137th Annual Convention of the
Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina

Bishop’s Address

As I have approached the task of writing this address to convention, I have found myself contemplating the ancient Greek Myth of Sisyphus. In life, Sisyphus was the founding king of a nation later to be known as Corinth who was remembered as greedy, deceitful and cruel, killing travelers and guests rather than showing them hospitality. After cheating the gods in his lifetime, Sisyphus was then punished by Zeus after his death. Sisyphus was condemned to roll a large stone up a steep hill. Before he could ever reach the top of the hill, though, Zeus would cause the stone to roll back to the bottom and Sisyphus would be forced to start over again. Day after day, for all of eternity, this pattern would be repeated.

Across the generations since, interpreters of this myth have held Sisyphus up as a model of the never-ending and futile nature of human endeavor. More recently, French philosopher Albert Camus wrote of Sisyphus as a hero of the absurd.

It is not that uncommon for some of us to feel, from time to time at least, that our efforts are never-ending, futile and even absurd. Each morning, we rise from our beds to spend the day working. When the day is over, and we lay down our heads to sleep, we may or may not feel that we have made significant progress towards our goals. Then, the next morning, we rise and start over again. It is not difficult to imagine that many find such routines to be mind numbing, and leading to a deep sense of hopelessness.

Over time, even the rhythms of “church life” can begin to resemble such routines. When this happens, and we begin to feel that our efforts have become clouded with hopelessness or even absurdity, and our life together is little different than that found around us in the world, is it any wonder that others are not jumping to join our Christian communities? Somehow, when this becomes our reality, I imagine the apostle Paul saying to us these words he wrote to the Church in Corinth, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (1 Corinthians 15:19, NRSV)

My friends, I want to say to you today that this world does not have the last word! Our hope does not rest in the possibility that one day we might finally manage to get the rock to the top of the hill. No, our hope rests in Christ Jesus, who died for our sins, was buried, and who was raised on the third day. In baptism, we die with Christ and we are raised with Christ. Our proclamation does not rest in our own worthiness, nor in our ability to conquer our own mountains, but in God’s love for us in Jesus.
Over the years that I have been your bishop, some of you have heard me affirm that the Christian gospel proclaims a message of death and resurrection and not a message of immortality, even if some of our actions might seem to say otherwise. Too often, we seem determined to preserve status quo even when evidence would suggest the need for a change. This year, in my address, I will identify two areas of our diocesan life and ministry that I believe would benefit from changed and new practices.

**Leadership for Ministry**

One of the greatest challenges we face grows out of the perception that there is a shortage of clergy across The Episcopal Church. Let me begin by sharing some current statistics from within our own diocese. With assistance from the Rev. Michael Singer, our Interim Transition Ministry Officer, I have categorized our sixty-seven congregations into four groups.

- Twenty-two of our congregations have a priest serving as rector or priest-in-charge on a full-time basis. Some of these congregations have assisting clergy.
- Thirteen of our congregations have a priest serving on a regular part-time basis.
- Fourteen of our congregations are actively searching for their next priest, whether for a full-time or a part-time position.
- Eighteen of our congregations are currently dependent upon available supply clergy.

This means that slightly more than half of our congregations (52%) have a settled full-time or part-time priest currently in place, and just less than half of our congregations (48%) are facing some level of clergy transition or clergy shortage. To be clear, these numbers are always shifting in one direction or another.

While those of us who live in eastern North Carolina appreciate the many blessings that God has given us in this beautiful slice of creation, congregations seeking their next priest face significant challenges, including the following:

- It is difficult to attract clergy willing to relocate for part-time work.
- There are far fewer clergy seeking new positions than there are congregations seeking new clergy, thus giving clergy many choices across the whole country.
- Some of our congregations struggle to offer compensation packages that compete favorably with congregations in other parts of the diocese or the country.
- Offering “employee only” health insurance does not always compare favorably to the “full family” coverage offered in other places.
Not all regions of our diocese offer viable options for a clergy spouse seeking employment.

- Housing is not always available as needed.
- Education and healthcare options can be less attractive than in other regions of our diocese or our country.

Even in the face of these challenges, and others, we will continue to work hard to attract clergy willing to serve in the congregations of our diocese, whether on a full-time or a part-time basis. Where congregations are willing, we will seek clergy called to serve a regional grouping of smaller congregations. We will continue to be dependent upon and grateful for the willing service of faithful retired clergy, many of whom are here with us today. ...Invite our retired clergy to stand to accept our thanks

At the same time as we continue to work hard in the ways that we are already working, it is my conviction that we must eagerly embrace two particular changed and new practices.

