

CONVENTION ADDRESS

1 NOVEMBER 2008

ABILENE, TEXAS

When I began my address last year, it was my expectation, and probably yours as well, that that would be my last time to address this community in convention. However, God has a way of taking our plans and challenging us to become pliable to His plan. Had we followed our timeline, right now we would be in the middle of consecrating a new bishop for Northwest Texas. As it is, we will elect my successor on November 22nd and then the consecration and ordination of the new bishop will take place, God willing, on March 21st, 2009.

Before I go any further, I encourage you, I exhort you to avail yourself of the opportunity to meet the nominees when they tour the diocese in about ten days. They will make presentations and be available to answer questions in Midland, San Angelo, Lubbock, and Amarillo. Let me also stress that these gatherings are for anyone who wants to “meet and greet,” not just the clergy and lay electors. Bring your family and friends, but come early. Presentations will begin at 7:00pm sharp. If you arrive late you might not get a seat.

Because this is my last official time to be with you in convention, I want to reflect on our time together. When I went to seminary almost 40 years ago, I expected to serve in small towns and small congregations most of my life. Again, God’s sense of humor proved that wonderful adage, “If you want to hear laughter in heaven, tell God your plans.” Until I arrived in Northwest Texas, I served in towns and congregations that could scarcely be called small. St. Paul’s Cathedral Oklahoma City; St. Michael’s Norman; St. Michael the Archangel Colorado Springs. When I arrived in Lubbock in 1997 I knew I was when God wanted me to be—and with a plethora of small towns and over half of our churches are small by

anyone's standards. If I have learned nothing else from growing up in a small church and now serving over 20 small missions and parishes, it is this: relationships are key to life and growth, both numerical and spiritual. By Episcopal Church standards, we are a small diocese. For the past 11 years I have been a part of a consortium of bishops of predominantly small congregations which calls ourselves the "Tiny Bishops Conference." I have also participated in the international consortium of dioceses that are developing community ministry, "Living Stones," and a number of our clergy and lay members have participated in presentations at the February Living Stones conference. Both of those gatherings have reinforced the importance of relationships.

Our diocesan convention has some very important work to do when we gather: we adopt a budget which has been prepared by 15 or so folk who have worked diligently to bring to the Executive Council a balanced budget which they send on to us here. Hopefully it has been vetted sufficiently to be able to be passed without too much debate and rancor. We elect folk to a variety of diocesan leadership positions that are vital in the ongoing operation of our diocese. We receive reports from our diocesan ministries that bring vitality and life in so many places that might not be readily seen unless spotlighted when we gather together. On occasion, we create new congregations, and as we had to do today we have to close those which have in essence died. All of this is necessary to the ongoing work of ministry development in Northwest Texas.

If all we had to do was conduct business, that could be done in perhaps a single day. However, the most important work we do when we gather is relationship building between and among one another. Because we are a small diocese, we need the support that can only come when we gather as the diocese. Because we are so spread out over 80 counties that comprise almost 80,000 square miles, we need to be together face to face just to enjoy one another's company. Our convention is in large part family reunion. I don't know if you have ever attended a large family reunion; I have

the opportunity each year to go to Sheila's clan gathering. Her father was the eldest of 10 children, and all but one had several offspring. We usually have about 70 members of the Byrd family come together for 3½ days. It can be loud, raucous, competitive and joyful; or it can be peaceful and quiet. Mostly the former. There are some Byrds I look forward to seeing, and some I wish would stay home. But they are all family and I have learned to love them all, even Uncle Syd.

My guess is that convention is like that for you, since it is indeed a family reunion. My hope and prayer is that you can learn through prayer to love all of us, even if you don't like all of us.

The Anglican Communion is a bit like what I have just described. Every ten years the bishops of the Communion from around the world are invited to a large family reunion by the Archbishop of Canterbury called the Lambeth Conference. We gather at the University of Kent for three weeks of Bible study, conversation, connection, meals together, listening to one another, and learning about context of ministry—the joys and difficulties of proclaiming God's love and mercy where we are. In some previous years, the bishops have entered into a legislative model to pass resolutions that are a snapshot of how the bishops of the Communion articulate our position, hopes and dreams.

This past summer, Sheila and I traveled to Scotland for some pre-Lambeth visitation and then to Canterbury for the Lambeth Conference. Archbishop Rowan Williams had included in his invitation that we would not be in legislative session at all; rather we would be building relationships and hopefully repairing some of the fracture the Communion has suffered in recent years. Because the conference would not be making absolute statements, about 25% of those invited stayed home. We were all diminished by our brothers' absence—and yes they were all brothers. However, those who were present had the opportunity of a lifetime to build friendships, establish companion relationships, and enter into

prayerful dialogue. There was also a wonderful chance to dispel mistaken assumptions. For those bishops of developed countries, we were able to learn that not all bishops of “so called third world countries” were uneducated or minimally so. Many bishops have been educated in the US, England, Scotland, Ireland, Europe, and even have advanced degrees from universities in those countries, as well as in Asia and Africa. We American bishops were able to rebut some stories about our Church that have spread around the world. “Are there only five American bishops who will say the Nicene Creed?” was a question I was asked early on. “Are over half of the American bishops homosexuals?” was another question put to me. A friend was told by a bishop from a developing country that he had heard that the Episcopal Church does not believe in Jesus Christ. Face to face relationships are the only way to dispel rumor, disinformation, and suspicion.

