

47<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Ak  
Sept. 29-Oct. 1, 2022  
Bishop's Address

Welcome to the 47<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Alaska!

It is good to be back together, in person. I can feel the joy present in the room. Yes, it is good to be here. And I want to acknowledge right at the start that it took a lot for us to be here. I'm not talking only about the effort, the herculean effort, that our staff: Suzanne, Lynnette, and Melissa made to plan, organize, coordinate, and produce everything that makes this event possible—every one of our communities that has hosted a Diocesan Convention knows how much effort goes into coordinating one of these events (and THANK YOU). No, I say it took a lot for us to be here because the past two years have been a challenge like none we've experienced in our churches before, and not just our churches, but every aspect of our lives. The pandemic changed everything.

And all of it was change we didn't ask for, change we didn't plan, and, frankly, change we didn't want. But we had no choice but to adapt; to do some new things, and to accommodate some old things in new ways. Moreso, we had to give-up doing some things that, frankly, we could never have imagined giving up (gathering, the Peace, *Singing*, **Communion**). It is exhausting just thinking about it. So many just want it all to be over. Yet, it seems to never end.

I am, also, hearing a deep worry from the faithful. How can we recover all that has been lost? How are we, in some cases just a small remnant of faithful folks, who have labored long and hard under the burdens and changes of the pandemic, how are we going to do all the things that “need” to be done to get back to normal, to recover, or to compete with those “other” churches or activities that appear to be attracting all the best people (the young families, the wealthy and generous givers, the energetic and willing workers).

It is a worry that is not only here in this diocese, but everywhere. Pew Research just last week released results of a survey on “The Future of Religion in America.”

“[The Center estimates that in 2020, about 64% of Americans, including children, were Christian. People who are religiously unaffiliated, sometimes called religious “nones,” accounted for 30% of the U.S. population.

In 1972, 90% of Americans identifies as Christian. Since then, individuals have begun to ‘switch’ from identifying as Christian to identifying as unaffiliated. And the rate of this switching accelerated in the 1990s.

Depending on whether religious switching continues at recent rates, speeds up or stops entirely, the projections show Christians of all ages shrinking from 64% to between a little more than half (54%) and just above one-third (35%) of all Americans by 2070. Over that same period, “nones” (People who identify as non-religious) would rise from the current 30% to somewhere between 34% and 52% of the U.S. population.]”

Sobering.

Little wonder that many are feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. You’ve been working hard not just to adapt to a pandemic, but to quite literally to “save the Church,” and to do all the things that we are told we must do, and do really well, to stop the trend of people leaving.

That is a great burden. An enormous worry.

But you didn’t come here to listen to doom and gloom. And, frankly, I’m not here to proclaim doom and gloom. If you are like me, I’m sick of doom and gloom. What I need, and what I’m here to proclaim, is hope: hope and, perhaps, comfort, and rest for the weariness we may be experiencing from the pandemic and all the doom and gloom.

So where is the hope? Where is the comfort and rest?

“Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.”

Those aren’t my words, friends, Jesus said that. Those are comfortable words...and not just for you Rite 1 folks. Jesus offers those words of comfort to all of us.

I believe Jesus’ spoke those words for times just like this. They are a reminder that when life turns difficult, it is time to turn to Jesus.

My hope is that we will use this time together to find comfort in these words and, together, share and bring our weariness and our burdens to Jesus. What burdens are you carrying? What do you need Jesus to lift from your heart or your

shoulders? What are your stories of change, grief, or loss that accompany you—especially from the experiences of the pandemic? What would you ask to have taken away or healed if you could?

I believe in the power of prayer, and in the power of common prayer--shared prayers and shared stories. Of course some of you might be thinking: “well, that’s good; I’m glad the BISHOP believes in prayer. You BETTER believe in the power of prayer!”

I do believe in the power of prayer, and I believe that prayer is an important element in what it means to be resilient. And right now, we need resilience.

One of the bumper crops from the pandemic was books, blogs, and advice on how to be resilient. I read a few. They were helpful. For the most part, however, the “lessons” on resilience spoke to strategies for how to bounce back from adversity and return to a “normal life.” The idea is that resilience is how to get through the process of recovery to restoration. For our churches, resilience, by this definition, might be understood as the abilities we need to accommodate to the temporary limitations caused by the pandemic, to adjust and survive, until we can get back to the way things were. The resilient church will bounce back to in-person worship; bounce back to overflowing Sunday school rooms; recover to when new members crowded in our pews; to when pledged giving exceeded our budget needs; bounce back to when there was a full time priest at every altar every Sunday and at every funeral....you know, the way things were before the pandemic.

But what if things aren’t going to get back to normal (especially the normal of our dreams)? What if the status quo we remember or look back at is really the status “no,” not anymore. What then? What does resilience look like in a situation where there is no going back?

