

The Rt. Rev. J. Scott Mayer - Convention Address
2009 Annual Diocesan Convention
Amarillo Civic Center
September 12, 2009

I want to begin this morning by expressing my gratitude to a number of people. First, thank you to the people of St. Andrews for your gracious hospitality, especially Clifton and Jo Mann, M.J. Coats, and H.Q. Wrampelmeier.

I also would like to publicly acknowledge and thank my office staff. I inherited a great staff, who works together as a team, and who understands that their role is to facilitate ministry within and beyond this diocese.

Carolyn Hearn, as you know, is the Executive Secretary to the Bishop, and has served this diocese in that capacity for over 30 years. I am her 4th bishop to train, and I cannot overstate her value to me and the Diocese of Northwest Texas – and besides all that, she is a confidant and friend. I wonder if you've ever noticed that the root word to "secretary" is "secret." I suspect she has forgotten more than most clergy have heard.

Anna Mora is our Financial Manager, and most recently she has taken on insurance as well. She has served with us for just almost two years, working closely with Carrol Holley, our Diocesan Treasurer. We can have utmost confidence in Anna's ability, and it's a bonus that she has a delightful personality, a willing spirit, and a great sense of humor.

Nancy Igo is now our Ministries Coordinator. When Nancy arrived on the scene she was given the title "program manager" because, basically, she did everything else that Carolyn and Anna did not do. She still does. But we have noticed that her role includes Transition Officer (once called Deployment Officer), and Safeguarding God's Children, and Clergy Wellness programs, and ministry licensing, as well as House Steward of the Hulsey Center. I made the observation that mostly Nancy equips the rest of us for ministry. She was willing to accept the title "equipment manager" but we thought better of it – so she is Ministries Coordinator.

I also want to thank – along with my office staff – those who were particularly helpful toward our transition from Abilene to Lubbock. The people of Heavenly Rest in Abilene have been especially generous, and the Episcopalians of Lubbock have been especially hospitable. Special thanks to Bill and Pat Russell, Carrol and Helen Holley, Jackie Batjer, Leon Swift, Cliff Craig, Mary Glover, and Wallis and Sheila Ohl.

And while on the topic of transitions, I want to express gratitude to those who have served sacrificially and with distinction in leadership positions during this transition: Leon Swift, President of the Standing Committee; Phil Rapstine, Vice President of the Executive Council; David Stidham, Vice President of the Board of Trustees, Carrol Holley, our Treasurer; Tom Choate, our Chancellor, and Cliff Craig, Chair of the Nominating and

Transition Committee. And to Louise Cummins, along with Carolyn and Jackie and everyone who offered themselves to make the March 21st consecration such a beautiful and meaningful event, thank you.

And finally – Jesus said the last shall be first – I want to acknowledge and thank my most supportive partner in all of this, my best friend and the love of my life – Kathy.

For less than six months I have been your bishop. Two weeks ago while making a visitation to St. James in Dalhart, Nancy Igo was taking some post-liturgical group photos. I was distracted, looking off somewhere, when Nancy said, “Bishop!” And I actually turned and looked. I don’t know if that’s good news or bad news, but I suspect it was inevitable.

From the beginning – even before the election – I said that I did not believe it would be the new bishop’s role to take office and declare the vision for the diocese, that a vision is not imposed from the top. The bishop is the vision bearer, but vision comes out of community discernment – which is yet to come.

Having said that, I would like to share with you my initial priorities during this first year.

1. My first priority is to get around this vast diocese, and get to know you. In some capacity I have visited about half of our congregations, and by the end of this academic year I will have made an official visitation to all of you. I want you to know what I am finding. I am finding that every congregation has a core leadership with a high level of talent, commitment, and desire to be faithful. I am finding congregations who are proud to be Episcopalians. I am finding congregations who are confident about the future, and eager to share in the vision and mission of this diocese. And I am finding the kind of people one expects to find in this part of the world – how my friend Bob Batjer used to describe a good Texan: “he will tear up his own pickup truck while pulling a stranger’s pickup out of a ditch.”

