

## *Bishop's Address*

102<sup>nd</sup> Diocesan Council, February 23 – 25, 2006

### **Part II**

#### *Part One: The Situation Before Us*

The purpose of our time together this afternoon will be to have a conversation about the vision of not only the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas, but what it means to be a Christian as we move into this 21<sup>st</sup> century as members of the Christian Faith. We are going to take a hard look at ourselves in the mirror.

As we move into this conversation, at the outset I want to acknowledge the many writers and thinkers behind the numerous books and articles that have helped shape my remarks to you this afternoon, especially Payne and Beazley in *Reclaiming the Great Commission*. I have been blessed by their good work. The credit is theirs.

The Christian Faith, while in the hands of God and ultimately under God's direction and purpose, is no doubt experiencing a serious crisis – because we members are in crisis. And this extends far beyond our current disagreements regarding human sexuality. The Christian Faith is, I believe, at a crossroads in her history.

This situation is not because people are not interested in the "Spiritual Life." In fact, study after study reveals that people are very much interested in things spiritual. People are searching for meaning and things that endure. Various studies point to very similar results. For example, a Gallup Poll states that 96 percent of Americans believe in God. However, a Barna Poll reveals that one-third of Americans do not believe in a "biblical" God, but something called a "higher consciousness or Eastern god, or many gods." Even more startling is that 4-5 percent of Americans believe they are God. We have much work to do in the world and in the Church.

As I stand here as your new diocesan bishop, I am greatly concerned about how we are moving into what others have termed *The Emerging Church*. Some call the current church the "submerging Church," and, unfortunately, that is not altogether untrue. The concept of the "Emerging Church" can be understood as that Church that will emerge amidst all of the changes in our culture and our world as we move into this 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Emerging Church is what we will be and do in the years ahead. Note the order of the words "be" and "do." We must "be" something before we can effectively "do" anything.

Our particular generation now faces monumental challenges and, therefore, monumental opportunities as we consider the future of the Church. There is certainly no doubt in my mind that people are searching for meaning and the things that endure. Our wonderful quality of life and abundance of material possessions has not filled our spiritual hunger, nor is it possible that they will.

George Gallup observed, “the focus of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been on outer space, but the focus of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may well be on inner space.” To me, this means the focus will be on looking inside of ourselves and, as Christians, beginning to consider and understand anew what it means to be created in the image of God. I hope George Gallup is correct, and if he is correct, the Christian Faith needs compelling apostles, and messengers, who not only speak this message, but live it in the very depths of their spiritual being. These things, *becoming compelling apostles who live and speak God’s message*, are the focus of these remarks.

Kew and White, in their 1997 book *A Church Odyssey*, observed that “People are persistently asking spiritual questions for which the churches seem to have either mislaid or forgotten the answers.” The result of this is that many people are not now necessarily grounded in established religion, and perhaps are even hostile to it.

We are all quite aware of the decline in membership of the mainline Protestant denominations. For the mainline churches to regain their ability to be an engaging agent for the gospel in the Emerging Church, we will need to regain our seriousness about personal faith, evangelism, and of course, mission.

I sincerely believe, as a life long member of a mainline church, that we mainline churches have a great deal to offer the spiritually hungry in our world. We need to be re-energized to become a dynamic force for Christ. We must position ourselves as individuals and as a church, with a gospel outlook, to transform our own lives as well as the lives of the spiritually hungry. But we can only do the latter if we have paid careful attention to the former – the transformation of our own spiritual life.

It has been said that the era of denominations is over or that it is coming to an end. It is certainly accurate to say that the 20<sup>th</sup> century era of denominations has ended. But I believe that the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be a time for the mainline churches to rediscover that we do indeed have an important, Godly role to play in the spiritual life of the Christian Faith.

Obviously, the challenge before us is great. The words we speak as the Emerging Church must be words that can be understood by the unchurched, but also theological enough to be transformational. The entire story of scripture, in its great depth and breadth, is the story of transformation.