Stephanie Spellers--I hope you remember Stephanie Spellers: she served as the Chaplain to the HOB until becoming one of Presiding Bishop Micheal Curry’s Canons. She was our Convention Keynote Speaker back in 2017. Canon Spellers recently put a book in my hands by Alice Updike Scannell, called “Building Resilience.” It takes a completely different look at resilience. Scannell uses the term: *radical resilience* to describe the resilience needed “not to bounce back from, but to work through the adversities that change our lives, the adversities that deliver a new reality in which we must make a new life.”

Scannell, who earned a doctoral degree in gerontology (the study of aging), was fascinated by the idea that no one seemed to be teaching people how to get old. Seems silly, right? But think about it: we raise children, teach them how to walk, talk, get dressed, take care of themselves, how to handle the challenges of life. We teach children skills for growing up; but, as Scannell noticed, there didn't seem to be any resources for teaching skills for growing old. And growing old is hard, maybe even harder than growing-up.

How to live when there is no going back to the way things were. That is a persistent reality for human beings as they age, isn't it. To be honest, it is a reality for everyone to some degree.

It is a reality for the Church, too.

How much energy has been given, especially over the past two years, to trying to bounce back to the way things were? The greater irony is that we've been trying to bounce back to the way things were since before the pandemic. There is a persistent image of what "church" should look like that many have been trying to recover for decades now.

Radical resilience suggests that instead of putting all our energy towards trying to bounce back to a past, beloved, comfortable, "normal," we would be better to make a new life in the new reality that exists.

Early this year, the results of a survey commissioned by the Episcopal Church were released. Even though I have now mentioned two surveys, I'm not really a big survey person, but I found a few of the results from the Episcopal Church sponsored survey very interesting. First, the question was asked: "Do you believe Jesus was an important spiritual figure?" 84% of Americans answered 'yes' to that question. 84% (n.b. Pew data reports that 64% of the US identifies as Christian). Breaking that data down further, it might not surprise you that 95% of Christians answered 'yes' to that question (what is the deal with the other 5%?), but what is surprising is that 50% of people who self-identified as not religious answered 'yes' they believe Jesus was an important spiritual figure. 50% of non-Christians--the "nones" think Jesus is an important spiritual figure.

That tells me Jesus is doing pretty well. He seems to have come out of this pandemic with a solid approval rating: 84% of everyone and 50% of the folks who don't follow him on the Church's official social media feeds think he is an important spiritual figure.

I wonder what we might learn from that data. I wonder what that says about our new reality and how we might exercise a little radical resilience. I wonder.

The same survey had another interesting set of data: “How do you describe a Christian?” The data shows that Christians describe themselves rather favorably. The top answers from the Christian respondents? Christians are: Giving, Compassionate, Loving, Respectful, Friendly.

That sounds a bit like Jesus, right?

Would you like to know how the “non-religious” respondents described Christians? I should warn you; it is a bit different. Top answers: Hypocritical, judgmental, self-righteous, arrogant, unforgiving, selfish.

That does NOT sound like Jesus much at all.

So, what might we learn from this information? What does this say about our new reality and how we might exercise a little radical resilience.

Well, first, I don’t believe it. Who are these Christians that the non-Christians are describing? There isn’t a single person in this room who fits that description: Hypocritical, judgmental, self-righteous, arrogant, unforgiving, selfish?! That doesn’t describe anyone here.....well, maybe it describes one person here: I think I can be like that. To be honest, I KNOW I can be like that when I’m not being like Jesus, when I’m not close to Jesus. And I know a few other Christians who would fit that description, too. Do you?

I believe we all can be like that when we lose sight of who we are and whose we are as *disciples* of Jesus.

So, what can we learn from this new reality the church is living in? What can we learn from the changes and exhaustion of a pandemic? What can we learn from a world where the church is growing less popular, where Christians are viewed as the opposite of Jesus, but Jesus is still acknowledged as an important spiritual figure? What can we learn?

We can learn how to live into new life.

We can learn how to be radically resilient by giving our burdens, our worries, our fears, and our exhaustion to Jesus and refocusing our lives not on being the church—the busy church that was, but *disciples* of Jesus now, in this world and this life.

Despite all the worries and the losses that we have experienced over the pandemic, now is not the time for us--for Christians, to focus on all that has been lost or changed in our congregations, or to give over to being negative, bitter, or critical of our churches and our church leaders because of the changes. Nor is it time, given our exhaustion, to fret about how we are going to restore our churches to the good old days. Instead, now is the time to focus on *discipleship*, trusting that the Holy Spirit's power will renew the church. Let's trust that work to Jesus.

