as a minimum,
- visits during the week or on weekends in alternate years, at the invitation of the congregation,
- deanery visits that will take me in and out of the congregations of this diocese.
Details of this new pattern will be shared in the weeks to come, with my hope that the new schedule will be published soon after Easter.

Whether or not the proposed canonical change regarding deaneries is adopted, we will be working together to revitalize deanery life and this will also involve some realignment. We have been well served by five clergy deans in recent years: John Bonner in Albemarle; Mimi Lacy in Pamlico, John Pollock in Trinity, John Frazier in Upper Cape Fear and Catherine Powell in Lower Cape Fear. With Catherine Powell’s retirement, and the departure from the diocese of Mimi Lacy and John Bonner, we are naturally facing changes.

At this convention, it is my pleasure to appoint ten deans, two for each deanery, one lay and one ordained. My appointments are as follows:

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<tr>
<th>Deanery</th>
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<tr>
<td>Albemarle</td>
<td>L: Beth Harrington, Holy Trinity Hertford</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C: Jeff Douglas, St. Thomas Ahoskie</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pamlico</td>
<td>L: Susan Holmes, St. Timothy’s Greenville</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C: Andrew Cannan, St. Paul’s Greenville</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trinity</td>
<td>L: Ginger Jacocks, St. Christopher’s Havelock</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C: John Pollock, St. Andrew’s Morehead City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Cape Fear</td>
<td>L: Rob Richardson, Holy Trinity Fayetteville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C: John Frazier, St. Paul’s in the Pines, Fayetteville</td>
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These appointments are for a period of one year at a time. Soon after convention, I will gather with the deans for a time of training so that we can properly “align” our efforts to support the revitalization of deanery life. They will then set a pattern of meetings for their respective Deanery Councils and invite the representatives from each congregation to come together. In your reporting to the diocese of the leaders selected for your congregation this year, please make sure to include the name of your deanery council representative. If you have not selected one yet this year, I’m encouraging you to do so as soon as possible.

None of us wants meetings for the sake of meetings, but I believe deeply that the body of Christ in East Carolina can be better strengthened and equipped for ministry when congregations work together rather than struggle in isolation. Please keep the renewal of the deanery life of our diocese in your prayers!

Last year, I stated that it was not my goal to “set out to grow a bigger staff but to lead our current staff into finding ways to effectively support and empower the work of diocesan leaders in our various areas of ministry.” During the past year, our staff has worked together to maximize our efforts and to consider ways of reorganizing our respective responsibilities. Separately from the Bishop’s office itself, our work is being realigned into three areas of responsibility: Leadership Development, Resources, and Diocesan Life with the plan that a senior staff person will lead our work in each. As we have worked to develop this plan, it has become clear that we are seriously understaffed in the leadership of Diocesan Life and so the cost of a new staff position to support this work has been included in the proposed budget for 2016. Details of this new position have been shared with and supported by our Executive Council, and presented in the Pre-Convention Deanery Meetings that have recently taken place. When our budget is approved, we will move to hire this new staff person as quickly as possible and then fine-tune the alignment of individual staff responsibilities. As this work takes place, we will do our best to communicate the changes we make, particularly as they impact on congregational life.

To sum up this section of my address, let me emphasize that the realignment I describe will be taking place with the clear desire to maximize the ability of the members of our diocese to more fully engage in the mission that God gives us in the world. God uniquely gifted each of us for the work of ministry. Together, we have all of the gifts and resources that we need “for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”
Growth

We must no longer be children, 
tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, 
by people’s trickery, 
by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. 
But speaking the truth in love, 
we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, 
into Christ, 
from whom the whole body, 
joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, 
as each part is working properly, 
promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love. 
(Ephesians 4:14-16)

There are lots of ways that the Church of Jesus Christ can grow. It is my deeply held conviction that as we are able to maintain the unity of the Body of Christ and align our respective God-given gifts in support of equipping the saints for ministry and for building up the Body of Christ, we will “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

Let me identify some ways in which I believe God is calling us to grow. As I do so, I encourage you to take a few notes. You might hear me speak of a ministry to which God may be calling you or you may be drawn by God to consider a ministry that I don’t even mention. If you feel God stirring you to respond, we would ask that you share this information on the evaluation form that we hope you will complete before leaving convention. In the weeks following convention, we will connect those stirred to respond with those who are leading our diocesan ministries. If, from your responses, there is clear energy to launch new ministries then we will do our best to bring people together for this purpose. The Canon for Diocesan Life, whom we hope to be able to hire so soon, will pick up responsibility for this work of connecting people and ministry when they begin work.

Last night, I spoke of the challenges faced by those involved in our Interfaith Refugee Ministry. Whether their board decides to go ahead with the settlement of refugees from all countries, including Syria and other countries associated with terrorism, or decides to limit their resettlement efforts in Craven County or other communities in which they work, they will need our support to strengthen their capacity for this important ministry. Those gifted in not-for-profit board management might be encouraged to join the board. In a little bit, their executive director will speak to us about other ways that we can get involved. I’ve been involved in refugee resettlement in other places, and have found this work to be deeply satisfying. I will commit myself to more fully supporting this diocesan ministry
in the year to come. Let us all keep Susan Husson and the staffs of the New Bern and Wilmington offices of Interfaith Refugee Ministry in our prayers.

