



Alabama Diocesan Convention 2007

The Bishop's Address

The Rt. Rev. Henry Nutt Parsley, Jr.

Bishop of Alabama

Dearly beloved clergy and people of the Diocese of Alabama: it is my joy and privilege to address you in this my eleventh annual convention as your bishop. We gather in this Epiphany because we believe that “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” We are here to be servants of the light who is Christ and to let his light shine through us for the sake of the world.

At this time last year we did not know if I would be here. But here I am and very glad indeed to be home with you. The ever clever Bill Yon, in his inimitable way, said to me after the Presiding Bishop election last summer, “well, you were the best man for the job; but we needed a woman.” We wish Katherine Jefferts Schori very well in her role as our Presiding Bishop, and I

bid you keep her in your prayers. Becky and I are very grateful for your prayers and encouragement through the uncertainties of 2006 and we thank God for you. All is in God's gracious providence.

Let me say loud and clear that I feel deeply called to our on-going ministry together in this diocese. I believe that as your bishop I may have the best ministry in the church. Combined with the honor of serving as the Chancellor of Sewanee, with all due respect to Mark Johnston, I may have the best job in the whole world! Thanks be to God.

2006 was quite a year. With the launch of the ACTS 2 Campaign, Bishop Andrus' election as Bishop of California, the Presiding Bishop discernment process, the General Convention, our new companion diocese relationship with Haiti, and the continuing tensions in the larger church our cup has been running over since our 175th Convention, leaving your bishop and diocesan staff a little breathless at times!

Through it all our diocese has remained resolutely on mission, moving forward in the work Christ has given us to do for the building up of the church and the healing of the world. On mission is exactly where God means us to be.

I believe that we are blessed in this diocese with as fine a community of clergy as there is to be found in the Episcopal Church, with countless

energetic and devoted lay leaders who make our parishes and ministries thrive, and with a wonderfully dedicated diocesan staff. We ordained seven new priests in 2006, the largest group in many years. Our newest parish Holy Spirit, Alabaster has just moved into its new building, which we dedicated last Saturday. The Birmingham Episcopal Student Center, to be called Trinity Commons, will be occupied this month, which is a tremendous step forward for our campus ministry in Birmingham. We are making plans to plant a new parish in Chelsea later this year, and we are seeking a new Youth Ministries Assistant who will work with our young people across the diocese and coordinate our tremendously important Sawyerville Project. Your parish covenants have increased this year 3.5% so far, which helps keep our shared ministry strong, and we are grateful. These are all signs of vitality and the Spirit's energy among us.

The most extraordinary news of this 176th Convention is the excellent progress of our ACTS 2: Living the Vision Together Campaign. As you have heard this morning, the “quiet phase” of ACTS 2 has reached \$5 million in commitments to date. The parish phase of the campaign in most of our churches has just begun to unfold. Our success so far says a lot about us Alabama Episcopalians. It is a wonderful witness to the strength and generosity of our diocesan community.

The ministries that ACTS 2 will fund at Camp McDowell, in planting new churches, in multi-cultural ministries, communications, lay training, and

campus ministry will strengthen our diocese and be life-giving for many people in years to come. Our excellent progress toward our goal shows that when we Episcopalians are focused on doing Christ's work and providing ministry that impacts the lives of people our church steps forward in commitment and sacrificial giving.

We are very indebted to Felix Drennan and his fine cabinet for their superb and dedicated leadership. RSI has given us excellent counsel and support. I have been especially moved by our clergy and their families having pledged nearly \$500,000. to ACTS 2 and it has been a great joy for me personally in these recent months to meet with individuals, families, and small groups across our diocese to share our vision. It continues to be a lot of work, but the generosity of many of us has been extraordinary and heartening.

As Felix Drennan said moments ago, it is now up to us to see that ACTS 2 reaches and exceeds our goal. We really need more than \$5.5 million to do what needs to be done, since building costs have increased since we began this journey. Now is the time for all of us throughout our parishes to make commitments to ACTS 2 that will make this happen. Broad participation and ownership of these mission initiatives is as important as the financial goal. "Together" has been a main theme of our campaign. As the second chapter of Acts tells us, a church alive in the Spirit should be 'together and have all things in common.' Together we can be successful, so let us as leaders do our

best to encourage all our people to participate generously and help us go “over the top” in this great endeavor.

