

Bishop's 2020 Convention Address

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” In the name of our triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When we began last year's Diocesan Convention, as some of you might recall, I had not yet been consecrated as your bishop. As a result of this timing, and in accordance with our diocesan canons, our Chancellor, Steve Sanford, was to be the President of that Convention. So Chancellor Sanford and I worked up the convention script – he had his speaking parts in that convention, I had mine – and, after the motion to adjourn the convention was made and accepted, I said to no one in particular, “Well, at least next year's convention will be normal!”

Apparently, the Holy Spirit's gift of prophecy had not yet befallen upon me.

Last April, when COVID-19 was changing the way that many of us have ever envisioned ministry being done, there was a point when I thought that had I known what the year 2020 would bring, my address to you last year would have been very different. In hindsight, however, I don't think that my words in 2019 would have

changed all that much. And this is why: God's mission, and our participation in God's mission, is where our true focus lies. Living into Jesus' Great Commandment – loving God and loving our neighbor – that is our focus! Living into Jesus' Great Commission – worshipping God, making new Christians, forming new Christians, and transforming God's world! – that is our focus! COVID-19 and all that it entails? That is not our focus! It is part of our current picture! It is certainly a part of our current picture! But it is not – and I pray to God that it never will be – our focus.

This is the difference: a Christian congregation who chooses to make COVID-19 their focus is a congregation that, I maintain, will most likely not survive this pandemic. Christian congregations who have become so set in their ways that they cannot possibly imagine doing anything differently because of this virus – these congregations will indeed perish! And they will perish because they have no vision. They have no vision. And the words of Proverbs 29:18 will become their prophetic reality – because as that passage so rightfully states: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

And it is not overly hard to understand why this will be the case! The people of congregations such as these are stymied! They are looking forward towards nothingness! They have not discerned any

new or different ways in which to worship. They have not looked for different ways to be in relationship with or to communicate with each other! They have not thought about different ways of offering Christian education! And they have given absolutely no thought as to how they can be the transformative agents of God that God has called them to be! And why? Because they cannot meet in person! They cannot do things as they have always done them in the past! And, if they cannot meet in person, and if they can't do things in ways that they have always done them, then, well, heavens to Betsy, what in the world are they going to do?

How does one sing the Lord's song while being held captive in the city of Babylon? What answer does one expect to hear when a person, such as in Psalm 121, looks upon the dangerous mountains, sets their gaze towards uncertainty, and cries out, "Oh Lord, where is my help? How can we be your people, God, while living in the midst of a worldwide pandemic?"

Such a person, such a congregation, can think of no answer. And maybe it's because they're not expecting one. Or perhaps it is the fear of having to do ministry differently that is keeping them from hearing what God is trying to say. In any event, and for whatever reason, such congregations have chosen to put their participation in

God's mission on hold. On hold! "We'll be back in your life," such congregations seem to be saying, "and God will be back in your life – when things get better. When it's safer. When things are normal. When COVID-19 is gone, and in the immortal words of Arnold Schwarzenegger, 'we'll be back.'"

God's mission in the world, however, has not been put on hold. God's mission, thanks be to God, continues – and it continues through those who believe in God's mission and through those who choose to participate in God's mission! And blessedly, and with great thanksgiving, we certainly have seen this happening in the Episcopal Diocese of South Dakota!

Stories abound concerning the leaders and the people of our congregations who have chosen to keep God's mission as their primary focus. COVID-19, as I said before, is certainly a part of the picture that these congregations are looking at! The people of such congregations are not denying COVID-19! They don't refer to COVID-19 as something other than the serious virus that it is nor do they refer to it as something that is inconsequential! Yet at the same time, COVID-19 is not their primary focus! God's mission is their focus! And as a result, what has happened?

What has happened is that our clergy and the people of our congregations such as these have found ways in which to worship God and to follow Jesus despite COVID-19. They have found ways to share fellowship and to stay in relationship with each other despite COVID-19. They have found ways to form their people and they have continued to transform their communities!

They have even found ways in which to welcome new members into their congregations! Get this now...some people who live within the Standing Rock Mission area and yet who were not a member of any church? They chose to become a part of a congregation! Ask Fr. Kim Fonder about his experiences during this past spring! People decided to become members of some of his congregations before they had even stepped foot into one of his church buildings! "I want to join your church!" they said. "What do you mean, you want to join our church? What are you talking about? You haven't seen the insides of our buildings! You haven't seen our stained glass windows, you haven't heard our music! You haven't had the uplifting and life changing experience of turning to page 355 in the Book of Common Prayer! You haven't even tasted our coffee..."

Just thinking that someone would join a church before stepping into a church's building just boggles the stereotypical Episcopalian mind!

