192nd Convention of the Diocese of Ohio
November 14 & 15, 2008
Convention Address

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

As you know, the Mission Statement of the Diocese of Ohio centers on "building healthy communities that grow, give, and serve." At this 192nd Diocesan Convention, our focus is on the first of these three: Growth. Growth in faith, numbers, and resources for mission. Of course, growth, giving, and service are inextricably connected. As Christians and as a community of faith, we cannot do one without doing the other two. Our service to others deepens our faith, just as our worship experience challenges and directs our giving, and the sacrificial giving of ourselves to God inspires our ministry with and on behalf of others. This afternoon, however, to the degree that we are able to focus specifically on growth, I would like to talk, and I would like you to talk in three brief conversations with one another, about some issues that are essential to our mission to grow in faith, numbers, and resources for mission.

Because some might legitimately ask how we can expect growth in a shrinking economy, I want to offer a word of preface about the economic realities of this time and its effect on the financial security of congregations.

First, we all understand that the global economic crisis has serious financial implications for congregations and dioceses alike. We have known for some years that the Church must necessarily reconfigure, by default if not by intention. The current state of the economy and its influence on pledged and investment income bring this reality into stark focus. According to last year's parochial report data, in the Diocese of Ohio the average parish dependence on investment income and principal to support Normal Operating Income in 2007 was 21%. Likewise in that year, 12.5% of the Diocesan operating budget was funded by investment income. Obviously, the same dollar amounts in 2008 or 2009 will place a larger burden on investments. Later in this Convention you will hear from Mr. John Shelley, Chair of the Trustees of the Diocese, about the work that has been undertaken over the last year in restructuring both the investing and spending policies of the Joint Investment Fund, which includes last year's reduction of the spending rule from 5% to 4.5%, with the intention of going to 4% when practical. Clearly this is not the moment to make that second reduction, but it has been the right time to make thoughtful and substantive changes in our investing practices. With the support of a new investment consultant and an extraordinary schedule of meetings for the last twelve months, the Trustees have been doing just that. Their continuing commitment and accomplishments are exceptional, and I give deep thanks for their generosity of service.

Second, in spite of the very real financial consequences of this crisis for many congregational budgets, it is important that we not make hasty decisions, especially ones that affect the security of staff, both lay and ordained. Most certainly we all will be making budgetary adjustments in the coming months, and we will need to do so thoughtfully, deliberately, and compassionately. This *is* a critically important time to engage the broader conversation, in both parochial and diocesan venues, about how much we spend on what, how we might do it differently in the future, and how we get to there from where we are now.

As well, we must all be acutely aware of and responsive to the pastoral needs of this time. While as Americans we may not want to admit our attachment to money, this crisis results in fear and grief for many. It will mean that college tuitions will not be afforded, that health care will be reduced, that dreams will be discarded, and lifestyles dramatically altered. The emotional turmoil that will accompany these losses is something to which the Church can bring healing.

To these practical and pastoral ends, I will ask a group of you, lay and ordained leaders from across the diocese, to explore with representatives of the Diocesan Council, Trustees, Standing Committee, Commissions on Ministry and Congregational Development, and others, what companionship and support we can afford one another as we move through the days ahead. I believe that we can find creative ways to assist congregations through both this trying time and the changes to which it will undoubtedly lead us, without sacrificing the valuable witness of The Episcopal Church across northern Ohio. I look forward to your contributions to this effort.

Growth in faith

In the 17th chapter of Gospel of Luke we hear the apostles demand of Jesus, "Lord, increase our faith!" While the use of the terms *apostles* and *Lord* lead scholars to posit that this is an editorial addition to the original text, it expresses nonetheless the yearning of disciples down through the ages for a deeper intimacy with God and for the strength of spirit to face the challenges of ministering to an injured and injurious world.

As you will remember from Luke's account, Jesus did not provide the disciples with some immediate and supernatural infusion of power. Rather he provided them with a fantastic image, indeed an impossible one as sycamine trees cannot live in the sea, nevertheless an image that directed them to attend to whatever faith they had, even if it felt to them as small and inadequate as the tiny mustard seed, and to begin there.

