

81st Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester

Trinity Episcopal Church, Geneva, NY

Our thoughts and prayers continue with all who have been affected by Sandy and its aftermath. I have been in touch with bishops in the affected areas. Thank you for your generous acts during these tenuous times.

I wish to begin with a big thank you to the epicenter of my ministry as your Bishop: Roja, whom folks at St. John Fisher College know as Dr. Jebaroja Singh. She is my rock and my joy, and on any given day when the load seems heavy and the road long, I know I have an abiding friend in her. She tells me the truth and walks with me. Thank you for who you are to me, my love. Thanks be to God we live in a state where the gift of marriage and the freedom to marry is available to all. We are grateful for our children, Ned and Eklan, our dog, Kiara, and our cat, Juliana, who share this journey with us.

I am also grateful for the excellent Diocesan House staff members who bring their gifts, passions, diligence, generous spirits, and a commitment to genuine relational growth of the church as we support the entire Diocese. *Please stand and be recognized.* We are so very grateful to the saints of Trinity Episcopal Church in Geneva for their generous hospitality in opening their significant spaces to all of us for this annual Diocesan event. My personal thanks to the leadership of The Rev. David Hefling, Rector of St. John's in Canandaigua, and The Rev. Karen Lewis, Priest In Charge here at Trinity, along with the entire planning committee that has done yeomen's work in attending to so many details to make this convention a joyful event for the Diocese. *Committee, please stand and be recognized.*

Let us pause now to give thanks for all who have been Baptized, Confirmed or Received into this Communion since our last Convention.

[Slide Show]

God be with you

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon *these* your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised *them* to the new life of grace. Sustain *them*, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give *them* an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. *Amen.*

We are entrusted with the sacred responsibility of nurturing these new believers after we have baptized, confirmed and received them.

The Episcopal Diocese of Rochester is a collection of 48 congregations spread around eight counties answering the call of God to be the living body of Christ here, now and in the future. The Church has endured all kinds of difficulties in the past and is still here. I am happy to tell you that the Episcopal Diocese in its various congregations and organizations is in different stages of engaging a culture that has changed and is changing in seismic ways. I hope I am right when I say that I cannot think of any congregational system in our diocese that is continuing to remain in a state of denial about the changes that have occurred outside our doors. I see a growing desire to be relevant in our different contexts. Of course, adaptive change is more of a learned behavior than technical change, which is expedient, but without a long range scope/vision. For instance, adaptive change is about nurturing a spirit of genuine hospitality among all our members because of the joy we share in Christ Jesus while technical change would be about orienting a welcoming committee; an usher with a card and a polite demeanor. Both kinds of change are necessary, but technical change is shallow without adaptive change.

I do see creative experimentation in missional startups, collaborative leadership, intentional study of the scriptures, and joyful worship with a heart and ear for diverse liturgical and musical offerings. I also see an expressed desire for greater transparency and accountability at several levels. Now, all of this is happening in different places while there is also an acknowledgement of depleting financial resources, which in the past were seemingly more readily available. In these lean economic times, we are being moved from doing church to being church. We are being led to be the body of Christ to nurture a hungry world, heal a hurting world, and comfort a disturbed world. While we cannot spend our time adoring the great buildings we have inherited we can optimize their use since they can be assets to God's mission. I am heartened to know of some congregations that are daring to drill into such discernment. We are being reformed to refocus on the main thing: to be the living, loving and joyful body of Christ.

This work of refocusing is mainly possible because of leadership that is an outpouring of our baptism. One of the main leadership resources that God is raising up and using during this season of increasing the number of churches who are growing into their context is the growing role of our Laity; the 99% who occupy the pews in our churches and spend a major portion of their time engaging the real world in real time. Example: The St. George's in Hilton story. Of course, an enriched laity is most often possible when there is or has been good priestly leadership.

