

# Bishop Address to the 165<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Diocese of Milwaukee

The Rt. Rev. Steven Miller, Bishop of Milwaukee

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*From his fullness have we all received grace upon grace.*

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace upon Grace. That is the theme for this the 165th convention of the Diocese of Milwaukee. As I begin this my tenth address to you as your bishop, please allow me to begin by acknowledging before you the grace I receive daily by working with such a dedicated group of people who serve you with me as the staff of Nicholson House.

I am privileged to work with gifted colleagues in ministry—the Nicholson House staff who serve with me in serving you the people who are the Diocese of Milwaukee —David Pfaff, Canon to the Ordinary, Peggy Bean, Assistant for Congregational Development, Carla McCook, Assistant for Christian Formation, Diane Blank, Finance Officer, Patty Jaffke and Barbara Klauber.

That grace is magnified by my loving family who support me in my work and ministry, my wife Cindy, and our daughters, Lauren and Haley.

I also wish to take a moment to thank Margaret Schumacher, who completes her term as Treasurer of the Diocese at the conclusion of this Convention. Margaret's ministry as treasurer has been a true gift of grace helping this diocese for the past four years as we sought to navigate through challenging economic times while continuing to keep assessment percentages from increasing. Margaret's manner and presence when presenting the budget and finances of the diocese evoke confidence and trust, confidence and trust earned by the outstanding job she has done in service of us all. A resolution honoring her time as treasurer will be before us as part of the report of the Committee on Resolutions of Courtesy. I ask you now to stand and join me in giving her a well-deserved round of applause as a sign of our gratitude for her gracious gift of her talents.

Last night at the banquet, I introduced you to this year's Bishop's Shield recipients; Marshall Williams of St. Peter's, West Allis and the Rev. Michelle Mooney a deacon of this diocese currently assigned to St. Mark's, Milwaukee. Both of these persons are further examples of grace in action. Through their work of advocacy and mentoring lives are being changed and God is being glorified.

Two agents of God's grace who meant so much to this diocese entered into the nearer presence of God this year. The Venerable Thomas Frank Winslow, the inaugural recipient of the bishop's shield award, whose acts of service to this diocese and its bishops as deacon, archdeacon and priest, as well as his service to the law enforcement and recovery communities, are too many to number died on August 23rd. For me, and I suspect for many of you Tom's absence is palpable. It seems strange not to have him seated with me at the head table for this convention. I suspect that something appears to be missing from the dias for many of you veteran convention delegates as well. I am so thankful for the gift of grace Tom Winslow was to me as I began and served my ministry as your bishop. To say that I miss him is an understatement.

Four days later on August 27th, the Rt. Rev. Roger White, tenth bishop of this diocese died due to complications following a brain aneurysm. Roger touched the lives of many in this room and across the Church during his nineteen years of service to this diocese. Roger was the first Episcopal Bishop in Wisconsin to ordain women to the priesthood. He continued and strengthened our diocese's long tradition of ecumenical leadership not only here in the state through his leadership in the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee and the Wisconsin Council of Churches but also by helping to establish relations between the Episcopal Church and the Church in Russia at the end of the Soviet era. His book with Richard Kew "New Millennium, New Church" raised significant issues that the Church as a whole is just now beginning to address.

Both of these men were signs and agents of God's grace. We give thanks for their ministry among us and pray that they and all those of our diocesan family who have died this past year, may go from strength to strength in God's perfect kingdom.

At our last convention, I reported to you that "One decision I hope we will need to make in the year ahead is the future of St. Edmund's property." After a ruling made in December in favor of our request for Summary Judgment, the remaining issues in the case were settled and the Church and rectory have been returned to us. I have asked our Chancellor Stuart Parsons to give a summary of the matter later today. The final ruling from the judge appointed for mediation arrived Thursday. I am hopeful that this matter will come to a conclusion before the end of the year.