As with every person who connected with Jesus, you and I, and the congregations which together we serve, yearn for deeper faith, for a greater attention to God's presence and involvement in our lives, for a clearer connection between how we live and how God lives among us. That spiritual growth begins with whatever we have, our mustard seed of faith, and is increased through the disciplines of fellowship, formation, prayer, and service. It is nurtured by community, fed by word and sacrament, exercised and strengthened in the service of others, and is essential to the health and mission effectiveness of both the individual and the congregation.

Over the last two years, 32 parishes in the Diocese of Ohio have engaged in the congregational development process of Natural Church Development, or NCD. These parishes are supported by a corps of 55 coaches, lay and ordained, who have received training to assist churches in diagnosing and developing the health of eight characteristics or facets of their congregational life essential for effective ministry. By a systematic surveying of congregation members, the eight characteristics of healthy congregational life and effective ministry are evaluated, and attention is given first to the least developed, under the theory that a barrel will hold water only up to the height of its lowest stave. In one sense NCD helps measure the mustard seed, it helps accurately

qualify our parochial reality, who we are and how we function as a congregation. Interestingly, in 17 of the 21 parishes that have to date taken the NCD survey, the lowest characteristic or "minimum factor" is Passionate Spirituality. Evidently this is not uncommon among "mainline" denominations, in whose congregations Passionate Spirituality is most often the minimum factor.

Passionate spirituality has to do with our experience of and connection to God, our zeal for the Church, our devotion in study and worship, and our interconnection with one another through prayer, sharing, and collaborative mission service. I am curious about what are some of the obstacles to passionate spirituality, what inhibits growth in faith, devotion, and interconnectedness with God and one another.

One recurring obstacle in my own spiritual life is fear. Sometimes I fear that I am not well prepared for the spiritual life, not so much in not being *good enough* in the sense of morally sufficient, but not being *up to it*, adequate to the task. Sometimes I fear that my spiritual relationship to God and Jesus and you and others may change me in ways that are too hard, or will expose things about me that I may not much like. And sometimes I fear that some of the things I care most about, some of my deepest convictions about what is just and faithful will differ so greatly from those of others, even some of you, that it will be hard for us to find common ground, to grow together. We don't have to look far in the Church before we see good reason for that fear. And of course, the power of evil wants most for me to be alone in those fears, and for you to be alone in yours, so that they will remain obstacles to our spiritual growth and passion, and obstacles to what God can do with and through us as Jesus' risen body in the world. Yet almost every time I have shared a fear with another person of faith I have received in return an encouraging companionship, and from that companionship a greater confidence, not in myself but in God, a confidence that God's grace will see me through.

Quite routinely I ask groups of Episcopalians, in parish visitations and other settings, "Do you have fears, for the Church or the world or yourself, and do you talk about them with other church folk?" Consistently, I hear from them three things: that they carry a variety of such anxieties and fears, that their anxiety is increased by the thought of expressing them to others, and that they are relieved to find that it is ok to do so and that they are in good company.

So right now, I'd like us to try an exercise in growing in faith, our faith in God, our faith in one another, and our faith in the Christ each of us bears to the other. I invite you to turn to someone nearby you, someone you don't know or someone you do, two by two, and talk quietly for a few minutes, maybe for a minute or two each, about a fear you have that complicates or obstructs your spiritual growth. Perhaps it is a fear for The Episcopal Church, or for your parish, or for yourself. And what kind of an obstacle does that fear present? Can you imagine what it would take to get past it, or learn to live with it in a way that removes its power to isolate or inhibit?

Take a few seconds of reflection and then explore with one another, for a couple of minutes each, these questions, after which I will call you back together you with a prayer:

What do you fear for the Church, for your parish, or for yourself? How is this fear an obstacle? What would it take to live beyond its power? What would it be like if it were removed?

