

Bishop's Address to the 166<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota  
Friday, November 10, 2023  
Eden Prairie, MN

To All God's Beloved in Minnesota,

Grace to you and peace from the God who immerses us in the loving waters of baptism, from Jesus who opens up new horizons of justice, and from the Holy Spirit who gives us the gift of delight in being together.

It fills my heart with more joy than I can put into words to see each and every one of your faces. It is so good to be together. Don't ever take this for granted. It is a pure gift.

Last month, I made a very quick trip to be with my family to Harry Potter World, which is part of Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida. I was late joining them because I had to do an unexpected stay in quarantine for covid, but I was able to join Melissa and the kids for the end of the trip. Everyone in the Loya household is a huge Harry Potter nerds so we were thoroughly enchanted by the chance to spend time immersed in that world that all of us have come to love so much. But the kids were at least as enchanted by swimming in the hotel pool as they were by all the roller coasters, and butterbeer, and all the other manufactured magic. So after a long day of standing in lines, and walking, and fighting or way through hoards of people, their energy spiked even higher at the prospect of spending a few evening hours in the swimming pool. And they vehemently insisted that the old man join them for every minute of it. Which I did. But the odd thing for me is that, when they are in the swimming pool, they don't really do anything. There's no overarching or unifying game or activity. They just like being there, laughing, and splashing, and being together. It's an amazing thing to watch. In the pool, they're not doing anything, and their spirits just soar with the delight of being together in the water.

According to the fourteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel, evidently the apostle Peter did not share my childrens' enthusiasm for being in the water. You know the story. The disciples, having been sent out by Jesus, are out in a storm on the sea of Galilee. Jesus appears walking toward them on the water in the distance. An eager Peter jumps out of the boat and asks to walk toward Jesus, and he's doing it either because it's a cool trick that he's seeing or because being with Jesus seems safer than being tossed around in the small boat. As he takes a few tentative steps out on the water, he panics. He freezes and begins to sink. Jesus comes over and saves him, and we have this object lesson for the ages in what faith looks like. When Peter puts his toes in the water, he finds that he prefers the tenuous safety of being in the boat. My kids, on the other hand, long for the delight of just being in the water.

That, from where I sit, is the choice facing the church in our day. We can anxiously cling to an increasingly unsteady boat, we can freeze with fear out on the waves, or we can learn how to delight in being out in the water, together, with Jesus.

To say that there are strong winds are blowing against the boat of the Episcopal Church is an understatement for the ages. Membership and participation in our congregations rebounded some in this past year since the pandemic low, but on the whole as a denomination we are still declining at a precipitous rate. Budgets are tight, volunteers are hard to recruit. You know all of it. Anyone who is paying even a little bit of attention can feel the winds blowing against us and can see the cracks in the hull.

But as we sit out here together on these stormy seas, we often make it much harder on ourselves by the story we tell ourselves about this boat. The story that's always under the surface of what we're saying together, the story we often tell ourselves as a church is that we used to be a big church. And we have always been a big church. Every congregation had full pews every Sunday. Every church always had a Sunday school that was just bursting at the seams. Every congregation always had a full-time priest who was thirty years old and had

Bishop's Address to the 166<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota  
Friday, November 10, 2023  
Eden Prairie, MN

twenty-five years of experience. But that is actually not true. The Episcopal Church today is roughly, not exactly, but roughly the same percentage of the American population as we were in 1930. There was a moment, in the middle of the twentieth century, that we got quite a bit bigger for just a minute as we rode the wave of post-war growth and cultural privilege. But for most of our history, the Episcopal Church has been a motley collection of small and scrappy congregations who have had to forge a variety of ways to sail on the world's stormy seas. But because we somehow came to believe that who we were for a minute is who we have always been and who we are always supposed to be, we have spent the last several decades trying to reclaim some real or imagined past. We have often acted like the goal is to fill the pews instead of joining God in healing the world. So much of what I have witnessed and been a central part of in my two decades of ordained ministry has been trying every anxious thing to get back to what we think we used to be. It has all failed. As our beloved Presiding Bishop reminded the House of Bishops in a sermon earlier this year: Jesus is coming back. The 1950s are not.

And thank God for that. Because our boat's most recent construction rested at least in part on a model of state privilege that the colonizers imported from Europe, and the call to spread the good news of Jesus across the continent was enmeshed in a cultural and racial imperialism, the devastation of which resounds loudly to this very moment. The size, power, and speed of that boat required us to sacrifice so much of the radical call of Jesus to the gods of civic respectability and cultural privilege.

