



## **Convention Address 2017**

**Bishop Gregory O. Brewer  
January 28, 2017**

It is now come that time in our diocesan convention for the bishop's annual address. Before I get into my address proper, I would like to formally welcome some people who are here.

First of all, Bishop Lloyd Allen, whom you saw last night, the Bishop of Honduras, is here to continue to celebrate the continued partnership that our dioceses have shared. It is actually the longest partnership between dioceses in the entire Anglican Communion. As well, Canon Connie Sanchez is here and thank you for all that we share together and our partnership in the gospel. I also want to thank Deacon Kathy Pennybacker. Kathy, would you please stand up? Kathy has given long service as our diocesan Canon to Honduras, a position she held since 2008. She is now retired and living back in Inverness, and I am grateful for the bridges that you built as well as your just passion for Jesus and for the gospel. Thank you very, very much, Kathy.

There is one group who has worked particularly hard and it is a group of our volunteers. And that is Tom Alday, Trippe Cheek, and Earl Pickett, in their service as our Diocesan Real Estate Committee. Between doing great stuff with finance and working on changes that are happening in terms of our buildings, everything from buying and selling to dealing with hurricane damage to working on property issues around the diocese, they're probably some of the hardest-working lay people, and I cannot express my gratitude enough. Besides saving us thousands of dollars, their expertise, their generosity, and their willingness to handle this in a level of, just, kindness; I'm profoundly grateful. So thank you very, very much. Guys, please stand up. I also want to express our thanks to our chancellors, Bruce Wooten and Bill Grimm, as well as our diocesan treasurer, Bruce Bauder. Kudos to our diocesan staff, Canons Tim Nunez and Justin Holcomb, Archdeacon Kristy Alday (more about them later), financial officer Earl Pickett (whom you will hear from later today), and our outstanding support staff: Beverly Jennings, Marilyn Lang, Caroline Miller, Erick Perez, Deacon Becky Chapman, and my executive assistant, Sarah Caprani, without whom I would be woefully behind in everything.

Lastly, I want to publicly thank my wife, Laura Lee, who is sidekick, wise counselor, prayer partner, and often driver that allows me to serve in the way that I do. As I have said to her before, I could not do this job in the same way without her. So I am profoundly grateful.

Now, and for perhaps the first time in our diocesan history, I would like to begin my address with a word from our presiding bishop.

*Note: During this portion of the Bishop's Convention Address, a portion of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's "The Jesus Movement" video is shown.*

What the presiding bishop is trying to do is give a visual for what does it mean to be the Episcopal branch of The Jesus Movement. And his analogy has to do with what happens when the gospel is read, particularly when it comes down the aisle, and all of our attention focuses on what's happening.

We actually change position. We're no longer facing the altar in the same way. Instead we're now turning this way, which means we're actually facing out toward the world. Because of course the symbolism is the deacon is bringing the gospel into the midst of the people, which symbolizes the deacon's role as somebody who brings the gospel out into the world.

To be the Episcopal branch of The Jesus Movement is to be a group of people who are committed to not just hoarding the gospel amongst ourselves, but rather actually turning and understanding that our focus is to bring the gospel to the world. That's really who our presiding bishop is calling us to be: a group of people who are committed to taking the gospel out, not just keeping it in.

I have to tell you the landscape has changed since 2015. A new presiding bishop is bringing a new vision for The Episcopal Church. As you saw in the video, he is calling us the Episcopal branch of The Jesus Movement. What? Who is this Church that describes itself as a movement? Who is this Church that openly talks about evangelism? Who is this church that talks about mission and means something to include more than opening a soup kitchen, as laudatory as it is? Is this The Episcopal Church of the past 20 years? No. No.

Something new is afoot, and Episcopalians are having to play catch-up to a presiding bishop who is taking us in places where we have not been in a very, very long time. For the first time in decades, decades, The Episcopal Church both hosted and sponsored a Conference on Evangelism in Dallas, Texas, November 17th through 19th. Leaders from across The Episcopal Church gathered to hear our presiding bishop; his canon for evangelism and reconciliation, Stephanie Spellers; Archbishop Josiah Fearon from the Anglican Communion office; and others teach on what it means to be an evangelistic church. As Canon Spellers says, "Evangelism is no longer just 'the e-word.'"

