



**State of the Diocese of Upper South Carolina  
Annual Convention Address 2023  
Christ Church, Greenville**

During my first month on the road a little boy probably around nine years old ran up to me with a version of a childhood song I hadn't heard before. Tucking his fingers together, he sang, 'Here's the church, and here is the steeple. Here are the doors, and here are the people . . . caught in a fire . . . Ah, ah, ahhhh!!!' And he ran off screaming. It was hilarious.

But the shocking part was when his grandmother watched him run off and muttered, 'Silly boy, doesn't know that Episcopalians are never on fire.'

So if we are not just fingers caught in a children's rhyme. What are we?

What is a church anyway? I once told a new bishop that I thought he had about two years to make an impact on us clergy. In particular I said he had about two years to define what a church is. It was a bold thing to say borne out of having spent a year thinking about the job from the point of view of the bishop search and nomination committee.

Well, we are almost two years in, so I better get to the job.

It was a bold thing to say because my point of view at the time was shaped by being on a couple of diocesan staffs and serving as a rural dean, but there is a unique point of view to any job, but especially to the over-seer role of bishop. The church looks different from here. Epi-scopal means something more like 'seeing with' but that is not how we bishops interpret it.

The local church from the cathedra is diocesan, something Louis Weil used to say in liturgy class. From my seat, Christ Church and St. Luke's in Columbia and Trinity in Abbeville are congregations within one church.

But from the pew, the local church is first and foremost the congregation, and the diocese is the . . .

Well. I have run into a bunch of different answers to that gap. Nuisance, maybe. Obstacle. And I get it, but our life is defined by our relationships. And I would like to be more than in your way. I would like us to be companions on the Way.

I may even send you Notes along . . .

So, before I catch us up on a few points of 2023, I want to begin there. The diocese is the local church from where I sit. And I would love to direct a few definitions for the next year for every congregation, while knowing that your mileage may vary according to your point of view.

First, a church is an embassy of a world that is and is not yet. The Kingdom of God is not a territory. It has never been synonymous with a "holy land" but rather a promised home for a people. That is a painful thing to say when the land we call holy is aflame with violence. But it must be noted that the priority was always a people who revealed God to the world. "You shall be holy, because I your God am holy." That people already exist, and they are all around you. Your job is to know.

Several years ago the chaplain at the parish day school where I was rector called. She also served as hospital and hospice chaplain for another congregation. She was facing a number of deaths on duty. 'What is my job?' She asked abruptly.

The question seemed important, so I prayed. Not a help me Jesus prayer, but something like that. And the Spirit spoke in my voice. 'Your job is to be the one in the room who knows. You know everything will be okay. You know who they ultimately belong to, and whose they are.'

She shot back. 'Got it. Thanks.' And hung up.

We believe that every human being is created by God to be his child and reveal his grace. Everyone has failed that almighty calling, but everyone has also been redeemed in the cross and given the Way to return and be the vessel of God's grace we were created to be. See Paul's letter to the Romans chapters 3-5.

No one deserves their creation or their calling. Your life is a gift, a grace, of God. Your salvation, your calling, your ultimate life in God is unmerited. So is mine. So we do not presume to judge those who come to us, but we treat everyone who enters the boundaries of our embassy as a child of God, beloved of the Lord and of us.

The church is an embassy and should be safe for everyone. The world is not yet under the Rule of God, so our first job as church is to make that Rule and its benefits available to everyone. We do that in programmatic ways with Safeguarding policies and respectful language. And we do that in simple courtesies, like holding the door for people.

That has to begin with me as God's servant and yours. From here we all have to live God's Reign by letting God rule in us and through us. We have to learn to let God direct our morals and ethics, our kindness and even let God set our boundaries. I am learning to do this in this new seat. Be patient with me. I have found help though.

For years I have meditated on the archetype of the king. Never fully realized in our human limitations, the king embodies the law, sets the boundaries of the land, brings fertility and life, providing for his subjects, and reigns in service to those same subjects. I have come to see that in Christ we have the subversion of authority, unifying reign and self-sacrificial serving one reality in his flesh. See Philippians.

This is love embodied, giving of oneself for the good of the other, while leading, providing, and giving life.

There will be a day when we will see his Kingdom with our own eyes. We pray for it daily in his prayer. Until then we live as ambassadors of our Lord in embassies of his reign.