I have noted studies that indicate that there is a great spiritual hunger in our culture and in our world as a whole. We know what happens when hunger fails to be satisfied. Creatures, including human beings, die. Or, the hungry find ways to be fed. And so it is with spiritual hunger – it will die or it will be satisfied with something. What shall it be? Will the spiritually hungry be fed by mainline churches? It is up to us.

I believe we have great food, healthy food, “soul” food, to offer – for I, myself, have been nourished by it, and I hope that you have, too. It is important that we share that with which we have been blessed. If we, a mainline church and a Christian community, can embrace the notion that we are God’s agents for transformation and not simply chapels

for our members, then there is great hope for us. Our very future hangs in the balance of this acceptance.

Evangelism is not a program of the Church, it is part of the essential work of the Church. Evangelism is a powerful activity of discipleship, and evangelism is part of what makes a person's spiritual development and growth transforming.

We must, as Episcopalians, forego our conspiracy of silence and have a clear picture of who we are and what we are called to be doing. We give lip service to the un-churched and evangelism, and if this continues, it will be our undoing. The Church has always grown as a result of the effort to carry the message of Jesus Christ into the world, and it will continue to grow if we live into this holy work. If we remain silent, contented to simply open the doors and hope people will come, we will be largely irrelevant to the un-churched.

The Church has two basic responsibilities - namely, to build community and to make disciples. One is focused on the internal, the other on the external – one to the disciples, one to the un-churched. The biblical example for this is, of course, the work of St. Peter and St. Paul as taught to us in the Book of Acts. St. Peter, though certainly involved in making disciples, was primarily concerned with the needs of the faithful, the church community. St. Paul was the great missionary, focused on the Gentiles, going about the business of making disciples. Building community and making disciples together are the Church of Jesus at her best. Both are very important. This is the crux of everything that I am going to speak about this afternoon.

Over the decades, mainline churches have focused on the care of our members, that is – the building of community, with a nod here and there to actively reaching out to the un-churched. This has resulted in stagnation and is one of the central reasons that the mainline churches are at best maintaining the status quo, and at worst, turning into the submerging church.

**Questions for discussion:**

- 1. Do you agree that the mainline churches, and we as Episcopalians, have been almost exclusively focused on the internal (building community) at the expense of the external (reaching the un-churched – evangelism)? Why do you think that is?***
- 2. Where are you, as an individual, focusing your energies – on the internal (building community) or the external (reaching the un-churched – evangelism)? Why?***
- 3. Name five ways your congregation might bring (or is now bringing) into balance “building community” and “reaching the un-churched.”***

## ***Part Two: Responding to the challenges***

Nancy Ammerman, in an article entitled “Running on Empty” in the June 2005 edition of the *Christian Century* magazine, writes this:

*Christian churches exist to worship God, to teach and nurture people in the faith, and to spread the Good News. Few of us live in “parishes” (areas) where everyone knows everyone else and all go to the same church. In the average urban or suburban Protestant congregation, less than half the participants live within ten minutes’ drive of the church, up to a third have moved to the community in the past five years, about half were brought up in another denomination, and less than a quarter have been in that congregation all their lives. We don’t share a common culture in which the values and practices of the church can be taken for granted.*

*So churches have to be intentional if they are to create a sense of Christian identity and belonging of any sort. Gathering takes work, but it is essential. [Mainline Protestants] rarely have any religious education for the children during the week. That 45 minutes or so on Sunday morning are the sum total of the intentional teaching they do. Mainline churches are more likely to sponsor a scout troop than to have any weekday religious education for their children.*

(Let me add here that this is not simply the fault of the clergy or lay leadership. When people fail to show up, it sends a pretty clear message about what is important to them. Therefore, part of this lack of programming is a result of years of lack of participation when it was offered.)