**Bi-Vocational Ministry**

We must continue to encourage individuals who will ultimately choose to follow traditional paths of formation for priestly ministry and then serve in full-time ministries of the Church. We must also find ways to encourage individuals to step forward who believe themselves called to lay and ordained ministries that will be expressed while they continue to live and work in the communities where they are already well rooted. Those following this second path could be described as being engaged in “bi-vocational ministry.” In order that the congregations of this diocese will have the lay and ordained leadership that we need, we must be creative in offering multiple paths of formation for those whom God is calling.

As congregations and as diocese, we need to more overtly affirm this understanding of call while working together to provide opportunities for individuals to engage in the sort of discernment that allows them to better understand whether they are called to a lay, diaconal or priestly ministry. Our Commission on Ministry has made a good beginning at this, through their offering of a vocational discernment event called The Path. I hope that they will continue to offer opportunities like this and that more individuals will participate over time. The Commission on Ministry will also need to continue strengthen its capacity for supporting the discernment and formation of individuals who are called to bi-vocational ministry.

We need to be willing to go home from Convention and begin the prayerful work of inviting one another into the sorts of conversations that will encourage people to understand that God might be calling them to ministries that they have not previously imagined, and then support them on the journey of discernment and formation.
School For Ministry

At the same time, we need to implement a plan to launch a diocesan School for Ministry early in 2021. This is not a new idea. I've spoken of the need for a School for Ministry for a number of years and in a number of addresses. In the past, however, I've understood that this would be the work of our Commission on Ministry. Now, I understand that this work needs to take place separately from the Commission, but with their support and in coordination with their work. To that end, and after wide consultation, I have been collecting the names of individuals who are eager to work toward launching this school. Others who are interested in this work should connect with Hannah Jarman at Diocesan House, so that they can be invited to our first team meeting, to be called soon after Convention has ended.

Building on the model of our existing School for Deacons, we will similarly develop a School for Lay Ministry and a School for Priests, all within one School for Ministry. This model will include partnering with Episcopal seminaries and others for high quality academic elements. At present, for example, we have two individuals studying at ACTS, the Alternative Clergy Training at Sewanee program. Greg Smith, of St. Andrew’s Goldsboro, is engaged in formation toward ordination as a priest. Rhonda Thomas, of St. James Parish Wilmington is engaged in formation toward ordination as a deacon. Their time at Sewanee includes two weeks in the classroom in January and then again in June, with online work with their professors and classmates between sessions at Sewanee. Other options are also available to us, besides this program at Sewanee, and we will explore them all. Some, like the Iona program hosted by the Seminary of the Southwest, will allow us to offer much of the academic work here in the communities of this diocese. For those being formed for leadership in lay ministry, I would also expect that all academic elements would be offered here in the diocese.

Beyond academic work, which will happen locally, at a distance, or online, we will provide spiritual and practical formation “at home” in the Diocese, with plans to use Trinity Center as a regular gathering place.

While there is a perception that The Episcopal Church is experiencing a clergy shortage, in our diocese and beyond, messages of scarcity, like this one, do not tell the whole story. I firmly believe that God provides for the Church all that the Church needs to engage in God’s mission in the world. We need to have eyes that can see where God is leading us, and especially where God might be at work doing a new thing. And we need to have hearts that are open to taking the risks involved in following God’s lead.
New Wineskins

I’d now like to give my attention to a second area of our diocesan life and ministry that I believe would benefit from changed and new practices.

There are many days when I am convinced that our diocesan structures need a serious overhaul. I’m sure I’ve said this on other occasions. While I don’t think of my work as your bishop as being absurd, or even futile, it is certainly never-ending. Perhaps it is this experience that leads me to contemplate the Myth of Sisyphus so regularly!

Each year, at this time, I am reminded of how many diocesan committees and boards are populated largely by my nomination. Some of these are committees without clear or current mandates, or with mandates that overlap those of others in the diocese. I am certainly convinced that our Diocesan Canons need a careful review and rewriting in order that our structures of governance better suit the work that God calls us to do.

At its last meeting, our Executive Council considered charters that had been drafted by five of our Diocesan Life ministries. By reflecting on these charters together in one meeting, our Council members were able to see the competing and conflicting assumptions held by ministry leaders about how our diocese functions and to whom they believed themselves to be accountable for their work. Executive Council will continue this work at its retreat in early March with the goal of better coordinating and supporting the ministries of our Diocese, and as a part of leading members of the Diocese in the clarification of mission priorities.