2. Apportionment Relief. Even before the consecration in March, the Standing Committee and I were working to meet the challenges of the national economic downturn by providing apportionment relief to our congregations. As you know by now, Carrol Holley worked miracles to make it possible to give relief in the amount of 3%. We did this without negatively impacting any current ministries or changing any personnel. You will notice when you examine the budget that we did not fill any open positions on the diocesan staff, we reduced our giving to DFMS, and we used resources from a recently closed mission. We will be presenting the same reduced apportionment rate for 2010 during this convention for your approval. I want to emphasize that this “relief” is intended to be a compassionate response to an unforecasted economy, and is not so much driven by vision. That will be addressed later.

3. You are the Diocese. It is a priority of mine to communicate that you are the diocese. The diocesan office is not the diocese. You are. I acknowledge that this is not going to be easy to communicate, and that I may violate the number one rule of being Episcopalian which is: we don’t harp on anything. I acknowledge that finding the right language will be a challenge, as for example, we call the budget on which you will vote “the diocesan budget.” Consequently, congregations see themselves as sending money “off to the diocese.” We

talk about leaders who serve at the quote “diocesan level,” as if congregational service is not diocesan. We call the bishop’s visit a visitation, as if the bishop is a guest. Finding new language will be a challenge. But, you are the diocese. For just one example in re-thinking this, a reduction in apportionment rate is not a diocesan budget cut. It is a re-allocation of resources within the diocese. And you decide that.

4. Diocesan Discernment Task Force. As I said earlier, it is a high priority to form a task force to discern the vision and mission of this diocese for the next few years. The make-up of this task force will be drawn from current members of the Standing Committee and the Executive Council, along with a few others in leadership roles. The Bishop’s Visitation schedule (that word again – visitation) for the next year allows for several Saturdays to partake in this process work. A year from now we should present to you a new vision and its supporting strategy and budget.

[These next 3 ministries are given priority in this year’s budget.]

5. Part-time Diocesan Youth Coordinator. Renee Haney has accepted the call to serve in this much needed position. Renee will support and promote diocesan youth programs and camps, serve as a resource for congregations, and provide training for adults working with young people. She comes to us with a wealth of experience, having served in similar positions in Kansas.

6. I have asked that we set aside resources in order to develop a new website. We are grateful for Jim Liggett’s offering to serve as Webminister for the past decade. Jim acknowledges that our website was “state of the art” over a decade ago, but it is time for a new one. The days are gone when a website was a novelty. This needs to be a tool for communication, obviously, but also a tool for evangelism.

7. And, we have also made room in the budget to bring in speakers for such events as Clergy Conference or Diocesan Convention or consultant to our task force. How those resources will be allocated remains to be determined.

8. Bishop Quarterman Conference Center Task Force. At our last meeting of the Conference Center Board it became very apparent that it was time to do some serious discernment work. A task force was created from throughout the diocese. A consultant met with us for the first meeting of two meetings thus far. You will hear from our director, Jamie Goldsten, later today – as well as from our Archdeacon, Chris Wrampelmeier, and I suspect they will share with you something about our progress in this discernment process.

I want to acknowledge some things about the conference center. First, it was a very generous gift of 240 acres of wonderful climate and big sky. Second, it is debt free. Third, its claim that “Lives Change Here” is true. Fourth, for some people it is nothing less than what the Celtics call “a thin place” – a thin place where heaven and earth meet. Fifth, our director, Jamie Goldsten, is totally devoted to this place and to exercising hospitality to those who come. She offers herself sacrificially to the ministry of this place. And sixth – one of the brutal facts – it takes money to operate it.

9. Campus Ministries at Texas Tech – Canterbury. I know very little about campus ministries. Our new Canterbury chaplain, Phil Webster, is trying as tactfully as possible to teach me. Over the summer he worked toward reorganizing the operating structure of Canterbury, putting in place better Safeguarding procedures, planning for the day school starts, and most obviously, contacting prospective students. Letters were mailed to every known incoming Episcopalian, and this Fall's attendance reflects that effort.