I was there, co-leading a seminar with Bishop Andy Doyle of Texas. Our topic was "Made for Evangelism: How Vision, Focus, and Institutional Structures Are Being Reshaped to Support the Work of Evangelism." And I was excited to share a part of the story of our diocese, one of seven

in The Episcopal Church that is, in fact, numerically growing. It was easy for me to accept this invitation to be a part of this conference, because it comes directly out of one of the key points of our own strategic plan, and that is a commitment to take our place in the councils of The Episcopal Church.

Our presiding bishop is taking our church through a theological turn to the center. And that center is Jesus.

Also under that same point, in our strategic plan, I accepted an appointment from the presiding bishop to co-chair a bishop's task force entitled "Communion Across Difference." The other chair is Bishop Robert Skirving of East Carolina. Bishop Skirving and I represent very different points of view when it comes to both theology as well as sexual ethics. But we like each other. We trust each other. We share a passion for the Church, finding a way to work together across these differences in the times in which we find ourselves. We worked with the presiding bishop on what bishops should be a part of that task force, and who gathered for our first meeting were representatives of the entire theological spectrum represented among our diocesan bishops, including Bishop Lloyd Allen of Honduras, all of whom want to find a way to move forward together in a way where no one feels left behind.

This past year also saw us host Archbishop Josiah Fearon, who serves in the Anglican Communion office in London and is a member of the Anglican Consultative Council. He met both privately with our clergy and then in a public gathering hosted by St. Luke and St. Peter in St. Cloud. He also preached at the Cathedral and was present for a question-and-answer series at their forum. Besides the Archbishop of Canterbury, there is no one on the planet better informed about the present state of our Anglican Communion than Archbishop Fearon.

I continue to be involved with Communion Partner bishops across The Episcopal Church, including providing strong support for many of our Latin bishops in Central and South America. We Communion Partner Bishops are doing our best to support each other. And we, in fact, we're having a hosting of that group at Camp Weed up in the Diocese of Florida, because Bishop John Howard has recently joined our group.

I'm looking forward to our next General Convention, which will take place in the summer of 2018 in Austin, Texas. I trust that we are prayerfully electing deputies who are well-informed, who will prayerfully represent us well, and reflect our ongoing commitment to think strategically, serve collaboratively, and witness joyfully, especially in this evangelistic moment that God has provided for us. As the Diocese of Central Florida is growing, you who are, people are paying attention, and congratulations to those of you who have already been elected.

I'm happy to tell you that Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is a bishop whom I trust and prayerfully support. He is a man of integrity. And the Conference on Evangelism, something that was funded directly out of our General Convention budget, was something I was pleased to help support as the chair of evangelism at that Convention. Of course, are there things I would like to see different in The Episcopal Church? It almost goes without saying. But if I have any

responsibility to put legs on my prayers, as I do by virtue of the commitment that both we made, in confirmation, and all our clergy made at ordination, then such a commitment must include, in my mind, the financial support that helps bring that difference in reality.

It's already beginning to happen. This is not untried territory. It is for this evangelistic moment, and for the doors that God continues to open for us, that I heartily support the efforts being made to find ways for us as a diocese to meet the 15 percent financial assessment voted on by General Convention. The resolution before this convention, which we will take up today, is only a commitment to find a solution, not at this time a proposed solution. In other words, we are empowering us to begin to find a way to think this through. We are voting to support the principle, in other words.

Why? Among other reasons, because the financial funding brings integrity to the work for change. And the work for change brings integrity to the financial funding. The two go hand-in-hand. As it might be said crassly, "Put your money where your mouth is." And that's what I'm committed to us doing.

But this work of taking our place within the councils of The Episcopal Church is actually only a small portion of what occupies our time and what we did in 2016. I continue to do pastoral visits, each congregation, 46 over the past year, besides the many clergy-spouse dinners Laura Lee and I host, and other meetings, both small and great, throughout the diocese, some of which are just sheer fun, others are really hard work. I do my best to pastorally serve the clergy who ask me to be their pastor, of whom there are many. And I do pray regularly for all of you.

