

## 2025 Convention Address

I want to talk about three things in this address. First, I want to add my thoughts to those of the videos about the ministry of the bishop: what it is and what gives it authority. Second, I want to say a few words about the Nomination and Transition process. Third, I want to offer a few initial thoughts on the state of the diocese as I've come to know it.

So, first – the episcopate, what it is and what gives it authority.

The word “bishop” in Greek, as we all know, is episkopos, meaning “overseer” or “guardian.” A bishop has oversight of a lot. A bishop is chief pastor, chief liturgist, chief theologian, chief administrator, etc., etc. In this day and age, with the costs rising and budgets shrinking, administration takes an increasing amount of a bishop's time. Most dioceses are multi-million dollar corporations with properties, endowments, investments, staff, lawyers, etc. As budgets shrink, the office of bishop has had to expand to cover the work. So, oversight is a big deal.

But oversight does not give the office of bishop its authority.

Authority comes from two sources:

The first is apostolic teaching. The bishop is, above all else, a teacher. Every engagement, however ordinary or extraordinary, is an opportunity to teach the faith once delivered to the apostles: the Good News of God's grace and renewing love revealed in the life, death and resurrection of God's son, Jesus. The laying on of hands at the consecration of a bishop signifies this tradition, this unbroken stream of teaching. Apostolic teaching is shared with clergy, and it's the bishop's responsibility to see that what is taught in the diocese fits within the norms of the apostolic tradition. The clergy are bound by that, bound to teach what is authorized by the church and approved by the bishop. This doesn't mean there can be no change. The Gospel must be adapted to each context and every age. But the Good News of God's self-revelation in Jesus is eternal. For that reason, the bishop's permission is required for changes in worship or the lectionary. It's why, for example, the bishop has to approve the new Creation Season readings.

In the late 80's, I was part of the Clergy Leadership Project, and the focus of our study was to determine “what is the primary responsibility of the priest in our time.” After three years of work, my class determined that our primary responsibility was to “keep the faith conversation going.” The bishop has that as his or her primary role: to keep the apostolic faith conversation going – everywhere, all the time.

The second source of the bishop's authority comes from the bishop's presence as a symbol of unity. A bishop's election is confirmed by the whole church: every bishop with jurisdiction and every Standing Committee has a vote. A bishop is not canonically resident in any diocese, but is enrolled on the Presiding Bishop's list. The bishop is a symbol of the presence of the whole church – the whole Episcopal Church, yes – and more than that – the whole Body of Christ, the community created by the teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. The bishop's miter represents the flame of the Holy Spirit present in the Body. When the bishop visits your congregation, it's not simply a visit by the boss, by the overseer. It's a sign that the life of your congregation is part of the larger whole. The worshipping community represents, in that place, the teaching of Jesus and the presence of the whole church, the whole Body of Christ. It is the bishop's job to guard and protect that reality.

These two things, then, the bishop as apostolic teacher and symbol of unity, give the bishop's office its authority to oversee the church. And, of course, the personal authority of a bishop comes from the development of trust in relationships and integrity in those relationships. In the best situations, a bishop is able to convey, through personal authority, the authority of the office.

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Second, some words about the Nomination and Transition Process. We are laying out a plan for the election and consecration of our next bishop at this Convention. By God's grace we will elect a bishop for this diocese next year and consecrate him or her about six months later. That's the standard timeline in The Episcopal Church these days. It may seem short, but it's a deliberate effort to keep dioceses from languishing due to too much time between bishops. We have a consultant from TEC, the Rev. Devon Anderson, to work with us and guide us.

It's been my experience, however, that God's grace must take into account human fallibility. Once we start dealing with real people, we may find the timeline doesn't quite meet our needs. That's what happened in the Diocese of Rochester. Rochester found that it could not bring to the Convention the best possible candidates without more time to receive names and more time for thoughtful interviews, background checks, etc. And so the timeline was extended about four months, and we hosted an electing Convention in February. We feared snow, but God was gracious, and it all worked out. Wonderfully, I might add. All this is to say that, we will pray fervently that everyone meets our expectations, and we will be flexible if they don't.

People want to know what they can do to assist the Transition. How can I help? I think there are two critical things: First, keep doing what you are doing to nurture your parish and your ministries. Don't step back. Don't wait and see. Step forward and strengthen your commitment to the work of Christ in your place. The ministry of Christ never ceases and will continue no matter how the Transition goes. As my mother used to say, "Stick to your knitting." Follow the paths of the Lord in your place. A new bishop would much rather step aboard a moving train than to try to push one out of the station.

Second, participate fully in the nominating and electing process. Take every opportunity to provide your input. Stay abreast of developments in the process. Help your faith community stay in touch with what's happening, so that everyone is aware of developments.

I am confident that your Nominating and Transition Committees will work diligently to bring together the candidates they believe are being called by God to serve God in this place. They will do their best work if they feel your support and have your understanding as they work. I anticipate you will hear from them frequently in the diocesan newsletter and through your parish communications. Pay attention to those and lean in.

