



Diocese of Missouri
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Address to the 169th Convention of the Diocese of Missouri
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Christ Church Cathedral

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The questions I put before you today are these, and they are urgent:

In a time of economic crisis, what is God asking of us the Church in the Diocese of Missouri?

In a time when the Episcopal Church is in persistent decline, what is God asking of us the Church in the Diocese of Missouri?

The first of these questions requires little explanation for anyone paying attention to the news these days. The second, however, begs some background. So here are some numbers.

In 2007, the five-year decline and ten-year decline in average Sunday attendance for the whole Church were at 13 percent and 14 percent, respectively. Those are astounding numbers. The decline is steep, and one lasting this long with such unchanging rates will have become endemic.

Notice that there was the same rate of decline in the years before General Convention 2003 as it was afterward; the controversial decisions of 2003 can hardly be “the cause” of the decline. It is something deeper.

The number-crunchers, in fact, tell us that the roots of this decline go back at least fifty years.

In the Diocese of Missouri, our ten-year decline is 6%, and our five-year decline is 2%, and statistically stable in the past few years. These numbers are markedly better than those of the whole Church, but they are hardly sustainable.

The fact that these numbers in Missouri give us the fourth best of any diocese in the Church is itself nothing less than sobering. A decline, and still fourth best—that's embarrassing.

I am saying these things to you, in order simply to tell the truth, for in such truth begins the process of healing. Denial may be the first and reactive stage to such hard numbers, but Jesus did not say that *denial* will set you free. I want to tell the truth, face it honestly, and go from there.

So, in the face of an economic crisis, and persistent decline: What is God asking from us?

My provisional answer is this: Go deeper. And go outside.

The instinctive answer might be to turn inward, to get our own house in order before engaging in anything beyond ourselves. Wrong.

I believe that the movements to go deeper, and go outside, are but two parts of a single movement, mutually sustaining. The deepening of true prayer, both communal and personal, will result in mission; the work of mission, in turn will convert us, deepen our spiritual awareness. It is that *missional spirituality* which truly interests me.

God's mission in the world is to reconcile all things and all people, through Jesus Christ. The more anxious the times, the more we need in this Diocese to participate in that mission. This *missio Dei*—God's project, as many theologians translate that Latin phrase—is the answer to what ails us.

I have four stories to tell, one from a work of fiction, one from Mark's gospel, one from my own experience, and one from the history of this Diocese, all to cast different perspectives on the importance of God's project, this work of mission.

Mary Doria Russell's science fiction novel, *The Sparrow*, tells a story of the near future, when a voice, an achingly beautiful voice, is heard singing from across the universe. The broadcast signal from some other world comes into the radio telescope at Arecibo in Puerto Rico, where the scientists hear it.

The world government at the time cannot get its act together to organize a journey for finding this voice. But the Jesuits can, and they put together a community of explorers and pilgrims to travel across the expanse of space and find the singer with the beautiful voice, and all those creatures like the singer.

And why would any part of the Church want to do such an audacious thing? The Jesuit Superior General put it this way, as his explanation: we are simply doing what we have always done; we go to find God's other children.

And so they assemble a strange community of people to travel the distance of four light years, to a place they had never even imagined, in a story that will break your heart and give you hope, all at once.

I believe that God continually calls the people of God to find God's other children. I also believe that God

calls us into such places that we have never imagined, into places of adventure and risk. Such places will break us and convert us, and fill us with joy.

Then there was the time in Mark's gospel, when Jesus journeyed into the land of Tyre and Sidon, a creepy, foreign place just next door to his home country, but the kind of place to make a pious Galilean hyper-ventilate.

In truth, pious Galileans would not go into Tyre and Sidon at all, there being Gentile people and all their nauseating Gentile stuff.

But look at Jesus, crossing over into another place, a place where he is not at home, a land of risk and adventure and of "the other." There he meets a local woman, that Syrophenician woman. The encounter was transforming for the woman, and not coincidentally, it was transforming for Jesus, who learned some things about himself and his mission that he had not known before.

It happened precisely through that movement which took Jesus beyond his comfort zone, and into a place to encounter "the other."

