

CONVENTION ADDRESS

29 October 2005

Lubbock Texas

Each year when I begin to ponder and write the address for convention, I pray “God what do you want me to say?” Some years the response is rapid and the writing comes quickly. Others years I am struck by the difficulty of putting together what I believe I need to say. This past week has been one of those latter years, when I have struggled with this time. I believe my task is to fire the leadership of this diocese to do the work God is calling us to do. I always want to give us as a diocese some direction for moving forward to develop mission and ministry. In addition, I want to give some glimpse into the life and health of the diocese.

To say that the past two years have been difficult for all of us in the Episcopal Church would be an enormous understatement. Many of us have lost relationships with those we consider brothers and sisters in Christ; we have seen some of our congregations suffer financially; and we have heard dire predictions concerning our future life together as Christians, as Episcopalians, and as members of the Anglican Communion. Certainly, we could wring our hands and say, “Woe is us!” and preach doom and gloom. I do not believe, however, that God wants us to retreat with nothing but a negative message.

2005 has been difficult for our diocese, but not overwhelming. Unless you have been living in a cave, you are aware that most of the members of St. Nicholas’ parish in Midland and the two clergy left the Episcopal Church to form a local congregation which has since connected itself with a diocese in Uganda. Before their departure the vestry had decided not to pay any of the diocesan apportionment until after the end

of this year. In addition, the vestry decided not to hold an Every Member Canvass in the Fall of 2004, so income was diminished for the first 5 months of 2005. Those who left did decide not to litigate the assets of St. Nicholas Episcopal Church and left the building and some cash assets. Reports of large sums being available to pay the apportionment were, as Mark Twain said of his obituary in a San Francisco newspaper, "greatly exaggerated." More than half of the cash assets are designated funds that must be expended as designated. Other funds have been and will be utilized to pay the two mortgages currently held on the property on Loop 250. This property has a substantially greater value than the mortgages, and our Trustees voted in April to maintain the property as an Episcopal Church, offering to assist if necessary with funds to pay mortgages and upkeep of the property.

Approximately 90% of the membership of record of St. Nicholas departed on May 31, 2005. The 35-40 members who chose to remain have worked diligently—in fact like Trojans—to maintain the Episcopal presence on the Loop. They have a voting delegation here this weekend, and you will see them in positions of responsibility as our time together goes on. In fact, at this time I want to acknowledge the delegation of St. Nicholas Episcopal Church. The "remnant" have set themselves the task of being faithful to their calling as Christians within the Episcopal tradition. That is not to say that they agree with ALL of the decisions of General Convention 2003. However, they are tenacious in their desire to be the EPISCOPAL CHURCH on the Loop. From the beginning, the new vestry pledged that they would offer a tithe of all their income as apportionment for the remainder of this year and the next. Yesterday they requested apportionment relief from the Standing Committee for

most of the amount they will not be able to pay because of the severe loss of pledged income. The original apportionment amount of \$109,000 has been reduced for 2005. Next year I guess they might make a similar appeal, which will take them to a place where the apportionment for 2007 will be based on actual income for 2005, making their share more in line with reality.

Because of the loss of income at St. Nicholas, and because the Executive Council of this diocese knew that we would not be able to sustain our own budget without some dire actions being taken, the Council asked me to initiate a "Special Offering" to make up for approximately \$100,000 from St. Nicholas, from St. Cyprian's in Amarillo who have also departed the Episcopal Church and which we closed this morning, and one other very small congregation who likely will not be able to pay their full apportionment. The only other option was to begin cutting staff and program, effectively reducing the ministry of our diocese to a "survival" mode.

The appeal began in the summer with highly positive results. Offerings for the diocese began to pour in shortly after the appeal began. We have received gifts from individuals ranging from \$5.00 to \$25,000. Some of our smallest missions have sent special gifts that were larger than their apportionment, in addition to the gifts made by individual members of those congregations. I want to report to you that we have raised more than I thought possible in my wildest dreams. Frankly I had hoped that we might raise \$75-80,000. With that amount, we would have to make some cuts, but not the drastic, draconian measures that some feared. As of noon yesterday, 28 October 2005, we have received \$131,435.61 cash in hand.