Our practices then are hospitality and repentance. Hospitality because we are to welcome all to God's presence. Repentance because we have all failed and carry the habits of sin in our bodies as Paul writes

in his letters to the Romans and even more heartbreakingly to the Corinthians. We must give up that which would keep us from welcoming others with open arms, whether that is greed or pride or politics or prejudice.

So we welcome and we repent because we are an embassy.

Second, a church is a school where we learn to live the Way of Christ.

The Way we follow is not like the ways of the world. It is a deception that we can do as we learn to do in the catechisms of YouTube or the evening news. The Mutual of Omaha Wild Kingdom biological anthropology has taught us that we are little more than what our genes express and our hormones dictate, predator or prey, and that our value is in what we accumulate, capture or kill.

The Way teaches us that human beings are of inestimable worth, and we are called to be generous protectors of other people's lives in Christ. We are generous because of what we have as our inheritance. We protect other lives and value because we are the ones who know what they are truly worth, whether they know it yet or not.

This is what we have to learn and be apprenticed in and be reminded again and again. Sermons, newsletters, Bible Studies, and times of prayer reshape our internal lives, mind and heart and spirit and will, into "little-Christ", Christians.

We study to do what we are called to do. The church is a school of Truth.

Third, a church is a gymnasium of the spiritual life. It is where we work out, where we practice the resurrected life. We practice life in Eucharist and meals, in service and welcome, in study and prayer. But we also practice in fasting and reading, disciplining the body and mind and heart and spirit. Because these days of peace can make us soft and selfish.

We American Christians are like children who live in a gated community in a violent metropolis. We are generally safe, if sometimes a little bothered. But our danger is mostly from the noise of suffering in

other places, outside the wall. Let us not complain but train. And let us go outside these walls when we can to serve those whose lives are in danger.

Tertullian wrote in a little monograph "On Patience," we fast so that we will be able to share our bread when famine comes. He gives other examples, but one will suffice for time. We fast now so that we can be generous when the famine comes. And we can be sure that the days of hunger will come in our lifetime or our children's.

Jocko Willink a retired Navy Seal and minor celebrity these days says that he is always aware that "the enemy is always out there." I was bothered at first about a life defined by his past wars. And then I remembered First Peter 5:8, "Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour."

Do not fall prey because of a weak spiritual life. Work out, train, practice. Fast, pray for a little longer this week than last week. Maybe there is an app for that? Read a book of the Bible and really think about it. Read Sunday's readings on Saturday and be prepared for the sermon.

When I teach the spiritual life to people, I steal from the Seal training the terminology that everybody needs a swim buddy and a boat team. You need one life or death partner a soul friend. And you need a small tactical group you trust. These must be cultivated and kept holy.

What does it look like to fall prey to Satan? I think we imagine some drunken ruinous life that ends in a gutter, but I have come to see that the light of Christ can be missing from a suit or an evening dress while a street person may carry a brightness you can barely stand. The deceiver will leave you convinced you are good just like you are while you serve him well.

In the gym of the church we practice the resurrected life that we know is here but is not yet visible, a life beyond the fear of suffering and the pall of death. The church therefore should be a place of inestimable joy.

Not fake joy. Not entertainment or mockery, not drunken debauchery, but deep and abiding joy. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians, but it is also a discipline of the mind and heart and spirit. Take some time to smile and reflect on the things that you are grateful for. And even more, be joyful in all things.

You cannot fake joy, but you can get in touch with it. Do not confuse seriousness with reverence. Wisdom has laughter in it.

We all know that Episcopalians can mistake a posture of reverence for a countenance of indigestion. You may have to practice a contented smile and a belly laugh.

To practice joy, keep a prayer journal of gratitude. Say thank you a dozen times a day. You will find that you are gifted with opportunities to bless people's lives and bring a little Kingdom to them when you are thanking God for the glimpses that you have been given. Don't let a blessing go unthanked.

In our care of the diocesan wide church this past year, we have focused on the remodeling of the Diocesan House staff and business, focusing on customer service to you and hospitality. We have added Dana Lindsey as executive assistant to the bishop and the Venerable Janey Wilson as archdeacon, and the canon overseeing transitions.

We have sought to orient the House toward the congregations and clergy. We have sought together to be more pastoral and present, especially in transitions and conflicts.