So it's clear that we are going to need more than just a few repairs as we sail toward God's ever-expanding horizon. And here's the thing. It's year four of my episcopate so I'm going to be real honest with you this year. What we are aspiring to do in these years together—cultivate a diverse church ecology by focusing on the four priorities (which are just basic Christianity) doing those things together—it's not a magic wand that is going to fix the boat. The coming years together are not a sure thing. The coming years together will require us to step out, and be scared, and to argue a little, and mostly, hopefully, to just grab on to Jesus. Success (whatever that might mean) is not at all guaranteed. But following Jesus doesn't promise success. Following Jesus does not promise safety. Following Jesus does not promise institutional sustainability. Following Jesus, if you want me to be really honest with you, promises death. Following Jesus promises resurrection, and transformation, and new life. Following Jesus promises that if we are willing to lose everything, we might just find the one thing we are all so desperately trying to gain: liberation through God's healing love. So the core question for us to ask ourselves in the years to come is not how are we going to sustain ourselves? The core question for us is can we live together like we believe the gospel of Jesus is true? Can we live together as a diocese, and in every single one of our faith communities, like we believe God's promise that we truly gain by losing, and we really live by dying?

I believe that if we aren't asking those questions in every single situation, at every gathering, in the face of every challenge, no other brilliant thing that any of us can do is ultimately going to matter very much.

And if you read your Bible, which I hope you do, or study our history, there's bad news: whether we want to or not, we are going to have to get out of the boat. It's how God always does. People never get to stay in the boat when they respond to God's call. So the only real choice that we have is whether we learn to delight in being in the water with Jesus, or freeze up with fear and let the waves consume us.

But here's the good news: what I see from my seat in the Bishop Whipple Memorial Volkswagen is a whole lot of stepping out into the water to be with Jesus. So I want to take you on a quick drive with me to see a few snapshots.

Bishop's Address to the 166<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota  
Friday, November 10, 2023  
Eden Prairie, MN

A celebration of new ministry at All Saints Church in Northfield. This remarkably lovely parish has experienced a real revival over the past year. New growth, an expanding ministry with college students, a beautifully contagious hope. The place last Wednesday night was packed and rocking with love and joy. And they aren't doing much that is novel, or anxiously trying to patch up the boat. Fr. Cody, their new rector, pastors the neighborhood. They worship in a deeply traditional key that cultivates a lively sense of the living God. They study the scriptures, they share their lives, they seek nourishment from the sacraments. I could feel them all reaching out for Jesus' hand.

Not too far down the road, Calvary Church in Rochester learned this year of the Mayo Clinic's ambitious plans for expansion. It will literally change the whole landscape around their building, and the multi-year construction will be a steady source of disruption to their common life. It's an icon, honestly, of what most of us are facing. The world around us has changed and is changing, and there isn't anything we can do to stop it. In a recent conversation, their rector, Beth Royalty, told me about her and the lay leadership's commitment to not let that define their whole life together in the coming years, and to actively continue to seek ways of maintaining their mission of reaching out for Jesus' hand at the center of their common life, come what may in the landscape around them.

Our Racial Justice and Healing Commission lead fifty people through a retreat at St. John the Evangelist in Saint Paul. We prayed, we learned, we cried, we remembered how racial healing is at the core of what it means to follow Jesus. And as the weekend drew to a close, and as I looked around the room, what I saw on everyone's face was not anger or shame or fear, but joy, and love, and gratitude, and delight, like my kids splashing in the water, because we can face the full horrors of our racist legacies and know that God's love is the most powerful force for healing in the world. What I saw was fifty people holding out their hands on the water, reaching for Jesus.

A meeting in my office with a group of people who have been working with Canon Blair Pogue around starting new Christian communities. The energy and the look in that room was completely different than in so many of our Episcopal rooms. There was palpable hope. There was not only a lack of fear about getting out onto the water there was unbridled enthusiasm and joy for it. We looked out at God's horizon together, rather than looking behind us in fear.

Twenty-five people from small towns in Northwest Minnesota gathered at St. Helen's in Wadena with Canon Schuster and me to talk about how they can deepen their connections and continue to share their ministries in more profound ways. They were imagining a future marked by God's promise. The conversation was lively and energized as we all started to take a few tentative steps out of the boat, and reached out for Jesus' hands.

Three days this summer at EYE with twelve young people who are dialed in and ready to lead as part of a renewed diocesan youth ministry that is being built to last. An effusive outpouring of joy as Bill Butcher was installed as Vicar in Cass Lake and Onigum, the first time we've installed an Ojibwe priest to serve Ojibwe congregations in many years. I could go on and on and on, but you all want to hear the Presiding Bishop this afternoon. Everywhere I turn, Minnesota Episcopalians are stepping out of the boat, and reaching out for Jesus. Everywhere I turn, Minnesota Episcopalians, in the face of all the storms and uncertainties, are learning again how to just delight in being together in the waters of God's love. In deeply traditional and ancient ways, in innovative and experimental ways. In larger cities, and in all the small, beautiful places. Beloved, we do not need to turn our faces away in shame or fear from the sobering challenges before us because we know that navigating the way forward is not about our ingenuity, it is about God's power.

