

## Diocesan Convention Address 2019

Dear Friends in Christ —

It is good to see so many of you here at our diocese's 135th Diocesan Convention! And I have to say, it's great to see you all in person! The last time that I saw this body gather together in this place was on May 4th. You were here — I was in Connecticut — and our connection was made possible by the Holy Spirit...and Face Book!

It was on that day that you and the Holy Spirit invited me and my wife, Kim, to move to South Dakota. On that day, you invited me to live amongst you, and lead you, and serve you as your eleventh bishop. To be quite honest, since that time, not a single day has passed that I have not woken up feeling both blessed and very humbled by this new reality. And having now been physically with you, on the ground, since August 1st — and literally having traveled in all directions across our diocese over these past two months — what I suspected was the case back in the fall of 2018 when your search committee and I first began to visit with one another — what I suspected to be the case here in South Dakota proved to be 100% true. The people of the Episcopal Diocese of South Dakota are a blessed people! We are a **very** blessed people!

Last week, I was at my very first House of Bishops meeting in Minneapolis. It was good seeing some old friends, and having a chance to make some new friends. I have to admit, though, I was kind of thrown off track when I first arrived there. When I showed up at the hotel to register, I was handed a name badge and it said, “Jonathan Folts, North Dakota.” I excused myself so that I could log back onto Face Book...and I watched the election video again...just to make sure that I was in the right place...

Now the person who fixed my name tag for me has been a colleague of mine for almost sixteen years. And she knew that I was spending time at night getting ready for our Diocesan Convention because time was growing really, really short! (My staff and I had exactly two months to get ready for this event when I first walked into the office.) And so my friend asked me how my very first diocesan convention address was coming along. And I told her that it was coming along all right...and then she asked me this: “Tell me,” she said, “How do you describe the state of the Church when you've only been there for two months?” And I said, “Oh, that's easy! The state of the Church?...that would be South Dakota! You and I already had that conversation!” “No,” she responded, “I'm being serious. How do you describe the state of the Church when you've only been there for a short period of time?”

So I looked at her — and I got serious — and I told her this: “The state of the Episcopal Church in South Dakota is blessed. We are a very blessed people! And my role as their bishop is to work with them — and to invite and to enlist their help — as together we cast and live into this vision of blessedness wherever we go and through whatever we do.”

You may recall in my sermon last night — (and thank you for coming back today, by the way — I greatly appreciate that) — you may recall in my sermon last night that I said that Jesus, in the fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, called God’s people out as being blessed! He did that through the Beatitudes! Well, my friends — Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is still doing that today! Jesus is calling us out, here in South Dakota, as being blessed! As being very blessed!

Now — I want you to think of the last time that someone called you out! Was that person calling you out because you were being a blessing? Or were they calling you out because of some other kind of behavior?

Those of you who are married or who are in a relationship, let me ask you...the last time that you called your spouse or your partner out...was it for because they were being a blessing? Or was it for some other reason? Those of you who have children or grandchildren living with you at home — think back to the last time that you called them out! Were you calling them out as being a blessing? As being a gift? Or were you calling them out for something else?

Don’t get me wrong, now — there are times where we need to be called out by those who love us because our behavior is less than what it should be. But here’s the thing. It has been proven that when a person is constantly being told how bad they are, and how many mistakes they are making, and how many problems they are causing, and how they never, ever will live up to another person’s expectations — the person who is being talked to starts to believe those words! And they begin to live into the words that are being said to them. And they begin to make that vision of their life a reality!

Conversely — the more that a person is told that they are loved? — and that they are special? — and that they are a gift from God? — and that they are a blessing?...the more that a person is told those kinds of truths, the more they begin to believe those words. And the more they begin to believe those words, the more they begin to live their lives as a blessing. As a genuine blessing! And they start making that vision of their life a reality!

A lot of people don't know that they are blessed...because no one has ever told them. A lot of people don't realize their gifts or their potential calling...because no one has ever brought those gifts to their attention. I was preaching and presiding at the Eucharist at St. Mary's in Promise last Sunday afternoon. There was a teenager at that service, a high school senior, who had come to church with her grandparents. Before the service started, I asked her what she wanted to do after high school — and she told me that she was hoping to go to college in Minnesota and major in social work. And I said, "Oh...have you ever thought about going to seminary?" Her eyes got real wide...her face looked really surprised!...and she answered me and she said,"No." And so I said to her, "I want you to think about it. I really want you to think about it! God's obviously given you a gift of wanting to do social work...you have a compassionate heart...you want to change people's lives for the better! So consider...please consider...whether God might be calling you through your Christian faith to use your compassion and your gifts as a major part of your ministry as an Episcopal priest or deacon."

