

The Rt. Rev. Steven A. Miller's Pastoral Address to Diocesan Convention 2016

Splendor and honor and kingly power are yours by right, O Lord our God. And yours by right O lamb that was slain for with your blood you have redeemed for God from every family language people and nation, a kingdom of priests to serve our God.

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

Greetings and welcome to this 169th Convention of the Diocese of Milwaukee. It is good to be with you. It is good that we are here to do the work which undergirds our common life as the Diocese of Milwaukee, the Episcopal Church in Southern Wisconsin. It continues to be a joy for me to serve among you as your bishop. A great part of that joy is that I serve with what I believe is the finest group of clergy in the Episcopal Church. I am so proud of the priests and deacons that serve with me in this diocese. They are capable, caring, and dedicated to the ministry of Jesus Christ. They are also on average some of the youngest in the Episcopal Church. You may be interested to know that we are one of only two dioceses, the other being West Tennessee, where over 30% of our clergy are under the age of 35. Many diocese don't have any and others struggle to crack 10%. This is in part the result of our encouragement of young people to consider seriously ordained ministry at an early age and our active recruitment of younger clergy to serve in our congregations. This is part of a strategy to draw younger people in to our common life. Studies show that clergy tend to attract predominantly those within 10 years either side of their own age. In the congregations they serve I am seeing new and younger faces in the congregation. This makes my heart glad. I am assisted in the work of attracting and recruiting effective and dynamic clergy by Canon Peggy Bean, who is respected throughout the Episcopal Church as a leader in transition ministry, what we used to call deployment and in congregational development and vitality. Peggy is a joy to work with as are the rest of the faithful and dedicated staff at Nicholson House, Patty Jaffke, Barb Klauber, Marlene Udovich, Melissa Badot and Marge Kiss, our Diocesan Secretary.

Two other members of the staff who serve you in the wider Diocese are Kevin Stewart, Diocesan Missioner for Community Engagement and Elizabeth Tester, rector of St. Paul's, Watertown who serves as the Director of Camp Webb. We are blessed by the service and ministry of these dedicated persons. You are well served by them.

But it is not only members of the clergy and the diocesan staff who serve this diocese well. Last night we recognized by the awarding of the Bishop's Shield not only outgoing Archdeacon Chuck Zellermayer but also Ann Brophy, for many years, the volunteer chair of the Haiti Project, an outreach ministry that is dear to many of us. I am grateful for the work of the dedicated members of this diocese clergy and lay who serve on behalf of us all. Please join me in expressing thanks to the members of the Standing Committee, the members of this diocese who serve on Executive Council, the deputies who serve us at General Convention which we will elect today, the members of our Finance Committee led by our Treasurer Clyde Bachand, the Commission on Mission and Development, the Commission on Ministry, the Commission on Professional Standards and Support, the Disciplinary Board, and the Haiti Project especially our Haiti Project Coordinator Heidi Ropa who has taken on the work with passion and joy. Speaking of Haiti, I am asking each congregation of this Diocese to take a special collection in the next few weeks to help our friends in St. Marc's, Jeanette recover from the devastating effects of this week's Hurricane Matthew.

Allow me to conclude these prefatory remarks by taking a moment to thank you for your prayers and support over this past year. As I am sure you all know, in July, I had surgery to repair a torn left rotator cuff. I am grateful for your notes wishing me well and most especially for your prayers. As I wrote you a few weeks after surgery, I am sure that the ease and success of my continuing recovery was in no small part due to the prayers of all of you. I ask for your continued prayers as I continue physical therapy to regain strength and mobility. My surgery this summer was the occasion for a reminder of how blessed I am to have Cindy as a wife and partner, she took good care of me during my recovery.

It has been quite a year in the Miller family and next year promises to be the same. This past January, our daughter Lauren was married at the Cathedral Church of All Saints. She and her husband Joshua now live in St. Louis where they attend St. Louis University and will complete their coursework in May. Haley is a senior at Illinois Wesleyan. She will graduate in May as well. Which means May will certainly be a busy time for us. Please continue to hold Cindy, Lauren, Haley and Joshua in your prayers.

