



# Address to the 171<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention of the Diocese of Western New York

*by the Rt. Rev. J. Michael Garrison, Bishop of Western New York*

Friday, October 24, 2008

I greet you in the Name of the Beloved Son in whom we have redemption and forgiveness; the One who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; the One through whom and for whom all has been created and in whom everything is held together. (Colossians 1)

It is hard for me to believe that this is the tenth time that I have had the privilege of addressing this convention as the Bishop of Western New York. As I announced earlier, I am calling for the election of the Eleventh Bishop of Western New York and, God willing, will resign as Bishop upon the consecration of my successor. I announced this early so that the diocese can go about the task of preparing, searching and electing the next Bishop of Western New York in an orderly manner and provide for a healthy and holy transition. Transitions are never easy but are essential for the on-going life of our community. Carol and I are both grateful for the opportunity that we have had to be with you for a time and a season.

One of the greatest gifts we have experienced was our time in England this past summer at the Lambeth Conference and the Lambeth Spouses Conference. This was an opportunity of a life-time for both of us. I am grateful that we were able to attend once and grateful that once was enough.

As I have written elsewhere, the experience was both awesome and frustrating. It was awesome to gather with the more than 650 bishops from all around the world who chose to be present at the Archbishop of Canterbury's invitation. We gathered as bishops and spouses with brother and sister Anglicans from some 130 countries around the world, representing most of the 38 autonomous provinces of our global Communion. Even though there were and

still are disagreements over issues such as human sexuality, we re-affirmed our longing for unity and our agreement that our life in Christ is more important than any issue over which we may disagree. It was awesome to hear other bishops and their spouses tell about how they are called to live the Gospel in their various cultures and circumstances. It was awesome to hear how heroic the lives of our brother and sister Anglicans are in many different contexts around the world. It was frustrating to deal with other's misunderstandings and misrepresentations of The Episcopal Church, both conscious and unconscious.

Lest I give you the wrong impression, however, I must tell you that the positives greatly out-weighted the negatives. It was awesome to begin the Conference with two full days of retreat time led by the Archbishop and to have Canterbury Cathedral all to ourselves for those two days. It was awesome to experience worship in the Cathedral on three other occasions.

The most significant part of the Conference for me was the daily Bible study. Eight of us from diverse backgrounds and differing perspectives on the issues that our Communion faces gathered together to break open God's Word. We studied the Gospel of John with emphasis on Jesus' "I Am" statements. This experience reminded me again just how important it is for each Christian to tell his or her own story in the context of God's story as revealed to us in Holy Scripture.

The most frustrating time for me was what was called the "indaba" group. Indaba is a method used in African communities that brings together stakeholders in whatever issue a community may be facing. It

provides face to face time and opportunity for solving problems. The face to face time was excellent. What was frustrating to me was what I would call the Western overlay of having to come up with a report about our conversations. I felt that too much time was devoted to creating these reports and not enough time was devoted to just conversing and hearing each other's perspectives. I also was reminded of the need that we all have to do respectful listening. Bishops, like many clergy, love to talk. Of course, talking is our stock in trade. But there is still much wisdom in the reminder that God gave us two ears for listening and only one mouth for speaking.

Another highlight of the Lambeth experience was our day in London. We marched in witness to the plight of the poor and in support of the Millennium Development Goals. We walked together through the heart of London to affirm our willingness to work together in Christ's Name to provide education and gender equality; to diminish poverty, hunger, disease; and to reverse the degradation of the environment. I am grateful that many of our congregations are responding to the MDG's. In Christ's Name we do make a difference.

The march took us from Whitehall past Westminster Abbey and Parliament to Lambeth Palace, the historic residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury. There, Britain's prime minister, Gordon Brown, addressed us. He emphasized that together we can make a difference in the world and break the debilitating hold that inequality, poverty, lack of health, and lack of education have on so much of the world's population.

Afterwards, Archbishop Rowan and Jane Williams hosted a luncheon for 1,600 in a tent on their back lawn. Then we trundled off in buses to Buckingham Palace for late afternoon tea with Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. For a first time visit to London, that's not too bad a day!