Recently, I had separate conversations with military chaplains associated with our diocese, one navy and one army. Each is preparing to retire from active duty in the next year or so. Both were wondering if there might be ways for them to become more fully involved in the life of our diocese. It didn’t take me long to ask each of them if they’d be willing to work together, with me and others, to strengthen our ministry with military families across our diocese. As this conversation proceeds, I expect that there will be lots of opportunities for others to join in.

At the January meeting of our Executive Council I was surprised to learn that few of those present, if any, were aware of local ecumenical gatherings in observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. While I am certain that many of our congregations regularly work with ecumenical partners to address local needs, I am hoping that we could strengthen our relationships with the wider Christian community and with our neighbors of other faith communities. Bob Hudak, rector of St. Paul’s Greenville, represents our diocese in some of this work and is actively involved in ecumenical and interfaith work in his own community. If others are interested in the growth of this dimension of our diocesan life and ministry, I’m sure there will be a way to come together to develop first steps.

Very early on, I learned that the members of la Iglesia Episcopal de la Sagrada Familia were living with the dream that they would one day have their own church. After all of these years, they continue to worship outside under a picnic shelter. Think of the temperatures of the last few weeks …a little cold? When I visited last summer, I deliberately dressed in full vestments with the cope and miter I wore last evening, even though the temperature was approaching 100 degrees. More than eighty young people and adults were confirmed that day. What excitement! The congregation has saved money themselves and still holds funds that were raised across the diocese in years past. This is a project that needs to be advanced as soon as possible. As I have continued to travel across the diocese, I have learned that many of our congregations wonder how they might reach out to Spanish speaking neighbors. At present, we have three congregations meeting each week. Fr. Tony Rojas leads La Sagrada Familia and also the congregation that meets on Sunday afternoons at St. Francis Church in Goldsboro. Deacon Janet Rodman leads the congregation that is a part of St. Peter’s Church in Washington. In order to support and strengthen these existing Spanish language congregations, and to explore the possibility of forming new congregations, we have applied for and been awarded a grant from the Isabel Lehto Foundation. We are grateful to them for their support, and plan to hire a bilingual, bicultural person familiar with the Episcopal Church on a contract basis to assist us with this work of ministry development. Before too long, I hope, we will gather a diocesan group in support of our Spanish language congregations and ministries and we will welcome any interested in joining this work. Participation with this group will yield a rich, bicultural experience.
With our Commission on Ministry and some others, I have begun a conversation about the possibility of launching a School for Ministry in our diocese, to support the varied needs of church leaders. We would follow the model of the School for Deacons but offer courses and workshops intended to support all baptized Christians in their life and in their leadership of their congregational ministries. Essentially, we would strive to “equip the saints for the work of ministry!” In time, offerings could also support the formation of those called to be priests in this diocese, perhaps supplementing academic work that would be done in traditional or non-traditional paths with our Episcopal seminaries. With the changing needs of our congregations for leadership, and particularly of our smallest congregations, the Church across North America is exploring new possibilities for formation for ministry.

Are you excited about something you’ve heard someone say at this year’s convention? Are other ideas stirring in your heart? Have you written them down? As God’s Holy Spirit moves you, I hope and pray that you will step forward to join in the growing ministry of our Church. Remember, you can use the Convention evaluation form to share your ideas or offer your gifts!

**Conclusion**

For now, let me leave you with an image.

...*put on Carolina Panthers jersey* ...

I’m wearing this to make a couple of points.

First, this being the day before Super Bowl 50, I want to simply say, “Go Panthers! Keep Pounding!”

Second, I want to let you know that the Diocese of North Carolina and the Diocese of Colorado are in a challenge to see who can raise the most money for Episcopal Relief and Development in the name of their team. As I finished writing this address, the Diocese of North Carolina was way behind, even though others of us have been supporting their effort. I want to encourage you go to the most recent edition of our diocesan News and Notes, or to our diocese’s Facebook page, and follow the links to make a donation.

Finally, I want to tell you why I’m wearing jersey #73 instead of #1. Cam Newton, Carolina’s quarterback wears #1. I love to watch him play. His skills, passion and style are exciting to me and I’ve become a Panthers fan this year. But no, I’m wearing #73 ...the number worn by Michael Oher, the offensive tackle charged with protecting Cam Newton’s blind side. That’s right. He’s the player whose life story is told in the movie “Blind Side.” Cam Newton would not likely be nearly as successful as the quarterback and leader of the Carolina Panthers if Michael Oher was not protecting his blind side, giving him time to make plays and keeping him from getting hit and possibly hurt.
To a certain degree, I understand my ministry as bishop to be that of protecting the blind side. Who’s the star quarterback? It’s not me. No that would be the body of Christ as represented by the saints of God in East Carolina.

As we finish our convention, and prepare to return to our homes, let us guard and protect the mission that God has given us in and through his son Jesus. One in God’s Holy Spirit, let us equip the saints of East Carolina for the work of ministry, that all may see and know the love of our God which is for us and for all people.

To God be the glory!