God who called a creation into being, has been trying for thousands of years to call a people into being, a people knit from every family, language, people, and nation.

God's mission is that very project, and we are called to participate in it. We will never get it done, if we settle for "our kind of people." It is the encounter with God's other children, those who are the most different from us, which will set us free.

The third story I will share with you is just one moment among many in my life, which took me outside my comfort zone, and became a moment of my continuing conversion.

My first trip to Lui Diocese was in the spring of 2005. To get there is not quite a trip across the universe, but the travel is arduous enough.

Two long legs of international air travel, then a final leg into Sudan on a single-engine Cessna Caravan, landing at a dirt airstrip which some of our Sudanese friends, with no little irony, call Mundri International Airport. Suffice it to say that there is no duty-free shopping at Mundri International Airport.

The day was hot, dry, and dusty; every day in the long dry season in Sudan is hot, dry, and dusty. We got off the plane, jet-lagged, and there waiting alongside the strip, as if an ad hoc welcoming committee, were twenty or so children and young teens, both boys and girls.

The sight of them took my breath away; I had never seen in the flesh the likes of them. Most were frail and thin, from disease or hunger or both. Some of the little ones had the pot-belly associated with extreme malnutrition. Flies were abuzz all around them. A lot of their clothing was torn or threadbare.

Most of them smiled in greeting, and many of them reached out to shake our hands. Seeing these "God's other children" broke my heart, and I prayed, "Sweet Jesus, I do not know if I can survive Sudan if this is the anguish you are going to show me."

Then into the truck and across fifteen miles or so to Lui town, where we were met at the main intersection by a parade. Drums and singers were there to greet us, and again a crowd of teens and young children. What a wonderful thing, to be greeted with a parade. And the singing in Lui is beyond description, as achingly beautiful and as surprising as any voices that might come across the universe.

I learned that day that I had come to a place where singing the praise of God happens with joy beyond measure. And it happens in a place not far away from privation. Often enough, it happens among the *same people*.

I relearned what I have known all along, that deprivation and joy are by no means mutually exclusive, whatever distance there might appear between them. Encountering these God's other children helped drive that knowledge deeper into my awareness, and my life.

Let us be clear that our friendship with the Episcopalians in Lui matters a great deal to them. Through two decades of war they had come to feel isolated from and abandoned by other Christians, especially those in the West. Our willingness to show up to stand alongside them, there in Sudan, matters more than I can tell you.

And the material difference that we can make, such as the drilling of deep wells, leverages a huge change for the better in the quality of their lives.

But for some dozens of us to go there and be touched by God's other children makes a difference to the Missouri pilgrims themselves, and to this diocese.

Mission transforms the missionary. That's the great secret. Missioners then scatter transformation among the communities who sent them in the first place. So mission we must do.

The same thing occurs when mission happens closer to home; take the mission trip to New Orleans, for example. Seventeen missionaries from Missouri spent a hot summer week mudding sheet rock in a house whose owner had no place to turn but the Church. We made a difference to him and to his family.

But going there and forming a strange little missionary community did something to us also. And seventeen more people came back to Missouri with the mission bug, for the sake of their communities.

The next step, as I see it, is to find a place within the borders of this Diocese for the work of mission together--one close by, one that is where we live. It is not a choice between mission far off and mission close by; one simply builds upon the other, and both are necessary.

As I began to sketch out this address, I knew that I would need to broach the matter of our nation's financial crisis and how that might touch this diocese. The short answer is that it will touch us somehow, but the extent of that effect is hard to tell—I only know that the prospects look worse almost every day.

So a fourth story, from our own history.

I went to our diocesan archives to look for materials from a most difficult era in our nation's financial history, the Great Depression. Very interesting what I found there. The program fund of the diocese was at

\$68,000 in 1929. It decreased almost two-thirds by 1935, when the fund receipts were in the amount of \$27,000. It increased incrementally to about \$31,000 in 1938 and remained at that level until the end of the war years.

The two Bishops of that era, Frederick Johnson and William Scarlett, both noted the sharp decrease in programming, as a result of falling revenues. Well, that's what will happen, in the wake of steeply falling revenues. The Diocesan Journals got progressively thinner over the course of these years, because there were fewer things to report.