Let me give you a sense of how important priestly leadership is seen to be by vestries across this diocese. Due to retirements, moves, and the need for associate priests, we have had a high turnover rate in our priestly leadership. More than 63% of the clergy who have been called to clerical leadership in our varied ministries have responded to calls in the past four years. Some of them were local without having to move too far, but some of them have moved here from other Dioceses like: San Diego, Ohio, Natal in South Africa, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Central New York, Indiana, Southern Virginia, Long Island, Mississippi, and New Jersey. In most search processes, the expressed desire of the lay leadership was to discern

and call priests who would come and help them grow as baptized Christians in an Episcopal ethos; not to do church but be church. Commission on Ministry has taken on the much needed responsibility of coordinating mentoring and support of newly ordained clergy.

While we are on the topic of lay and clergy leadership I wish to extend our congratulations to the Rev. Canon Denise Yarbrough on her new position as Director of Spiritual and Religious Life in the University of Rochester. We wish you well, Denise, in the new leadership position affording more of the bridge building that you so passionately do in the name of Christ's inclusive love. We are grateful to The Rev. Bill Petersen, for stepping up to be the coordinator of Anglican Studies at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School. This partnership with General Theological Seminary and CRCDS is growing steadily. We are now the second highest student body on the Hill. Bishop McKelvey's leadership as Interim President has been significant to the discerned call of the newly installed President of CRCDS, The Rev. Dr. Marvin A. McMickle, our Preacher at the Eucharist later today.

We also give thanks for the leadership provided by the Rev. Canon Peter Peters in the area of Vocational Discernment and Leadership Development over the past two years. Peter will be stair-stepping towards retirement over the next year and will serve within a limited scope in the discernment process while coaching the Laity Committee of the Commission on Ministry to support the ministry of all the baptized. I am personally grateful for his place, wisdom, theological acumen and unique Aussie humor at the table during executive staff meetings. We will miss you at the table, Peter. Thanks mate!

This year we will also say good bye to Canon Karen Noble Hansen who will retire after 12 years of service to the Diocese as CFO and these last two years as CIO. We are grateful to Karen for her leadership among us and wish her many years of good health, and much joy in her musical explorations. We will have a special resolution later today celebrating Karen's leadership in our midst.

And now I invite all the veterans in our midst to stand and be recognized for their leadership and devotion to our beloved country. Thank you for your service.

Two stories of transformational leadership from among the laity...

Not all of our congregations are able to afford full time clergy anymore. As a Diocese, we have discerned the need to make some bold investments under special circumstances in some congregations that have shown demonstrable signs of potential for growth. A good portion of our budget goes in this direction. We have balanced such discernment with our willingness to concur when a vestry of a small and declining congregation says it is time to close their congregation. We will do this officially in three places in the Southern Tier that have come to this conclusion. We give thanks for the faithful ministry of word and sacrament in these places and will use any available assets remaining in that region to further the mission of Christ.

Regardless of whether it is an investment of resources for the future or a discernment to say “when” with gratitude for a ministry that is complete, it is all an investment in Christ our eternal joy. Therefore, there is always in Christ, a commingling of birth and death, of beginning and ending, of formation and transformation, of water and wine, of heaven and earth. It is all mysteriously held together in the Eucharistic experience of gratitude because nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

In an age of growing cynicism concerning any authority, I am embarrassed that I have observed some uncharitable treatment of one another from time to time in our church. As with any system we too have circumstances when we do not all see eye to eye on matters of consequence. However, especially during those times we may be reminded that our common witness to the presence of Christ in our midst is in the practice of love. Jesus did point this out on a vulnerable night in his journey when washing his disciples’ feet he reminded them of his respectful love for each one and said: “by this shall all know that you are my disciples if you have love, one for another.” Therefore, beloved, let us bathe in the spirit of Archbishop William Temple, to grow in God’s reign which has justice for its foundation and love for its law. I grew up in a time and a culture where I stood up for an older person when he or she walked into a room regardless of who they were. It was just a simple sign of respect for wisdom and I strive to do this even today. In an increasingly cynical culture when we easily objectify the “other” as “enemy” whom we can then treat disrespectfully, Christ calls us to a higher value in collectively guarding each other’s dignity and saving each other’s pride. When there are disagreements, I hope we will choose the option to speak the truth in love and listen to one another.

