



Bishop's Address to Convention

Rt. Rev. Craig W. Loya, ECMN Convention, 2025

I.

Many years ago, Angus Young, one member of the classic rock duo AC/DC, was asked by a journalist: "How do you respond to people who say you've just made the same album eleven times?" He quipped back without hesitating: "I'm sick to death of talking about how we've released eleven identical albums. In fact, we have released twelve completely identical albums."

For those of you tracking, in the five times I have addressed this convention as bishop, I have delivered the same core message, with different metaphors and stories. Well, welcome to my sixth album.

You're going to hear some familiar guitar riffs, and I offer no apology for this. The gospel of Jesus Christ, like rock and roll, does not require novelty. And the Christian leadership we share is not about coming up with shiny new things, but calling ourselves back to who and whose we are. God has a project to heal the broken and hurting world with love, and we are invited to participate. All we have to do is surrender our whole life to it. Not novel. Just true.

II.

If you read the scriptures, and study the long arc of church history, you'll find that the times we are living through are not novel, either. God's people have been just where we are today over and over and over. In every season of crisis, catastrophe, and disruption, the people of God have carried forward what it means to keep covenant with God from one period of stability to another by forming small, remnant communities of practice, witness, and resistance. That was the case in the Babylonian exile that produced most of the Old Testament, it was true of the early Christians in the shadow of the Roman empire, the desert fathers and mothers, Benedict, Francis and Clare, Dorothy Day, the house church movement in communist China, over and over. Small communities, that practice the way of love, bear witness to the power of God, and that resist the forces that destroy God's precious creatures is the formula, every, single time.

The 29th chapter of the book of Jeremiah is a vivid snapshot of one such period. The prophet sends a letter to those living in the painful aftermath of their homeland being razed to the ground, and having been deported to live in a land they do not know. Jeremiah's advice for surviving such a crisis? Settle in and get comfortable with the discomfort: plant gardens, start families, engage and seek the welfare of this strange land where you have been placed, and don't you forget the outrageous promise of God that has sustained you, and will sustain you still.

There can be little doubt that we are living through such a period in our own day. We continue, as we have for many decades now, to steward an institutional expression of Christianity that no longer enjoys the strong cultural supports that sustained it for many years, and continues to shift and change underneath us. And in our nation, we are seeing is not just political division, but a bumping up against the limits of the American democratic experiment to hold together. In both our church and our nation, we have entered one of those exilic seasons when it is clear we are not what we once were, and what we will be has not yet fully taken shape. We can deny it (which we often do), we can lament it (which we probably should), we can rage against it (which often feels satisfying), or we can settle in and start planting some small gardens. Regardless, none of this is novel. It's just true.

What I have tried to do in my first five years as your bishop is invite us to see this remnant, exilic position not as a threat to be feared, but as a gift to be embraced. Our work, like our ancestors in every other moment like this, is to form and tend small communities of practice, witness, and resistance. So as I begin my second five years as bishop, I want to outline what I hope it will look like for us to live fully into our call to be a diocese in the exilic, remnant key.

III.

It will mean at least four things.

First, it means we are going to be weird.

Authentic Christianity will always appear strange to the world around it, because Jesus invites us to live in a different story. The story told all around us is that the world is a zero sum battle of winners and losers. The story told all around us casts me as the main character. The Jesus story sees the world as a community that longs to be healed. In the Jesus story, God is the main character, not me, and I can only be free by giving myself over God's will, not getting what I want. The Jesus story says love your enemy, bless those who curse you, blessed are the poor, you have to lose it to save it. If we live in that story, we should look weird.

Over at Breck School in Minneapolis, one of our extraordinary chaplains, Bryan Bliss, is taking a page out of the ancient philosopher Socrates in his work with high school students. Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth of his day by introducing them to "the strange gods." Bryan sees his own work as helping students navigate a culture that constantly demands

teenagers produce, accomplish, and succeed by introducing them to the strange gods, including the strange God of the gospel. There's a small fellowship that gathers for noonday prayer every Friday, to try to spend some time with this strange God of the gospel.

At San Nicolas in Richfield, Casa Maria is a ministry of food and loving community for recent immigrants, which you'll hear more about right after lunch. It is supported by a network of at least seven of our faith communities. This is a moment in our nation when the federal government is enforcing immigration policy with a racially narrow filter and a cruel delight. At Casa Maria, we are daring to look different, and heeding the overwhelming moral imperative of scripture to care for the stranger and the outsider. The work of Casa Maria is not about politics, it's about dignity. It's not about scoring points, it's about joining God's work of healing. It's a brave, new story.

The fastest path to church decline is to pretend like the gospel isn't weird, to apologize for its strangeness, to soften its radical demands. As we steward this remnant diocese through an exilic season, we have to keep it weird.

Second, it means we are going to keep digging deep roots.

On a day off last week, I took a long hike through William O'Brien State Park just north of Stillwater. At one point, the trail comes up out of the wooded river bluffs and onto a beautiful expanse of prairie. A sign describes the critical role the regular fires play in preserving the ecosystem. The prairie grasses can sustain the necessary trauma of the fire because the grass has such deep and interconnected roots.

Five years ago, in my first convention address, I outlined four core priorities that I hoped would shape our life together: discipleship, justice, faithful innovation, and congregational vitality. Discipleship—apprenticing our lives to the way of Jesus—is the foundational priority from which everything else is possible. Focusing on how we tether our hearts fully to the living God is how we grow deep and strong roots to weather the fires that inevitably wash over us. In this remnant season, we will be better served by strengthening our roots than always trying to fight the fires.