*Protestants seem to be putting all their hopes for creating a distinct Christian identity in the basket of Sunday morning worship for adults and Sunday school for children. Because the mainline was the “mainline,” the environment was assumed to be friendly and supportive. Creating a community of faith out of people who don’t live near each other and haven’t known each other all their lives requires more than a few minutes at coffee hour after the service. Helping them figure out how their faith asks them to live requires more than even the very best preaching can provide in one Sunday service.*

If this new era is going to be about spiritual transformation and disciples making disciples, then we have some serious work ahead of us.

I firmly believe that The Emerging Church is an excellent metaphor in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. And I think it is exciting and a Holy privilege to be a part of whatever God is doing and whatever God will be doing in the years ahead. You get to be a part of it as well. That should be an energizing and exciting thought for you, and if it is not, then you need to ask yourself why it isn’t.

We live in an amazingly fast paced world, one full of change at every turn. The rapid rate of change is perhaps too fast for us, but it is nonetheless the world that we have. We

can lament this fact or we can, with the Holy Spirit's assistance, set our sails accordingly and make this rapid pace of change our ally.

There is strong biblical hope that can be found in this outlook. In the narrative of Holy Scripture, when the people of God are confused, divided, apathetic, and uprooted from their homes and comfort zones, the Holy Spirit repeatedly moves powerfully as an ally.

We need to position ourselves as an **agile** church, enthusiastic to respond to the challenges in our own day and to catch the wind of the Spirit as it moves through our congregations. Agile is a word I chose carefully in thinking about this rapidly changing world and the church's responsibility in such a world. Agile means "quick and easy movement; deft and active; keen and lively." I daresay these are hardly the adjectives that pop into mind when we are describing the mainline churches. An agile church would be willing to change and take risks with the hope of reaching the un-churched as well as to build up the community.

This endeavor will take the best we all can offer, and it must be claimed - not only by clergy - but owned and implemented by the laity or it will not work. Clergy and laity alike must be willing to proclaim the Word of God as the first century laity was willing if we are to have hope of participating in the Emerging Church.

Can God use us as apostles and disciples to reach out in this fragmented world and offer a glimpse of a fuller, richer, and more hopeful life? Of course. And even though this may sound to you as a lot of trouble, it is Good News. But we have some work to do to equip ourselves to be of significant use to God in this ministry.

We must overcome our aversion to evangelism, for after all, the word "evangel" means "good tidings, good news." Whoever heard of a successful church that had an aversion to good news?

You know, as that first century moved through the years, the little movement originally known as "The Way" had some significant challenges. One was communication. There was no internet, no fax machines, no press conferences, no television or radio. So God had to settle for what was available – a simple little event known as Pentecost. That is how the Book of Acts begins.

Then, as the first century moved along and the original apostles began dying off, God got busy inspiring people to say things like, "You know, these apostles are dying off and somebody needs to write down what they are telling us of Jesus' marvelous works." God decided he had had enough from Saul, and turned him from His biggest problem to the greatest evangelist and missionary the Church has ever had. Later, God inspired others to say, "You know, we need to gather up and collect these letters of Paul and others or they will be lost to us." And then God inspired the Church to bring all of this together in what we know as the Bible, the Book, the inspired word of God. The very book that I asked you to bring to council and that I hope is on your tables.

All of this would have meant little if a living people did not respond with an enthusiastic carrying forth of the faith in that first century. This type of enthusiastic response is necessary in our own day as well. And our response, our spiritual development and our personal spirituality, must not be about doing what we want, but rather doing what God wants. And the way to figure that out is to know the biblical story, to understand the faith of those who have gone before us, and to see God moving among us in our day. We Anglicans call this Scripture, Tradition, and Reason.

**Questions for discussion:**

1. *What is the most frustrating aspect of our rapidly changing world to you?*
2. *When have you felt the wind of the Holy Spirit at work in your life? How has that transformed your life as a Christian?*
3. *What might your church community look like if it were an “agile” church?*

### ***Part Three: Spiritual Transformation***

Every human being always has a point of reference - something that is central and defining in his or her life. Payne and Beazley, in their book Reclaiming the Great Commission, express this by saying every human being worships at some altar. Clifford Stanley, long time seminary professor, said that a person chooses a dominant influence to command his/her life. Whatever prevailing influence captures the spirit shapes the person. Jesus himself always sought to discover what influence was controlling the center of a person.