But these Bishops noted the drastic shortfall almost in passing, and with no sense of self-pity. They reported at length, however, about responsibilities of the Church to respond to a whole nation in crisis. And more particularly, to their Missouri neighborhoods in crisis.

The internal financial fact of funding shortfalls was noted, and the cuts were deep and painful. Whole programs vanished.

As far as I can tell from the Journals, the work of the Church in that era focused almost entirely beyond itself, which was a matter of mission and not program. And it happened by way of personal and corporate sacrifice.

New Churches were planted. Deaconesses went into regions of southeast Missouri, to start congregations there and to minister to those in material need, making sacrifices themselves in order to do so.

Rural poverty became a pressing concern, as did matters of racial justice, both in St. Louis and beyond. It was a pretty lively and interesting Church. Recruiting clergy, to Missouri, capable clergy, was not difficult during these hard times, because this Diocese was such a fascinating place to be.

And as far as I can tell, any time the Church remains so focused beyond itself, it will thrive. Whenever it turns in on itself, danger lurks. Mission is the lifeblood of the Church.

I am required by canon to report in this address the official organizing of new missions. This seems a logical point at which to make mention of St. Vincent's in the Vineyard, in Ste Genevieve County, Charles Orme-Rogers their vicar. May God prosper the work that is yours and ours, in that place.

The Lambeth Conference from last summer begs for some of my attention; only I do not want to allow it to take all the oxygen out of the room. Let me say that in balance, the conference was for me very good, a time of renewal.

Being around so many other Bishops made available the resources for learning how better to be a Bishop.

Two matters from the Conference touched me deeply. One, the realization that most of the 620 Bishops at the conference had a yearning for God's mission, in their own setting and beyond. Mission was a common thread in much of what we were about. It was very important—just not much of a headline grabber. The conference was about mission.

Second, I was humbled again and again by the cost that discipleship requires from Christian sisters and brothers around the world. Persecution is a word with that comes from current events, not history.

Christians face physical violence and threats in more places than I realized. They need our prayers, and our solidarity.

I need to report that the misunderstanding our province had with the Episcopal Church of the Sudan made for the three worst days of my time at Lambeth—and those days drew a sharp line to show the cultural distances between our two Churches.

For the sake of Jesus who calls us all, these differences demand closer attention to our relationship with these our sisters and brothers—not indifference, or reactivity, or abandonment. Closer relationship—if indeed God is making a people from every family, language, people, and nation. And not just “our kind of people.”

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, leads our communion in the most difficult of times, and his manner of leadership attracts criticism from every quarter. He is too easy a target. As a side note, let me say that almost anyone daring to be a leader in these hard times, both in culture and in Church, becomes too easy a target.

I beg you to recognize that fact when it comes to your own priests, who have said yes to a daunting task. Pray for them. Support them. Make them rest and take care of themselves, so they have the wherewithal for the work in front of them. Give them resources and encouragement, so they can be the leaders you need and deserve. They are our treasures.

Back to Archbishop Rowan, let me say that his insistence on a retreat to begin the conference, his steady spiritual calm, his decision to move away from the usual legislative model, and his quick theological wit were just the right gifts for the bishops at Lambeth. I think he proved the leader we needed and deserved.

One blessing of mission is that it tends to build up community. There is something about shared adventure in the name of Christ which strengthens the bonds uniting the Church.

That may not be the case when it comes to the Church's consideration of issues, even those issues which the Church must address. These resolutions about human sexuality, before us today, probably fall under the category of those issues which must be addressed. They are issues for this season of the Church's life—probably issues for a long season.

Let me reiterate my position, that the arc of history and the Good News of Jesus Christ will take us, the Church, to a place of full inclusion for the faithful gay men and lesbians among us. Let me reiterate that I believe such movement will probably require a generation to complete.

And at the same time, I remain committed to sustaining the highest degree of communion available to us, within the Anglican world. These are, let us admit, the pushes and pulls of our time. Legislation, in and of itself, will not bring to a conclusion these pushes and pulls.

And yet we must vote today. That means that the assembly will be divided along the ayes and nays, to use parliamentary language. Understand that there is every heartfelt position you can imagine, around these issues, within the walls of this Cathedral. I know that for a fact.