The Lord be with you. (And also with you.) Let us pray:

> Fearless God, whose grace alone can remove the power of those things of which we are afraid: give us through our companionship with Christ and our fellowship with one another such confidence in you that we might live beyond the inhibitions of our fears and with a renewed freedom to do your will. In Jesus' name we pray. *Amen*.

Another obstacle to spiritual growth has to do with identity, knowing who I am in the broad spectrum of believing and knowing where I am in the wide landscape of the Church. We can get lost in our faith journey when we can't identify ourselves or our spiritual community. Because we gather this weekend as a diocese of The Episcopal Church, I want to focus particularly on our identity as Episcopalians. Sunday after Sunday, I and the Assisting Bishops travel across the Diocese of Ohio to worship in your parishes and meet with your fellow communicants. A particular joy of this is the time I spend with those who come forward for confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation. I commonly meet with them for an hour or so before the service and get to know something of their journeys, how they got there and why they are doing this.

Perhaps the most common request of me during that time is to help candidates get a sense of who we are as The Episcopal Church and what it means to be Episcopal. Even before last summer's Lambeth Conference and the media exposure it received, candidates expressed either confusion or interest, and often both, in exploring our shared identity as Episcopalians and our heritage as Anglicans. Of course, *I* am keenly interested in what it means to *them* to be, or in some cases to be becoming, Episcopalians. I am eager to learn how they understand themselves as members of this Diocese and denomination. I want to know what it means to them when they say, "I am an Episcopalian," *and* what they want it to mean to others.

One of the biggest challenges to our Church today, and one reason for much of our current distraction and conflict, is the lack of common understanding, indeed the lack of common identity we share as Episcopalians. For many, our denominational identity is largely a byproduct of our parochial affiliation – I am an Episcopalian because the church I attend is Episcopal. One result of this is that we develop an expectation that The Episcopal Church will always reflect the character and convictions of our own parish, and conversely we are disappointed and disenfranchised when The Episcopal Church, by the actions of the General Convention or other Episcopalians, does something that defines us in ways with which we do not agree or by beliefs we do not fully share.

In the media and in many of our own minds, we in The Episcopal Church have come to be identified by our differences, and perhaps even more by our struggle, and in some cases our inability, to live with those differences. For some that is an embarrassment and for many it is a frustration as it feels like a diminishment of our credibility as the body of Christ and a distraction from the work we are called to do. I want to suggest that, as embarrassing or frustrating as it may be, we are *rightly* and *accurately* identified by our differences and the struggles we have living together with them. For it seems to me that we are striving to do the very thing Jesus prayed for just before his crucifixion, that those who believe in him may all be one. One, even with the differences that threaten always to separate us. That is why we need his prayer. One, even with

the conflicting convictions and beliefs by which we individually identify as Christian and Episcopalian. That is why we need his prayer. One, even with decisions of Diocesan and General Conventions that from time to time run against what we might individually hope or need the Church to proclaim. That, too, is why we need his prayer.

I do not believe that an identity, which embraces the diversity of all whom God has called into our Church, necessarily devolves into a cultural relativism, as some have claimed. Rather, I see such an identity as comprehensive, allowing us to reckon with our differences while not forcing us to reconcile them. As I wrote to the Windsor Continuation Committee and the Anglican Covenant Design Group during the Lambeth Conference, "irreconcilable differences are nothing to be afraid of; irreconcilable is generally what differences are. God calls *people* to be reconciled, not their differences. God calls us to be reconciled precisely in spite of and because of our differences."

This comprehensiveness has for four and a half centuries been a hallmark of Anglican spirituality and ecclesiology, the *via media* or middle way that accommodates *both/and*, beginning most notably with the Elizabethan Settlement. It has never been easy. The 1559 Act of Uniformity that brought all of the Church in England under one Book of Common Prayer, as theologically embracing as it was of both catholic and protestant convictions, only passed Parliament by three votes. It could not have been comfortable for all to live with, and it doubtless cost everyone something. It stretched catholic and protestant believers alike. Yet it affirmed the place of all, at the same time that it began to define a common identity.