I am overwhelmed by the love and care that the members of this diocese have for the diocese and the mission and ministry we do in our part of Texas. I am humbled by the financial commitment so many of our members have to insure that we continue our diocesan mission and ministry.

The diocese is the primary or basic unit of the Episcopal Church, since it is only at the diocesan level that we have a bishop, elect successor bishops, approve and ordain priests and deacons, authorize certain ministries of the laity, and connect one another in the fullness of the life of the Church. Too often in our part of Texas I hear folk grumbling that the diocese is unnecessary, or unhelpful, or ruining the work of our parish/mission. The fact is, in this diocese we are one Church with many Altars. Certainly if one lives in Monahans it is difficult to know intimately what is happening in Perryton. Or if one is a member of St. Stephen's Lubbock to understand the dynamics of life in Hereford. But that is what we are about here today and tomorrow. Frankly, I see my greatest work as bishop as that of connecting the various Altars, congregations of Northwest Texas with one another. Frequently when I meet with vestries and groups on a weekend visitation I relate what I know of the work of ministry which is going on in both small and large churches. I believe we need to get to know one another better in order that we might help one another develop the mission we share in Christ Jesus. We are in this together, and this special offering gives me great hope for the future of this diocese as we move forward together.

I want to take a few minutes of what might be personal privilege to speak of my life here with you. About two years ago, as we began to set aside funds for the election and consecration of my successor, someone

asked just when I would resign. I say resign because technically, bishops do not retire, they resign for one of three reasons: 1) advanced age, which has been determined to mean 62 years old, 2) infirmity, or 3) missionary reasons—usually meaning allowing an indigenous priest to be elected in an ethnic region or diocese. When asked, I said I would probably call for an election in 2005 or 2006 as it takes almost two years for an election/consecration to take place. Some have been hoping I would make that call in 2005, while others wish I would wait until 2013. I am eligible to resign for advanced age as of this month, and 18 months ago I reached the place where I could take “early retirement” according to the pension fund. I have spent a great deal of time and thought and prayer about how long I should stay as bishop of NW Texas. I believe I was called in 1997 to this place, and I believe I am still called here as your bishop. I cannot say when I will step aside, probably not as late as 2015 when I will be 72, but also not as early as 18 months from now. This job has been incredibly gratifying, if at times painfully difficult. However, I must be where God wants me to be, and today that is right here. I am humbled to be your bishop, and I will continue to listen for God to call me to another situation in life—resigned or retired—when the time is right in God’s economy. I will repeat what I have told others before, all of the congregations I served, and the Executive Council shortly after I arrived. I am on temporary duty. You are the permanent party. (Father Keith Adams who has just returned from temporary assignment as a Chaplain with the US Navy certainly understands this.) I will leave at some point. Either: 1) God will call me elsewhere and it will be a clear call, 2) I will retire, or 3) you will carry me out in a box. In any case, it will be in God’s time.

I want to say a bit more about remaining with the Episcopal Church. Since August 2003, some individuals and groups have pushed me to lead this diocese out of the umbrella of the Episcopal Church. I have said repeatedly that I was born in this Church and I will die in this Church. I did not, nor do I now agree with some of the decisions of General Convention 2003, but I do not believe that any of those decisions undermine the Nicene Faith that I hold dear. Some have accused me of giving up my faith for a mess of pottage—Pension Fund retirement. As an aside, I have done some computations, and the difference in my pension if I take it now or if I continue for the next three years is about 1% per year. I do not believe this is apostasy; an error yes, but not apostasy. I will give you a biblical image which has helped me, particularly this past year.

