

“Outposts of Hope”

Diocese of Alaska Convention 2023, Juneau

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine:
Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever.
Ephesians 3:20, 21

Whose power? God’s power. Where do we see that power at work? In us; in the Church, and in Jesus Christ for ever!

The power of God is at work: In you; in this Diocese; in this Church; and in Jesus Christ.

Let us never forget that.

I start with this point because it seems to have become a persistent concern, an overbearing topic of discussion and worry, in the Church in general and in the Episcopal Church specifically, that the power of God is fading; that the Church is dying; that the future of faith is rapidly coming to an end.

Last week I attended a House of Bishops meeting where one of our presentations was “on the numbers”—the bleak parochial report numbers. Please believe me, I am not discouraged by numbers. As the bishop of Alaska, I know very well that a community of 3 or more people gathered in the name of Jesus is a living, vibrant, faithful example of the living church. I don’t engage in too much hand wringing and worry about the life of the Church—I leave that to God. So, while I share the “numbers” with you, just know that the data tells a story, but not the whole story. The Holy Spirit is working despite the numbers.

With that in mind, here are some of the numbers the House of Bishops considered: in 1980 there were 64,367 children baptized in the Episcopal Church and 8,611 adults. In that same year there were nearly 40,000 marriages recorded in Episcopal Churches across our communion, and 50,070 burials. One way to look at that is to say we added nearly 73,000 members through baptism and lost only 50,000 to burials/death—a net gain of about 23,000 members, if you will permit me to look at it that way. Not a bad rate of return, although significantly down if we were to compare those numbers to, say, 1965.

And those nearly 40,000 marriages in the year 1980? Many of them were a solid sacramental investment in future baptismal candidates and Episcopal membership. In fact, that is an interesting statistic: growth in membership is directly related to the birth rate. As the birth rate goes down, so does membership. This applies to the birth rate of Episcopalian, however. There are certainly many more children being born today than in 1980, the problem is those children

are not being born to Episcopalians (or people of any denomination). And 20 years later, the numbers begin to show this point.

By 2000 the numbers were down: that year, 49,904 children were baptized as were 7,259 adults (57,163 total). There were 24,054 marriages--nearly half as many marriages as 1980; but the burial business was still doing fairly well with 40,117 burials, which, again, if you will permit the analysis, is still a net gain of about 17,000 members. Compare that to the net gain of 23,000 in 1980.

Last year, across the Episcopal Church, there were 15,272 children baptized and 2,147 adults (17,419). There were only 5,562 marriages performed—pause to consider that number, last year there were 75% fewer Episcopal Church marriages than 22 years ago. And, of course, the number you might be waiting for: there were 25,905 burials recorded in 2022.

I did the math for you: a total of 17,419 baptisms with 25,905 burials is a net loss of 8,486 members. *Please recognize that this is NOT an adequate or even especially accurate way to describe this data. There are many other ways members are added to the Episcopal Church than by baptism, it is simply a way to look at current trends.*

And for those of you who are in small congregations thinking or worrying that you are alone, that you are the only parish in the Episcopal Church with fewer than 25 people in the pews on a Sunday morning, the 2022 parochial data records that 30% of all Episcopal congregations has 25 or fewer average Sunday attendance (ASA). Another 25% has between 26-50 ASA which means that over half of Episcopal congregations, 55%, has an average Sunday attendance of 50 people or fewer.

Pretty easy to get discouraged by these numbers. Pretty easy to let them entangle us in hopelessness or, worse, separate us from our faith. They can certainly become a distraction—a persistent worry that seems to demand all our attention and all our effort. If we don't do something, *ANYTHING*, the Church is going to die. And there are plenty of folks who are prepared to tell you exactly what needs to happen to save the Church from certain death. Lots of great ideas, and a few, in my opinion, not so great.

But to all of it I have only this to say: “Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever.”

Whose power? God's power. Where do we see that power at work? In us; in the Church, and in Jesus Christ for ever!

