Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ -

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the holy one, Jesus Christ.

Happy Anniversary! This meeting of our Annual Council is the culmination of a year-long celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Diocese of Nebraska. It was 150 years ago this month, on October 9, 1868, that the General Convention voted to accept our request to be admitted as a diocese of the Episcopal Church. It’s a fun footnote to know that in order for a territory to become a diocese, the Episcopal Church required a “convention” of parishes meet and make that formal request. Nebraska was nearly denied status as a diocese because when we met we called ourselves a “council” instead of a “convention,” a move for which the larger church chastised us. To this day, we are the single diocese in all the 111 dioceses of the Episcopal Church that has an annual council instead of an annual convention. I’m not sure if that’s because we’re wonderfully independent or because we’re just a little bit rebellious, but either way, it’s pure Nebraska!

It’s been a great year remembering and celebrating our history in this place. We kicked off our anniversary with a visit from our Presiding Bishop, who came to Nebraska on the first weekend of 2018. Though he had a cold at the time, the irrepressible Michael Curry was an electrifying and inspiring presence for all those who made the journey to Omaha to come see the leader of our Church. We got great media coverage of the Presiding Bishop’s visit, partly because a resident bat from Trinity Cathedral awoke during the PBs Sunday sermon, and swooped around the sanctuary while he was preaching. Bishop Curry - unflustered - told the congregation he was pretty sure we were seeing the Holy Spirit Dove that morning. But for those of us who were close to the action: that was one hairy dove!

Our visit from the PB turned out to be a coup even beyond our expectations because just weeks after he came to Nebraska, he took another jaunt - this time to London - to preach at a little wedding that was being thrown in the land of our Anglican ancestors! We’re blessed that he came to see us when he did. Now that Bishop Curry is an internationally known rock star for Jesus, it’s a little harder to book him!

On the same Sunday morning the Presiding Bishop was here, we gathered in our local churches all around the diocese for a special Nebraska Liturgy. With beautiful prayers and music composed especially for that day and this year, we raised our voices together to begin our sesquicentennial in common prayer.

In the springtime, our anniversary celebration continued with two joyful and unique gatherings. In April we celebrated “Cranes and Common Prayer” in Kearney, a day which included prayers and song and feasting … and some of the most delightful and moving storytelling I’ve ever participated in here in DioNeb. With June came “Pray,
Walk, Do” which though it fell on a blazing hot day did not deter a great, big crowd from coming out and participating in a 5K walk/run, and a massive post race breakfast feed on the shores of Lake Zorinsky. We capped off that gathering with beautiful prayers for our saints who’ve gone before, and for our continued faithfulness as a diocese of the Church.

This Annual Council is the culmination of our year-long anniversary celebration. Over the course of the next 24 hours you can look forward to hearing more tales of our storied past and our spirit-filled present, as well as a keynote address from a modern-day Nebraska hero who truly needs no introduction. All along the way over these precious hours together, we will join as a big Nebraska choir to sing our special sesquicentennial songs - and pray our special sesquicentennial prayers - for one last time.

This is the place to thank some of the key players in this jubilee year. Brother James Dowd, Canon Liz Easton, Karen Burkley and Diny Landon were the support team that helped welcome Bishop Curry to DioNeb, while that same weekend Dean Craig Loya, Father Chuck Peek, Marty-Wheeler Burnett and Rae Whitney did the Lion’s share of work pulling together our special Nebraska liturgy. Archdeacon Betsy Bennett, Father Chuck Peek, Bill Brush and the folks from Saint Luke’s and the Central Deanery lead the charge for Cranes & Common Prayer. Father Ernesto Medina - with great support from the folks at St Martha’s - masterminded Pray, Walk, Do. And Jo Berhens, our diocesan historiographer, organized the terrific series of reflections on the lives of Nebraska saints that have been featured on Facebook and in our diocesan publications over the course of the year. Tales which have not only reminded us of times now past but inspired us to be still more faithful disciples today.

Behind all this, was the ministry of the amazing Noelle Ptomey, who volunteered two years ago - when everybody else was looking at everybody else - to Chair the entire celebration of our 150th Anniversary. Noelle was gracious, collaborative, inclusive and tireless in her efforts to help us throw this year-long party. Will you please join me in giving thanks to Noelle and to all those who helped us celebrate so well over the course of this special year?