Also before us is the missionary call to look at our neighbors and face the missionary challenge that is before us, another point in our strategic plan. We are responding. New local missionary efforts are springing up from around the diocese: new Spanish-language services at Messiah, Winter Garden; St. John's, Kissimmee; Incarnation, Oviedo. A burgeoning network of diocesan congregations, who are now finding ways in a very organized way to help homeless people to get back on their feet, called "The Open Table." And Orange County Government came to us and said, "Would you help us in that task?" That's the genesis of it.

And several congregations working in interdenominational networks to reach their region with the gospel. If you really want to reach your neighborhoods with the gospel of Jesus Christ, it's probably going to take interdenominational partnerships for that to really happen. We can't do this solo. There are many congregations serving those in need, like San Cristobal, who has opened a new child care center, now staffed by their people in their congregation, serving a community that is made up of many of those we would consider outsiders, and I'm thrilled at the work that they are doing. Also the Fresh Expressions movement is active among us.

However, nothing has grabbed at least our nation's attention like the largest mass shooting in American history at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando. In this horrific tragedy, I could not have been prouder of our Cathedral, who rose to the occasion, providing emergency triage, hosting an enormous funeral service that was covered on national television, and a community-wide

prayer vigil as well as providing ongoing ministry to several of the families of some of the victims. Almost \$11,000 was raised and given to a local organization called Proyecto Somos Orlando, helping them to provide emergency aid for the families of victims. It was extraordinary work.

Our missionary plan also states our commitment to revitalizing children and youth ministry. Our initial response was to hire Steve Schneeberger, head of the Youth Ministry Institute, who works directly with our congregations who want to develop what they're doing in youth ministry, facilitate hires of youth ministers, or start a youth ministry from scratch or work with volunteers. He has been doing a fine job. And to date, 46 parishes in our diocese have active youth ministries: five have assisting clergy who are primarily responsible for youth ministry, nine churches have part-time youth ministers, seven congregations have full-time youth ministers. And this does not include volunteers, nor does it include the chaplains that ably serve the students and faculties of our diocesan schools.

New Beginnings, a retreat for middle school students, continues to flourish—thank you, Phyllis Bartle. And Happening, a retreat for high school students, under the leadership of The Rev. Becky Toalster, is beginning to emerge as well. If you're interested, there are displays with more information about both of these retreats outside. I also participated in a diocesan youth event at Trinity Vero, where we did everything from sharing and praying to learning how to make bean dip.

Recently, I met with youth leaders from around the diocese and I asked them what they wanted attendees at the Diocesan Convention to know. They said, "We want a church environment that welcomes children and youth into our worship services, and that starts with the rector. We want intergenerational participation in worship planning and in worship services. Also, we need prayer. But above all we need relationships, particularly with older adults. Don't sequester us in a back room."

I must underscore the importance of what they are saying. As we continue to adjust to what I really do believe is a post-biblical culture, it is critical that our churches become laboratories of discipleship, where we are learning how to disciple, catechize, and raise up the next generation of Christians. We cannot assume that parents can do that alone. My wife and I certainly couldn't. Most of our families need all the help they can get. Nor is a "normal" Sunday school program and youth group an adequate answer, although it is a good place to start.

Our Prayer Book offers this prayer at baptism: "Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, the spirit to know and to love You, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works."<sup>1</sup> That's our outline.

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<sup>1</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 308.

“An inquiring and discerning heart,” meaning the capacity to be curious; that has to be taught. Ask questions, encourage a hunger for learning, and instill a biblical knowledge that allows them to discern good from evil, better from best.

“The courage to will and to persevere,” which I think means the capacity to live and witness for Christ as minority Christians, which is who we are. And to have a sense of character that guides their decisions, even when those decisions are unpopular.

“A spirit to know and to love you,” meaning an intimacy with Christ, not just learning about God, but an experiential relationship with God, so that they know by experience the empowering companionship of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And finally, “a sense of joy and wonder in all your works,” a sense of knowing both a love and forgiveness of God that brings joy and confidence. And the enduring quality of childlike wonder, not only with nature, but the capacity to see each human as worthy of wonder, care, and respect.

To be a laboratory of discipleship means leading by example. To support these persons in their life in Christ means it is our common task to grow together—not just learning about God, but learning to walk with God, demonstrating that all people matter. That for example, the Syrian immigrant child who dies on the shores of Italy is just as important to God as the banker in Washington. That the plight of persecuted Christians is just as important to God as the health of our congregations. And that minority Christian populations are not to be considered expendable collateral damage in our ongoing geopolitical conflicts. We choose to quote the book of Galatians, “not to forget the poor.”