One of the greatest moments of the Conference for me came at the very end of the closing Eucharist. It is a moment that both haunts me and gives me hope. The bishops and our spouses were gathered in the mammoth nave of Canterbury Cathedral. Just before the final blessing, members of the four

religious communities that serve in the islands of Melanesia in the South Pacific presented the names of seven brothers who were members of the Melanesian Brotherhood to Archbishop Rowan Williams. The brothers had worked as peacemakers among their fellow islanders who were locked in the conflict of a civil war. In 2003, all seven were cruelly murdered.

As peacemakers, the brothers had been seeking to disarm the combatants, broker a peace agreement, and care for the wounded and the dead under very difficult circumstances. One disappeared while on a peace mission. Six of his fellow religious went in search of him. It was not until months later that their fate was confirmed. They were martyred for their efforts to bring peace to their native land.

After their names were presented to the Archbishop, the brothers and sisters began to chant a "Litany of the Saints" that included the names of the slain brothers. As they chanted they began a procession bearing the list of the names of the brothers. They circled the nave altar, passed within ten yards of the place where Archbishop Thomas Becket was murdered some 900 years ago, climbed the twenty some steps that lead into the quire of the Cathedral, walked through the quire, climbed the steps to the high altar and then the steps to the cathedra, the seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Directly behind this throne, at the far eastern end of the Cathedral is a chapel dedicated to the martyrs and saints of our days. They carried the list of these names to be added to the list of names of persons in our own times who have witnessed by their lives and their deaths to the presence of Christ in our various places and cultures throughout our global village.

As we waited in the Cathedral nave for more than five minutes, the chant of the brothers and sisters grew fainter and fainter as they moved into the great depth of the Cathedral. There was absolute silence as we listened to the haunting chant. As the chant concluded the Archbishop dismissed us with a blessing and the Fourteenth Lambeth Conference came to an end.

The witness of the brothers is, in fact, the witness of our Anglican Communion. We are because of Christ's reconciling love. We are because Christ first

loved us. We exist to demonstrate the power of that love in all areas of human conflict and disagreement, whether in the Church or the world.

These thoughts bring me closer to home. I am disappointed and saddened by the decision of many members of Saint Bartholomew's, Tonawanda, to leave The Episcopal Church and this Diocese in order to start a new church. I am convinced that their departure diminishes us and our witness here in our region. I am also convinced of the rightness of our decisions to become more inclusive as The Episcopal Church. I remain proud that we are taking such a prophetic stand in the face of continuing opposition. For me the issues of inclusion of all people in the life of our Church remains an issue of justice and I am heartened by the reminder that comes from a paraphrase of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The long arch of history will eventually bend towards justice. We know, however, that change is never easy.

The following are the principles by which we are moving forward in these matters: Just as every individual is free to come to The Episcopal Church, so also every individual is free to depart The Episcopal Church. Parishes and dioceses, however, are not free to leave The Episcopal Church. Dioceses are creations of the General Convention and parishes are creations of a diocesan convention. An explicit canon that affirms that all property and assets held by any parish or mission of any diocese are held in trust for that diocese and for The Episcopal Church has been in existence since the 1970s.

Since last convention, the teams that were envisioned by the Futures Committee in the Revitalization Plan have begun their work and will be making a report shortly to this Convention. I am grateful for the work accomplished thus far, even though

the work has had a slow start. I am convinced that these teams provide an important way forward in the revitalization process. At the heart of this work is the continued need of all the parishes and missions to discover a new sense of vitality in our various communities. We suffer from the same anxiety and distress that infects all our communities here in Western New York.

All of us are well aware of the economic downturn that has been in our news, our thoughts, and our conversations over the last few weeks. We are all affected by this in our homes, our businesses, our churches and in our diocese as well. This downturn is a crisis that adds to the other challenges that beset us. But, crisis and challenge also provide opportunity. Such opportunity was exemplified in a speech given by one of the members of the House of Representatives. When speaking to the bill that hopefully would ease the crisis, the congressman pointed to the motto prominently engraved in the wall above the Speaker's dais in the Chamber of the House of Representatives. He indicated that the motto was what was needed in the midst of our troubles. The motto, as you may remember, is "In God We Trust."

It is in God that we place our trust to see us through our tough economic times. It is in God that we place our trust to grant us new insights into vitality for all our congregations and the work we do together as the Diocese of Western New York. It is in God that we place our trust to provide the person called to be the next bishop of this diocese. We are all God's beloved children and God invites us to trust that all is held together in our Savior Jesus who always seeks to draw us into a deeper relationship with God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.