10. Practice Disciplines. Again, the last shall be first. Or it should be. It is a priority that I will continue to practice my spiritual disciplines, which include prayer, study, teaching, physical exercise, and sabbath time. I might add, it is not an accident that on 6 particular Sundays in the Fall, I will be within driving distance of Lubbock. I'm not sure that qualifies as a spiritual discipline, but I bet we are all grateful that this convention date was moved from its original date – during the Tech – A&M football game. (I hope that's not too insulting to the Rice Owls, as Tech plays them tonight, but there are far more Aggies.)

These are my 10 initial priorities. The key word is "initial." Certainly, there are crucial ministries missing from this list – ministries which reflect the vision of this diocese. Again, that vision work lies on the horizon – so to speak.

Now if we are honest, much of my report thus far could have been given at the annual meeting of most not-for-profits. We've use such words as: leadership, talent, commitment, priorities, vision, mission, allocation of resources, task force, structure, personnel, and of course budget.

Any good operation, including the Church, should be using such language and concepts in both the challenging times and the best of times. But now ... I would like to shift gears to this year's theme.

The theme of this year's convention is "Walk in love, as Christ loved us" – taken from the verse in Ephesians (5:2), saying, "Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God." Probably most heard in our tradition as the offertory sentence before the liturgy moves us to the table, this is a comprehensive passage with a number of key words. I'm not going to unpack all that – at least not now – but I would like to hold this year's theme in front of you for the next few moments.

Convention Address - Part II

As I have been traveling around the diocese over the past five months, I have been suggesting from the pulpit that it's a new day for Christianity – at least in Northern America; that just as the Spirit "swept over the face of the waters" in the beginning of creation, and just as the Spirit came upon the Blessed Virgin Mary, and a child was born, and just as the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism, and just as the Spirit descended upon the followers of the Risen Christ at Pentecost, ... that same Spirit is blowing through Christianity in a new way. Like a wind that "blows where it will," the Holy Spirit is uncontrollable and untamable. And it is an exciting time to be a Christian.

That may be a surprising claim, given that the polls say that fewer people are calling themselves “Christian;” and many wring their hands over the decline in numbers and loss of influence throughout Western Civilization; and probably no Christian tradition in our time has escaped the pain of division.

And yet, I believe a new wind is blowing, and it cuts across denominational boundaries, and includes everything from the mega-church to the home church, and from evangelical to catholic, and it transcends our categories and labels of “liberal and conservative” or “progressive and fundamentalist.”

Some scholars have suggested that we are in a new Reformation (re-formation). Phyllis Tickle, the sociologist and author, calls this period in our history “The Great Emergence.” Dr. Tickle will be speaking at St. Nicholas in Midland during October, and I hope you will make every effort to hear her. “There is a new movement of the Spirit among us,” she says. We are part of an emerging Church.

Whatever we call this new day, it appears that a fundamental shift in our self-understanding is beginning to emerge. One way I’ve heard it described is this: Christianity is moving from presenting itself as a “system of beliefs” to presenting itself as a “way of life.”

For people are hungry for more than doctrine, more than “head knowledge” about God. People are hungry for an encounter with God. People are starved for a WAY of life which leads to a sense of God’s presence, a PATH which leads to the abundant life which Jesus promises, a PATH which leads to a sense of being alive. That’s the shift we are seeing. And more and more Christians from every corner of the Christian tradition are returning to the ancient Christian practices which lead to life. We are moving from an emphasis on doctrine, and returning to our Christian roots actually – returning to an emphasis on practice.

Brian McLaren is an author and speaker, and once was the pastor of a large non-denominational mega-church in Maryland. Someone handed me his latest book, and I thought, “Do I hafta read this?” It was like when Nathanael said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” “Can anything come from the mega-church?” Well, Nathanael and I proved ourselves to be theological snobs.

Brian McLaren is one of the leaders in this Emerging Church Movement, currently a movement which remains very ill-defined – which of course, makes sense, as it is emerging. At any rate, it is McLaren who points out that while the Apostle Paul was a theologian, it was Paul’s TASK to show us the way to follow Jesus.

McLaren says about Paul: “Far from being a rigid member of the dogma police or inquisition mafia, Paul, like Jesus, is a prophet of love, calling people to follow a love road, to walk a love path, to practice a love way. Paul’s faith is not just an idea to which we assent but a way in which we walk.” [p45]

And take note of a small sample of the times Paul uses such language: “I will show you a still more excellent way,” Paul says before the famous passage on love. Love is patient. Love is kind. And so forth.