And it really shouldn't! It really shouldn't. People joined a congregation because of how God's mission was being put into action! These people saw God! These people saw Jesus! They saw hope and compassion! And most of all? – they saw love. They saw love in action.

I'll offer you another example. The people of the Cheyenne River Episcopal Mission – a reservation which is the size of Connecticut and which is now being served by two priests who formerly came from Connecticut! – the people of the Cheyenne River were rolling along with the help of Fr. Jim Marrs and Canon Chris Corbin when COVID-19 hit. And at that point, travel and other gathering restrictions were put into place. And they, like so many others, began asking the question, "How are we going to reach our people?" They couldn't gather indoors! No priests (or bishop!) were being allowed to come to them! (I know because I tried! I came as close to begging as much as a bishop should!) And in addition, unlike other places in our diocese, internet service is not readily and easily available. So what did they do?

Ask Deacon Iva Traversie about what they did! To their credit, and to their belief in God's mission, they didn't quit. They didn't throw up their hands in the air and walk away. Instead, they went to a local

radio station! And they did Morning Prayer services, on Sunday mornings, over the radio. And these services, and their prayers, and their messages of God's hope, and their sharing the good news of Jesus Christ – their words reached a number of people far greater than the number of those who normally would be gathering in their church buildings.

Now, I want to be clear on this point, because I think it is so important – Deacon Iva and the leaders of the Cheyenne River Episcopal Mission made this decision. They were the ones who took the initiative! They responded to God's call to act! They didn't call me and ask, "Bishop, we have no priest! And because of the restrictions, no priest can travel to us. What should we do?" They responded to God's call. They responded to God's call to reach out to God's people, and they responded faithfully. And I am so proud of them. I am so very, very proud of them.

I want to offer you a third and final example by asking you this question – how can a church host a mission trip during a pandemic? How can one of our congregations tell the story about what God is up to when there is no one around to hear the story? Ask Mother Lauren Stanley to tell you about her experiences! Because Rosebud West Mission faced that particular challenge! – and do you know

what they came up with? Virtual mission trips! People sent funds; Mother Lauren Stanley put those funds to use; and then, using video, she provided the missionaries with a show and tell of what God had done because of what they did and had offered. And she continued to teach such groups about God's mission in South Dakota.

So...what do you think the major difference is between congregations whose focus has remained on God's mission and congregations whose focus has remained in the past? Romans 12, I think, provides us with a very strong clue when St. Paul writes these words: "Rejoice in hope; be patient in suffering; persevere in prayer." Hear those words again: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer."

How well do St. Paul's words apply to us and to our participation in God's mission at this time? When we read the news every day; when we look at many of the things that are happening all around us; it sounds a little silly, or maybe it sounds really foolish, to speak of hope, much less to rejoice in it! We are also not a culture that is overly known for its patience. We want instant cures and instant solutions. And insofar as persevering in prayer is concerned? My experience has been that some people tend to persevere for only so long...because when their prayers aren't being answered to their

liking or on their timetable, they throw up their hands, walk away, and stop praying altogether.

And yet Paul's words contain, I believe, some of God's very best directions to us during this time: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." Allow me, therefore, to share with you how these ten simple words have been manifested and lived out on a diocesan level since we last met.

At last year's convention, you will recall, we identified ourselves again as being a missionary diocese! We began talking about our new star quilt initiative. We talked about looking at, and praying about, and acting upon how the people of our diocese could best participate in God's mission. And we identified five different areas, five different star quilts, to focus upon: our relationships with each other; our communications with each other; the ways that we are forming our people in the Christian faith and life; the ways that we are transforming our diocese to best reflect God's kingdom; and the ways in which we are advocating for ourselves, telling our stories about what God is doing where we are!

We then started to do some planning. We started to design some potential patterns for these five star quilts – and about halfway into

it, along came COVID-19. And as a result, we were left with a choice. Were we going to live in fear? Or were we going to live in hope? When our patience is tested, are we going to pass the test? Or will we fail? Will we persevere in our prayers? – or will we put our participation in God’s mission on hold and wait until things get better?

This is how I would choose to best illustrate the situation in which we found ourselves facing. One evening, a couple of weeks ago, my wife, Kim, and I were watching a baking competition – and it was one of those baking competitions in which the contestants are given a theme or a certain item to bake and a time limit. About halfway into their time, the host of the show came out with a certain ingredient and she said to all the contestants, “Surprise! You have a special challenge! You now have to incorporate a can of pureed pumpkin into whatever it is that you are baking!”