If you have not made your personal commitment to ACTS 2 I urge you to do so at this convention. Pledge cards are available on your tables and at the ACTS 2 exhibit table. Mite boxes for the children of the diocese are being distributed so that all our children can make gifts during this Lent and at other times, which will be given to build the altar in the new Chapel of St Francis in their honor.

As we move forward, in order to keep us firmly on mission and to insure the strength and stability of our diocese, I ask you in this convention to approve the election of a new Bishop Suffragan. My vision for the Bishop Suffragan will be to join me in the proclamation of the Gospel in word and deed, to share fully in parish visitations, and to assist in the oversight of our parishes and ministries. I will ask our new Suffragan to focus particularly on the oversight of our smaller parishes that need special attention, on the pastoral care of clergy and families, on our campus ministries, and on the implementation of our ACTS 2 initiatives, especially lay training and multi-cultural ministry. No doubt our new Suffragan will bring his or her own unique gifts and visions for which we will need to make room.

Our Standing Committee has been taking counsel for this process and if you approve my request according to the canons they have an election process

and a nominating committee to present. Let me remind you that a Bishop Suffragan is chosen to be a bishop for the whole diocese, not just to be my assistant. His or her tenure is independent of mine. Obviously electing a Suffragan is different from electing a Diocesan or Coadjutor; but we all need to own this very important discernment process and work to make our new bishop an integral part of our lives and ministries. I look forward to having another Episcopal colleague to help this diocese grow in faith and love and go from strength to strength in the ministry of Christ.

Meanwhile I am very grateful to Bob Miller for his invaluable service as Assisting Bishop. It is a gift to have Bob making visitations and being more present among us at this time and we thank you.

This 176th convention highlights our Episcopal Campus Ministries and the superb work of our eight gifted chaplains and the many students, faculty members and lay volunteers who make our ministry flourish on the campuses of our diocese. The work of Canterbury Chapel, led by Chaplain Fields and Austin Kendrick and many from our other campus ministries, in hosting this convention is extraordinary. I recently visited St. Dunstan's at Auburn where we had an overflowing congregation, three student baptisms and eleven student confirmations. The new campus center at Birmingham, to which Bill Blackerby has dedicated so much time and energy for over five years, is a great addition to our church's ministry. These are some examples of the great work of our campus ministries.

Our commitment to this ministry is, I dare say, among the strongest, if not the strongest, in the Episcopal Church and we heartily salute all whose gifts and dedication make this possible. I ask all who are a part of our campus ministries to rise and be recognized.

In keeping with the spirit of ACTS 2 and our campus ministries the theme of this convention is “Reaching Beyond Ourselves.” This strikes a note at the heart of the Gospel, that in reaching out in self-giving service to others we find Christ and our truest selves. God as we know him fully revealed in Jesus Christ is the Holy One who reaches out in endless love to create the universe, to come among us in Jesus Christ and dwell within us in the Spirit, and to bless all people with his grace and peace. We are made in God’s image and are called to be alive as God is alive – by loving, by giving, by serving.

In our sinful nature, nonetheless, it is natural for us to be turned inward, on our own needs and concerns and agendas. Martin Luther said, we are *incurvates in se*, turned in on ourselves. This leads us to a kind of self-orientation and spiritual narcissism that erodes the soul. The Bible consistently tells us that this is the way of spiritual death.

The Holy Spirit always pushes us outward, not toward ourselves but beyond ourselves, toward God and others. This is why our Lord’s final, new

commandment is to love one another. The Greek word for this love is of course *agape*. *Agape* is the love of God within us that is not turned inward, seeking for self, but that overflows for others. This is not ours by nature but by grace, by God's image and the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. Living in *agape* is the way to real life, life that is not just *bios* – physical existence –but that is *zoë*, real and eternal life. As the lay theologian Elizabeth O'Connor wrote, "The spiritual law at the core of our being requires that we reach out...So wondrously are we made that we are happiest when we are loving and miserable when we are not loving, The nature of our own being witnesses to the nature of God's being. The task of the church's liberation movement is to free love in others and to free love in ourselves."

Many of us have been living this truth recently in reaching out to those on the Gulf Coast who are struggling to recover from the hurricanes of 2005. Countless groups have gone from our diocese to reach out and well over \$500,000 have been given by all of us, directly and through Episcopal Relief and Development, to relief and rebuilding efforts in Mississippi and New Orleans. As Bishop Gray said last night, this has been and is continuing to turn darkness into day for many. We are grateful for his moving words and for his courageous witness during these difficult days.