Becoming and remaining a spiritual person is a challenge in today’s world, because our society continues to edit out the sense of holy and spiritual from our daily life. We are, as a culture, divorcing ourselves from our spiritual nature. The spiritual hunger in our culture results from the fact that many people’s reference points, and perhaps our own, are centered in material things rather than spiritual truths.

To rise above this will require substantial spiritual health, spiritual transformation, and a belief that there is indeed such a thing as the spirit of God that does in fact move among us. When we decide intentionally to belong to God, we take an important step forward toward wholeness. Then the Holy Spirit can get busy with our personal spiritual “center.”

Our faith must be something that is able to be articulated well and must answer the questions that people are asking. But it also must be something each of us is willing to take seriously in our own life first, and then are moved to share with others. We cannot share that which we do not possess. The spiritual impact of a church upon its neighbors, the larger community, and the world begins with the spiritual life of its individual

members. Wholeness and salvation begin at the point where we make the decision to have a union of faith with Jesus Christ. Then God's transforming power can be known.

The people in the earliest phase of the first century church became disciples not because of what they read in the Bible, for the Bible had not been written. They became disciples because of what they saw and experienced from those who called themselves believers, followers of Jesus Christ. It is still true today. People come to belief by watching people who do believe. It is one of the amazing ways that God works with human beings.

But spiritual development is not a weekend program for which you sign up, so forget about that. Oh, we wish it were. We'd like to have our religion like we like so much of the rest of our lives, neatly wrapped, well organized, and brief – kind of a shrink-wrapped salvation in a tidy package. The entire country seems to suffer from Attention

Deficit Disorder. But spiritual development is a process that requires disciplined effort. It is not an event, but a way of life; it is not a conference to attend, rather it is a relationship with God. Spiritual development happens, however, not in isolation but in community with others. Spiritual development is first and foremost a dedication of life. And the Church desperately needs healthy spiritual members and leaders.

An extremely important part of spiritual development is in knowing the story. And I mean the biblical story. The biblical illiteracy in the pew is staggering, and it is a self-inflicted wound. Nobody did it to us. And it's not because we're too dumb to become biblically literate. But when attendance at Christian Education for both adults and children is painfully small, is it any wonder that we have difficulty finding "zeal" for the urgency of the gospel message? When people do attend, those persons with the responsibility for the ongoing Christian education of others must be able to communicate the message of the gospel in ways that relate to people's everyday lives. Jesus was a master in this area, and we need to follow his example. Too many times, we take the most exciting book in the world and put people to sleep with it. This must cease. We are called to assist others with their spiritual development, but before we can do that effectively, we must tend to our own spiritual development.

The search for spiritual development, spiritual wholeness, is stated in all kinds of ways. "I feel scattered and my life is so busy. I feel disordered. I don't know who I really am. I believe things would be better for me if I knew what to believe. Though I don't know how to break out of it, I know that I am too self-focused." And on it goes. Jesse Trotter, in his book, Christian Wholeness, states that your spirit is simply what you mean when you say "I."

Our spiritual wholeness must be about carrying our faith into this new Apostolic Age. Spiritual development, therefore, is a precursor to evangelism, to sharing the good news. We must see our spiritual growth as part of the bold venture into the Emerging Church, not a retreat from it. Boldness hasn't been our mark lately, but it needs to become our mark now.

**Questions for discussion:**

- 1. How many Bible stories can your table group list in 5 minutes?**
- 2. “Every human being worships at some altar.” At what altars do you worship? Which of these are interfering with your worship at God’s altar?**
- 3. “Spiritual Development is not an event, but a way of life.” Where do you see the Holy Spirit leading your congregation in its spiritual development?**

***Part Four: Where we go from here***

We have come to the end of our afternoon conversation. I want to conclude with a few final thoughts and then send you on your way rejoicing.

