

**Bishop's Address**  
**154th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh**  
**November 16, 2019**

*A transcript of remarks to Convention delivered by the Right Reverend Dorsey W.M. McConnell, VIII Bishop of Pittsburgh:*

Welcome, dear friends in Christ, to the 154th Convention of the Diocese of Pittsburgh. Your diocese. God's diocese. Your convention. It is a joy to see each and every one of you, and I am especially grateful for the very warm "welcome back" that you gave to me and to Betsy last night. It is just wonderful to be here. I was thinking about starting this off with a slide show about my sabbatical for about 120 minutes or so, but I thought there is more important things to do.

As an ice-breaker this morning, I would just like everybody to stand up here, just stand up, and turn to somebody who is not in your parish – wait for this – and just say this: "Jesus is everywhere, and he is always there for you." OK, can you do that? "Jesus is everywhere, and he is always there for you."

*(Those in attendance do so.)*

That was beautiful. Wasn't that wonderful? Don't you feel better? That was your break. *(Laughter.)* Just kidding. We have a lot to do. I am not going to rehearse all the wonderful things God is doing among us, has done among us. My report, and the report of the staff, is available in the Pre-convention Journal. Instead, I want to focus on the rather grand task implied in the Convention theme – Love. Teach. Heal. Re-imagining Our Diocese – and ask the question that must be in some of your minds, when you read this, which is one word: Really?

Now for years, when I sat where you are sitting, on the other side of the bishop's microphone and the bishop announced a strategic plan – and this was in four different diocese prior to my coming here – or, issued a booklet on Miraculous Expectations, one of my favorites; or put out a ten-point program for growth, let's not forget that one; I would sigh and roll my eyes as rector of a parish, because I knew where such a thing would wind up if I was lucky – on a shelf someplace gathering dust, while the machinery of the church went on much as it always had.

And now, I'm on this side of the microphone, and here we are talking about re-imagining the diocese, and the question is, is this just another such exercise. And I would say that depends, it depends on how seriously we all take the work, and I would say that this work, particularly, is actually different and worth taking seriously. It has its origins in a committee that was joined together to initiate a mutual ministry review of the entire diocese and soon was dubbed Project CREED – the Committee for the Re-Envisioning of the Diocese – just in case you think it's all about the BAWG [Budget and Assessment Working Group], sometimes it's about the CREED. Many of us invested a lot of time, under the guidance of Jon Delano as convener and Judy Stark as our consultant, considerable money, efforts and hours and the carbon footprint of 68 people and more, some of whom made long commutes, to pray and talk about the ways God may be calling us to re-invent ourselves, or at least, reimagine ourselves. Sixty-eight people who soon settled on four areas – governance, communication, new initiatives and meeting our neighbor – where we might make some changes and try something new that could lead us all to see the Church differently in an inspiring and life-giving way for us all.

I'm going to try not to steal Jon Delano's thunder, or that of the other groups [who are to present to Convention], but I point out that the group produced four resolutions which amount to an invitation to all of us to take a few concrete steps in this direction. In a sense, what they're offering us is not the usual "grand plan" viewed from 30,000 feet, I would suggest, but rather they start on the ground. They ask us to take stock of where we are already, of who is around us. They ask us to look at the resources God has already put into our hands. These resolutions are more akin to what Jesus says to us about mustard seed that is the smallest of seed, but produces a great tree where all the birds of the air come to nest in its branches; or what he says about the seed that grows secretly, day and night, producing first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain. So as I read these resolutions and prayed through them, I realized that a great vision, a huge change in the way in which we see God, see ourselves and the world, is often brought forth through small works begun in hope and practiced faithfully. It is such concrete works – out of which God will bring great fruit – that I believe these resolutions offer us. And in case you doubt that God can use a small thing, a chance encounter, a casual word to completely change the way you look at God and the world and life, I have, yes, a story for you.