For everyone who says a firm “aye,” from a place of clarity and rightness of cause, someone else will say a

firm “nay,” likewise from a place of clarity and rightness of cause.

And, second, the binary nature of voting “yes” or “no” does not easily take into account the gradations of understanding and belief within the walls of this Cathedral.

My appeal is simple: Deal gently with one another, for these are tender issues for so many of us. And the vote today will by no means finish them.

Many of you know that from the Diocesan Planning process, two forums for the people of the Diocese have been built.

One venue is a workshop to be held in every Congregation, a workshop that is about making disciples, which is something you actually already know how to do. The materials are based on Matthew's gospel, and as much as anything, they give you a tool for appraising the mission and ministry of your community.

How are we doing as disciples, and at making disciples?

What are the things we are doing now, and what other things need our attention, both far off and near?

The leaders for the workshops are all layfolk. The materials are great. The workshops are not ends in themselves; they are tools for us to use.

The other venue will be in the Convocations, with people from the different parishes in the same general area, no more than twenty at a time, who will be invited to “Conversations with the Bishop.” These conversations are a leisurely but purposeful gathering of some two hours with a shared meal in the middle. It will give me an opportunity to let you know more of what is on my heart, and it will give me a chance to hear from you.

A scribe will be present at every conversation, to make sure that everything is heard and recorded—which will give me and the other leaders of this Diocese valuable data for our common life.

But more to the point, these conversations will be about building relationships. We have not nearly enough time to be together, in this over-caffeinated culture of ours, not nearly enough time for the leisurely dreaming of the Dreams of God. I want to do such a thing among you.

What dreams am I dreaming for this Diocese? Here are some of them, in this season of urgency.

I dream of a diocese where teaching the faith and learning the faith is integral to our life together, and sustainable. It is something we do so naturally we don't have to call it a program.

I dream of a diocese where there is no curriculum for teaching and learning the faith, apart from the people of God, the life-giving Eucharist, the Holy Scriptures, the traditions of the ages, and the work of mission. The work of mission—because that Syrophenician woman does have a lot to teach us, you know.

I dream of a diocese where we can say, “It's the mission stupid,” and know that such words are our life.

I dream of a diocese that calls itself Eucharistic, and not just because everyone goes to mass. Eucharistic in the sense that we become the bread and wine, gifts taken, blest, broken and poured out, so they might be

shared, that notion rooted in the teachings of Richard Hooker. Who taught about our presence with Christ in the bread and wine!

I dream of a diocese in which the word survival is never said out loud, because we realize that our purpose lies in the life of the world. Not simply in keeping our doors open. Survival is not interesting—and is not the same as thing as resurrection. For Christians, living as we do under the sign of the cross, survival is not the agenda.

I dream of a diocese in which the distinction between clergy and the rest of the baptized is a matter of detail, and of designated leadership, not a matter of how-serious-a-disciple-I-intend-to-be: because everyone is serious about discipleship.

I dream of a diocese in which the work of mission is contagious and enlivening, where mission is never a chore but always an adventure.

I dream of a diocese, where the urgencies of this season are never excuses to give up but reasons to persevere.

Our brothers and sisters in Lui Diocese rebuilt their bombed-out cathedral while a war was still going on. They lived through a twenty-one-year-long season of urgency called civil war, and even now the peace is fragile. To rebuild a bombed-out Cathedral during time of war is nothing less than wisdom of the cross—but to the world, it is foolishness. None of our urgencies now are as threatening as the ones our Sudanese friends have faced, not a one of them.

I dream of a diocese with their wisdom and foolishness, their audacity and perseverance. I want some of what they have.

I dream of a diocese where we really are about the Life of the World, for the sake of Jesus. That is the reason to become a disciple; that is the reason to make disciples. That is why we need to build congregations, healthy enough, interesting enough, yeasty and salty enough, that they would be missed if not there.

Making Disciples. Building Congregations. For the life of the world.

This is the sort of thing I am dreaming. I want you to dream with me. For the sake of mission—for the sake of what it is that God is doing in the world.

The Rt. Rev. George Wayne Smith,
Tenth Bishop of Missouri