

ATTACHMENT E

The Bishop's Convention Address October 28, 2006 Abilene, Texas

“ I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.”
(Ephesians 4:1-6)

In the midst of the muddle that we in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion have found ourselves, it is always valuable to return to our historical roots. Anyone who has taken even a cursory glance at the history of the Christian Church knows that this is not the first time Christians have found themselves embroiled in controversy over the interpretation of Scripture which threatened to divide us into factions and fracture our unity. This is the unity for which Jesus so fervently prayed just before his arrest and Passion, and for which St. Paul from his prison cell pleads of the congregation at Ephesus as he travels to his own death in Rome.

Since the Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century, and especially since the early days of the 19th Century, Western Christians have made fracturing unity into an art form. Even our own Church has seen the ravages of fracture since the late 19th century. Since the General Convention of 1976 those that left the Episcopal Church to form the Anglican Church of North America (Episcopal) are now no fewer than 53 different denominational groups.

Now we are in the most divisive era of the 200+ year history of the Episcopal Church. Factions have been created that are being pushed further and further away from one another by the lobbing of theological hand grenades into one another's camps. Of course, this is not unique to the Church; we see it in virtually every level of our lives: politics, social systems, economics, and even education. The mantra seems to be, “If you do not agree with me in any area you are an outsider and to be avoided.”

The question for me is how does Jesus treat the outsider. In his earthly ministry does he avoid at all costs those with whom he does not agree, or does he welcome them into his circle? What about the hated tax collector? Or the woman at the well who also happened to be a Samaritan? Or even the Syrophenician woman with whom he bantered? What about the blind, mute, or demon possessed persons? And let's not even talk about the dreaded lepers and how he touched them. His culture told him to shun such persons completely, but he refused to comply and opened up the way of salvation for even such as us.

I chose the theme for this year's convention “One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism” based on what I believe to be the best of the Anglican tradition and, in fact, the Christian tradition. We Episcopalians look only to one Lord—Jesus the Christ; there is but one Faith—expressed through the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds; and we accept anyone's Baptism who has been baptized with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. To my knowledge we do not ask for a theological treatise on any of these subjects when someone who is baptized presents themselves at the Communion rail; we bring them the precious Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus, trusting in God's mercy to make them whole and to nurture them in exactly the way God knows they need touching.

We can argue about the specifics of any of the creedal statements and our understanding of them through our language and culture. Christians have been striving to understand and reinterpret the tenets of the Faith since the beginning of the Church. We agree that these tenets are dogma, but how do these apply to us today? The real question for me is: how can we proclaim God's grace and mercy to a broken, hurting, world starving for some Good News?

I am deeply concerned that we have become so enmeshed in the disagreements of the present time that we have forgotten our primary mission in life is to proclaim Jesus, and Him crucified, resurrected, and risen. We are so focused on the issues of human sexuality that we have forgotten what Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple said of the Church. To paraphrase Temple, “We are the only organization that exists to serve those that are not part of us.” We are so focused on ‘us’ that we cannot see beyond ourselves. Too often we are blind to the world about us that desperately needs Jesus. Or to quote a more recent Archbishop of Canterbury, Arthur Michael Ramsey, “The Church that lives to itself, dies by itself.”

Does that mean that the interpretation of Scripture is of minor concern? Absolutely not. But to require that all everywhere adhere to a single understanding is simply not Anglican. I am convinced that we need to argue passionately with one another, AND to stay in communion. Our heritage is to debate and disagree as heatedly as we can until we come to the Lord's Table. Remember, it is not your table, nor is it mine; it is THE LORD's TABLE! As one wag has put it, "Our task is to invite and welcome and gather. It is God's task to sort."

Our conversations with one another are vitally important to the health and life of this diocese, this Church, this Communion, and with our ecumenical partners. Simply because we have hearty conversations does not mean that we have to agree to hold a single point of view. Within conversation that is heartfelt, we are both converted, transformed, and drawn together in Jesus. As he said, "where two or three are gathered in my name there I am in the middle of you."

Following General Convention in June, I began to be concerned that conversation would not continue between various factions of our Church. I was invited to attend a gathering at Camp Allen in September and I agreed to go, because I believed then and believe now that this has to be a part-note that I said a part-of the conversation. My greatest concern was that the invitation was for a select group and not an open invitation. Some of the bishops who attended wanted to withdraw immediately from the Episcopal Church, and some have made moves to attempt to do this by requesting Alternate Primatial Oversight. Many of us at that meeting were not of such a mind and have no intention of joining any alternative group. The basis of our conversations at Camp Allen centered on the Windsor Report, which I commend to you. It is not scripture, nor does it have the force of Canon Law. In the Preface Archbishop Robin Eames calls the Windsor Report a process which enables conversation, and I believe we must continue this conversation.