This little event took place at a gas station near Scottdale on the Eve of All Saints, it comes from the Reverend Biff Carpenter, newly received and rector of Saint Francis, Somerset, and this is the story in Biff's own words as texted to our Canon for Mission, Kim Karashin:

"Finished 4 pm Mass, left the church in my cassock. Stop at gas station, go in store at same time as a couple of kids in Halloween costumes. Guy comes over to me while waiting in line and gives me a buddy punch on the shoulder and says, 'Forgive me, Father, it's been six years since my last confession,' and laughed. I turned to him and said, 'Six years since you talked to papa???' Brother we are going to need shots and beers to get through this.' He laughed again and things got quiet. The costumed couple in front of me asks, 'Are you headed to Jason's party?' I shrugged and said 'I don't know Jason. I just finished mass.' Everyone laughed, I looked confused. I said, 'I'm a priest,' everyone giggled awkwardly, and I repeated, 'no seriously, I'm a priest. We're not all predators or grumpy geezers. Some of us, believe it or not, just love God, and try to love each of you the way he does.' Got really quiet and the guy asks, 'DUDE WHERE IS YOUR CHURCH?!?' I said, "Somerset and Scottdale, PA, but Jesus is everywhere and is always there for you'. It got really quiet again, but in a good way. Everyone parted ways and they said things like 'Dude you're awesome' and 'I wish my priest was like you'. I just said be there for each other and know God loves you."

*(applause)*

Now let's just take a moment to drink this in: a priest in a cassock in a gas station in Scottdale, PA, with three others standing in line, a little talk, a little love, a few laughs, total time five minutes, and for all four who were there – including, I'll bet, the priest – a new vision of Jesus, a new vision for the Church. They might as well have been Andrew and Simon Peter, Philip and Nathanael, who met Jesus in an unexpected place and time at the beginning of John's Gospel and launched, what became, this. And it is to multiply the odds of such encounters as this, only in your own places, in your own ways, and in your own words – please do not try to do it the way Biff did it, one Biff is enough (*laughter*) – but in your own words, that these resolutions are before you.

You will be discussing these later today, focusing on how to implement the recommendations in your communities. As you might expect of such resolutions, they are rather full, if you've read them. And I would ask you, after some fruitful discussion here, to endorse them, not to try... I know that there's a lot of language there you may have issue with, but that can be adjusted within

your own contexts. Take them for what they are intended for, which is inspiration and guidance. Then take them, as you discuss, whether one or two or three aspects of them sparks something in you that you might want to implement. Take them back to your congregations. Ask your sisters and brothers there to pray and consider something in these texts might spark an idea, a thought a direction. For example, what do you need to communicate more effectively within your parish, with the people who live around you, and with your sisters and brothers across the diocese? How can you meet your neighbors, find out who they actually are, their joys, their sorrows, who they are, what they take in their coffee, whether they even drink coffee, hear their stories and share with them the good news of God in Christ? How can you partner with another parish in some new form of mission, even perhaps a new church plant? And how can all of us, together, reshape our governance so we are spending fewer person-hours and fewer gallons of gas on governance, and more time actually being the body of Christ in our contexts? And to help us focus our time later on, I'm just going to take a few minutes I offer my own thoughts now on what seems to me to be the most important implications of each of these, and tie them to the diocesan mission I have articulated of loving, teaching and healing.

So first – this is not the order in which you're going to be voting on them, which is one of my clever ways of keeping you awake – first, Meeting the Neighbor. The first objective in our diocesan mission is to love, in the name and power of Jesus Christ – to love God, love the neighbor and love the enemy. These are not the imperatives of your clergy, or your bishop's, they are Christ's own imperatives. We may think we love God, but the Lord would say the proof in that would be if we are loving our neighbor and loving our enemy. It's likely that none of us would really pass this test with high marks. It is hard to love your neighbor if you do not know your neighbor, and impossible to love your enemy if you spend all or most of your time with you friends. By supporting this resolution, you are saying you will take a step out the door, to meet the people around you whom you do not know yet, and to love them; even if they seem scary, or hold opinions you find objectionable, or otherwise make you uncomfortable, you will meet them and get to know them and as you know them, you will ask God's grace to love them.