We talk about these subjects with our children, our youth, giving our time and money to care for others both locally and internationally in this global Anglican communion. We teach our children to do the same.

Is your church talking not only to adults but also to youth and kids about giving, about service? How are we training parents, godparents, grandparents, about how to set an example for our children and our grandchildren? Are there classes in Christian parenting that you know about? Are we teaching our families how to pray together as a family unit?

Do husbands and wives pray together? Do you pray with your spouse? Where are the parents who covenant together to support each other in raising children as strong Christians? One of the turning points in the lives of our children was when our kids were in youth group we parents banded together to meet and pray together regularly for our kids and to talk about what would and would not be acceptable behavior among this peer group. We set up an alternate peer group to what they knew in middle school and high school, so that they would have fellow kids who said, “Yeah, we don’t go see R-rated movies either.” As a result, they didn’t feel quite as alone, because they knew they had youth group kids that were living under the same patterns of discipleship. It made an enormous difference.

Where is the support that we could provide single parents? Where are the children that commit themselves to supporting Christian families, because it is the safest and wisest place to raise our children? If this work is not happening for our local churches, we can safely assume that it is not being done at all.

“Giving them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, and the spirit to know and to love You, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.”

If that vision that I described fits what you are doing in your congregations with children and youth, I want to know about it. While I am thrilled at the progress we are making in youth ministry, I know very little about what is happening in children’s ministry in our diocese. Every young child has the capacity for a tender and intimate relationship with God, and we are bereft if we are not making that an intentional focus, not just for our kids, but for our neighborhoods.

I still remember after leading a chapel service for preschoolers, I was down on one knee, shaking the hands of the kids as they came out of the chapel. One little girl stopped and, with a twinkle in her eye, gave me a very serious look and she said, “Jesus is my friend,” and I knew I was looking in the face of a saint.

We continue apace to ordain and place new clergy in our diocese. When I first became bishop, I knew there was and continues to be an urgent need to raise up new clergy. Many of our full-time clergy are fast approaching the retirement age of 72. And not only do we need to find worthy successors, but new congregations need to be planted. Just this past week, Canon Nunez, who beside his frequent puns (as you heard last night), does an outstanding job of supervising our congregational search processes, told me that in 2017 alone, there will be 11 congregations searching for new rectors. In 2016, I presided over 7 celebrations of new ministry for new heads of congregations.

That means within less than a 24-month period, we had an 18 percent turnover of the rectors in our diocese, and that will continue apace for the next two years. Only within the past two or three weeks, two more people have announced their retirements. That is why I continue to visit seminaries, to recruit and support what they are doing, to raise up people in ordination. I also spoke at The Episcopal Church’s National Conference for Seminarians of Color that met at our Canterbury Conference Center last year, thanks to the invitation of Canon Angela Ifill, and will do so this year when that conference returns to our Canterbury Center under the direction of Father Anthony Guillen.

This past year I have visited the Anglican/Episcopal House of Studies at Duke, Sewanee School of Theology, Virginia Theological Seminary, and Nashotah House, recruiting and speaking good words about the Diocese of Central Florida.

I must also mention that I continue to be grateful for the ministry of Canon Justin Holcomb, who is doing an outstanding job in helping us find and bring in new leaders. I also commend Archdeacon Kristi Alday, who does a phenomenal job working with our permanent deacons. I am proud to announce that recently the International Anglican Communion Office has put on their website a link to our ICS (Institute of Christian Studies) website because of the high caliber

of the training that we offer.

In fact, if you have been ordained in the past year or are presently in our ordination process, would you please stand up? I hope you understand—I'm trying to keep up with the pace of change. I'm also happy to announce that nine of these leaders will be ordained to the transitional diaconate at a diocesan service this coming Monday evening at the Cathedral. It'll be fantastic; I'm just so excited.