My friends, God's power is at work in our lives, in the church, and in Jesus Christ. God's power as we have all witnessed it and as it is expressed in scripture and in the Creeds, is: life, creation, resurrection, salvation, reconciliation, and hope. Hope! God's power is at work in us, in the Church, and in Jesus through HOPE; and, as Paul might say, hope does not disappoint, because

the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:5)

My call to you as the Diocese of Alaska is that we be the Church: that we continue to live in the power of God, that we seek more and more to be outposts of HOPE in our communities—Hope in the power of God to bring life where there is death; renewal where things have grown old or are worn thin; reconciliation where there is despair, shame, or injury. Let our congregations be outposts of hope where people can find meaning...*MEANING*...for their life, purpose for their life, a sacred ground on which they can stand and into which they can send forth roots to nourish their life; outposts of hope where people are not just welcomed, but belong.

“The Episcopal Church Welcomes You”, yes, but you belong in our Outpost of Hope.

The world needs Outposts of Hope. What worries me far more than shrinking numbers in church on Sunday are the growing numbers of despair we see in our communities.

Consider these data points: the percentage of people who say they don't have close friends has increased four-fold since 1990. The share of Americans ages 25-54 who aren't married or living in some manner of committed relationship with a romantic partner has steadily increased year to year to 38 percent in 2019. More than half of all Americans say that no one knows them well. The percentage of high-school students who report persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness has shot up from 26 percent in 2009 to 44 percent in 2021! 44 percent!

Sociologists tell us that as we become more isolated, more overwhelmed by loneliness, we become more ossified in totalizing identities—more radicalized into a narrowly defined group or single purpose. This often manifests as inflexibility and a total lack of sympathy or concern for anyone outside the identified group or position. Moreover, it is not enough to claim the identity of the group or position, it is even more important to “destroy” all that stands against you. In short, people have become mean.

There is a bitter irony in this, or, at least, a curious word-play: people need meaning in life; without meaning, or with a meaning forged from loneliness or despair, people become mean. People without meaning, without hope, become mean people.

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever.

Whose power? God's power. Where do we see that power at work? In us; in the Church, and in Jesus Christ for ever!

We have such a wonderful gift to share—the gift of God's power to give hope, to give meaning, to give purpose, to encourage amendment of life, to give forgiveness, to give new life. The world needs us to not worry so much about numbers--whether or not we look like the church of 1965; or if we have a part-time or a full-time priest or no priest at all; or if we have an active Sunday school; or the right music; or the best preaching. The world needs us to be the Church: a

community of hope where people can find meaning in the life of Jesus Christ; where individuals are not just welcomed, but belong--belong to something bigger; where the power of God to transform the isolation of sin and death into new and meaningful life is witnessed in the fellowship and purpose of a community of hope.

What I am looking for is a revival of the Episcopal Church in Alaska—and not like the good old tent revivals we might envision with that phrase (as wonderful as THAT might be). What I am looking for in this revival is Church Planting—the planting of churches as outposts of hope. Even if that planting is in the same soil, the same garden, where your church already exists.

What might that look like--A new church plant in the same garden a soil where our congregations already grow?

First, let me be clear to the clergy here: I want you to stick to your knitting—preach the Gospel; celebrate the sacraments; teach the faith; pray and worship according to the traditions of the Book of Common Prayer in our church buildings; nourish Christ's people from the riches of his Grace; and while you are at it, be sure to seek nourishment from the riches of Christ for yourself, too. Your success, your value, is not measured by statistics or the number of people sitting in the pew, but by the faith, hope, and love you share.

The same is true for the laity. I remain encouraged by your abiding hope and faithfulness, and by the power of God working in you as you step forward into leadership in your communities. I give thanks to God that though we do have many churches without clergy leadership, nevertheless, there is worship and ministry happening by the power of God working through you. And, in fact, some of the fastest growing congregations in the Diocese of Alaska are being led by lay leaders. What is true for the clergy is true for you, too. Your success and value is not measured by numbers, but by the faith, hope, and love you share.