Some of us are learning how we can be involved with the church in Haiti to help our courageous sisters and brothers build new hope and possibility for people there. Father Valdema and Carmel, who are with us, are doing

remarkable ministry with children and schools and parish ministries in the Croix de Bouquets area and we are grateful for the privilege of partnering with them and learning from them how to make a difference in the midst of great human need. This is a primary way that we are living our commitment to the Millennium Development Goals with at least .7% of our budget committed to this action-based evangelism.

I have rarely been so moved as I was on a trip to Haiti last October with a team from our diocese. At a school in the village of Thomazeau a young girl stood and asked if we could help them get a well to provide water for their school. It was then that I realized that they had none. There is an Episcopal school of 240 students without running water, food service, or adequate supplies, but which is doing superior and heroic work teaching children and forming young lives in faith and skill.

Matthew 25 last night reminded us “when I was thirsty you gave me something to drink...as you have done it to the least of these who are members of my family, you have done it to me.” I felt that it was Christ who was speaking through that young girl in Thomazeau. In helping her and the school we are serving Christ himself. I am glad to say that the offerings received in the services of this convention will be divided equally between building that well in Haiti and reaching out to help restore lives on the Gulf Coast.

The rabbis have an expression in Hebrew “*tikkun olam*,” which means the mending of the world. This is what God is doing. This is what we are called to do in and through the Diocese of Alabama. We are a country and church of enormous resources in a world of great need. Faithfulness in our time means reaching beyond ourselves to use our many gifts to help mend the world. As the former Secretary General of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld once wrote, “in our time the road to holiness passes through the world of action.” Our churches need to be engaged –really engaged- with the needs of human beings, reaching out to provide childcare, relief and shelter for the poor, recovery ministry, and initiatives that bring people together to meet needs, both spiritual and material.

A healthy church today is one that is open to the community around it and doing sacrificial, loving service for others. Churches that live for themselves die by themselves.

That appeal leads me finally to a word about the continuing tensions in our church nationally and in the Anglican Communion. Many of us have been grieved over the divisions in our church and the Communion which have led in recent days to some dioceses and parishes in our country distancing themselves from the Episcopal Church. I continue to give thanks for the spiritual maturity of this diocese and the unity we have in Christ over a spectrum of differences. But we are not unscathed by the conflicts. There are now several independent and self-styled “Anglican” churches within our

diocesan boundaries made up of people who have left the Episcopal Church and chosen to be under the apparent oversight of another Anglican primate.

This kind of separation is not what God wants for us. We are all one family in God. Our church historically has been a model of Christian unity in the midst of our human differences. I believe we urgently need to recover this heritage in these polarized times.

I am sorry to report that the loss of membership and income at Christ the Redeemer Parish in Montgomery during the past two years has been so great that the vestry has deemed it necessary to cease regular services and declare the parish dormant. We profoundly regret this, but it is my duty under our canons to ask you to accept this report so that we can take charge of the parish and its properties until such time as we, God willing, can mount an effort to begin a new parish ministry there. This is the first and only parish in our diocese that has had to become dormant because of our recent divisions and it is a painful example of the stresses of the moment.

I remain firm in my belief that the Windsor Report with its excellent account of Anglican ecclesiology is the way forward for us. I am committed to honoring its recommendations about the collegiality of the Anglican Communion, the listening process about important matters of sexuality, and exercising restraint as we seek theological consensus on the substantive matters of Christian ethics before the church. I believe that the vast majority

of our dioceses are also living with such a commitment explicitly or implicitly. With such a commitment it is right to call upon the Anglican provinces abroad that are intervening inappropriately in our domestic dioceses to honor the request of the Windsor Report not to do so. It is the Church Catholic's rule going back to the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 that bishops do not act in dioceses other than their own. This must be honored as we sort out our differences, or else further chaos will be created.

There is a fiction being created in some quarters today that Episcopal and Anglican churches can somehow be separate. The truth is that the Episcopal Church and Anglicanism in this country are one and the same, and I believe we must be resolute in seeing that this remains so. There is a place in this church for all of us, the great catholic, evangelical, and liberal traditions, which woven together as a rope make a strong and resilient community of faith known as Anglican Christianity. We are the church of reconciliation.