I also need to report to you that the congregation of St. Timothy's, Milwaukee made the decision to close this year. With the assistance of the Commission on Mission and Development, the people of St. Timothy's discerned that it was time for that ministry to end and new life to begin. Members of the parish, the majority of whom no longer live in near proximity to the church, have found new church homes. At the end of last month, we sold the property to our neighbors at Krause Funeral home who had been using some of the space prior to the parishes closing. A tithe of the sale is being used as seed money for an Episcopal Service Corps site, a program for young adults ages 21 to 30 giving them the experience of living in Christian community while serving others. The experience of many dioceses is that these programs have become an incubator for future leaders of the church, lay and ordained. This is Grace upon Grace. Resurrection; God bringing new life.

This past year was also a General Convention year. The most publicized resolution was number A049 entitled Trial Rites for Blessings. At the end of the day what convention adopted was a provisional rite for use subject to the permission of the bishop. What does that mean for the diocese of Milwaukee? Those of you have read my paper "yes to bless or Christian Marriage for all:" available at my blog site, [milwaukeebishop@wordpress.com](mailto:milwaukeebishop@wordpress.com), know my thinking on this matter. I continue to believe the rite endorsed by General Convention is flawed on a number of levels and I would add falls significantly short of our call as Christians. I am also aware of a number of other things. I know that my position is a minority position at least among the members of both the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies and I would suspect throughout the Church. I have not used this issue as a litmus test for clergy we recruit to come to the Diocese of Milwaukee and I know through our clergy gatherings after convention that the majority of the priests in this diocese are willing to offer blessings if episcopal permission is given. I am also aware that the election of my two immediate predecessors was in many ways a referendum on the hot topic of that day the ordination of women. I do not want the election of the 12th bishop of Milwaukee although it is a number of years away to bear the same burden. My position is further complicated by the fact that I have been named to the Standing Commission

on Liturgy and Music of The Episcopal Church the body which will evaluate these provisional rites and report to the next General Convention. So where are we? We are a diocese where both positions are respected with a bishop who is opposed to the rites as adopted, who has written a cogent and well received theological case for same gender marriage which these rites say they explicitly are not by intention although closely resembling the same and the enabling resolution for these rites adopted by General Convention allows for local adaptation in dioceses where same sex marriage is legal, situated in a state where same gender marriage is banned by the constitution, in a diocese with a stated desire to remain in the highest degree of communion possible with our sisters and brothers across the Anglican Communion the overwhelming majority of whom have a different view on this subject than that of the Episcopal Church as expressed by General Convention and which has covenanted with our ecumenical partners not to do anything that would create a further stumbling block to unity while being ourselves a community of believers which seeks to welcome and honor all members of our diocese in fulfillment of our baptismal vow to respect the dignity of every human being. As you can see there is much to consider as a way forward is discerned. I am still discerning.

Another issue that came before General Convention was the issue of Communion of the unbaptized, a resolution which sought to overturn the ancient, dare we say, seminal practice that the reception of the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ is for those who are the body and blood of Christ, the baptized members of the Church. Why, because in the Eucharist we receive what we are the Body and Blood of Christ. The doctrine of baptism before communion is enshrined in our Church's constitution. I would add that in our the Book of Common Prayer, this church's most important theological document, baptism, chrismation, and first communion even of infants is the intended trajectory of our rites of initiation and incorporation. I am grateful that General Convention affirmed "that baptism is the ancient and normative entry point to receiving Holy Communion and that our Lord Jesus Christ calls us to go into the world and baptize all peoples." What does this mean? It means that we have affirmed that teaching of the Church but we are not going to card people at the rail. It also means that we need to be clear in our bulletins and teaching that in this Church it is all persons baptized in the name of the Trinity, who believe Christ to be present in this sacrament and are communicants in their own traditions unless forbidden by their own faith community who are welcome to receive Holy Communion in this Church.

Some of you may wonder why I am going on about this. That the issue of communion of the unbaptized has even come up points to a painful reality in our church that while we have worship centered on the Holy Eucharist, we have done little to teach eucharistic theology and piety to the members of our congregations and perhaps even the students in our seminaries. To that end, in the coming year, together with Carla McCook and the task force for Christian Formation I will be preparing an instructed Eucharist that I am asking each congregation to use as a means to deepen understanding and devotion in this the central act of our worship.