“... so we too might walk in the newness of life.” [Romans 6:4]

“... we walk by faith, not by sight.” [2 Corinthians 5:7]

“... walk in a manner worthy of the Lord [Colossians 1:10]

“... as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him.” [Col 2:6]

“... walk in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God.”

To Paul, following Jesus is like walking a path, the way of love. It's a discipline, an exercise, a training, a practice.

Practice – that word again. Think of it this way. McLaren says, "Practice (or exercise) may not make perfect" – we've all heard the old saying about practice – "but, it does make currently impossible things ... possible."

Practice can make the gifts of patience, and kindness, and courage, and forgiveness, and inner peace possible. Practice alone won't earn those gifts, as by definition, we cannot earn a gift. But practice makes these gifts possible. Practice can make the gift of an awareness of God's presence possible. Practice can make the gift of communion with God and one another possible.

Already this morning, you have participated in presentations on the practice of art, and the practice of praying with icons. Later today we will participate in music from the tradition of Taize, and then we will get a little physical with Sign Chi Do, and we will conclude today's work with Centering Prayer. All of these are practices which take us beyond the intellect, beyond the rational, even beyond the constant racket, the constant inner chatter of words.

I would like to say something about contemplative prayer – centering prayer, specifically. Art Goolsbee will be leading us in prayer at the close of the day, so I'll be brief.

Centering Prayer is an exercise in emptying the self of fears, anxieties, and desires – a practice in letting go of the self. Simply put, we spend 20 minutes letting go of thoughts. It is a practice in letting go of anything which comes to mind. It is not a practice in stopping thoughts from arising – we can't do that – but rather, when they arise, let them go.

If you're like me, there are certain thoughts we want to hang onto, and massage, and develop – especially when the brilliant idea for the next sermon surfaces. Let it go. It's a death – a dying to self.

And the practice of that letting go – that self-emptying – will change us. It's one method among many, and not for everyone. There are other Christian practices which involve self-emptying and sacrifice, ranging from stewardship to hospitality to keeping sabbath. All of them are paths, ways of following Jesus, who teaches us that the way of the cross is the way of life.

The way of the cross is the way to life: the way to move from being nominally alive to being fully alive; changing from a guarded heart to an open, compassionate heart; from a closed, fearful existence to a free, awakened, expansive life.

The pectoral cross which I wear was designed by Nolan Kelley, a sculptor who happens to be the Senior Warden at Heavenly Rest. Nolan has provided a description for this cross, and I won't read it entirely, but it says: the dove at the center of the cross symbolizes the Holy Spirit, and the dove is depicted as moving over the face of the waters at creation, and as hovering over the shepherd's staff which is carried by the bishop, and over the tongues of fire descending on bread and wine.

When Nolan and I sat down together to discuss the design of this pectoral cross, I expressed a desire to include a symbol common to the geography of the diocese. And we wrestled with that. Do we include cotton,

or cattle, or corn, or an oil derrick, or sheep, or a mesquite tree, or a canyon? It all depends on where one lives.

And it dawned on us – one thing common throughout our entire diocese is not so much geographical, as it is celestial. We looked up at the Big Sky. Sunrises. Sunsets. Bright stars. Storms.

So as Nolan says in his description – “the moon, stars, and sun on the arms of the cross reference the vast open sky, a defining feature of the Episcopal Diocese of Northwest Texas.” Even the shape of the cross comes into play, as the discs which emanate from the cross serve to remind us of the mesas ... that emerge from the expansive Northwest Texas horizon. The Latin word for the shape of the cross itself means, “to open, to extend oneself.”

Vast. Open. Expansive. Nolan has described our territory – the defining feature of this diocese. Vast. Open. Expansive. And yet, he has described more than the territory. He has described your heart. He has described our hearts on a clear day – and what our hearts can be when we “walk in love, as Christ loved us.” Vast. Open. Expansive. I count it a huge privilege to walk this path with you. Thank you.