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

What I **am** asking is for us consider what a “new” church plant might look like in our congregation? How might we use the riches we have in our people, in our buildings, in our treasure to become an outpost of hope where we don't just welcome people but create community where people belong and where they find meaning, purpose, and hope and new opportunities for engagement with others in the life of Jesus. What would leadership look like in such an outpost of hope? How might we invite people in to share our faith, our hope in Jesus in new ways, to engage with others and connect with the power of God that gives meaning to our lives and our fellowship?

How might we plant churches from within, outposts of hope that form new disciples of Jesus?

Later this morning, we will be presenting and experiencing a resource called “Centered.” I am not assigning this as a program everyone **MUST** do, but offering it as resource for planting—a way possibly to create a new outpost of hope with some of your friends back home whether or

not they attend church with you on Sunday. The purpose of “Centered” is to guide small groups in discussions about God, belonging, and living a meaningful life.

Each of you has received a thumb drive with all of the Centered materials and videos preloaded. Later we will have the opportunity to test drive this program together. I hope you see the possibilities Centered might hold to plant a “church” where folks who might never walk into a church building might find an opportunity to engage with Jesus, his love, and his hope.

[Break]

You will notice in the budget that our goal is to continue to invest in training for Worship Leaders and licensed ministries. As we build leadership capacity in our congregations, I am hopeful that we can begin to expand the models of congregational leadership in Alaska, and be a model for the whole church (where many are just now experiencing what it means to depend on team ministry and lay leadership). I am encouraged by the possibilities of forming deanery-wide or regional ministry teams to serve and support several communities. Glory to God whose power working in us can do so much.

The budget also continues direct support to the deaneries--what we have come to call “Deanery dollars.” The purpose, as you know, is to encourage creativity and cooperative ministry in our deaneries.

We can anticipate a report from the Standing Committee on the work being done researching the history of boarding schools in the diocese of Alaska. All of that is part of the on-going work of the resolution passed two years ago at our Diocesan Convention.

Somewhat related, I have been appointed to serve on the General Convention Committee to respond to General Convention resolution A127 which calls on the Episcopal Church to address its role in American Indian and Alaska Native boarding schools. I am delighted to share with you that our own Pearl Chanar has been elected to serve as the chair of the A127 committee.

Also related, in May this year, a bill was introduced in the United States Senate, S.1723, which is a bill to establish a federal Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies. The bill was introduced with 28 sponsors including Senator Murkowski of Alaska. I have several copies of S.1723 for this convention to share (we will make them available). You can also find the full text of the S.1723 online. Just search Bill S.1723.

I intend to write a letter of support for this Bill to Alaska’s Congressional Delegation. However, if it is the will of this Convention, you might decide to adopt a resolution of support on behalf of the Diocese of Alaska. A resolution from the bishop’s address is in order, as is a resolution prepared and presented by the Resolution Committee of this Convention.

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

To bring this address to a close, may I express my deepest gratitude to all of you for the gift of your hope and faith. It is an indescribably blessing to serve as your bishop—I hold that blessing very dear.

I cannot thank your Diocesan staff enough for their partnership in this ministry. Melissa Ward our secretary and my assistant, Lynnette Winfrey Frank our book keeper, assistant to the Canon for Finance and Administration, and Suzanne Krull our Canon for Finance an Administration: those are their titles, but the work they do goes far beyond the titles. Their work is truly an expression of the power of God. Thank you all.

It gives me great joy to tell you that Suzanne Krull will be taking a well-deserved sabbatical beginning in November. She will be on sabbatical until the end of February next year. Yes, I'm terrified thinking how we will survive without her, but we will.

Finally, thank you to Holy Trinity for your excellent hospitality. I am grateful for the many gifts that I have received here at Holy Trinity. You will recall that I mentioned that there were 5,526 marriages recorded in the Episcopal Church in 2022. One of those took place right here at Holy Trinity when Patricia and I were married June 25th last year. And while some will wring their hands at the shrinking numbers on Episcopal Church parochial reports, I can say that 1 of those numbers has meant the world to me and certainly added blessing upon blessing to my life.

Thank you, Patricia for your love and support, and especially for being Holy Trinity's coordinator for this Convention. (75 closest out of town friends)

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever.

Amen.