As I described yesterday morning, our Diocesan House staff team has continued to work through near continuous change. In 2019 alone, we said goodbye to three valued team members: Canon Matt Stockard retired in the spring; Beth Nagy left for other employment in the fall; and Canon Sonny Browne’s position was eliminated at the end of the year. Beth’s position has been filled this week by Melissa Grady, and we are currently searching for the person who will provide leadership as our Canon for Diocesan Life and Leadership. Those staff team members who continue have seen their roles and responsibilities shifted and changed, and I know that this has added stress in the lives of people who were already working very hard on our behalf. I am grateful to Matt, Beth and Sonny, who no longer work with us, and to LaTonya, Patricia, Jimi, Emily, Lindsey, Fred, Michael and Hannah who continue to work so hard in support of the life and ministry of the Diocese of East Carolina. I am also grateful to the members of our Diocese’s Personnel Committee for their efforts in helping us to clarify job descriptions and compensation standards for Diocesan House staff. They will be reporting to the Executive Council on this work in the months to come.

My work as your bishop involves facing a wide variety of expectations that come from many different directions. Amongst other things, this means that there is always work that needs but does not get my proper attention. Therefore other people find
themselves waiting on me longer that they’d like and I become a block to their work and therefore to the work of the Diocese.

In the interests of full transparency, my responsibilities as Chancellor of the University of the South have been far more demanding this year than I could ever have imagined. As some of you know, the University is currently engaged in search processes to find its next Vice-Chancellor and President, its next Chaplain and Dean of All Saints Chapel, and its next Dean of the School of Theology. What are the chances that all three incumbents would choose to retire at the same time? As Chancellor, my participation in these searches has been expected, and I have participated to the best of my abilities, using a mix of personal time and work time for the additional travel to Tennessee. The best news in the midst of these realities is that we are getting closer to the end of these search processes and my work as Chancellor will therefore return to more normal levels. And I will decree that those whom we hire will stay in their respective positions at least until after my term as Chancellor ends. Just kidding.

I have not spoken of our diocesan structures or my work as bishop with the goal of impressing you with how hard I work. Neither have I intended to convince you that it is impossible for our Diocese to do the work that God has given us to do. Instead, it has been as a lead up to these recommendations:

- For a time, let’s lay down some of the burdens of our Diocesan structures and find ways to give prayerful and careful consideration to how we might organize our common life differently. Related to this recommendation, I am asking that this year, membership on the Annual Committees of Convention and on some other committees and boards be confirmed or elected on my nomination to the Executive Council rather than here at Convention.

- I would recommend that Executive Council continue its good work of building right relationships with the various ministries of our Diocesan life, in order to clarify such things as purpose, membership and accountability with our existing ministries and so that we might set clearer patterns for new ministry opportunities that could be explored.

- Finally, I would recommend that our Executive Council, working with other Diocesan leadership, design a process of discernment that would be launched at next year’s Convention to engage our wider Diocese in gaining clarity with regard to mission priorities for our life together. Gaining such clarity will allow us to better focus our resources of time, talent and treasures.

Are you all still awake? I hope so! I fully understand that the work I have described and the recommendations I have offered are not the sort of material that others people find deeply fascinating. But this material is, however, the stuff of new wineskins. Do you remember these words of Jesus? “And no one puts new wine into old wineskins;
otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”  (Mark 2:22, NRSV)

If we are to be able to bear the new wine of God’s ever new creation, then we need always be attentive to letting go of habits, patterns and structures that prevent us from being able to do the work we are called to do in our own time.

In Conclusion

Later this year, after I have returned from the Lambeth Conference in August, I will take my first sabbatical in more than twenty years. My last planned sabbatical was cancelled when I found myself participating with the people of this Diocese in the process of discernment that led you to call me as your bishop.

This time of sabbatical will last for three months, with my return planned tentatively to take place a week or so after All Saints Day in November. While some of my plans are still in development, the focus of my studies will be on the work and ministry of a Bishop, with particular attention to what this will look like for me and for us in the next season of our life together in East Carolina. My sabbatical plans will also include time for rest and renewal. As the time draws closer, I will share more details.

Members of the Standing Committee are working with our Chancellor and with me to sort out some of the practical details that will need attention. While I am away, we will not be having another Bishop make weekly Sunday visits, so confirmations will need to wait until my return.

To be perfectly honest, I wake up almost every morning excited to be your Bishop and to share with you in the work of being the Church that God calls us to be. I still find myself incredibly surprised and humbled that God would have brought me to be with you for this purpose!

In offering this address, and the recommendations contained in it, I am recognizing that after almost five and a half years together it is time for us to explore again the gifts that God has given us for ministry, and to refresh the structures of our common life in order that we can be more effective in serving the mission which God places before us.

May God continue to bless us richly as we serve together as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement in eastern North Carolina.