Among the Minor Prophets we find the Book of Hosea. Here is a prophet of the northern kingdom of Israel speaking to his countrymen. Israel is under attack by Assyria and chaos reigns. The people of Israel are accused of following Ba-al, of being unfaithful to the Living God. Hosea the prophet is called to take as his wife a harlot named Gomer who will bear three children, presumably not Hosea's, and later leave him to return to harlotry. The prophet goes after her and brings her home, showing forth his love to her all the while. The Prophet is called to make his personal life an incarnation of God's redeeming love, the love God will show to Israel, even though Israel has been unfaithful. Hosea's prophesy is lived out for the people of Israel.

I do not want you to take the image of the Episcopal Church and Gomer too literally. I do believe, as the 39 Articles say, that the Church in council can make mistakes. However, I also believe that in the course of

time God will show us the way to redeem any mistakes that we make, or that we might have made. I believe the Church was in error in affirming slavery; I believe the Church was in error in allowing apartheid; I believe the Church was in error in preaching the Crusades; I believe the Church was in error in condemning Galileo; I believe we were in error in 2003. Obviously not everyone here agrees with me, nor do all the members of this diocese, the Episcopal Church, or the Anglican Communion. I believe that everyone who voted in favor of Canon Robinson to be bishop of New Hampshire did so in a prayerful manner, listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We are a divided Church on the matter of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. As repeated resolutions of Lambeth Conference and our own General Convention challenge, we are to minister with care and compassion to ALL who come to us, gay and straight. In God's own time we will know fully how the redeeming love of God is being worked out in our midst. Unfortunately it may be our great grandchildren who see the fruit of what do this century. So it always is.

One of my favorite personages in the Lesser Feasts and Fasts celebrations is Bishop Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, whose feast day is October 14th. Schereschewski was born a Lithuanian Jew and was proceeding toward studies as a rabbi. He moved to England and became a Christian and then emigrated to the United States where he completed seminary at the General Seminary in New York. He was elected Bishop of Shanghi by the House of Bishops and learned Mandarin on the sea voyage from San Francisco to Shanghi. He began translating Scriptures into Mandarin and later into Wenli. Within a few years of his consecration Bishop Schereschewsky was stricken with paralysis, but

continued his translation efforts after resigning as bishop of Shanghai while sitting in a special chair, a precursor of the wheel chair. He helped develop the Chinese typewriter and worked for many bringing the works of Holy Scripture to the Chinese. Near his death Bishop Schereschewsky is quoted as saying, "I have sat in this chair for over twenty yearsw. It seemed very hard at first. But God knew best. He kept me for the work for which I am best fitted."

I tell that story, as Bishop Schereschewsky is one of my heroes. And when I get down or discouraged I remember his words, "God kept me for the work for which I am best fitted." Especially in those times when I think it would be easier to resign, I am called back to Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky—the work best fitted."

Again, this is all to say that I am here, that I am staying in the Episcopal Church, and that I want to call you to follow. I can do no more.

I do want you to understand that I am not being a "Pollyanna" about what I have said. I do believe that there may be some more difficult times ahead. I also believe that God, who is full of grace, will give us the grace needed to meet the days ahead. In the future we may have to take the draconian steps that will gut our programs. In the future we may have to cut staff. We may be in for some lean times. But I keep coming back to the Good News that God has already redeemed the world. God took a handful of frightened people on the first Day of Pentecost and brought the Church into being. The future does not depend on us; it is in God's hands.

For the last few minutes of this address I want to focus on the theme for the convention and the conversation Bishop Schori led is through this morning. When I was in seminary, I was introduced to the

writings of a 19th century English missionary named Roland Allen. In his first book, *Missionary Methods; St. Paul's or Ours*, Father Allen compares the bureaucracy of the English missional system with that portrayed in the Book of Acts and St. Paul's epistles. He concludes that the New Testament model is one geared for ministry development and growth, while the English system is stultifying. One of his tenets is that the Holy Spirit gives each community all the gifts it needs to be the Body of Christ.

Not long after reading some of Allen's work I learned of a bishop of Alaska, Bill Gordon, who had worked through the 50's and 60's to develop indigenous ministry among the native peoples of Alaska, using Roland Allen's principles. His theme for the diocese of Alaska was the acronym TEAM, meaning "teach each a ministry." Bishop Gordon was the prime mover behind what came to be called Canon 8 priests—later Canon II, and most recently Canon 9 clergy. These local priests were called by the community to be trained to exercise the leadership through the liturgical worship of the Church they already exhibited in their daily life in the community.