Now, some of the contestants who were working with chocolate or with vanilla cream...oh, they were thrilled! One contestant, however – she was working with lemon curd. And perhaps needless to say, she was not thrilled by this turn of events. The pumpkin puree challenge totally disrupted her vision. However, she didn’t quit. She didn’t give up. She didn’t throw up her hand in despair and walk off

stage. Instead, she chose to live in hope – she chose to be patient – and I’m assuming that she chose to persevere in prayer, because she was going to need some!

So – what has happened to us as a diocese as a result of the COVID-19 challenge? How have we chosen, as a diocese, to respond to God’s invitation to participate in God’s mission when, halfway into our year, we learned that we would have to cope with a pandemic?

Well, for starters, we have been spending a good deal of our time focusing upon our relationships and our communications across our vast diocese of over 77,000 square miles. Your clergy and I, for instance, have been meeting weekly using Zoom technology since March of this year. These meetings of ours, initially, were all about how to do ministry in light of COVID-19. Because, as you will no doubt remember, the pandemic hit us during Lent and we were all trying to figure out how to conduct Holy Week and Easter services.

Now these clergy meetings are not mandatory – and yet the majority of our active clergy members sign on every week for one hour. And whereas there are, of course, continued updates and news regarding our participation in God’s mission despite COVID-19 – we also use this time to share information about diocesan programs and

processes; we have offered a couple of workshops; we share resources; we share prayer requests; and we share fellowship. Two or three of our clergy members log on to these meetings thirty minutes before they are scheduled to begin, just to see and to talk with each other! Many have commented and continue to comment on how good it is to see everyone's faces and how much they look forward to this time together. One clergy person even shared with me a couple of weeks ago that he can remember a time when he only saw and visited with his fellow clergy members at the annual diocesan convention.

Here's an interesting little fact: had we not had to respond to this challenge – had we not considered how we were going to participate in God's mission despite COVID-19? –I don't know if we would be having these meetings. I cannot honestly say whether I, or anyone else, would have come up with the idea of having a weekly clergy meeting on Zoom! And get this part – our diocesan clergy want these meetings to continue even when COVID-19 has passed us by! Clergy people, asking for meetings to continue – another idea that boggles the Episcopalian mind!

Another program that has been initiated are what are known as clericus deanery meetings. These are times when I will travel to one

of our seven deanery locations to meet with the clergy. The first clericus gathering took place last Thursday with the clergy from the Black Hills – and we used our time together to share information about the diocese, our congregations and ourselves. We also used this time to discuss a book that I have asked all of our clergy to read concerning racism and how to be agents of reconciliation and healing in our respective communities. Because of COVID-19, everyone who attended was properly distanced and properly masked – and those who cannot attend will be given the opportunity to participate using Zoom technology in places where it is feasible to do so.

Additionally, we will be trying on a new idea when it comes to bishop visitations in 2021. After Kim and I enrolled our daughter into college last August and became true “empty-nesters”, we purchased an RV. And our plan is to take the RV on visitation trips whenever possible between April and November. Now, like unto last year, each reservation in our diocese, and each congregation that is not in a reservation, will be receiving a visitation. The change is that, in addition to those visits, I will be spending about a week or so in each deanery of our diocese – and we will be calling these events “deanery visitations.” On the Sundays of those weeks, I will be making official visitations -- but during the week itself, I will be

remaining in the deanery. And what will happen during this time will be constructed by the clergy of these deaneries and by me. If a deanery-wide service is wished for, we'll make it happen. If there are tribal, political or community leaders whom it would be beneficial for your congregation to have me visit with, we'll make it happen. This is a brand new idea that we are trying on – it will be an interesting experience using a mobile office – and I look forward to offering reports about these events as they occur.

Insofar as our communication star quilt is concerned, we have begun making use of programs which allow us to send out emails to entire groups in a format that is much more helpful than just sending a plain email with various attachments. We began using this program for our Diocesan Council meetings and for our communications with clergy. Most recently, as I hope that the majority of you have experienced, we set up a separate list for those who were interested in knowing about our Diocesan Convention matters. And one of our plans for this next program year will be to create a Diocesan-wide E-news for those who wish to receive it. Although we realize that not every person in our diocese has reliable internet access, our clergy do. And just as we asked and relied upon the clergy to share diocesan convention news with their delegates who do not have good internet access, we will be relying

on our clergy, especially those serving congregations where the internet service is spotty, to print and post copies of these notices in their churches and to share what is happening in the wider diocese in whatever way they are communicating.

The technology that is behind this convention is another way in which we have been working on our communications with each other. As a result of having to conduct our convention differently because of COVID-19, we were able to purchase some communication equipment that some of our sites are using today! Our goal, ultimately, is to have one set of such equipment in each deanery. And I want to thank the St. Mary's Leadership Board in particular for their donation of funds towards making this project a reality.