Finally, we continue to pray through a missionary strategy for the diocese. It is clear that not only is the world coming to our door with all the people who are moving into central Florida, but we are being asked to go out into the world. Today, we are going to hear from many of you and your churches about mission trips both locally and abroad, and I'm excited to present to you some of those stories. Especially stories about how God has changed us by praying and going. Because when we go, more often than not, other branches of the Communion become our teachers—teaching us an intimacy with Jesus that allows people to walk with dignity and purpose even in the face of poverty and persecution; teaching us about the supernatural power of prayer, of leaning into Jesus when you have nowhere else to go; the necessity of being a part of a church family that is both stable and adaptable in the face of social upheaval; and the joys as well as the price of being salt and light in an increasingly dark world.

These are lessons we are learning here as well, and God is using them to be our teachers, whether it be through the newsletters of Stephen Dass, our missionary in São Paulo, Brazil, or through the missions conferences, like what recently happened at New Wineskins for Global Missions last May. These are lessons we are being called by God to learn as we discern what it means for us to be a church in this increasingly dark world.

I say this not to provoke fear or concern, but to invite us into what I can only describe as what I really believe is as a fresh move from God. A move marked by prayer, a serving and evangelistic church, a move that is rediscovering the power of prayer and intimacy with Jesus because we so desperately need it. A move that is calling us to ask God, again, "Who is my neighbor, and how would you have me serve?"

If we want to continue to do church in the ways that we always have, our churches, sadly, in many places, will continue to shrink even as the inhabitants of this dark world are crying out for a better world where we love our neighbors and respect the dignity of every human being. Can we, the church, show the world something new about what it is to sacrificially love and care for each other? Can we be in the world where people are crying out for a way to fill the spiritual void that is both in and around them?

You see, all they know are more lovers, more material accumulation, a corrupt set of institutions including often their experience at church, and a brand of politics that always tries to benefit one group at the expense of others. And they know that all of these are efforts are tragically inadequate.

Henri Nouwen writes this: "I am, of course, very aware of the loneliness and pain that exist in the Church, and especially that of many clergy, and that for many people in the church, it has in fact, become an unsafe place, where the voice of love can hardly be heard. Still, I believe

deeply that outside of the church things won't get easier (he wrote that a while ago), and that the church has within itself all of the treasures, especially the treasures of the mystical tradition, that are needed to give people new courage, new hope and a true experience of God's love."<sup>2</sup>

Are we willing to follow Jesus into this fresh move that He is orchestrating to draw the world to himself? Can we stand with theologian John Webster, who wrote pointedly that "Hearing the gospel is never finished business, never something which the church has behind it. It is always a fresh activity"?<sup>3</sup> Will we lean into Christ's sacrifice and go back to the scriptures, learning new ways of prayer and servanthood, or will we only fall into the same trap as the world and demand that church operate in a way that benefits me first?

We live in a culture that has really accepted that as their mantra. I shudder for the United States, for example, when Jesus said that he would judge nations by "I was a stranger, and you took Me in. I was naked, and you clothed Me. I was sick, and you visited Me." Those are standards of Christ's judgment.

And in the midst of all of that, we need to express the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ: charismatic, catholic, evangelical, socially alive, deeply united to one another. Filled with the power of both joy and the power of prayer that changes things, especially as institutions continue to fail.

People don't expect from us answers to their deepest questions when they live out in the world. We have to get out there where they are. If we expect them to come and show up just because we're going to start a new service, or we do a better job with welcoming, we are profoundly mistaken. That's not evangelism growth; that's primarily transfer growth.

Now, we do have a lot of people transferring in, and so some of us experience the benefit of that. But what it does not mean is that we are reaching lost people who do not know Jesus and inviting them to come and meet Jesus for the first time in adult baptisms and confirmations, where people can say with great testimony, "I once was lost but now I'm found."

If that isn't happening, we need to go before God and say, "Do whatever it takes, Lord, change us. Help us to become the missionary people that you have intended."

The good news is that I believe that something new is emerging: a church that sees herself as a part of a global whole where she is called to serve, a laboratory of discipleship for people of all ages. This is, in my opinion, an exciting time to be a part of God's church, the Episcopal Branch of The Jesus Movement, here in the Diocese of Central Florida. I continue to be thrilled to be here, I have lost none of my energy and believe with all my heart that the best days are still ahead of us. Thank you.

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<sup>2</sup> *Love, Henri: Letters on Faith, Hope, and Vocation*

<sup>3</sup> *Holiness*, p. 72.