I often wonder whether we, as post-modern Christians, are coming to grips in a similar way with the *both/and* into which God has been herding us as Episcopalians. And I wonder whether our ability to live in a *both/and* church may be the beginning of our ability to minister to a world that is failing in its struggle to live with difference.

Of course, if we are to discern and articulate a comprehensive spirit and identity as Episcopalians, we need to gather those pieces that each of us brings together in Christ. We need to hear and collect all by which we identify as Episcopal, and make as much room for them in ourselves as Christ makes drawing all to himself. It may result in a reordering of how any of us identifies as Episcopalian, as making room in ourselves for the other always changes us and brings us spiritual growth. And it will require of us an ongoing and generous sharing with one another about how we identify as Episcopalian and what we want others to identify as Episcopal. With a General Convention being held next July, we will have an important opportunity to manifest and articulate our identity as The Episcopal Church. That gathering will benefit much from our beginning now to explore Episcopal identity as a diocese of congregations.

Tomorrow afternoon, I hope we will have some time to hear one another's thoughts and hopes about identity, but now I again invite you into a short conversation with one another and ask you to explore together the following:

When you say that you are an Episcopalian, what do you want people to identify in that? What does it mean to you? What do you want it to mean to them?

The Lord be with you. (And also with you.) Let us pray:

> Inviting God, you alone who have called every one of us into The Episcopal Church, and by the sacrifice of your beloved Son have secured for each a place at your table. Give to each of us a humble assurance that all those things by which we identify ourselves as Episcopalians can come together in a common identity, one reflective of Jesus promise: I will draw all people to myself. In whose name we pray. *Amen*.

Growth in numbers

Clarity about our own identity is essential to our growth in numbers, just as it is to our growth in faith. In receiving our invitation and welcome, others will need to identify who we are as Christ's body if they are ever to find their own Christian identity among us.

Later in this convention we will hear from the Evangelism committee of the Congregational Development Commission about the resources they are developing to support each of us in fulfilling our vocation as evangelists, and to their presentation I want to add a few words about our mission to grow in numbers.

Two of the critical elements of evangelism are invitation and welcome. Better than nine out of ten people who go to Church go because someone invited them. A friend, a colleague, a classmate, a relative, a neighbor, a stranger – someone extended to them Jesus' invitation to come off the fishing boat, out of the tree, up from the beach, and follow him. Congregations that grow in number often develop an ease among their communicants with making invitation. It becomes a norm, a habit, like encouraging someone to read the book we just enjoyed or see the film we just found interesting. Invitation takes practice and is supported by just the sort of clear sense of identity we have been exploring. And it is something in which you, as the lay and clergy leaders of this Diocese, can take a lead, developing your own invitational practice and sharing that with fellow communicants. People came to Jesus because they heard about him from others, and today they need to hear about him from us.

This February 6 and 7, the Winter Convocation (a combined offering of what was previously the Mission and Ministry Conference and the Bishop's College for Parish Leadership) will be held in Perrysburg, the keynote speaker for which will be The Episcopal Church's program officer for Evangelism, the Rev. Terry Martin. I bring the Winter Convocation to your attention now as it will offer workshops and presentations on a full range of topics, including considerable focus on evangelism and church growth.

The complement to inviting is welcoming, something our blue and white signs have long proclaimed but our actions have not always supported. The challenge of true welcome, of not just tolerating but really becoming one with, is that not all whom God invites into the Church are those with whom we easily settle. This gets ever more challenging on the larger scale, when we are confronted with welcoming as a diocese or the denomination as a whole. For example, those who value a more traditional liturgical expression are not quite certain how to make room in our Episcopal identity, let alone our pews, for evangelical or charismatic Episcopalians whom God

has invited into the Church. Likewise, those who are theologically more conservative find it difficult to accommodate folks with perhaps a more progressive commitment to social advocacy, whom God seems also to have invited into the Church, leading to conflicting expectations of the Church's stance on social issues. Because the things that most form our theological and spiritual identity vary so widely from congregation to congregation and communicant to communicant, and because they include, with dramatically differing influences, scriptural interpretation, liturgical expression, practices of prayer, theological inquiry, visions of justice, and experiences in mission, it is no wonder that we can arrive at a place that challenges our ability to take fully into ourselves the Christian understanding and identity of even our fellow Episcopalians. It challenges our ability to welcome those who are already here, let alone those whom God may be steering toward us.