Some who were in attendance at Camp Allen came with an agenda that was very limited. Others were open to hearing what might come forth. We did some wonderful Bible study together on Philippians and heard some powerful teaching from Bishop N.T. Wright on community and communion based on St. Paul's writing. We had conversations which were not all one sided, nor did everyone agree even on the final wording of the letter which was disseminated at the end of the meeting. We worshiped together, prayed together, and were involved in conversation. This is what we—all of the Church—must be about in our life in Christ: worship, prayer, study, and conversation.

There are those at both ends of the theological/political spectrum who want to close off conversation and expel from the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Communion all who are not of the one mind that they dictate. From my study of history, this is wrong. How long will it take before we come to a common understanding of the present issues? I do not know. As an amateur historian I know that past controversies have taken a century and more to resolve, and we are not even half way there with the present debate. What I do know is that when I have cut off my sister or brother from the table or the conversation I have cut myself off from the Lord's presence in some way.

Let me state for the record one more time. I am a genetic Episcopalian. I was born into Christ in this Church and I will be buried from this Church—whenever that time comes. I am not aligning myself with any "foreign power" or overseas church or bishop. I am a loyal member of the Episcopal Church and will continue to be loyal as long as I require oxygen. It is my responsibility to speak the truth in love to those with whom I disagree but to stay connected even with those with whom I disagree vehemently.

When I was ordained—each of the three times—I swore an oath of conformity to the Episcopal Church. I intend to uphold that oath as long as I live. I am willing to be a part of what the English delicately call, "the loyal opposition," but I will not collude in secession. It did not work in 1861, and it will not work now.

While we are on the issue of my participation in the Episcopal Church, I want to address another, albeit related, issue: the timing of my retirement. As many of you know, when I became Bishop in 1997 I said that it was not my desire to continue to work until my 72nd birthday and then retire. There have been days, however, in the past three years when retirement sounds too good to delay. On bad days when asked when I will retire I have said, "Maybe tomorrow." On other days, when my impish side gets the better of me and I am being pushed into a corner, I have said "the day after my 72nd birthday." Today, I cannot agree with either of those extremes. I have not yet set a timetable and probably will not do so for a while. What I can say for certain is that I will be on the job longer than tomorrow and shorter than nine years. In other words, please do not make this issue a matter of concern; I will let you know through the Standing Committee when the time is right.

I do want to share with you a bit of good news for our diocese. As many of you know, the ministry we share on college campuses is vital to our corporate life as a diocese and as a Church. In the late 1960's and early 70's campus ministry was severely restricted across this country, and because of that loss we gave up an entire generation of students, some of whom might have sought ordination. We have a dearth of laity and clergy in their late 40's and 50's who have significant ministry experience in the Episcopal Church because of that loss.

Some years ago the ministry at Texas Tech was revived by Bishop Hulsey when he called the Rev. Jo Mann to Canterbury. It was part-time at first but soon became a full time job. The Rev. David Krause served us at Tech for 13 years but has moved to McKinney to resume parish work. There was a question in the minds of some as to whether we would continue to fund this ministry—a ministry that has no immediate “payback” in terms of dollars and cents. Some say College ministry is a black hole into which we pour money. I fervently believe it is an investment in the future of the Episcopal Church—indeed in the Christian Church itself. It is vital that we have a presence on every campus in this diocese, either led by volunteers as at Midland College and West Texas A&M in Canyon, part-time as at Angelo State and Abilene, or full time as at Texas Tech.

Because of my belief in campus ministry and with God's leading, we were fortunate to be able to call the Rev. Lauren Browder to lead our Canterbury in Lubbock. I sincerely hope that we will have many years of Mother Browder's ministry among us, drawing college students into the life and work of this diocese.