You might have noticed that my style of leadership is a balanced combination of discernment through collaboration and direct action with sufficient clarity. We have had a few thoughtful processes of engagement around issues such as apportionments, Communications, Diocesan Council’s Congregational Development partnership and Mission partnership, Commission on Ministry’s reorganization to enhance the ministry of all the baptized and an Episcopal School Exploration experiment. I must also acknowledge the faithful work of the last year’s Marriage Task Force as well as the Retiree Health Benefits Task Force, both of which resulted in significant clarity that helped create a meaningful way forward. Convention 2011 commissioned the Apportionment Task Force under the leadership of The Very Rev. Jim Adams, Dean of the North East District and Rector of St. Peter’s in Geneva. After a two-year discernment process with listening opportunities around the Diocese, this Task Force has completed its work. It will report and make a recommendation to us later today. We are grateful for their dedicated work to help us continue to be less congregational and more diocesan as followers of Christ in these challenging times.

Earlier this year, the Communications Search Committee set off on its discernment under the leadership of Mr. Dick Van Belzen, of Christ Church in Pittsford. I wish to thank Dick and the

committee for their perseverance, patience and eventual clarity. They have worked with creativity and sensitivity to identify and present to me a thoughtful young follower of Christ with a heart for spreading the joy of Christ and the skills to help us do this well. He is an Episcopalian who comes to us from Florida and assures me that he is well seasoned to the North American winters since he went to school in Toronto. It is with great joy that I present to you our Communications Missioner, Mr. Matt Townsend. Matt, speak to us!

We have more processes that are ongoing and are grateful for the rising leadership to help us navigate challenging waters. I am convinced that congregations that are willing to do the heavy lifting in prayerful discernment of vision and mission have a much better shot at growing spiritually than those that don't. The evidence is indisputable. Less than ten years ago, Two Saints and St. Stephen's entered a partnership and as part of this process engaged a visioning process identifying measurable markers. Today they both are in a better position than they were in terms of vitality and joyful mission. They are living into the dream of a vital presence in a city, which as of All Saints Day in just this year has had 35 homicides. Three congregations have embarked on similar processes in the last year and all three are sensing new life and are signing on to covenants to monitor and evaluate their journey. Recently, about twelve people went through training as Facilitators to help congregations do the work of strategic planning using appreciative inquiry as a methodology. Friends, it is adequately clear that developing a vision and a path to realize it is crucial for us to thrive as a church. If this is necessary for congregations I contend that it is equally important for us as a Diocese. With that in mind, I will commission a Strategic Planning Task Force by the end of this year inviting it to make recommendations to our 82nd convention.

In closing, if joy in Christ is our vision keeping us on the path like the star of Epiphany did with the Maggi and like the North Star did for escaping slaves in the dangerous season of the underground rail road, the mission God entrusts us with is that we grow as congregations in spiritual and missional leadership. Growth is not so much a strategic plan as it is the very heart of the Holy One. The triune God whom we worship and adore essentially is about growth, vitality and new life. All of creation from generation to generation is resplendent with this cry of regeneration and growth! Our Lord Jesus Christ kept promising and practicing the gift of life abundant! The Holy Spirit is that one last hope for human kind through whom we know that God has not given up on this, our island home. Every crying baby, every new dream, every new day gives us yet another reason to believe that we are meant to grow in every way, all the time, now and through eternity. May God who calls us to grow also grant us the increase as necessary in due season. May we be ready to receive it thankfully with affection for one another! Rejoice in the Lord then, little flock, again I say rejoice! Amen