Second, Communication. The second objective in our diocesan mission is to teach – to teach the mystery of God with us, in the Lord's incarnation; of God for us, in Christ's Cross and Resurrection; of God in us, through the Holy Spirit. This mystery must be shared, if it is to bear fruit. We are the ones called to bear witness to the full joy, sorrow, and glory of God's redemption through Jesus the Christ. We're called to speak of him and write of Him, and tell of Him, declaring the mighty works the Lord Jesus has done in our lives. So, it seems to me that the most significant implication of this is first that we share the good news with each other, friends, within the Body of Christ, within our congregations and across the boundaries of our parishes. Tell the stories of what God is doing in the lives the Lord is touching in your midst, and ask to hear the same witness from others. Put it on social media, send it through the diocesan communications network this resolution envisions, but most of all find ways to tell your story of redemption to the neighbors you now know, to the ones you once walked past or ignored, but now embrace and pray for.

Third, New Initiatives. The third objective in our diocesan mission is to heal – heal the person, heal the church, and heal the world. This healing comes through the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We all know that – it's in our Baptism vows – but that knowledge doesn't come just through communicating by our words. It comes through the intentional building of communities rooted in the good news of Jesus, in the mercy of His Cross and the power of His Resurrection. As you get to know your neighbors, can we all then take a step to show the love of Jesus in their midst? This can mean simple acts of care you undertake with your new friends for the benefit of those around you, or meals offered in a parish hall for anyone who

wants to come and eat, or big things like planting new communities. I know by my own experience that people get healed through such endeavors; that is how I got drawn in to this magnificent, chaotic adventure we call the Church. Churches become strengthened and more confident when they do this, and the world around us begins to move from an anxious and threatened place toward becoming more merciful, more generous, as the hand of God moves among them showing them that Jesus is in fact everywhere, and always there for us.

Now, I know these initiatives, as you look at them, that you may think that they're great on paper. But I also there is another question, which is: "Is this just more stuff we have to do? Our congregation is already stressed just by the tasks of keeping the doors open, taking care of the people we already have, worrying about the budget and the boiler and the roof." Friends, believe me, I get it. We worry about your budgets and your boilers and your roofs, about your people and your clergy, which is why we pray for all of the above, every day, all of you are in my prayers and the prayers of your diocesan staff. Every Sunday, the parish I am visiting that day is held up in prayer by all the others through our diocesan cycle. And this is the key, my friends. Whether it is communicating the good news of Jesus, or getting out to meet your neighbors, or building new mission initiatives or planting new communities, the message is you can't do it alone. Because, if you try that, it is going to be just "more stuff to do." But, if we join together in this, seek out sister congregations with whom to build a partnership in the Gospel, then all of this can be truly life-giving for any of us who participate.

One last piece, and a couple of other notes. The resolution on Governance, which I will address briefly in a moment, envisions re-vitalizing ministry districts. I would encourage us to interpret that vision broadly. Because the right partners for you may be down the block or in the next town, but they may also be three counties away. Explore the possibility that you have gifts another community needs even if it means driving an hour or more to share those gifts, and similarly that they may have resources you need, which you will not discover unless you get to know them. Somebody has to take the initiative to make that happen, so please don't wait for it to be somebody else besides you. Great things can happen when a vestry person, or just someone sitting in the pews, picks up the phone and calls a different vestry person in a different parish and just invites those people to dinner with their people. Or, makes a date for a joint prayer walk in a neighborhood. Or, shares experience in reaching out to 12-step groups in their community. We have resources in this budget, both in funds for mission grants and formation for mission grants, to support your efforts in all of this in communications, neighbor-knowing, and new mission, and I suspect council will look most favorably on proposals from parishes who have twinned in an interesting and effective way.