Anyone who has worked somewhere for a long time knows the difficulties of transition, and I want to take a moment to give thanks to the entire Diocesan House staff for their work in really opening up in new ways and staying faithful to those things that have worked well. We have tried to communicate more, welcome more, and to hold a posture of working with instead of fixing congregations, and all while still getting health insurance and bills paid. Where we have failed, blame the new bishop. But for every success, thank Stephen Rhoades, Janey Wilson, Dana Lindsey, Chanda Kelly, Cynthia Hendrix, Katelyn Kenney, Courtney Thompson, and Frank Ballard.

They are a joy to work with and a blessing to the Diocese.

This year's turn to the congregations began last year with the Standing Committee supporting us making Martin Darby's work with congregations a part of our House budget, supporting both in individual communities, focusing on vestry leadership and clergy, and with the Commission on Congregations, small church retreats for the last two years at Camp Gravatt.

In Transitions we have taken feedback from last year and revamped the presentation that Canon Rhoades and Archdeacon Wilson do for churches when a clergy person leaves, and we are working on ways to recruit strong candidates while supporting congregations in transition.

I recognized them last night, but I want to brag a little bit about who God has called to join us in just the last few months. I get the privilege of meeting new clergy who are coming in view of a call, and we have really gotten some of the best. I even get calls from other bishops who are fine, but they point out that we are stealing the best of the shepherds.

And we should, we have the best of God's flock.

A dear seminary classmate showed up last year to say she had moved to the Diocese in "retirement." But the Rev. Lynn Sanders has tremendous gifts and vision, so I asked her to help me out by helping lead Mutual Ministry Reviews for a couple of new colleagues, and she took my request and turned it inside out. She calls them Mutual Ministry Studies and dives into the needs and even the history of a congregation and their ministry to discover where the calling of God may be for the next phase of ministry. She has helped some places that were rumbling find ways to start singing again. Thank you, Lynn.

Speaking of colleagues. When I was elected one of my major insights was that I was being called to serve and lead clergy who were often more talented, wise, and experienced than I am. It was a humbling realization, but as I pondered who was in a similar boat, I thought of the great sports coaches who led great players, and listened to *Eleven Rings* by Phil Jackson.

Jackson led both the Bulls and Lakers in the Jordan and Kobe years to so many championships, but more importantly was the way he lead.

We have some of the Jordans and Kobes of priesthood and diaconate here. I am so grateful and proud of our clergy, like 99% of the time. (Joking.)

The work that clergy have put in through COVID has left many of our best people tired and even sick. We have lost some great men and women to the burnout of the last few years, and sometimes to just early retirement. But we were already facing a significant clergy shortage that has not been helped by the pandemic.

Beyond recruitment of experienced and talented pros, we are also working to bring up new priests and deacons. This year we were able to reopen a new and heavily revised discernment program. Canon staff and the Commission on Ministry worked to shorten and focus the process so that there is clarity and kindness to putting your life forward for examination and call. I am grateful for all of their work. And at the Day of Discernment back in March we had 41 people come. We just interviewed 17 who have been through local discernment groups and moving forward toward one of the orders of ministry.

Keep the people who are willing to put their lives forward in prayer, o Diocese. And pray for new people to be called into a life in vocational ministry.

We have an incredible diversity of folks in discernment, and we have many opportunities to serve, but we are also facing a very different field of service today.

As many of you know, half of our denominational seminaries have moved to online or hybrid programs, and there are fewer people going into three year seminary formation than at anytime over the last fifty years or more. We are seeing tremendous calls to bi-vocational and late life vocations, which we are finding ways to respond to appropriately.

The Commission on Ministry in particular is tasked with creating discernment processes and making recommendations to the bishop about ordination and lay vocations. It is a more complicated time to serve in that role than ever. But it also a blessing to enter deeply into prayer and discernment together with such called people.



One of the primary questions for us is how to name and form people who may not fit the called and responded as a young adult model that dominated the distant past. We are seeing people who come forward with lifetimes of ministry experience now ready to follow the call into vocation, and we are seeing people called who have found their way back to faith more recently and need a longer and fuller formation. This work will not be simple, and we could all use your prayers and patience as we seek to raise up a new generation of leaders, lay and ordained, who are examined and called in ways that “respect the dignity of every human being.”

They will be called to work in a church that is changing, and frankly that is getting smaller.

Our beloved Episcopal Church is shrinking, notice I do not say "dying." In the last ten years, we have lost 36% of our baptized members in this Diocese. In the Episcopal Church at large the number is -43.2%, with the only upward trends over the last decade coming from South America. The data is staggering. And these numbers are all post-2012 and the formation of ACNA or AMIA. The decline is across all provinces and all North American dioceses. You can find the reports at the General Convention Office website.

