

The Bishop's Address to the 24th Diocesan Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Michigan

The Rt. Rev. Cate Waynick, Bishop Provisional
October 27, 2018 in Flint, MI

It is my joy to be with you at this 24th Convention of the Diocese of Eastern Michigan. My ministry among you began just a year ago, and for me, the time has flown by. It has been my privilege to work with diocesan committees and clergy and have been able to visit twenty-nine parishes sharing worship and have conversations with members and Vestries.

During this year we have shared two celebrations of Confirmation, instituted three rectors or clergy in charge, and ordained one transitional deacon and a priest. And of course, I have been immensely helped and supported by one of the best diocesan staffs in The Episcopal Church!

What I have learned here is what I expected to learn: Episcopalians all over Eastern Michigan are caring for each other, faithfully reaching out to meet a variety of needs within their communities, entering into partnerships with other churches and organizations, and providing a witness to God's love in and through Jesus the Christ. More information about two parishes in particular in just a minute.

I had the joy of representing Eastern Michigan and working alongside your Deputies at the General Convention last July in Austin, TX. They were all very dedicated and hard-working, and you can be justifiably proud of them. You'll hear more from them in the course of this Convention, but I will say that a few of the highlights, for me, were a prayerful listening session in which stories were shared from people who have been sexually harassed or misconduct in our church. They were hard stories to hear, but they were offered in the context of prayer, and reconciliation. We Bishops confessed that we have not always dealt with the victims, parishes, or clergy in helpful ways, and committed ourselves to respond more fully and helpfully in the future.

We also had a significant witness during the convention around the need to address the evil of gun violence. We gathered on Sunday to pray, and to hear from families and students about the ways in which gun violence has intruded into their lives. This is not about eliminating or confiscating guns. It is advocacy for the

regulations/laws which will help prevent the current epidemic of gun violence. You may already know this, but it is new information for many others – that every day in the United States – an average of 93 people are killed in gun violence. While we are gathered here for this convention, close to 180 people will die, because guns were obtained illegally, guns were not carefully secured, and often they were stored loaded. We would voice our concern about any other cause of violent injury and death, and it is entirely appropriate for people of faith to advocate for gun safety.

It was great fun to revisit Camp Chickagami – I had been there over 50 years ago, when my little brother attended boy's camp there! You've already had an official report on Camp Chick during this Convention, so I don't need to say more here, except to underscore the fact that support of church camps is one of the most effective ways of engaging and retaining our young members. On the whole, kids who attend camp are more likely to stay involved in the church, so I congratulate and encourage you on your ongoing support of Camp Chick.

Now the two parishes I mentioned earlier.

A particularly heartwarming visit was with Holy Family, Blue Water, where three congregations have been stepping up to the challenge of blending their particular congregational identities into a new community of faith. Work has already begun on making their building accessible, and preparations for reconfiguring the worship space are under way. These brothers and sisters are gaining valuable experience in learning what it means to allow personal preference to take second place to an awareness of God's call to become something new – and they are an inspiration! Please continue to hold them in your prayers as their exciting project continues.

Another challenge which has been met with creativity and faithful determination involves St. Christopher, Grand Blanc. Some of you may be aware that St. Christopher had, for some time, been rather withdrawn from diocesan life. There were a variety of reasons for this, and it would not be appropriate to mention all of them here. But some of you may remember that two years ago (?) several members of the parish came to this Convention and expressed their regret over this estrangement, pledging to help bring St. Christopher more solidly into the diocesan household.

What is less well known is that for more than a decade the inner life of St. Christopher was tightly controlled by one person, including all the financial aspects. Accurate information concerning finances was not made available to the

members, including information about the mortgage which had been taken to erect a new building. Financial records were not open and transparent, designated gifts were sometimes used for purposes other than the donor had stipulated. Parochial Reports were not fully transparent and complete, and over time the financial situation became more confused.

The good news is that during these past two years the Priest in Charge and members have been working to bring the parish into new life. It has not been easy for them, but they have done the hard work of changing the culture of the parish to include having members reclaim the responsibilities they should always have had, and to become completely transparent about their finances.