Cindy and I are also in that stage of life familiar to many of you when we are caring for aging parents. Cindy has had to make several trips to Missouri this year to help her mom as she faces health challenges. My parents are dealing with health challenges, too, as well of the challenge of making the decision to move out of their 3 story condo. Please pray for our parents and for us as we help them in this stage of their life.

As I told you last year a multicultural team from across the diocese continues to gather monthly to look at how we can be more inviting to all people in our communities as a first step. And in a follow up step the team is planning how to truly include and incorporate our diverse neighborhoods into our congregations while at the same time learning how our congregations can be incorporated more fully into the wider community. This Convention theme and its workshops yesterday are a part of the fruit of their labors. I am grateful for the presence of Canon Anthony Guillen from the Episcopal Church Center for being with us as our preacher and workshop leader yesterday and for Nick Upthall from the South Central Synod of the ELCA and the Wisconsin Council of Churches. I am also grateful for the hard work of the team that designed our Convention Eucharist in which we put our theme into practice.

Our theme for this Convention is from Every Family Language people and nation a kingdom of priests to serve our God. It is taken from the translation of the song in the Revelation to John found in our Book of Common Prayer.

Splendor and honor and kingly power are yours by right, O Lord our God. And yours by right O lamb that was slain for with your blood you have redeemed for God from every family language people and nation, a kingdom of priests to serve our God.

These words remind us that we are a priestly people called by God to serve him and join in God's mission to every family, language, nation and people. God is calling people to serve him from every language and nation. And we are called in to this priestly ministry by grace through faith to participate in God's Mission, what our presiding Bishop likes to call the Jesus Movement.

It is clear that this time is calling us to reach out in ways that many of us would never have imagined.

Last Sunday as we gathered for worship we heard the lament of the prophet Jeremiah,

Lamentations 1:1-6

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.
She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has no one to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,
they have become her enemies.
Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,
and finds no resting place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.
The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are desolate,
her priests groan;
her young girls grieve,
and her lot is bitter.
Her foes have become the masters,
her enemies prosper,
because the LORD has made her suffer
for the multitude of her transgressions;
her children have gone away,
captives before the foe.
From daughter Zion has departed
all her majesty.
Her princes have become like stags
that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
before the pursuer.

Jeremiah, spoke those words after the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of the people of Judah to Babylon. He saw the fall of Jerusalem and the conquering of that city as the result of the apostasy of its people and its leaders. The consequence of the failure to repent and follow God's commands.

As I heard those words my mind was filled with images of communities across this diocese where downtowns and inner cities are boarded up while boxes of corporate greed grow outside of each community, havens for low paying jobs and cheap goods. And I was reminded of the word we the Bishops of the Episcopal Church issued last month in Detroit.

It read in part:

We lament the stark joylessness that marks our present time. We decry angry political rhetoric which rages while fissures widen within society along racial, economic, educational, religious, cultural and generational lines. We refuse to look away as poverty, cruelty and war force families to become migrants enduring statelessness and demonization. We renounce the gun violence and drug addiction that steal lives and crush souls while others succumb to fear and cynicism, abandoning any sense of neighborliness.

But because we are people of faith our word to you did not end on that note. It continues:

Yet, in all this, "we do not despair" (2 Cor. 4:8.). We remember that God in Christ entered our earthly neighborhood during a time of political volatility and economic inequality. To this current crisis we bring our faith in Jesus. By God's grace, we choose to see in this moment an urgent opportunity to follow Jesus into our fractured neighborhoods, the nation and the world.

Every member of the church has been "called for a time such as this." (Esther 4:14)

And what is our call? It is to be from every family language a kingdom of priests. Jesus is the model of our priestly life. He is our great High Priest, the one who reconciled us to God the Father by his giving of himself fully completely and even to death. We are called to share in his priesthood by our own self emptying.

I have spoken about this to you before. In my address to you two years ago, I said:

Self-emptying means surrendering power.

Self-emptying means setting aside privilege.

Self-emptying means putting our wants and needs for the greater good.