I have tried to bring into sharp focus the rapidly changing world we live in and highlight ever so briefly some of the major challenges for mainline denominations, Christianity in general, and the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas in particular. While I am deeply concerned by these, I am not frightened by them; because another word for the words “challenges” and “problems” is **opportunity**. It is time for us, as people of faith, to follow the old adage: *I’ve stopped telling God how big my problems are and I’ve started telling my problems how big my God is.*

There are great challenges in this world, but that has always been the case, and God has always seen us through. In this day and age, we often hear the term “post-Christian world,” but I don’t accept this term because no world is “post-Christian.” How can something be post-Jesus Christ? God in Jesus was, is, and always will be.

Our culture certainly acts in post-Christian ways, but to me, that is simply another opportunity for the Emerging Church to respond. Great opportunities lie ahead, and I am not willing to sit by and chart our extinction out there on some future year based on the current projections regarding mainline churches.

Jesus said, “For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7.8). It is time for us to stop standing outside the door, wandering around the hall, admiring the carpet, and thinking about repainting the walls. Knock for Christ’s sake!

We need to be vibrant waters, not dead seas. We need to take St. Paul’s words to heart, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor 5.17). We as a church need to look less like a museum and more like the body of Christ. Change is not only coming, it is here. How shall we respond?

I want to issue a few challenges, a few opportunities to you this day for the coming year. Whether you step up to them or not will be your decision. But if you do step up to them, God’s Church will be the better for it.

Number One:

*I challenge every member of this diocese to seriously consider this question: What does it really mean, at its core, to be a Christian person?*

Number Two:

*I challenge every member of this diocese to be a regular participant in the Sunday morning offerings and mid-week opportunities in your local congregation, especially committing to Christian Education, yes, that's right – Sunday school.*

Number Three:

*I challenge our congregations, lay and clergy alike, to be responsive to those who come into our holy spaces, and to change our subtle, oft-times unspoken message, "We are glad you are here, we hope you like the way we do things" to the more Christ-like message, "We are glad you are here. How may we help you?"*

Number Four:

*I challenge every member of this diocese to invite at least three un-churched people to church in the coming year.*

Number Five:

*I challenge you to read, study, and discuss the Book of Acts this year. It is in the Book of Acts where we learn how the original little movement known as "The Way" grew and became the Christian Church under the watchful eye and the energetic guidance of the Holy Spirit. As a tangible sign of this request, in a few minutes, the diocesan staff is going to give each of you a study guide to the Book of Acts. Whether you use that one or another, I encourage you to read the Book of Acts **devotionally**, not simply as an interesting history of the first century church.*

As your bishop, I am calling you to a time of discernment on how we, the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas, might be transformed for the ministry that will be necessary for the Emerging Church. This discernment will take some time and you will be hearing from me frequently on this.

Let us find a way forward as a Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The future is out there, a blank canvass. How shall we paint it? What shall it look like? It is up to us.

Finally, then, a few questions. When I am making a visitation and we come to the part of the baptismal covenant where we make promises to do certain things, I remind the congregation that if they are not ready to do them, don't join the rest of us who are ready. And that's okay. I tell them to say, "I'll think about"; or "Maybe later." But if they say, "I will with God's help," then they need to do it, because they have promised that is what they would do.

So, let me ask you a few questions in that same spirit of our baptismal covenant. If you are ready to do what is required, then answer loudly with, "I will with God's help!"

*Can we be a community of disciples committed to transforming ourselves into the image of Christ our Lord, and then enthusiastically invite others to share in God's redeeming and sustaining work?*

*Can we carry the Good News of Jesus Christ to those around us in terms they can understand?*

*Can we be unified in purpose even as we are diverse as individuals?*

*Can we create a community of faith for all people?*

What is God doing in West Texas?

If we open our eyes, our ears, and most importantly our hearts, I'll bet we'll be amazed at what we find.

Thank you and may God bless us in the holy and exciting work.

Amen.