Our days at Lambeth began with Bible study in groups of eight to ten. In my group were three Americans—including me, a Tanzanian, a Canadian, and Englishman, a Welshman, an Australian, and a South African. We were a diverse group, linguistically, ethnically, and theologically; but we became a community through prayer and study of the Gospel of John. One member of this group became a friend almost immediately. Ossie Schwarz is from a rural diocese of South Africa whose heritage is Afrikkans. Genetically he is African, German, and English. I asked how many languages he spoke and he replied, “Only one, and that poorly—English.” Within 30 minutes he had spoken to other bishops in 4 languages I do not know and I challenged him about only knowing English, to which he replied, “Well, I really don’t know those languages, I just get by.” One day Ossie asked me the origin of the name Ohl. I told him that it was from Germany. With his beautiful grin he said, “Perhaps we are related!” I answered, “We are related—by our baptism.” In many ways Ossie kept me focused and sane over the long three weeks we had together, and I will ever be grateful to him for his friendship, his love, and his prayers.

One other encounter that I want to share with you began on the day of the group photo. On a Saturday morning, the spouses' photo was taken, as Sheila tells me within about 40 minutes. It was no problem to line up 650 spouses in bleachers and have the photo shoot done. That same afternoon, it took about two hours to line up bishops who are accustomed to giving, not receiving orders. As I stood in the middle of a group of very dark skinned African bishops, the bishop on my right, a tall, very muscular man extended a very large hand and said "My name is Zac. I am from Kenya. Who are you?" I replied, "I am Wallis from Texas." I learned ten years ago not to put the modifiers on Texas, since even most of the American bishops don't know where NW Texas is. Zac looked at me and said, "Northwest Texas?" I didn't know what to say, so I said yes. "I've been looking for you," he said. I didn't know whether to rejoice or to run. He then began to relate his story of meeting Peggy Valentine in Kenya in the mid-1990's and coming to Abilene at our convention in 1999. We had met in this very place and had lunch. He expressed a desire to study at the School of Theology at Sewanee. I was able to make a phone call to assist him in his endeavor. A simple act of no real consequence to me, and one I was delighted to make. As he told the story of our first meeting, the memory came flooding back. We embraced like long lost brothers. In the past when I have said, "It's a small world," I really referred to the local area, perhaps the state, or even the region. Now when I say "It's a small world," I mean the whole world. Zac, his wife, and Sheila and I had lunch a day or two later and we continued to greet like close family for the remainder of the Conference.

I tell these stories to bring you just a sample of how something as enormous and long as Lambeth Conference can bring brothers and sisters in Christ together to grow in the grace and love of Christ. I could tell you of many others who have impacted my life and helped me understand how God works in other geographies and cultures. I could tell you of Winston Halapua from Oceania who helped me understand just a tiny bit of theology from the perspectives of a Polynesian navigator. Or I could speak of John

Simalinga from Tanzania who arrived at Lambeth with the ink still wet on his ordination certificate with the look of an okapi in the headlights, but who always bore a big smile. Or I could speak of the bishop of Jamaica with whom I had a disagreement, but following the call of Jesus in Matthew 18 was able to reconcile with him. So many stories of others that we met or with whom we reconnected could be recounted, but that would take all day.

Someday I want to write a book. And it is a different book from the one about my grandfather the Rev. John Wallis Ohl. I even have a title for this work: *Water Is Thicker Than Blood*. Yes I said that right. The waters of Baptism bring us to birth in this incredible family we call the Church. We are nurtured and fed by those who have led us to this community. As we grow into maturity in Christ, we are called upon to become the nurturers and feeders of others. Our commission is to bring others into the family, either through new birth in Baptism or through the “adoption” that draws those who have wandered away or who have no Church family into the closeness we share with Christ and one another. Families are composed of many individuals who bring their own gifts and idiosyncrasies into the mix to be used by our Lord for the building up of His Body. Whether our part of the family is large or small, it is only a part of the larger family—the whole Church. One rule of life in this and every family is that we do not get to select our brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins or grandparents. We are, however, to welcome and love ALL of them as we would welcome and love Christ himself.

My favorite collect in the Book of Common Prayer is found in Morning Prayer on page 101. “Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name. *Amen.*” If we can only take this prayer to heart and reach out to the world in which we find ourselves, our spirits

and our congregations will grow. We can become a people on mission, with a fire for sharing Christ's love with ALL people.

The Diocese of Northwest Texas is a spread out family that sometimes rejoices together, has fun together, celebrates together, prays together, and just lives together. There are times when we argue and bicker and fight. We have had some who don't want to be part of the family any more and have left. Yet, they are still part of the family of Christ and forever will be a part of us.

I cannot express in simple words what you all have meant to me for these almost twelve years. You have fed me—way too much on Sundays, you have encouraged me, you have chastened me when I needed it, you have loved me into more than I ever could have hoped to become, and you have welcomed me into your hearts. You, ALL OF YOU, will forever be in my heart.

I leave with the words of one of my favorite cowboys, "It's been a hellofa ride."