I think now *is* the time for each of us, the whole church, the whole Diocese, to recommit to living a "Jesus-shaped life;" to making disciples who live the faith and hope of Jesus in such a way that they become an invitation to a new life that is consistent with His way of love. Though it is easy to get stuck wondering how we are going to get more people in our pews or how we are going to save our church from dying, or how we are going to do all the things we are told we **MUST** do in order to recover: to attract the "nones," the youth, or the generous givers, we would be better off asking: How can we become better disciples? How can we better do the things Jesus tells us to do? How can we better tell and share our love and hope in Jesus? How can we serve as he served? How can we love as he loved?"

That is Jesus' great commission: BE disciples and make disciples. I wonder what he would say to the exhausted church today? I think he would say 'come to me all you who are carrying heavy burdens, I'll give you rest. My yoke is easy, my burden is light. Learn from me. All I ask is your faith in me and that you be my disciples. Follow me. Do what you have learned.

At the Lambeth Conference, the bishops of the Anglican Communion revisited the Five Marks of Mission as a renewed "Call" to discipleship. The Five Marks of Mission in the Anglican Communion are nothing new, in fact, they have been around since 1984. But as I revisited the Five Marks, I have come to see them as a "Call" to all of us for this time, this new reality, this new life; for the Marks of Mission are the Mission of Christ who is our hope in all times. The Five Marks are:

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptize and nurture disciples
3. To respond to human need by loving service

4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth, and to be good stewards of all God's gifts

**Therefore,** I call on all Episcopalians in Alaska and all Episcopal communities and congregations in the Diocese of Alaska to renewal and growth in discipleship through the Five Marks of Mission. Specifically, I call us to:

**Tell:** I call on all Episcopalians in Alaska to pray and reflect on their individual relationship with Jesus and to prepare a simple, from the heart, answer to the question: "Why is my hope/faith/love with Jesus Christ?" As you are comfortable, share your statement with someone else.

**Teach/Learn:** I call on all Episcopalians in Alaska to commit at least 15 minutes each day to reading and praying on the Gospel lesson assigned for Morning or Evening Prayer. How does the passage relate to your life, your situation? How is the Gospel part of your story? As you are comfortable, share your story with others.

**Tend:** I call on all Episcopalians in Alaska to engage in serving any one need in your community (neighborhood or deanery). Serving can be direct support or by contributing resources; *however*, service must include getting to know more about the need. Service can be a partnership with others: ecumenical partners, your deanery (funds to support that work). There are plenty of human needs in our communities. We don't have the energy or resources to tend to them all. Pick one that the Holy Spirit is calling you to do. You don't need to form a committee or establish an eternal ministry, just serve the need.

**Transform:** I call on all Episcopalians in Alaska to participate in the work of peace, justice, and reconciliation. Where do you see Jesus and his love being wounded? Where can you, working with others, be a bridge to reconciliation? Disciples make peace.

**Treasure:** I call on all Episcopalians in Alaska to commit to a discipline of stewardship and creation care, consciously reducing to some degree our energy consumption, and giving to support your local congregation and the common good

of your community. How does your stewardship reflect what you treasure? How does it witness to what Jesus treasures?

This “Call” is not intended to be rigid. Jesus said his burden is easy and his yoke is light. Instead, I make this call as an invitation to begin where you are, with the energy, effort, and resources you have available. Start with one of the Marks of Mission and see where it takes you as you grow in discipleship. Join with others as you are able. Invite someone to join or share with you.

We have a catch phrase in my family that we attribute to my grandfather who was an Episcopal priest. It may be that the phrase did not originate with him, but that doesn't matter, we credit him anyway because it was what he said. When getting to the end of some gathering or event or conversation, especially a challenging one, my grandfather would say: “Well, let's press on smartly and hope for the best.”

Beloved, let us press on smartly and hope for the best. We have every reason to press on into the new life that is before us as disciples of Jesus. We have every reason to press on hoping for the best---even if we don't know exactly what the best will be. As disciples, we put our hope in Jesus, and with Jesus as our hope, we shall never hope in vain.

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It continues to be a joy, an honor, a rich blessing to serve as your bishop. It is hard to believe that I have begun my 13<sup>th</sup> year. That is the wonderful thing about the new life and hope Jesus offers us: it makes all things new despite the years.

I remain deeply grateful for the abiding support and gift of my friends who serve the diocese in the office: Suzanne, Lynnette, and Melissa. We are partners in this ministry, and I could not ask for a more wonderful and devoted team.

Finally, and speaking of partners, I am deeply grateful for the new life and hope that I have been given this year in my marriage to Patricia. She is a gift. She says it was the power of prayer that brought us together. That may be true. I did say I believe in the power of prayer. But I think her smile and her eyes and her love had a little something to do with it, too. Thank you, Delegate Lattime.

Bless you all.

Fin.