If this is not in itself enough good news, let me share some other information. Two faithful Episcopalians have begun to help recruit funds to renovate Seaman Hall in Lubbock for our Canterbury ministry and hopefully, in time, to be able to endow the ministry of Canterbury at Tech. You will be hearing more about this fund soon, and if you have an interest in aiding this ministry, please do not be shy about saying so. The work on the building will not be completed until the early part of 2007, but the remodel of that historic facility will give us the opportunity to reach out in a new and significant way to the greatest mission field in America. As an aside, to call the work being done on Seaman Hall a remodel is a bit of an understatement. The building will be completely handicap accessible with an elevator and accessible bathrooms. The 70+ year old heating with new air conditioning is being completely replaced, new wiring installed, and the kitchen completely rebuilt. St. Paul's on the Plains in Lubbock is so committed to this work that during construction they are providing office and meeting space, telephone and computer access for Canterbury. I personally want publically to thank Father Sellers and the vestry of St. Paul's for their generosity.

It is my hope and dream that in 20-30 years we will have active Canterbury groups at EVERY campus in this diocese, from the smallest campuses, such as the college in Vernon, to the largest campus in Lubbock. There are some in this room who became Episcopalians during their college years because we had a presence on their campus. Can we ignore another generation of seekers because we do not have the time, energy, or funds?

On the other side of the equation is the pending departure of our faithful Canon Mike Ehmer. Mike has been called to be the Assistant Director of CREDO, a wellness initiative for clergy and lay leadership of the Episcopal Church. He and Sue-Ann will be moving to Memphis at the first of the year. His extensive gifts will be utilized for all of the Episcopal Church, and although we will still be the recipients of his gifts through CREDO, we will miss his day-to-day input and activity to keep our diocese—read here its bishop—on an even keel.

I want to tell you also about a study which will begin in the next month or so. For several years I have been concerned about the apportionment percentage for Northwest Texas. Over four years ago, our Executive Council began to discuss how we might rework our apportionment, but after General Convention 2003 that deliberation ceased. Because of my continuing concern over this area, and with the encouragement of the vestry of the Church of the Heavenly Rest, I will be appointing in the next weeks an ad hoc committee to explore how we might begin to reassess apportionments beginning in 2008. My hope is that this group will be able to provide a means whereby we can begin to reduce congregational assessments, decreasing the percentage each year by a fraction. Obviously our budget is not so filled with “pork” that would allow us to slash a significant percentage all at once and still be able to maintain our ministry throughout the diocese. This ad hoc group will propose methods and amounts of apportionment for the Executive Council's approval. Information about the deliberations will be available in a timely manner.

One Lord, one faith, one baptism. Ever since I arrived in Northwest Texas, I have had a single song for us—the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I have repeatedly called this diocese to seek out the broken hearted around us. I have challenged every member of convention to reach out to someone who is unchurched and offer the love of Jesus as well as inviting them to come to worship. I have dared us to think in miraculous proportions about

how God might work through us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison (the growth industry of western Texas), help heal the sick, welcome the stranger—the alien other, to give a sip of living water to the thirsty. I have exhorted us to move beyond a theology of scarcity to an understanding of and declaration of God’s incredible abundance. I have called us to look to our Latino brothers and sisters who, like us, need the life in Christ that the Episcopal Church has to offer—and today we brought in Santa Maria as our newest mission. But brothers and sisters, we have a long way to go to reach any of those goals. In some quarters there is a glimmer of light, but opportunities abound. We have been called to be lanterns held high, not lights concealed beneath a bushel basket. As I said some years ago, to claim to be the best kept secret in town is sinful. We are called to be the best known church because of our faithfulness. We have been called to become servants not masters, to live as Christ himself lived, as one who came not to be served but to serve.

Now is the time to redouble our efforts; it is not the time to shrink under the weight of our disputes and issues. Now is the time to seek the 65% of every county in this diocese who are not regular members of any faith community. Now is the time for us to pray about how we can help to meet the needs of our communities, rather than whining because we don’t have sufficient resources. Now is the time for us to pray, to read our Bibles, to worship together and invite others to join us. Now is the time for us to open our hearts and wallets to help eradicate poverty, hunger, illiteracy, and abuse. We have faced difficulties in the past, and God has provided for us, often in surprising ways.

And finally, as the Prayer of St. Francis de Sales says,

“Be at peace.

Do not fear the changes of life, rather look to them with full hope as they arise.

God, whose very own you are, will deliver you from out of them.

He has kept you hitherto, and he will lead you safely,

And when you cannot stand it, God will bury you in His arms.

Do not be afraid of what may happen tomorrow,

for the same everlasting Father will take care of you then and every day.

He will either shield you from suffering or will give you unfailing strength to bear it.

Be at peace,

and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations.

Amen.