I recently heard a wonderful story about a family gathering, perhaps it was a Thanksgiving holiday, when all the adult children and their significant others returned to spend a few days at the family home with the parents. One of the siblings brought home a new love interest, who did not seem to click with anyone. The first evening was very awkward, and while no one addressed it directly, everyone was painfully aware of the difficult dynamic. The next morning, when most of the family had gathered in the kitchen for coffee, except for the sibling who had brought the new beloved, the mother came in and announced that late that night she had had a conclusive conversation with God, who, she described, had straightened her out on this difficult situation.

"You see," she explained, "God simply reminded me what committee I am on. I mistakenly had thought I was on the selection committee, but in fact, I am on the welcoming committee." Not another word needed to be said.

The fact is that each of us is on the welcoming committee. Not just the "Hello, how are you?" welcoming committee, and not even the "I'll slide down in my pew and make room for you" welcoming committee, but the "It is my responsibility to make room for you in my own self and in my concept of the Church, even if that means change" welcoming committee.

I am reminded again of Parker Palmer's words about community, words that I have quoted to you before and that ever ring true about the Church:

> In a true community, we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and world. In fact, we might define community as that place where the person you least want to live with always lives!
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> (*The Promise of Paradox*)

God seems always to bring into God's Church someone or some group or some perspective that challenges our ability to embrace, accommodate, and welcome. And I have observed that the people in my life who have had the least difficulty with this are those who have confronted it head-on in themselves in the past. So one final time I ask you to share another brief conversation in pairs:

Where do you find the most difficulty in welcoming? When does it stretch you? What would it feel like to get beyond that? What would the Church look like if we did?

The Lord be with you. (And also with you.) Let us pray:

> Lord Jesus Christ, by whose welcome each of us has found our place in your risen body, give us such an assurance of your love that we might likewise welcome into ourselves those who differ from us in tradition, conviction, experience, or any other way; for they, bearing to us your spirit, will surely make us more whole and help us grow more fully into your divine stature. *Amen*.

Growth in resources for mission

The greatest resource for mission is collaboration. Of course we need money, materials, medicines, food, and people for mission, but if the Church is going to step up to challenge of ministering to a deeply divided and perilously fragile world, we will need to get past our own divisions and become a vibrant resource of collaboration. Indeed, that may well need to become our most identifying characteristic.

This winter our food pantries and feeding programs are going to be taxed as we have not seen them in generations. 1.2 million jobs were lost in this country in the last ten months, bringing the number of unemployed to 10 million, with more layoffs announced daily. A global economy in freefall and a world at war on numerous continents will have increasingly grave consequences for the poor and the working class in developing and developed countries alike. While for many there is a renewed spirit of hope following our presidential election, that hope will not come to realization without sacrifice and hard work, over an extended period of time. And little will be healed without substantive leadership that models and establishes broad collaboration. If faith communities do not provide that leadership, who will? If the Church cannot model how to live together with difference and work together toward the good of all, who can? Indeed collaboration in the face of our differences may be the ultimate measure of our ability to serve the world effectively.

We can make a substantial difference in the lives of countless human beings, in our own towns and cities as well as in villages and communities across the globe. But to do so we will need to work together, parish with parish, diocese with diocese, and province with province. And that depth of collaboration, of being one, will depend in large part on our commitment not to allow our differences to obstruct our being reconciled by God as God's people.