So, to recap, if we adopt these three resolutions, it seems to me we are doing the following: We are making a commitment in a variety of ways to communicate better with each other what God is doing among us, and to set up a few simple structures to facilitate that communication. We are making a commitment to get to know the people around us, through something as simple as a Meet-Your-Neighbor Day, in the hope that will become a habit. We are making a commitment to undertake some form of new mission where we are, whether that's a limited engagement addressing a single human need, or something larger, such as planting and nurturing a new community of faith. So, endorsing these resolutions is an expression of our commitment to take a concrete next step in each of these areas, and that's more important, I would suggest, than taking some time just to add or delete information or language that gets your attention.

There are two other aspects of these resolutions – and thank you for your patience, but it needs to be said – I want to point out before moving on. First, is the commitment at the center of the resolution on New Ministries that every parish or congregation encourage a diversity of

leadership in new ministries in regard to race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, sex, marital or family status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disabilities or age, with particular attention to historically under-represented populations. This is not just there to mimic the words of national Canons or of General Convention resolutions. Early on in the discussions which lead to this work we all agreed that we have to redouble our efforts as a diocese to deal with historic under-representation, particularly of racial minorities, and especially of African Americans, in the leadership of the Church. The history of racism in Pittsburgh – the historic burden left particularly to black neighborhoods and churches from 350 years of chattel slavery – has been a concern of mine since I began my tenure among you over seven years ago, and disquiets me at every moment of every day, as it should disquiet us all, no matter where in this diocese we live. I passionately hope that our efforts in regard to communication, mission, and meeting our neighbor will especially focus on incorporating people who have been historically excluded, and I promise I will do all that I can to make this a priority for our common mission going forward. Second, I note in both the resolution on Communications and in Governance, there is an expectation of diocesan funding. I have already mentioned these funds are there, through the lines for mission and formation grants and other possibilities, and I will ask Diocesan Council particularly to favor proposals for partnerships that, among other things, intentionally enhance this diversity in congregational, mission, life and leadership. Amen? *Amen*. Thank you.

Finally, Jon [Delano], even though I've stolen a lot of your thunder, I want to steal a little more. There are a few structural changes that cannot be done without constitutional amendments. That's what is coming before you next. A constitutional amendment requires approval by two consecutive conventions. Even if you have substantial questions regarding the specifics of these amendments to the Constitution, or with the entire approach, a positive vote of endorsement on the constitutional changes at this convention will give us a basis for further discussion in the coming year. The language can be discussed in district gatherings later on; further shaped by Council, if necessary; and even amended by Council, in which case the amended proposed amendments to the Constitution would be brought back to you [next year] as a first reading, requiring approval also at the convention of 2021. So there is space and time. On the other hand, not to approve these changes in some form at this time, I am afraid, will kick the whole question of structural reform indefinitely down the road. So I pray that we may focus our debate on this, as well as the other resolutions, to matters of substance, and leave here with something in hand that will make a substantial beginning to the task of right-sizing our governance to a shape and form appropriate to a diocese our size.

And with that, I am done – almost. As I turn this conversation back over to you, however, I ask you to keep in mind the Church we have not yet seen, but that is the Church which God sees all the time. I mean the people, women and men and children, who get up in the morning, somehow make it through the day, and go to bed at night wondering if their lives mean anything. They may be in our poorest or richest neighborhoods, because no matter how good you look or what you drive, you may still be afflicted by the demons that assault us all, forces of anger, fear, self-loathing, lust, despair – I think we all could add to the list. The only difference between those inside our churches and those outside is that the former have found a place to come and lay these burdens before a holy and merciful God. And if it is true that Jesus is everywhere, then those we see every Sunday are only a small portion of His Church, the others being those beyond our doors who struggle to get through life with some semblance of hope, unaware that there are communities like yours where they may find Christ's own mercy and blessing and peace. And that is why Christ commands us to go, to meet these His children, not only for their sake but for ours, because as we meet them, we will meet Him. So, let's go. And remember, he is indeed everywhere, and he is always there for you. Amen. *Amen. (Applause)*