As a young priest I met Bishop Wes Frensdorf of Nevada who was expanding on the work of Bishop Gordon for the whole diocese of Nevada. The reason I invited bishop Schori to address us was the decades long experience her diocese has in ministry development. Bishop Frensdorf used to contrast the 19th century model of ministry and what he was upholding as ministry development with the following comment. "What we have seen is a community gathered around a minister; what we want is a community gathered to minister."

For the past seven years, our diocese has been working to lay the foundation for moving into what some call “total ministry” or “mutual ministry” but which I prefer to call “community ministry.” Canon Claire Cowden has worked diligently primarily with small congregations to assist them in discerning their ministry, both as members of the congregation and for the congregation as a whole. She has been ably assisted in the panhandle by the Panhandle Regional Missioner Larry Spannagle. In some of our small congregations, community ministry is life blood for moving from maintenance/survival mode to mission. In some of those congregations, one or more individuals have been called out by the congregation for local priesthood. Others have been discerned and called for such ministries as pastoral care, stewardship, outreach, deacon’s orders, and one congregation, St. Mark’s in Abilene, called and commissioned “yard angels.” We have a number of congregations working toward community ministry where every member of the congregation is called, equipped, trained, and commissioned for the work God has called them to do. I encourage you to visit with the folks from St. Mark’s Abilene, St George’s Canyon, St Mark’s Borger, and the Sand Hills missions in Monahans, Kermit and Andrews to learn more about this burgeoning ministry development.

MANY GIFTS-ONE SPIRIT. The real problem that I see for the future is that we look at Community Ministry as “what those tiny congregations do because they cannot afford a ‘real’ priest.” It is my hope and dream that all of our churches, regardless of size--from Holy Trinity Midland to All Saints Perryton—will move in the direction of ministry of all baptized persons. I believe fervently that the Holy Spirit has given to absolutely every baptized person gifts for ministry, as St. Paul says in

Chapter 4 of Ephesians, “to equip the saints, for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ.” For some, it takes much of a lifetime to discover the gifts the Spirit has given. For others, the gifts are so obvious and apparent that from childhood the path is certain. We need the community to help us both discern and live out the gifts of ministry we have been given. I want you to understand that I am not extolling the ordained ministry above lay ministry. All ministry is Christ’s work, and all members of the Body of Christ have work to do. As we live into the future, I pray that you will open your heart to the leading of the Holy Spirit to guide you into how you are being called to minister. I want to encourage you, the diocesan leadership, to affirm your brothers and sisters in the congregations you serve in discerning and exercising their gifts.

I call us together to look afresh at the mission to which we have been called in Christ Jesus, to be faithful to our vocation as bearers of the Good News. I call each and every one of us, the leaders of the diocese of Northwest Texas, to redouble our efforts to discern, both for ourselves and our congregations, how we can make visible the redeeming love of God in Christ to this broken and starving world. I challenge you to pray about whom you might invite to be a part of the living Body of Christ, someone who is inactive or has never been a part of a church community, and then as Simon’s brother Andrew did, BRING them to Jesus. Welcome everyone into your presence as if welcoming the Lord himself—for indeed you are doing just that. Remember our Baptismal Covenant? “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons loving your neighbor as yourself?” This is not a suggestion; it is a command by our Lord himself. Look around your town and see what needs to be done to feed the

hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, give drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison. Why? “Even as you did it unto one of the least of these you did it unto me.” We know this but we need to be reminded from time to time.

Unfortunately we have allowed the distractions of life to undermine the work for which we were fitted by God. We have allowed the internecine struggles to sap our energy for mission and ministry. We must renew our vigor, our focus to be the hands and feet and lips of Christ as we are the only hands and feet and lips He has to bring Good News. If we are faithful to our calling, more can be done than we can ask for or imagine. Now, let us be about the Lord’s work.