To her credit, this young lady did not jump into her grandfather's truck and drive away. She stuck around. She stayed for the service. And she may well grow up to be one of the finest social workers of all time! She also may grow up to be one of the finest priests or deacons that the Episcopal Diocese of South Dakota has ever had. Time will tell! And if I have the blessing of ordaining her in seven years — I'm giving her a signed copy of this convention speech!

My point is simply this — people won't know that they are gifted — people won't know that they have gifts that can be used as blessings to others— some people won't know that they are themselves blessed — unless and until we, as the Church, tell them! — and raise them up to live into the blessing that they are!

Throughout the Episcopal Diocese of South Dakota, Jesus is calling us out as being blessed! And being a missionary diocese...say those words with me now, "Being a **missionary** diocese"...being a missionary diocese at heart, we need to live into this calling. This calling of being a blessed people. And we need to make this calling of ours a shared reality!

When I presented myself as a bishop candidate, I shared with you that there are five areas of our life and ministry that I am inviting us all to live into together as God's blessed people in the Episcopal Diocese of South Dakota. Focusing on these five areas, I believe, will help us become not only a bigger blessing to one another — it will also help us become a bigger

blessing, and a more powerful blessing, in the lives of those we touch with the Holy Spirit's help.

**I used to call these five areas the “Five Umbrellas”** — but that was before I was introduced to star quilts. I love seeing people being wrapped up in and enveloped by a star quilt as it is draped over them. I did the same thing for a dear friend of our family, Ruth Schumacher, who lived in Connecticut and whose funeral was two weeks ago. When I returned from Niobrara Convocation, I brought back a star quilt that I had won at Niobrara Convocation — it had been made by St. Elizabeth's Church — and I wrapped that quilt around her just as I had seen done before by others. And Ruth's facial expression was one of joy, one of love, and one of deep blessing.

Thus I now refer to these five areas as being the five star quilts of South Dakota. And as I introduce them and as we begin to live into them, I invite you to see yourself being wrapped up inside each of them. And my prayer and hope is that your life will radiate with that same kind of joy as together we grow and make improvements and adjustments in each of these five areas.

**These five star quilts are: Relations; Communication; Formation; Transformation; and Advocacy.**

These five star quilts are listed, I believe, in order of greatest importance. And that is why you hear *“relations” being listed as number one*. Our relationships with one another through Jesus Christ are the most valuable thing that we have. Without relationships, we are just individual silos — individual silos of faith scattered across our diocese with no connections. When that happens, people begin to feel that they are all alone in this diocese of ours, especially if they are serving and worshipping in far out places. People begin thinking that maybe no one cares — that no one knows that they even exist. And yet — and yet, ironically, when opportunities come around to share fellowship, and to take counsel together at different events, and to build relationships? — too often, I have heard, the response has been, “I'm not going to go. I'm too busy. It's too far. I'm too needed where I am. I cannot come.” And the opportunity is missed.

So when you hear me speaking about how we're going to work on our relationships, know that I am speaking about the whole spectrum of our relationships — I'm speaking about all of our connections with each other, connections that go both ways. I'm speaking about my relationship with our clergy and their relationships with me; I'm speaking about my relationships with our congregations and about their relationships with me. I'm speaking about

the relationships that are enjoyed amongst our clergy and the relationships that exist, and that can exist, between two or more congregations. And I'm talking about your congregation's relationship with the diocese as a greater whole.

As I said, our relationships are the very best thing that you and I can invest our energy in — and why? — because we cannot be the Church all on our own. I was taught that in the early days of South Dakota, people's livelihood and even their very life depended upon the relationships that they had with their neighbors! You could not afford to be on the outs with your neighbor over silly little stuff! Relationships are important. They are life-giving! They are a blessing! And together, our relationships help us to become an even greater blessing!

So there are two things that I am going to invite us to focus on during this next year as far as our relationships with each other are concerned. The first is this — if you are not already doing so, I would like to invite your congregation to consider entering into a partnership relationship with another congregation in our diocese for a year's period of time. That congregation may be within your own town or city — it may be within your own deanery — it may be on the far side of the diocese. I am inviting you to reach out and connect with another congregation. Learn about each other's strengths — your joys — your challenges — and how you both are living out the Christian faith. Learn about how you can support each other through your prayers as well as through your gifts and talents. I am inviting you to explore having a partnership relationship — and then let us know who you have partnered with. For it is my hope, that at our next diocesan convention, we can have some old-fashioned testifying! — and have some people who will come up and witness as to how their partnership has led them to become a stronger blessing of Jesus Christ.