Secondly, it points to the disturbing trend that many in the church place all the responsibility for hospitality and welcome on the liturgy. All the "All are welcome" statements in bulletins, newsletters, and announcements don't mean a thing unless it is matched by a spirit of welcome and hospitality in the hearts and actions of the congregation as manifested by intentional acts to welcome and incorporate those who come through the doors of the church coupled with and undergirded by an intentional evangelism program to invite others to follow Jesus. I have visited enough congregations across this church to know that words are easy and real welcome takes intentionality and practice.

But finally, I think it points to a cheapening of the Gospel as evidenced by disturbing trend in the

church exacerbated by a narcissistic culture that seems to reduce the Gospel to being principally about welcome and acceptance rather than the reign of God in our lives and in all the world.

The Gospel is not only about acceptance. It is about healing, redemption, salvation, and sanctification. Yes, God accepts everyone, embraces everyone but there is more. God loves us so much that he does not leave us there. Grace upon grace.. in the words of that much loved hymn there is welcome for the sinner and more graces for the good there is mercy with the Savior. There is healing in his blood.

Our Anglican Tradition is a tradition that emphasizes sanctification. At confirmation, we pray that those being confirmed may increase in grace more and more. Even when we commend the departed to God our prayer is that they will continue to grow in grace. Perhaps a prayer chant I have learned recently says it best. Take, O take me as I am. Summon out what I shall be. Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.

Our call is to preach the whole Gospel of Jesus's love, acceptance, redemption, and sanctification.

We live in a time that I believe is more like the first days of the Church than it is like the era of Christendom that preceded it, the gasp of which breathed its last just a few years ago.

In my address to you last year I said, "A part of our reality is that we have 19th and 20th century structures in 19th and 20th century locations seeking to do ministry in the 21st century. We need to look at all this seriously. What is the shape of parish ministry in the years to come? Will churches and synagogues continue to be exempt from property taxes as local governments in a climate of scarcity seek new revenue streams? Will a culture increasingly hostile to faith forget the importance of religious presence and witness in society and change its place in the public sphere? And if so what will that future look like? How can we be best prepared to meet the challenges of the years to come? What contingencies might we wish to have in place?"

And I called for our diocese to enter a new season of strategic planning. The question before us is how do we do mission and ministry most effectively in the 21st century? What is required of us to give God our best which is his due? We are not alone in seeking to address this new and ever-changing context. A Strategic planning task force has been established and begun its work. You will hear more concerning this work in the months ahead in the E-news and other communications from me and the task force.

Which relates to perhaps the most important action of General Convention was Resolution C095 which called this Church to reimagine itself through the lens of the Five Marks of Mission. It reads in part:

Resolved, ... That this General Convention believes the Holy Spirit is urging The Episcopal Church to reimagine itself, so that, grounded in our rich heritage and yet open to our creative future, we may more faithfully:

- Proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- Teach, baptize and nurture new believers
- Respond to human need by loving service
- Seek to transform unjust structures of society
- Strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth; and be it further

Resolved, That this General Convention establish a Task Force under the Joint Rules of Order, whose purpose shall be to present the 78th General Convention with a plan for reforming the Church's structures, governance, and administration

Our diocesan strategic planning initiative and this action of General Convention bear witness that many within our Church realize that business as usual is no longer acceptable. The task before is to discern how God is calling us to be the Church in this time. To discern that which is holding us back from embracing God's mission and ask for grace upon grace to let those things go. To behold the new life God places in our midst and ask for grace upon grace to receive that new life, accept it and embrace it.

I believe we can do that because God is faithful and the God who gives grace upon grace will continue to pour that grace upon us the Episcopal Church in this place.

Being displayed on the screen are a few questions that I would like you to discuss in table groups, inviting your input into this discernment process. This will not be your only opportunity but it is an initial opportunity. Please take 30 minutes to discuss them and then ask one person from your table to right down your responses. The tellers will collect them after the break.

The questions are these.

How is your congregation experiencing new life?

How do we, continually ourselves and others to see the new life God is calling forth and deepen our relationship with God?

How can diocesan structures and ministries help you in these efforts?

In conclusion, Thank you for the privilege of serving God by in, among, and through you the people of this great Diocese. May God bless us all as we go forward receiving grace upon grace.