Our General Convention's resolutions in response to Windsor admittedly were not perfect, going too far for some and not far enough for others. But they clearly and unequivocally stated our commitment to the Anglican Communion, our regret for our part in recent actions that have injured our communion, our commitment to work for healing and reconciliation and to exercise much of the restraint that was called for. We do not know how the Primates' Meeting this week and the on-going Windsor

process will evaluate our response, and I expect that there will be continuing stress and strain as we approach the Lambeth Conference scheduled for 2008.

I prefer to view this ferment as a kind of birthing process, the coming forth of something new in the Anglican Communion. Birthing is usually painful. Out of all this I believe will come fresh clarity and structures to help the Communion strengthen our shared life and mission across the world and deal with our differences in more healthy ways than we have of late. Archbishop Rowan Williams is exactly right in his letter *The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today* when he writes, “ what our Communion lacks is a set of adequately developed structures which is able to cope with the diversity of views that will inevitably arise in a world of rapid global communication and huge cultural variety. The tacit conventions between us need spelling out – not for the sake of some central mechanism of control but so that we have ways of being sure we’re talking the same language, aware of belonging to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ.” The process of developing an Anglican covenant is a key way to do this. Covenant is how we live together under God toward a common ideal, with our human differences and imperfections. I believe a fresh Anglican covenant offers real hope for the future.

As we journey through these times we must take to heart our church’s witness. I am weary – and I know you are too -of seeing newspaper headlines about our conflicts. I want to see headlines about our glorious worship of

God, our work in Haiti, our ministries on campuses and with children, our efforts to make our cities and state more compassionate and just, our care for the poor and hurting, and our commitment to the stewardship of the earth and its creatures.

Our divisions do not serve the cause of Christ or witness to his mercy and forgiveness. They communicate that the Christian faith is about arguing and conflict rather than about reconciliation and love. They are the way of darkness not light.

How we deal with our differences says a great deal about our faith. One of the great spiritual gifts of Anglican Christianity has been our ability to live with differences with grace and charity within the faith of the Prayer Book. At our best we are blessed with humility, balance, and a generous orthodoxy, proclaiming Christ crucified and risen but not pretending to know all the truth, which belongs only to God. We have much to offer a world struggling in so many ways to live with vast differences and find spiritual paths that lead to the reconciliation for which Christ died and was raised.

I visited the Church of the Ascension in Montgomery several weeks ago, a wonderful Sunday with a full church and an overflowing luncheon afterwards. I noticed on the beautiful bronze doors this inscription: “Be watchful. Stand firm in your faith. Be courageous. Be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.” Those are good words for our time, especially “Let all

that you do be done in love.” As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote, “Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.”

Let us remember that our children are watching us, seeking a church that shows forth love, mercy, and forgiveness of Christ. Let us remember that the world is watching us, seeking light and hope. Let us not give them a scorpion.

Reconciliation must be our constant, passionate theme. Let us be united in the faith of the Prayer Book, honor the journey of our Church toward healing and renewal, respect the dignity of every person and make room for all God’s people, and “keep the main thing the main thing” - that is the reconciling work of Christ for the healing of the world. Our witness matters. Let it be not to division but to the divine love that transforms our hearts and gives life to the world.

This means not turning in on ourselves and our internal issues in the kind of spiritual narcissism that saps our strength. It means reaching beyond ourselves in glorious worship, in loving service, and in blessing all people with the grace of Christ. It means staying true to ourselves and seeking always to “free love in others and free love in ourselves.” That is the way of the cross,

the way to life and peace. Let it be our way in the Diocese of Alabama. With the initiatives being made possible by the Acts 2 Campaign we have important new work to do. Let us do it together, with renewed zeal and unity. Christ is counting on us.

A poem written by W. H. Vanstone, *The Risk of Love*, puts it eloquently, in conclusion:

**Love that gives, gives evermore,
Gives with zeal, with eager hands,
Spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
Ventures all, it's all expends.**

**Drained is love in making full,
Bound in setting others free,
Poor in making many rich,
Weak in giving power to be.**

**Therefore he who shows us God
Helpless hangs upon the tree;
And the nails and crown of thorns
Tell of what God's love must be.**

**Here is God: no monarch he,
Throned in easy state to reign;
Here is God, whose arms of love
Aching, spent the world sustain.**

This is the One whom we serve, the outstretched Christ. In all things let us stretch out our arms of love with him and serve God and others with gladness and singleness of heart.

**“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”
That is why we are here. God bless you in all that you do in the name of
Christ, the Light of the world.**

Amen