Bishop's Address to the 166<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota  
Friday, November 10, 2023  
Eden Prairie, MN

Those are a few snapshots. Just quickly, I want to tell you about four few commitments that I hope will help us do more of this in the coming year.

First, earlier in 2023, we signaled our intention to shift the School for Formation from focusing mostly on training new clergy to deeply forming lay leaders and disciples. Seminary education has shifted dramatically over the last decade, and there are many free, accessible, and outstanding ways we can continue to do the critical work of forming new clergy. But navigating through these waters cannot and should not be the domain of clergy alone. What the world and the church most need is for God's whole people to be lit up with the Spirit's power, soaked with the waters of love, rendering Jesus' peace and justice in the world. That's work that every single one of us is called to every moment of our lives. So in December, we will be launching a partnership with Faith Lead Academy at Luther Seminary to offer three pathways for deeper lay formation: to form lay leaders who are called work with clergy to start start new Christian communities; to provide support for lay leaders who are already the primary pastoral leaders for their congregations, which is true today and has always been in Minnesota; and three, helping every congregation do the core work of forming everyday disciples in the world. Almost 50 years ago, the 1979 prayer book recovered the ancient understanding that baptism is everyone's primary call to ministry, but we have, as a church, never really designed for supporting the laity in living fully into that calling. Much more to come as we launch that in December.

Second commitment: at last year's convention, I set out the hope that in the long-term future, we will not have fewer congregations than we do now, but we will have more. Many, many of them will be intentionally small, led primarily by laypersons, and overseen and supported in different ways by clergy. So this year, I am convening a group of lay and clergy leaders who will work with Canon Pogue to start a series of these micro-communities, intentionally small new faith communities that will meet in homes or public spaces or wherever, so that we can start to learn a little more together about what that landscape might look like.

And third, it has been many, many years since we have looked comprehensively at how we are funding and supporting our eleven indigenous congregations. This past year, we have begun after a season of dormancy to reconvene the Mission Committee on Indian Work with two weekend retreats. In the year to come, Canon Two Bulls, Canon Schuster, and I will be working with the diocesan council and with MCIW to discern the best way to structure and support these ministries as we navigate forward. This is long overdue, and I'm grateful for all the leaders who are engaged in helping us with this work.

Fourth commitment: this past year, we created the position of Missioner for Multicultural Ministries, and the Reverend Jeckonia Okoth has hit the ground running and is connecting in beautiful ways all across the diocese. The ways that we have supported our multicultural and culturally specific faith communities over the years has been episodic and ad hoc, and so Jeckonia will be working with leaders of those communities and with the diocesan council to develop a more intentional strategy for how we support those ministries in the future. The horizon toward which God beckons us will undoubtedly continue to be much more racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse than our past, and investing in our future and stepping out of the boat means recognizing and designing for it.

I'll close with this story. In July, I spent an epic day paddling and fishing a stretch of the Mississippi River between St. Cloud and Clearwater. It was awesome. I mean, I probably caught and released at least two dozen smallmouth bass. And when I was about a mile and a half upstream from my end point, all of a sudden, with seemingly no warning, the clouds rolled in and the heavens opened with what felt like a biblical downpour. I don't know if you know this—that's not good when you're floating in a small piece of plastic on the open water. I didn't want to stop fishing because it was too good, but I paddled over to the bank, and because in that

Bishop's Address to the 166<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota  
Friday, November 10, 2023  
Eden Prairie, MN

particular stretch of the river there was nothing on the shore but bluffs going straight up from the water up to residential backyards, there was no shelter from the rain. So for about thirty minutes, I couldn't do anything but stand on the open bank and let the rain soak me to my core. At first I was annoyed, but I quickly became just giddy at how ridiculous the whole situation was, just like my kids in the pool. And as I sat there laughing at myself, grateful no one could see me, soaking and looking at our river, I imagined Minnesota's earliest Episcopalians—Enmeghanowh and Bishop Whipple and James Lloyd Breck, and countless numbers whose names we do not know—who without question paddled and fished that very same stretch of river over and over and over. I could almost feel them with me. Like us, they labored as faithfully as they could through all their beauty and brokenness. They faced a landscape and a future that is every bit as uncertain as ours. And they stepped out, they reached out for Jesus' hands, and they learned how to just delight in being in the water together. We are no different. We are beautiful, and broken broken, and soaking wet, and scared, facing an uncertain future. But beloved, here's Jesus this weekend, reaching out, calling us, just like Peter and everyone who's come after him, to step out of the boat, to splash around, to dance and to soak and to play in the waters of grace, until the whole world is flooded with love.

Submitted to you on this tenth day of November, in the year of our Lord 2023 and in the city of Eden Prairie. I am, by God's reckless and irrational grace, number ten.