A number of congregations across the diocese have been experiencing renewed vitality through John Mark Comer's *Practicing the Way* series of free, online courses, which focus on helping us practice together, in deep community with each other. Every other Tuesday morning, the diocesan staff and I spend nearly two hours engaging this series, and it has changed my own life and faith, and transformed how we work together by helping us regularly focus on growing deeper roots. You'll hear more from St. Paul's in Duluth about their incredible experience later this morning. One participant from a Minnesota congregation wrote saying, "This is helping me come alive again spiritually." What the church and the world need most in this moment is people who are spiritually alive, because they are rooted deeply and daily in the nourishing soil of God's love.

A group of metro area youth ministers have been working closer and closer together in recent years, opening up their events to one another, and jointly coordinating discipleship for young people. On a recent Saturday morning, I picked up the youngest Loya kid from a church lock-in, and even after a night of shepherding some super excited pre-teens, the joy and excitement in the place was palpable. These very hard working youth ministers aren't trying to build successful programs by standing on their own, they are trying to make disciples by growing deep and interconnected roots, just like those prairie grasses.

Wherever we are digging deep roots, even if it's only with a few others, we are seeing beautiful fruit.

Third, it means we are going to embrace our limits.

The people that Jeremiah wrote to were living with the devastating loss of the Jerusalem temple. It had been the center of religious, political, economic, and social life. The small communities of practice, witness, and resistance they were now tasked with cultivating in exile could not be all things to all people. They had to radically focus on the essentials in order to preserve the covenant through a transitional season. Gardening in exile meant embracing the limits of what they could and could not do.

When the church was at the cultural center of American life, the local parish church was a hub of community and social life. And even though our place in the culture has shifted back to the margins, we often still try to sustain the congregation as a full-service center of great programs and fun activities for all types and interests. We are often trying to frenetically paddle the boat at the same speed it used to be blown by the strong winds of cultural expectation of participation in church. It's exhausting for both our lay and ordained leaders, and we can't keep trying to be everything to everyone.

Like our ancestors in ancient Babylon, we are going to have to set down things that are not part of our core work of making disciples who practice God's way of love together. Setting things down will always disappoint someone. Not everyone is going to want to come along for this stage of the journey. Our job as lay and ordained leaders is not to keep everyone happy, it's to keep our communities focused on the thing that matters most.

When it comes to embracing limitations, I am not only your chief pastor, but your chief hypocrite. I have done this job for five years as if my body is not mortal. It has humbled me enough by now to know that sustaining such a pace over the long arc is neither possible, nor faithful. I will be on sabbatical for three months next year, my first in more than twenty years of ministry. I continue to feel deeply called to this work in this place, and I want to preserve my ability to do this, with you, over a long horizon, so periodic rest is just going to have to be part of the deal.

It also means that I am going to endeavor in this next season to keep myself and the diocesan staff focused on the work that matters most, and there will inevitably be things that will go undone. The great gift you gave me when you elected me was absolute clarity about what you needed me to do: be deeply present in and with the diocese, cultivate a public pastoral and theological voice, help us discern new shapes and forms of Christian community in a changing landscape. That is still the work that I think is the core of a bishop's ministry, and how I can serve the diocese best. I hope that the way we steward this diocese together is not a matter of chasing everything that could be done, but by helping each other stay focused on our most important work.

Finally, it means we are going to live with a bold and contagious hope

In another remnant moment, the author of 1 Peter addressed the emerging Christian movement living in the shadow of an oppressive empire by urging them to always be prepared to give an account of the hope that is in them. Despite the impossibility of their political circumstances, the first Christians lived with a bold and immovable hope in the power of love, and it made their small little communities irresistible to a world that was coming unravelled.

So it is to be with us, beloved. In this painful moment in the life of our nation, in this challenging moment in the life of our church, the healing the world longs for will not come from winning a shouting match, or from political victory. The healing the world longs for will come today, as it ever has, through the power of love. We can be part of God's healing if we are fully alive with the hope that is in us, if we can live fully from the hope we have that love has already won.

The world is starving for hope, and the good news of Jesus Christ was made for a moment like this. More than twenty-five of our congregations have grown meaningfully in the years coming out of the pandemic, which is a testament not only to their leadership but to the spiritual hunger all around us. Under Blair Pogue's leadership, more than two hundred people in the diocese are involved in starting new initiatives and communities to introduce people to the way of Jesus. Jeckonia Okoth has begun to lay the foundation for one of the first church plants our diocese has undertaken in many years. Where we focus on deepening roots and sowing seeds, the Spirit will always produce fruit.

By the end of this year, we will also have closed two churches. When we deconsecrated Church of the Redeemer in Canon Falls just a few weeks ago, a large number of area clergy and lay leaders gathered to help hold the faithful few members with a tender love. We sang, we told stories, we gave thanks for the presence of that church across the generations. It was one of the most powerful moments I've experienced as your bishop, not only because of how much I love that congregation, but because as a diocesan family, we faced that death like we believe in the resurrection. We held each other, not just in love, but in hope.

We do not face dark and hard times, and we do not face death, in fear and despair. As followers of Jesus, we face hard times, we face the forces of oppression and evil, we face death itself, by shouting defiant alleluias that rise up from the hope that is in us. In the years to come, we will be setting some things down, we will be planting some new things, we will be deepening our roots. We will be weird. And we will do all of it knowing that God has already saved the church and the world, so we don't have to. God, and the world God made, doesn't need us be a large and successful institution. God and the world don't need the church to be wealthy and influential. What God, and the world need desperately, is for us to look like the cross of Jesus, meeting all the hard forces that assault and crush God's children with a fierce and gentle love, joining the Spirit in gathering all of it into God's perfect embrace in the one light. Not novel. Just true.

Submitted to you on this, the 14th day of November, 2025, in the city Rochester.

The Right Reverend Craig Loya X Bishop of Minnesota