It has not been just sesquicentennial celebration since we last gathered as the Annual Council a year ago in North Platte. Here are some of the other highlights of the past year in DioNeb …

In January, several groups of Episcopalians gathered to be part of the women’s marches that were held all across Nebraska. Against a political backdrop that continues to divide us as a nation, a state, and often even from our closest friends and neighbors, it has been challenging at times to know when to organize and to make sure that the voice of the Church is heard in the public sphere, and when to heed Jesus’ call for unity, and err on the side of maintaining peace and stability in this body. In the case of a march organized to support women’s equality in every sector of our common life, and to condemn violence against women of any sort (including in our nation’s political discourse) the presence of the women and men of the Church joining together to participate in those January women’s marches was a no-brainer.
Women were among Jesus’ closest and most intimate companions and disciples; women were the most stalwart and courageous of Jesus’ friends at the time of his persecution and death; women were the first witnesses of Christ’s resurrection from the dead and were among the most generous and faithful supporters of the early church. And Jesus himself, again and again, lifts women out of poverty, powerlessness, marginalization and every situation where by coercion or violence they are being harmed by the empire or the religious authorities of the day. It is my sincere prayer and expectation that though we have often failed in the past, our Episcopal Church will always stand with women, and that includes continuing to strive towards still fuller inclusion and justice in this denomination around issues like fairness in hiring practices, parity in compensation, and representation in the House of Bishops.

I hope and expect that this January, we will march again.

In the spring, Canon Easton and I made a week-long pilgrimage to the panhandle for our Western Residency. This journey has become a fixture of diocesan life and our diocesan calendar over the last six or seven years, and I am not sure whether the folks who do the visiting or the folks who host the visits are more enthusiastic about - or have more fun with - this annual event!

As an example of what these visits look like, let me tell you about our sojourn to Saint Mary’s in Holly on a Friday evening in late May. The sun was still pretty high when we pulled off highway 87 into the church lot, but a couple of folks were already present at St Mary’s, pulling together drinks and desserts for the evening to come. The diocese bought barbeque from EJ’s in Chadron to help with the potluck, and so our first order of business was to unload from the truck about two tons of pulled pork, coleslaw and baked beans!

Families soon began to arrive for the evening’s activities, which included baptizing a little new baby who belonged to a local ranch family, feasting together in the church undercroft and gathering for an old-fashioned hymn-sing organized by Father John Adams and for which we imported a local organist for the evening. Probably 50 people came out that night, which meant little St. Mary’s was full-to-bursting, and that when we raised our voices at the hymn-sing to praise Jesus together, we could surely be heard beyond the walls of the church and all out into the stunningly beautiful landscape of that part of Sheridan County.

I’ve noticed that when church worship is felt as a duty - and when church people aren’t very deeply connected to their brothers and sisters in the parish - people tend to disburse very quickly after a morning or evening service. No surprise that when Canon Easton and I finally threw in the towel to drive to the next place that Friday night, there were still a half dozen cars and pick-ups parked on the lawn at St Mary’s, and a big, tight group of folks still standing in the setting sun outside the parish doors: talking, laughing and being the Church.
This is one small example of the sort of intimate moment and celebration that best characterizes so much of our shared experience as Nebraska Episcopalians. Note well my brothers and sisters: God the Creator, Son and Spirit are routinely and wonderfully manifest in such a gathering, whatever the occasion and whatever the locale.

In July, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church met in Austin, Texas. Like many folks, I am ambivalent about our General Convention. I think it’s too long, too big, too expensive and not very representative of what the Episcopal Church looks like in real life. I have advocated - and will continue to be an advocate for - some real change around this inherited, cumbersome structure. But having said all that, General Convention provides a unique opportunity for us every time it meets, because it is populated by a whole bunch of faithful, sincere, and hopeful Episcopalians who have taken two weeks off from their homes and jobs to try to advance the cause of Christ in and from our larger Church.

Thanks to the hard work of those people - including a superb deputation from your Diocese of Nebraska - I think we did a credible job this year as a General Convention. We passed a responsible and lean budget for the larger church’s coming three years, that aims to continue the work of pushing Church resources towards the local level and funding the Presiding Bishop’s mission priorities of Evangelism, Creation Care and Racial Reconciliation. The witness and ministry of women was front and center at convention, and legislation was passed to help support fairness around hiring and compensation of women serving across various church ministries. Likewise, our disciplinary canons were changed to help address misconduct and abuse and to better care for survivors of abuse in the church setting. We re-admitted the Diocese of Cuba to the Episcopal Church (after we had unceremoniously severed ties with the island in 1966 at the height of the political tensions between Cuba and the US.) This move was cause for a huge outpouring of joy, especially among the large Afro-Caribbean population of our denomination. And in a legislative compromise, we decided not to begin the process of updating the Book of Common Prayer, but rather to encourage and enable much broader and more creative experimentation with prayer and liturgy in our local contexts, as a way to begin imagining what the next BCP should be.