Because of the COVID-19 virus, this new equipment became more than just a wish or an idea – it became a necessity – and it has become a genuine blessing. For many of our events, people have to travel a number of miles to attend – and we also are very dependent upon the weather. So having this technology and equipment will therefore widen our ability to meet and offer diocesan-wide programs, and especially those regarding Christian formation.

Turning now to the Christian formation star quilt, Canon Portia Corbin has begun putting together a new curriculum ministry group for our diocese as a whole. One of the purposes of this group will be to do research into the different kinds of Christian education program materials that are out there and to categorize them in terms of the different contexts of our congregations. Leaders of any congregation, regardless of size, and regardless of how many children are in their church, will be able to call upon this group or upon the work of this group for recommendations for Christian formation materials for children, teenagers, college students and adults.

Moving forward, Canon Portia, the Rev. Cody Maynus, and the Thunderhead Episcopal Board will be continuing their focus on Thunderhead Episcopal Center and its role in the formation star quilt. And I want to note in particular our appreciation to Fr. Cody and to Cassie Boettcher for their work in presenting a virtual camp experience last summer. Although the COVID-19 required us to have to cancel having a summer camp program on site for campers in 2020, this team persevered and was able to think and to act outside of the proverbial box!

In addition, Archdeacon Paul Sneve will be offering a new anti-racism course this October in Pierre, as well as a Dakota Learning Experience in Rapid City. Niobrara Weekends will be continuing as well as a Safe Church training program which all of our clergy will be taking. I am also pleased to announce that the process for those discerning whether God and the Church may be calling them into ordained ministry has been revised over this past year and has reopened. We had our very first priesthood/diaconate information day this past August which was very successful. Two people who were interested in learning about the priesthood attended, five people who were interested in learning about the diaconate attended, and we had eight facilitators. Two other areas that have been identified as being part of the formation star quilt pattern are congregational formation for clergy and lay leaders and formation opportunities for licensed lay ministries.

When it comes to our Transformational Star Quilt, there are eight different areas that have been identified as being a part of that quilt's pattern and they are as follows: racism, suicide, addiction, care for God's creation, disaster preparedness, creating a partnership with the South Dakota Lutheran Synod, interfaith relationships, and helping congregations create local partnerships in their respective contexts. Our hope and plan as we move forward in

these areas is to create eight different groups of people who are interested in these areas of transformational ministry with representation of at least one person from every one of our deaneries.

The last quilt that I will touch on is Advocacy – the telling of our stories. One of the ways that we are beginning to tell our story better is by revamping the format of our diocesan budget and categorizing our expenses underneath our respective star quilts. Just as a congregation’s budget should accurately and transparently tell the story of how it is participating in God’s mission, a diocesan budget should do exactly the same thing. And thus I wish to publicly thank Mitchell Honan, our new Canon for Property and Finances, for working with me in crafting the format of our new diocesan budget and for putting the story of what God is up to in South Dakota into a Microsoft Excel format.

Another part of the pattern of this quilt will be to better tell the story of how we are participating in God’s mission in our reservations. All clergy who are serving in our reservations will be meeting with me and with our diocesan staff three times each year, and our first gathering will be next month. One of the items on our agenda will be to begin crafting and publicizing the ministry efforts

of these mission churches. Working with Canon Chris Corbin, we will begin putting these stories onto the website and including them in the two reports that we are required to give to the National Church concerning how we are using the Block Grant of \$763,550 that is used to pay the salaries of all our mission clergy.

Now, having said all this – and having looked back on how our diocese has been participating in God’s mission since our last convention, and especially so during the past seven months – I continue to think about that baking show that my wife and I saw. I remember well the look on the face of the contestant who was challenged with pumpkin puree while working with lemon curd. I can relate to that look! And so can all of you. Initially, when we were faced with the challenge of COVID-19, we were shocked and stunned. But we reached deep inside of ourselves. We made use of the faithful resiliency and tenacity that God has given us. We believed in God, we continued to follow Jesus, and we trusted each other.

In everything that we have done – in everything that we are currently doing – and in everything that we are planning together to do despite the COVID-19 challenge – we are rejoicing in hope. We are being patient in our suffering. And we are persevering in our

prayers. The fruits that our ministry is growing is testimony to the truth of St. Paul's words – and to what can happen when a diocese, and when congregations, faithfully participate in God's mission.

And so, my brothers, my sisters, my siblings in Christ – may those words of St. Paul be our continual mantra until COVID-19 is no longer a challenge and is no longer a part of our picture. “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” Stay safe. Remain faithful. Continue to love your neighbor and don't forget to love yourselves. And may you know and always remember – Jesus is still our Lord; we are still children of God; the Holy Spirit is still calling us to go forth as God's missionary people; and most importantly of all, you are loved. Amen.