This was dramatically underscored for me this summer at the Lambeth Conference. When the Bishops of the Churches of the Anglican Communion gathered in Canterbury, England, the most effective and important work we did resulted from our eight-person Bible Study groups and our 40-person "Indaba" conversation groups. In those daily sessions, the conversations we had about difficult issues facing our Churches and the world were ones through which we embraced, not simply tolerated, one another, and by which we did not reconcile our differences, rather *we were reconciled to one another* by God. It was when we engaged in hearings about the proposed

covenant that would define who is in and who is out of the Communion, or when we engaged in hearings about the continuation of the process initiated in 2006 with the Windsor Report, or when we engaged in hearings about what we would say to our Churches and to the world about the conference itself that we returned to the worst of who we are as a body, fighting for our own agendas, our own ways of seeing things or doing things, our own theological certainties and ecclesiological self-interest. In those open hearings, as bishops lined up at microphones to make their claims to the truth and denounce the claims of others, the fragile reconciliation that God had struggled to bring to us in the Bible Study and Indaba groups as the children of one God was greatly undermined. How much it diminishes our potential for mission.

While this is always a threat to the mission of the Church at every level, it is important to name instances of the opposite. In our own diocese, I am moved by the number of youth groups who have undertaken or committed to mission trips and service projects with their peers in other parishes. I am inspired by the number of young adults who have approached me with genuine interest in doing mission service overseas in other Anglican dioceses. I marvel at the many mission collaborations sustained by congregations of our diocese, and I am encouraged by the increasing efforts that the two Episcopal dioceses serving the state of Ohio are making to address issues of social and environmental justice together. As these and other similar collaborations grow, so do we continue to grow as living resources for God's mission.

When Jesus was challenged by religious leaders about theological and cultural issues that threatened them or separated them from him and others, he rarely answered the questions as asked. Instead he focused his response on how we act toward and on behalf of others. He repeatedly described actions of love and non-violent justice. In some ways he avoided the ecclesiological and theological particulars that inevitably separate, and he pointed instead to the divine mandate of connecting to the Samarian, the leper, the tax-collector – to all – not as we might like them to be, but just as they are. That connecting, in ways that will undoubtedly change us, is what the new life in Christ is largely about. That connecting is the greatest resource we can return to God for God's mission.

Growth in faith, numbers, and resources for mission

This afternoon I have explored in these ways our mission to grow in faith, numbers, and resources for mission, and I have asked you to begin talking with one another about some of the elements of it, because if we are to accomplish that mission, we are going to need your leadership to do so. Your leadership as convention delegates, as elected lay and clergy leaders, will require more than a two-day convention responsibility. It will mean increased participation in diocesan commission and committee work, as some of you already do. It will mean participating in the Winter Convocation, in regional gatherings and deanery opportunities, in creative preparation for this summer's General Convention, and bringing those conversations to life in the congregations you represent, as some of you already do. It will mean raising up candidates, including yourselves, to stand for election to future Diocesan Councils, Standing Committees, General Convention deputations, and for appointment to other positions of diocesan responsibility, as some of you already do. If we are to grow in faith, numbers, and resources for mission, in a shrinking economy and fearful world, it will be the leadership of *all* of us in this

room, gathering our mustard seeds of faith, our collective identities as Episcopalians, our common identity as The Episcopal Church, our authentically welcoming hearts, and our intentional collaboration, that ultimately will define us to others as a people united as the body of Jesus to serve the world in the unlimited ways of his love. For if it is not we who will lead, then who?

In a recent address in Chicago, Archbishop Desmond Tutu adjured, "God has no one except you. God says, ‘Help me. Help me make this world the kind of world I intended for it to be. Help me.’"

In these times of great challenge and opportunity for the Church, the country, and the world, it remains a singular privilege to join you in responding to God’s call for help, and to grow together into the full stature of Christ, that we might indeed help heal the creation he died to redeem. For your faithful leadership and generous companionship I am very grateful. Thank you.

The Rt. Rev. Mark Hollingsworth, Jr.
Bishop of Ohio