That work has already begun with the publication and sanctioned use of expansive language Eucharistic prayers that are now being used in several parishes in the diocese. And as a next local step, I have appointed Father Steve Lahey of St. Matthew’s in Lincoln to the position of Canon Theologian for our diocese. We’re even now receiving the names of individuals both lay and ordained who would like to be part of the team that will help oversee our efforts to explore new liturgical forms here in DioNeb. If you have gifts as a theologian, a liturgist, a writer, a poet, a musician or an intercessor - and would be interested in serving in that capacity - you can still let me know!

Two highlights from earlier this autumn and the concluding months of our sesquicentennial year bear noting here.
In September, Becca Stevens - an Episcopal priest from Tennessee and the renowned founder of Magdalene and Thistle Farms - came to Nebraska to help us celebrate the opening Magdalene Omaha and Thistle Lights.

Now Magdalene Omaha is not an Episcopal Ministry, nor is it in fact a “Church ministry” in the strictest sense of the term. But Magdalene Omaha was the brainchild of Deacon Teresa Houser, who I know credits this body with being among the first and strongest supporters of her vision to serve women who are the survivors of rape, incest, domestic violence or sex trafficking, and are doing the hard, hard work of starting life anew. And Magdalene’s board is populated by a number of Episcopalians including Dean Craig Loya who serves as it’s President. And when Becca came to Nebraska, the sold out crowd who came to hear her speak was brimming with members of our church who had driven from all around the diocese to be part of that special evening.

Some of the best and most faithful ministry the Church does, is work that starts in the parish and is then handed off to the larger community. Or work that happens in collaborative partnerships between church groups and community groups who find creative ways to serve together … or work that just happens to be done by Christian people, who care and serve because they are disciples of Jesus. In the end, it does not matter whether the Episcopal Church somehow gets “credit” for community initiatives that feed the hungry, house the homeless and heal the broken hearted. What matters is that Christ is met and served in such work and that the people of God are doing their part to support it.

I asked Deacon Teresa if she could share some measure of the lives impacted by the ministry she been leading us in over these past few years. Many, many of you have contributed to the Friends of Tamar, which was a precursor to Magdalene Omaha and has become, in the words of Deacon Teresa, “a full diocesan effort.” 20 Episcopal Churches of this diocese have worked with local social service agencies to determine the best ways to support the local needs of women who are the survivors of sexual violence. And that little seed of an idea that launched Friends of Tamar: helping women who are leaving an abusive situation to escape sexual violence with a suitcase of toiletries and clothes? Since Christmas Eve of 2014 when a woman (miraculously enough named “Mary”) received the first suitcase, just sort of 900 bags have been delivered in the metro area to help survivors.

Deacon Teresa will tell you more about what’s going on with Friends of Tamar and Magdalene later at this Council, but the encouragement I want to offer is to point to what can happen when one person - with the support of the body of Christ - has an idea about loving, serving, caring for or supporting their neighbors in need.

I don’t know how often I am asked about how to make a difference, or how to grow the Church, or what God might be calling us to in this here and now, but surely this story shows us a pattern for that work:
Open your eyes and hearts to your neighbors who need to experience the love of God. Get to know those folks, and help your churches get to know them. And then find a way to leverage the passion and power of the body of Christ that is your local congregation.

Later in this Council you’re going to hear from a half dozen folks who have started local ministries that are having a real impact in terms of loving and caring for church neighbors and contributing to the sense of identity and mission in the parishes where these ministries are being carried out. I hope you find real inspiration from these mission moments. Truly - the Church is the sleeping giant of this age in America. There is nothing we cannot accomplish if we put our hearts, minds and prayers to the task.

Two years ago at this gathering, many of you met Brother James Dowd for the first time. Though I knew Brother James to be sincerely faithful and just a ton of fun, I was also - truth be told - just a little worried about how you all would react to a be-robbed monk, whose great passion in life is embodying and teaching about prayer. Well I need not have worried - and who could have imagined all that was to come!