Most of us in this room have the privilege of being in the majority. Because of the color of our skin and the history of our nation, most of us have never experienced discrimination or racial profiling. Contrast that with the fact that almost 2 out of 3 children of color live in poverty and that African-American men are many times more likely to be imprisoned than whites for the same crime. We have seen on our televisions this summer the results of this state of being as we watched the events unfold after the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

Two years later we continue to see more of the same and this time it was not two states away but right here in Madison and even more recently in Milwaukee. It has to stop. And we are called to be the priestly people who lead the effort to put an end to this scourge once and for all. I would remind you of my message to you in July following another week of senseless violence.

The definition of insanity is doing the same thing while expecting different results. We are the perpetrators and victims of this insanity unless we are willing to come together to make the necessary changes, personally and corporately, that will allow God's justice to shine through.

That is why I continue to labor with Bishops of this Church in addressing the issues of Racism and Gun Violence. This coming year, in Easter week, Bishop's United Against Gun Violence will hold its second conference. This time we will be meeting in Chicago. A part of our time together will include a public liturgy making witness and standing together against the unholy trinity of poverty, racism, and violence in the name of the Triune God of abundance, equality, and peace. I hope some of you will attend our conference. You can learn more about it on our Facebook page. I hope many of you and others from your congregations will come down and join us for this public witness.

Our common life as a priestly people is undergirded by the work we do today. This Convention has three responsibilities to elect people to serve in diocesan offices and as deputies to General Convention. Those elections are already underway. I am grateful for all those who have offered to serve and are willing to stand for election.

The second responsibility of this convention is to pass a budget. I know that over 90% of our budget comes from the faithful giving of the members of this diocese. Throughout my episcopacy aided by a succession of faithful and skilled treasurers and in consultation with your elected representatives, the executive council, I have strived to be a faithful shepherd of our common life and a steward of our diocesan finances. The current budget is no exception. It is a bare bones budget. What it does reflect though is a reallocation of assessments to reduce redundancies while continuing to strengthen our common life. For example, over the last few years the duties and work of the finance office have expanded by taking over some of the administrative duties once given to a Canon to the Ordinary or earlier in my episcopacy to a Canon for finance and administration and to providing direct help to congregations when they have financial questions and issues.

We have also been able to bring in some help for our Director of Finance so that she may spend less time in the weeds of payables and receivables and more time helping congregations and supporting the work of volunteers. The position of Camp Webb Director has been reduced in hours which has allowed us to partner with St. Paul's, Watertown by us purchasing a portion of their rector's time to oversee this program. This helps them to continue to have full time clergy presence. And camp is thriving and expanding under this model. In addition, we have added a part time missionary for Community Engagement who helps us develop in partnership with others ministries that serve those in need. I believe the budget presented to you by the Treasurer and Executive Council is a good budget and I ask you to adopt it.

The other work of this Convention is Resolutions. There are two before you. One is the annual canonically required resolution from the Executive Council through the Committee on Professional Standards and Support setting diocesan minimum compensation for clergy. Remember these are minimum standards that serve as guidelines. They have no canonical force. They set norms.

The other resolution calls for the creation of a task force to look at Canon 28, a canon that is at best unclear and needs repair. A copy of that canon is in your packet. Before we begin discussion of that resolution I am going to ask you to take some time at our table to read the current canon. A clear reading will show that it needs to be updated and revised. I would remind you that the only action the resolution anticipates is the creation of a task force jointly appointed by me and the Standing Committee. The need is clear. What does styled as a parish mean. The canon is unclear and contains outdated language and both of these things are unhelpful. A part of the task of those appointed will be to provide a mechanism for partnership with congregations in need and in severe decline to restore them to health. We are already engaged in such partnerships with Zion, Oconomowoc and St. Luke's. Bayview.

Next year you will have an opportunity to receive the report of the Task Force and accept, reject, or modify their proposals. But we need to move on this. As I said earlier the definition of insanity is to do the same thing, in this case nothing, and expect different results. Pass this resolution for the good of us all.

This is my 14th Convention as your diocesan bishop. Looking back on these last 13 years, I can truly say we have come a long way together. Our Diocese is leaner than when I began but it is also stronger, more nimble, and more united than when we began our work together. As I prepare to celebrate my thirteenth anniversary as your bishop, I look forward to our work together in the years ahead confident that together we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.