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Finally, some thoughts about the Diocese of WNY.

I've been in conversation with folks since mid-summer, and I've heard stories. The Diocese of Western New York has been through a rough season: a six year Partnership with NWPA that was barely underway when Covid struck, then two long years of life almost solely online attempting to encompass the differing canons, customs and cultures of the two dioceses, then an uneven emergence back into normal life post-Covid, and then the loss of Bishop Sean to the concerns of The Episcopal Church. For many, the last six years have felt like marking time or, worse, slowly losing ground. Thankfully, the Diocese is blessed with strong leaders, both clergy and lay, and a skilled diocesan staff. They have all done very good work on your behalf. They are also stretched thin, juggling more balls than can be kept in the air at one time. Everyone I've spoken with is

overbooked and wearing many hats. They are anxious to restore a sense of normalcy and forward movement to the life and work of the Diocese.

There's a lot to do. For the Diocese of Western New York, the big concern is a kind of diocesan-wide reset, a recovery from the Partnership and the reestablishment of canonical and diocesan norms. Much of what WNY did with NWPA was experimental, not only in terms of mission and ministry, but also in terms of process. Because there were two sets of canons, the Partnership tried to straddle the differences and find easy, if sometimes non-canonical, ways to work together. And because the operating styles of the two dioceses were so different, decision makers often found themselves having difficulty understanding and communicating precisely what was happening back to their home dioceses.

The work of the Commission on Ministry is a good example. Much of the ordination process in NWPA was more informal and more locally focused than WNY was used to. Record keeping was casual. Candidates were selected for what was called "local ordination" with the understanding that that required less or different education and that such persons would not leave their home communities. The WNY COM is now faced with determining what the ordination standard for WNY will be going forward. It's also my insistence that we follow the canons of TEC. There is no local ordination. The church did away with so-called Canon 9 ordinations in the revision of Title III twenty years ago. Ordination is for the whole church, and any ordained person may be called to serve in any diocese. What does that require of us in preparing people for ministry? Does this mean there is no room for experimentation? No. The changes in the church may actually be requiring a whole new set of skills, like community organizing, that need to be addressed. What does preparation for today's church look like? The COM of wrestling with all of this and trying also to be fair to folks who began the process under a different system. The COM and I will be spending a lot of time with this in the days ahead.

Another example has to do with the relationship between the bishop and decision makers. The leaders of the Diocese have stepped up to fill the gap caused by Bishop Sean's departure. I give them fulsome praise and my enduring respect. They have done tremendous work. But they have done this work sometimes not knowing for certain what their authority is and what its limits are. We're going to work on our relationships and iron out the rough spots, so the new bishop does not have to begin that process. Hopefully, we will present him or her with a solid, flexible and well-boundaried governance structure. The next bishop will continue this work, but we will start now.

The cultural and economic realities that led you to consider a partnership with Northwest Pennsylvania continue today unabated. As an institution, we are under continuing stress. I know that several congregations have closed in the recent past, and they probably will not be the last. We are having to do more with less, as are many other institutions in our country. Although there are some indications that the slide in membership has bottomed out and some congregations are reporting new members and young families, we are not out of the wilderness yet. We will need to continue to adapt, and to consider new ways of being church. We will need to continue to look at how we communicate and what we communicate, and we will need to be ready to receive young people and adults who have never before been part of a church.

We are also living in a time of unprecedented stress related to the church's ministries, the works of mercy: welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and those in prison. We see in our country a growing distrust of strangers, particularly focused on immigrants, resurgent racism, sexism and gender discrimination, and growing confusion about the relationship between religion, politics and freedom of speech. The federal government is making changes that challenge and, in some cases, attack our ministries. This confusion and conflict plays out in our congregations in political divides and objections to

ministries the church has exercised for two thousand years. Clergy and lay leaders are stressed and wondering if it's safe to do the work God calls us to do.

Jesus didn't promise we would be safe. He promised that he would be with us. As we wrestle with all the challenges we face, as we walk through the minefields of contemporary life, I want to say simply that now, more than ever, we need cleave to the ancient truth, the apostolic teaching, that God loves us and invites us to love God with everything we've got and our neighbors as our own flesh. Our task is to follow God's path, to stay in the Way. Our call to love and compassion is unchanged, and no matter what anyone else does, we will welcome the stranger, love the poor, bring comfort and healing to the sick, and remember those in prison. It doesn't seem grand enough, perhaps. It doesn't seem like enough power to change the course of the war in Ukraine or growing tension among nations. But it is, by faith, the way to bend the arc of history. Hearts are transformed one at a time, and God has invited us into this work of transformation and renewal. It's an anxious, anxious time, and you are forgiven your doubts and fears. Yet, God's invitation continues. So say your prayers, study the scriptures, and get to it: loving God and your neighbor, trusting that the love that raised Jesus from death still powers the universe, and following the Way of Jesus.

Thank you, again, for the trust you have placed in me.