The former New Yorker and theater guy fell in love with our Nebraska landscape and with all of you. You in turn welcomed Brother James with open arms as he drove around this state to visit our parishes and come to know us more deeply. And in relationship together, we quickly discovered that we all have a hunger to learn to pray better and from that to find ways to serve Jesus more deeply … a desire so widely shared that it could only be a call of God on our common life.

And so fast forward to a Friday evening just a month ago, on which 150 people gathered to celebrate “Foundation Day.” And open a Benedictine monastery and an adjacent program and home for young adults who wish to spend a year learning more about service and prayer, all on the campus of Church of the Resurrection right here in DioNeb. Brother James will say more later today, but I want to say what joy we share in his discernment to stay with us, what power lies in the witness of the people who have become the community that is The Benedictine Way, and what inspiration and hope that nascent community gives us as we seek to be shaped as people who will pray better, serve more bravely and love more deeply.

There is plenty more going on in this 150th year of the Diocese of Nebraska.

Our Bishop’s Society continues to support The Curacy project, through which we’re attracting great young priests to come to Nebraska for a season and who in turn gain an absolutely unique experience of priestly life in their first-ever calls. Our summer youth camp for kids - Camp Canterbury - continues to be a deeply joyful and authentic experience of Christian community for our youth. And the camp has grown so much over the last few years that we may soon be facing the challenge of too many kids wanting to spend a summer week learning more about Jesus (a challenge we shall be happy to meet!)
And not incidentally - remember a year ago when I reported that the larger Episcopal Church had released its data about church giving and attendance across our denomination? Last year, it seemed like a miracle to be able to report that Nebraska was the seventh fastest growing diocese in the Episcopal Church. Well - you did it again! Of those 111 dioceses of our world-wide Episcopal Church, there were exactly 12 that measured increased attendance when the stats came out earlier this fall, and once again the Diocese of Nebraska was counted as a member of that distinguished group. For the second year running, we grew. We grew.

Let me say as I did last year that every one of you - no matter the size, shape or health of your church family - contributes to that impressive statistic. Every time you come to worship on a Sunday morning - every time you invite a friend to come and see something that’s happening at church - you play your part in helping us to grow. Keep up the good work!

Just a little later on this morning we are going to consider two resolutions that appear on page 17 in your yellow book. These are the edited articles of our diocesan Constitution that we worked on at last year’s annual council to re-organize our governance structure. We eliminated our Executive Commission, and re-structured the Bishop & Trustees of the diocese to allow for fuller elected representation across the spectrum of our diversity around life experience, talents, Nebraska geography and all the rest. One of the rules of our polity as that when we are adopting a change to our Constitution, two Annual Council’s running need to vote for exactly the same change. I want you to know that I am very enthusiastic about the re-structuring we’ve accomplished, and that I do encourage your vote to affirm the work we did last year without amendment. I’m confident that we’ll be a more efficient, representative, and harder working governance team once this change is made.

Finally - I want to acknowledge your diocesan staff, and all of you.

Many of you have visited our diocesan offices over the course of this past year. There, you will find a group of both full and part-time people who are not only hard working and conscientious employees, but are deeply committed followers of Jesus and earnest friends one with another. I am sure that if you’ve ever walked through our doors you were met with a smile, encouraged with a prayer and witness to a little community that actually endeavors to be the Church first and foremost. I am so grateful for the support and companionship of Kyle Smith, Lachisha Baskin, James Dowd, Beth Byrne and Canon Liz Easton. They make coming to work a joy every day and they work hard serve all of you with extraordinary faithfulness and commitment.

And last of all - to all of you gathered here this morning, who are representative of 53 church communities planted all over the 77,000 square miles of this state and composed of the several thousand women, men and children who have committed themselves to be a part of the Episcopal Church in this time and place. To watch you, to work with you, and to serve you is just an extraordinary blessing. The determination and labor you bring to the project of loving each other is a powerful witness of the reconciling
love of Christ. The commitment and pride you bring to the task of caring for your communities and serving your neighbors is an inspirational act of discipleship. And the hope with which you face the challenges of this moment is nothing less than an act of extraordinary faith in God’s providence … and God’s grace.

It is a privilege and a blessing to stand with you in this time and place. Thank you for all that you do and all that you give and all that you are.

Submitted this 26th day of October in the Year of our Lord 2018,
In the City of Gering

+ The Right Revered Joseph Scott Barker
Eleventh Bishop of Nebraska