The second thing that I am going to ask to happen is that when there is a clergy conference or a clergy retreat — unless there is a really, really good reason or an absolutely dire emergency, I want our clergy to be there. And I want them there so that they be with each other. And visit with each other. And pray with each other. And support each other. Some of our clergy live in very remote parts of our state. Some of our clergy are serving multiple churches without much support. So when opportunities arise for clergy to come together — I need them to be there. And I need congregations to make sure that they are able to come and that they are given and provided with the means to come! Because when they return to you? — when they come back to do the day in and the day out ministry that they have accepted the call to do — they will come back to you recharged and renewed. They will come back to you knowing that they are

not working alone in this diocese that we live in. So when a clergy person tells you that they are going to be away for an event with other clergy? Give them your blessing — support them — reschedule whatever may need to be rescheduled — and make sure that they take full advantage of being able to check in with their bishop and with their fellow sister and brother clergy.

*The next area or star quilt that I want to address is communications.* You obviously can't have a relationship unless you are somehow communicating. Thus I want us, as a diocese, to start looking creatively at the ways that we are communicating with one another.

There are parts of our diocese that do not have easy access to internet capability. Some of our members have to travel to get online. That's a reality that we have here in South Dakota. So we need to discover ways to ensure that our communications reach those who need them and in a timely fashion. Because if you are not informed, you cannot act. Or worse — if you are not informed like everyone else is being informed, it goes back to that feeling of being alone and out of the loop.

So for my part, and speaking for our diocesan staff, we will be addressing this issue from a diocesan standpoint. And we will come up with a system that will ensure, to the very best of our ability, that information gets to where it needs to get to successfully.

On another note, I have had people in parishes tell me that they have no idea what is happening on our reservations. And that's where most of our congregations are located! At the same time, and this was just a couple of weeks ago, I had a person from one of our reservations tell me that she has no idea what is happening in our parishes! So how we are communicating with each other will also be one of the areas that will be addressed in the coming year.

The last question that I would raise when it comes to communication has to do with how we are communicating with those who are living in our communities. If your parish has a website, how up to date is it? Go home and check that out. If your church has an answering machine, is the message on your machine listing ALL of your services? Is the message listing the times of ANY service? (Check that out when you go home — I guarantee you, speaking as a person who was calling churches, and trying to put this year's bishop's visitation schedule together, some of you are going to be surprised!)

How are congregations getting the word out in their communities about who they are? — and about what they do? As some of you heard me say during the walkabouts, the days of us sitting in church and waiting for people to discover us all on their own have gone and left! Those days have been gone, in fact, for over fifty years, if not more! So how are we communicating information about who we are and about what we do with the people who live in our communities?

So I am inviting you to return home and talk with your clergy, your leaders, and with your congregation about your communication needs and about your communication methods. This will be one of the areas of conversation that I will look forward to having with you during a visitation. And if you are a congregation that publishes a newsletter? I'd be grateful if you would add me to your list! At this point, out of our seventy-eight congregations, I believe that I am currently receiving three. And I l'd love to see that number go up!

*The third quilt is the area of formation.* How are we forming our people on both a diocesan level and on a congregational level? Thunderhead Episcopal Center is a wonderful jewel in our diocese. It has had a long history and has much potential — and I am grateful to those who care about it and who will be willing to explore how it can be used in the future, year round, to be a place where God's people of all ages can come and be formed.

How are we forming our seminarians and the people who are being prepared for ordained ministry? This conversation has begun already — and a hold has been placed upon new people coming into our process until our process can be easily defined and best suit the purposes for ministry here in South Dakota. As I said before, we are a missionary diocese at heart...and thus those whom we will help to form for ordained ministry will be trained to be missionaries. They will be trained to serve missions on reservations and parishes alike. They will be fearless, energetic visionaries with a heart for God's people! — because that's what we need. I am very excited about this formational kind of conversation — and I am particularly excited about the fact that our diocese has garnered the attention from seminaries in the Episcopal Church in training future priests from other dioceses!

Formation will also be a topic of conversation during episcopal visitations — for I am genuinely curious about what your congregations are doing to help form your people. And if you need help in finding resources or ideas, let's raise those questions up. If you haven't thought about raising up a catechist in your church to help form your people, let's talk about that as well.

People are hungry for learning — and in many of our congregations, especially those on our reservations, this kind of formation is going to have to be done, and done well, by the laity.

*The fourth quilt is transformation.* As Christian people — as blessed people — as people of a missionary diocese — we have been called to go forth into God's world and to be God's agents of change! We have been called to be God's agents of transformation! We are people of hope! — with some of us living in areas which, on the surface, can seem pretty devoid of hope because of the number of challenges facing them.

Last June, when I was at a College for Bishops gathering, we had a workshop on how to interact with those in the media. And we took turns being interviewed by the leader who acted like a reporter. And when it came to be my turn, the leader asked me to describe the challenges that we were facing in the Diocese of South Dakota. And so I told him. We have a high unemployment rate; we have a high alcoholism rate; we have a high suicide rate; we have people living in third world conditions right here in the United States; we have racism — I've been told that the ratio of young Native American males being shot by police compared to the ratio of young African-American males being shot by police is four to one; we have false narratives being told by the government insofar as how much "help" Native Americans receive; we have priests serving a multiple number of congregations on their own; we have congregations that cannot be reached during certain parts of the year, etc.