What they learned, and this is the hard part, was that for well over a decade (or more) no payments had been made on the principal of their considerable mortgage. They had been paying interest only. The result is that they have a balloon payment due in February of 2019, and the price tag is 1.7 million dollars.

Over this past year the situation was brought to the attention of the Diocesan Council, a complete audit has been conducted, the parish accounts have been restructured and simplified, conversation has been undertaken with the bank, and a way forward has been identified. Members of the parish have already pledged nearly \$500,000.00, and those contributions will continue to grow. Your Diocesan Council has also made the decision to provide another \$500,000.00 toward making the payment the bank requires in order to refinance the mortgage. These diocesan funds, taken from the Breaking New Ground Fund, are a long term loan, to be repaid after the mortgage is retired. The Council took great care not to unduly deplete the Breaking New Ground Fund, while still providing meaningful support to St. Christopher. The decision of the Council took into consideration the reality that the parish had been mis-guided, and that diocesan leaders had also been kept in the dark.

I have two hopes about this. My first hope is that we might all take a lesson from the experience we share with St. Christopher's. The reason The Episcopal Church insists on accurate record keeping and financial transparency, the reason we insist that more than one person be part of the money handling process, the reason a bishop has the authority and responsibility to examine all parish records – including financial records – is precisely to prevent this kind of situation from developing. In the case of St. Christopher things fell through the cracks, and at this

point there is little to be gained by casting blame. The parish will have very tight budgets for many years, and they know the giving level of members will have to keep pace with both their mortgage and their ministries. But the primary lesson here is that there must be NO SECRETS about money!

My second hope is that the response of the whole diocesan household will be deep gratitude that you have the capacity to make this kind of decision. Providing this level of financial support is not possible in many places, and you are blessed to be able to help your brothers and sisters emerge from both a mountain of debt and estrangement from you. This is one of the advantages in not having a congregational system of governance. As Episcopalians we have automatic allies and partners in each other – and in situations like this one we have the chance to rejoice together!

One of the most pressing issues for you this year has been the work of preparing to make a decision concerning your near future. In preparation, meetings have been held around the diocese, giving you the chance to hear from each other, to share your ideas and feelings, to identify those aspects of your common life you consider to be successful, and what you would like to change or improve.

One issue which was mentioned quite often at these meetings, and which I also heard in conversations with Vestries, is the desire to grow spiritually – to grow in understanding of the faith, in prayer, and in the ability to share your faith with others. One path to the deepening of devotion, and the sharing one's faith, is to adopt practices, or disciplines.....sometimes called a Rule of Life. Our Presiding Bishop has offered an invitation to a Rule of Life he calls The Way of Love. Your General Convention Deputies have information for you about this Rule, and your Diocesan Council is bringing a resolution to you about adopting it on a diocesan level.

Another concern raised in these meetings was about diocesan finances. So at one of the meetings, held last June, you were also provided some information about the financial state of this diocese, and the concerns and questions you raised in response to that meeting have already spurred conversation and action on the part of your Trustees. They will be aggressive in finding ways to maximize the income on your investments, in hopes of giving you more resources for your mission and ministries.

The Standing Committee, some of our staff and I have also been in conversation with leaders in the Diocese of Western Michigan, about the possibility of being increasingly faithful stewards by sharing all kinds of resources. As you know, there is already an impressive list of ministries and programs we share with other Michigan Dioceses. An exciting addition to that list is that Katie Forsyth is now serving as the Canon for Evangelism and Networking for both Eastern and Western Michigan. Bishop Hougland and I are also agreed that we will explore ways to share other staff when openings occur in either diocese. One possibility might be the possibility of sharing of a bishop.

Today you will consider three options for discerning/selecting your next bishop. The first option is to have the Standing Committee select a search committee who will craft a profile and begin the process of electing a bishop as you have done twice in the past.

The second option is to have the Standing Committee find and nominate a Bishop Provisional to serve you for three to five years, during which time you will have a chance to study a variety of approaches, explore ideas you haven't had yet, and come to a somewhat more leisurely conclusion about next steps.