In the last two years our ASA here went up by 238 but our membership went down by 503 according to latest parochial report data. Our own return from COVID from 2021 to 2022 was less impressive than other dioceses at 7.1% while others were around 13 to 14%.

I want you to get a sense of the true landscape of the Episcopal Church. This tracks with Protestant, non-evangelical, numbers according to Pew Research studies. There is decline across the board, but we mainliners are feeding the "nones" at an alarming rate. We are not raising our children to follow in our footsteps.

With General Convention coming next summer, it is easy to look at denominational issues as definitive, but the numbers show that this decline is ours. This is not their problem. We must reclaim our purpose and calling as a church in this diocese. We must proclaim the Gospel Truth, and we must proclaim it to other people. And that will take faith.

I know some of you wince at the word Truth, especially capitalized. But if we know Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and we know who he is and the God he reveals, we should be sharing that Truth boldly. But that is not what is happening.

All of this looks like a loss of faith in our faith. As I look at these numbers in aggregate, the landscape of our branch of the Jesus movement has suffered from a decline in the faith itself. When people are no longer concerned when their children do not share their religious faith, it indicates that they hold the faith to have little intrinsic value. If something is valuable, I want my children to have that valuable thing. If something leads to life, joy, and peace, I long for that to belong to my offspring because I want my children to have life, joy, and peace.

At dinner with seminary professors from a neighboring denomination years ago, Amy and I were shocked to hear them rejoicing that their children were marrying outside the faith or even just shacking up long-term with people of no faith. It was shocking but mostly because of how normal it has become to accept that our children will not see the value of the faith that we profess. What have we not shown them? What do we not value in our faith?

We must go back to our congregations within this great church with a renewed call to be ambassadors of God's grace and rule. We must discipline ourselves as Christ's followers and a people of the Way of God. And we must learn to have joy again after such a season as we have seen and no matter what the future holds.

Now, when we send you home tomorrow, what will you carry with you?

The church is changing demographically in that we are declining. We are riding the last threads of the coattails of the so-called glory days of whenever. But our calling has not changed. It is time that we renew it. This is our time.

At the Diocesan House we are renewing staff and customer service. At the Commission level we are renewing our focus on healthy and thriving congregations and clergy, even as we all are called into a new and changing landscape. But that is not enough.

I want my children to have the faith that I have! I want you to have the faith that I have! I want you to know the God that I know! I want you to know who you are in my God's eyes! I want you to experience the life that I know! the joy that I experience! the peace that I bring with me wherever I go because I have peace with God because of Jesus Christ. I want you to know God's blessings and favor!  
I want you to know who you were Created to be, whose you were Created to be, and who you really are in Christ.

And I want you to experience that in our church, our congregations. I want you to own it and give it away!

Our church is an embassy of God's Grace and Rule, hospitable, open, and in training to stay until Christ comes back, to thrive and grow until we stand before him to hear the words, Well done, my good and faithful church.

We have a radically different stance to offer the world. And that stance has the chance to change the trajectory of our denomination and if I may be so bold, of Christianity. But only if you take it and make it your own.

The stance is this, nothing matters as much to me as God's grace poured out through us to the world. "God loves the world so much that he gave his first-born son so that whosoever has faith in him shall not die but have eternal life."

The character of God is grace, to give love freely without making the recipient earn it. How do we love this way? How do we offer our lives this way? How can I love you without making you earn it?

With Benedict of Nursia, I have to begin in humility. I am only here by God's grace. That is my worth. Everything else is not much compared with that. I am of little account, and you are the Beloved of God. I know that in my bones.

We use the phrase "respect the dignity of every human being" which is another way of expressing this idea. As deacons, we serve those who are not able to serve us. As priests, we preach, proclaim, and lead

communities who do not deserve grace but are called to pour it out into our parishes. And as bishop, well, I am working on that.

As lay people you get the greater freedom because you get to discover the particular ways that God can use you to take that grace into the world. God gets to be way more creative with you.

Let us work to build congregations where that creativity gets full reign. Where God's grace is known and available to all. Where all are formed to live as Christ's ambassadors in the world, and where joy flows like a river from God's throne.

We have the Holy Spirit to guide us, Christ who has redeemed us, and God who has called us his own, no matter who is prowling around outside the door or what tomorrow brings. Beloved we are called by his name. He will not forsake us. Let us get out there on the Way.

+Daniel

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