To be honest with you, I thought that I answered the reporter's question pretty well. My colleagues, on the other hand — the other bishops who were in the room? — afterwards, they looked at me and asked, "Where's the hope? Where's the hope? What is your diocese doing about all those situations?" And I looked back at them and defensively said, "Wait, wait, wait! I wasn't asked a question about hope! I was asked a question about our challenges!"

And then they said to me words that I will never forget...words that I will always, as a bishop, remember when talking to other people about the Episcopal Diocese of South Dakota. These bishops said to me, "No one...no one is ever going to ask you about hope! No one is ever going to ask you about how your diocese is helping to make a difference in people's lives! Our country? Our country right now thrives on disaster! When was the latest hurricane? When was the last tornado? When did the latest flood occur and how many people died in it? When was the last mass shooting? What's the latest scandal? Tell us all about the latest conflict!"



Those kinds of stories sell. Those are the kinds of stories that our nation hears about and they feed off of them! Rarely do we hear what's being done in response to those situations. We rarely, if ever, hear about how people are trying to make a difference! And do you know why? Because two or three days after a conflict is over, we've become focused on a brand new disaster! And the previous disaster?...the previous situation?...and the lives of people who were affected just 48 to 72 hours ago? — they're forgotten. They're forgotten.

My brother and sister bishops taught me a very important lesson that day. They taught me that I've got to be one who brings hope into the story. **We've** got to be the ones who bring hope into the stories of South Dakota.

Quick case in point — there was a young woman who went missing, and who was later found to be hanged — her family believes that she was murdered — on the Rosebud reservation. Did the reservation police go looking for this woman when she was reported missing? Nope. Did the FBI go looking for her? Nope. Do you know who went looking for her? We did! The Church did! Mother Lauren Stanley, who is the Supervising Presbyter of the Rosebud Mission West, she got her people moving! She worked with the victim's family, she organized them, she instructed them, she fed them, she energized them...she even involved the two seminarians who were in her charge last summer! And that group of people? — they were the ones who found that young woman. And Mother Lauren helped her community to bury that young woman. And in response...all those officials...all those officials who initially had refused to help or give any assistance whatsoever to the search...they repented. They repented. And they publicly said, "Never again...never again."

That's a transformative story of hope. That is what being a transformative agent in God's kingdom looks like! Even when a part of God's kingdom is confronted by many challenges, we cannot allow ourselves to be convinced that we are powerless! We cannot be convinced that there is nothing that we can do! We are a blessed people! We are a missionary diocese! And as a missionary diocese, we can bring God's **hope** where God's hope is needed! We can bring justice where justice is required! And we can bring love...we can bring God's love...and we can apply that love to hearts that are hurting...and make differences that count...and that matters...and that lasts.

*And that leads me to the fifth and final quilt — the quilt of advocacy.*

We are blessed by other people in the wider Episcopal Church — as well as by people who are not involved in the Episcopal Church at all — people who want to come to South Dakota and be with us, and to do things for us and for our people. **We** are the harvest that the Holy Spirit has called them to explore and to go and do work in. And that's fine. That's fine. We welcome them. And we want them to come.

It honestly does not matter to me that some of these initially may be coming to us because of their curiosity — or because of their sympathy. What does matter to me is that they come — I want them to come and spend time with us. Because in addition to doing whatever it is they are feeling led by the Holy Spirit to do — I want to insist that they take time to listen to us. And be taught by us. And be gifted by us. And be transformed, through the Holy Spirit's power, by us!

Because — the people who are coming to our diocese on mission trips? Folks, those people are part of the harvest that you and I are being called to go into! Many of these people, I believe, are coming to South Dakota with the intention of giving and transforming, and thanks be to God that they are! Partnerships and working relationships that are grounded in Jesus' work are to be welcomed and celebrated!

However! — as I said earlier, a relationship goes both ways! I don't want any mission team coming into South Dakota thinking that they are here only to give — and not to receive. I don't want any mission team coming into South Dakota believing that they, and they alone, possess the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit. They already have made the decision to come and be with us and to work amongst us! And so I want us to deeply engage them — and invite them to sit with us, and listen to our stories, and learn from our elders. I want these folks to return home knowing what God is up to in our diocese, how we have come to know God and how we have come to love God! For in doing so, we will be transforming **them** — and we will be giving them a far, far better gift to take home and use than they could ever purchase at Wall Drug.

Our work is cut out for us. It's a large agenda — there's a lot of work to be done — and I believe that we're up to the task! Because we're God's blessed people — and God is already at work preparing us for some very good things ahead.

Thank you again for inviting me to join you in this newest chapter of our history — may God bless our efforts — may God bless our diocese — and may God bless each and every one of you.