The third option is to elect Bp. Hougland of Western Michigan as your Bishop Provisional for a similar period of three to five years, specifically focusing on ways these two dioceses might have a more robust and intentional common life.

ALL of these options leave you open to consider the sharing of staff/ministries/programs/resources with any other diocese.

NONE of these options locks you into a particular path forever – even option #1 leaves you open, after being served by your own Bishop as you have been in the past, to consider options like #2 or #3 in the future. NONE of these options includes or mandates the co-mingling of funds. Let me repeat that – NONE of these options involves the automatic pooling of your financial assets with another diocese. And this is why, though there has been a good deal of curiosity about the financial details of Western Michigan, there is a sense in which it really doesn't matter!

One of the preparatory gatherings was a Sunday afternoon with Bp. Sean Rowe, the Bishop of Northwestern PA. That diocese and the Diocese of Western New York

have been in conversation for several years about trying to share a Bishop. This very weekend, at their convention, Western New York will elect Bishop Rowe to be their Bishop Provisional, and he will serve both dioceses beginning in January, when the current Bishop of Western New York retires.

If you were present for that time with Bp. Rowe, you may remember him talking about some of the challenges this will create for him – he will be dealing with two budgets, two COMs, two Standing Committees, two Diocesan Councils....and two diocesan conventions – probably to be held jointly to enable them to share workshops, education, and worship opportunities. That they are sharing a Bishop does not mean they are merging! They will be operating on parallel paths, so each diocese will send deputies to the General Convention, and each will maintain its particular identity. They are, with great good humor, referring to themselves as the ‘diocese of the rust belt,’ but that is their own informal way of designating themselves as partners in ministry in an innovative way. So – to reiterate yet again – NONE of these options involves the co-mingling of funds or the automatic merging of the dioceses.

If you choose option number three, your Bishop Provisional will be Bishop Houglund for the next three to five years. During, or at the end of that time, you will be free to decide whether you want to continue that arrangement. You will also be free to decide to elect someone else to be your Bishop Diocesan as you have done in the past, or to move toward an arrangement that might – in the future – lead to merger.

It is not my role to urge you in one direction or another. Any of these options is a faithful way to proceed, any of them can be undone in the future, and any of them can still provide you with ways to be innovative and creative as a diocese. Whatever choice you make about your next bishop, you can’t break the diocese! God must really want the Church to exist – if that weren’t true, we would have put ourselves out of business a long time ago!

Two weeks ago when the clergy met, I asked them to make just one decision in advance of this convention. NOT a decision about which option they would choose, because I hope you are all here in a spirit of openness. I asked them to decide -in advance - to support whatever decision the Convention makes. I’m making the same request of all of you. You will have a substantial period of time to consider

each of the three options around your tables, to share your own thoughts and to listen to what others are saying.

Please enter these conversations with open minds and compassionate hearts, because we all know that when there are options, there will be differences of opinion and preference, and some of you will discover that your preference is not shared by enough other people to prevail. But none of these options is wrong, or bad, or will wreck the diocese. What CAN wreck the diocese is the sour grapes refusal to get on board with the decision of your Convention. So don't do that! Please commit, right now, in this moment, that whatever choice is made here today, you will share in implementing it, and do your best to make it productive and fruitful.

Decide in this moment that you will continue to be your very best selves....and remain focused on the mandates of our faith. Because as followers and disciples of Jesus, we are not commanded to craft the perfect diocesan structure! Your decision today must be made in service to the mission of the Church. We are commanded to love – and to make the eternal, redeeming, healing, reconciling love of God known to the world. That must be the focus of your passion and the desire of your hearts.

Every year, at our Convention in Indianapolis, I would close by saying that I was blessed beyond telling to be their Bishop, and that I was sure I had the very best job in The Episcopal Church. Today I am saying it to you – thank you for allowing me to be part of your life, and providing me another of the very best jobs in The Episcopal Church !!!!

+ Catherine Waynick, Bishop Provisional