

**Address to the 135th Convention
of the Diocese of Southern Ohio
The Rt. Rev. Thomas E. Breidenthal**

*In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,
And to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

Let us pray:

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

I would like to begin by thanking the Committee on Dispatch of Business for its untiring work in preparing and implementing this, the 135th Convention of the Diocese of Southern Ohio. I wish particularly to thank Bishop Price, who has for years ensured that all of our necessary business is done properly, with due attention to both kinds of canons – the legal canons that govern our outward life as an institution, and the canons of sound judgments and graciousness that express our inner life as a people of God. I would also like to extend special thanks to Richelle Thompson, our Director of Communications. In a time of intense activity and general short-handedness, Richelle has not only ensured that the diocese is informed and engaged but also has made sure that we keep on top of a thousand details that might otherwise have been overlooked.

This convention's theme is "Let your light shine." Two and a half years into my episcopate, I observe a diocese of great resilience and full of the light of Christ. Most of our congregations are weathering the economic storm with grace, ingenuity and sacrifice, while devoting themselves all the more to care for the

hungry, the homeless, and the unemployed. Where mission share adjustments have had to be made, there has been a good spirit of cooperation, pragmatism and openness. I commend Diocesan Council for its tireless work in this area, as well as Bishop Price, Chris Stires, our CFO, and John Johanssen, our canon to the ordinary.

It is the faithful and steady contribution of all our congregations that makes these adjustments possible, supplying relief where it is needed. Just as importantly, your support ensures that our diocesan work goes on – work that is at once financial, pastoral, connective and organizational. Apart from this work and those who carry it out – some paid, some unpaid – it would be hard to bear one another's burdens equitably and to the benefit of all. I thank you all for that.

This spirit of cooperation and dedication to our common life gives me hope as I consider problems that will face us long after the economy has turned around. I know none of these concerns will be a surprise to you, since you raise them regularly when I visit you. A missing generation of young adults; difficulty reaching out to college students; the high cost of seminary-trained priests and the resultant push to do without a learned clergy; a general sense that we are not equipped for the challenge of competing Christian models.

These are serious challenges which we must begin to address concretely. But God does not give us challenges we are not up to, and often they are the very challenges we need to take our next step together as a community of faith. I am convinced that the time is right for boldness. As the Episcopal Church begins to arrive at a resolution of its long and bitter struggle over sexuality, a new clarity about our common grounding in Scripture and devotion to the Lordship of Jesus Christ is emerging. This goes hand in hand with a renewed appreciation of our Prayer Book tradition, as it has been both reaffirmed and transformed by the centrality of the Baptismal Covenant, with its constant reminder that the church is a transcendent mystery which we participate in here and now. We are clearer about what it means to be Christian, and we are clearer about the heart of our own witness as Episcopalians – as Anglicans. Namely, each of us is invited to share in the mystery of the body of Christ, and this invitation carries with it the conferral of real authority to speak for and within the church. Two things follow from this. One, we are always called to see the big picture and must be willing to shed what is

secondary if it stands in the way of the Holy Spirit's vast work. In other words, none of us is a "consumer" of what the church offers, and none of us can cling to what is private and familiar at the expense of the Spirit's work. Two, we can no longer be content with any vestige of the old paradigm of clergy as "professional Christians" and laity as their clients. The clergy do constitute a profession by virtue of training, expertise, a code of conduct and expectations of competence in the particular areas of work to which they are called. But this work boils down to teaching, community organization and entrepreneurial spirit, not as a replacement for the initiative and authority of every baptized person, but as a steady, living, institutional resource that ensures that all of us will have access to knowledge of Scripture and tradition, will be constantly goaded to act effectively as the collective people of God and will be encouraged to think big. It is the clergy's job to call forth our power.

You will recognize that I am talking about common ministry here, which is a calling forth of the light enkindled within us God's people, exercising to the fullest the offices and ministries which God has placed before us. This will and should play out differently in different kinds of congregations and in different regions, but for all of us, big and small, urban, suburban and rural, rich and poor, common ministry is the real challenge behind the concerns that face us all across the board.

Take our need to attract young adults. Nothing will attract them more quickly than the demonstration that we are a community of faith that values connection without coercion. Well, connection without coercion is the very heart and soul of common ministry. The more we live into shared ministry and common life as deaneries and across commonly held areas of godly passion – for the environment, for music, for immigration rights, for public education, for contemplative prayer, for healthy families, and on and on and on -- the more we do so from the grass roots, as it were – the more our 20 and 30-year-olds will find there is a place among us, a place that satisfies their intense hunger for community that is accountable but not all that strictly defined.

As for college students, every indication is that Generation Next values the older generation, and seeks its guidance. But, as recent graduates of our own diocesan youth program have repeatedly told me, they want a voice at the table and the real opportunity to make a difference rather than just "fitting in." Again, they have a

deep reverence for the past, but they are choosy in this regard. They want the best past, not the worst. They want the ancient liturgy of the church and the sacraments and the creeds. But they don't want lingering racism, opposition to the ordination of women, and the ongoing questioning of gay and lesbian communicants as proper Christians. Again, they want connection without coercion – that is, connection with our truest and best past.

I would like to take this occasion to note how blessed we are with a vibrant, diocesan-wide community of young people – teenagers, undergraduates and young adults, who take their own authority as Christian ministers seriously and stand ready to follow the Lord Jesus wherever he leads them. A number of them will be leading our worship at the close of this session. My thanks go to them and to our Director of Youth Ministries, Rob Konkol.

Clearly, common ministry speaks to our young people. They understand it, they embrace it, and they demand it. How does it speak to the other main problem facing most of our congregations, namely, the cost of a priest's salary package – to say nothing of the high cost of seminary? Let me say, first of all, that our seminaries are in a period of tremendous flux, as the whole church reflects on the value of this kind of formation for ordained ministry. My own view is that a deep, thorough and communal immersion in Bible, theology, ethics and church history is essential for the formation of priests who will be effective resources for the whole church. How we will be accomplishing that five, 10 or 15 years from now is an open question, but it is certain that such immersion will not come cheap, and will produce priests who will continue to need fair compensation for their education and skills.

What we can begin to do right now, however, is to clarify the role of the priesthood in our church in the light of common ministry. Priests share with their bishop the duty and the authority to gather the church wherever they are in such a way that the gathered body knows and understands the larger reality of which it is a part, that is, the church throughout the world, in all times and in all places. Priests exercise this office because they, in communion with their bishop, have been set aside and ordained expressly to represent and remind us of that larger body. This explains why we reserve the celebration of the Holy Eucharist to bishops and priests. The Eucharist is always something we do in union with the church universal, and so

from the earliest times the church as a body has insisted that the celebrant of the liturgy be a bishop or one of his or her representatives. Here again, the ancient paradigm is common ministry, since the only fundamental role of bishop or priest is a reminder of the big picture. Once that's clear, we can think much more easily outside of the box about how best to make use of the ministry of priests. Some will continue to function primarily within particular congregations, but with the understanding that they will be offering themselves as Eucharistic presiders – and therefore also as teachers, organizers and entrepreneurs – to congregations that don't have access to them on a weekly basis. Others will exercise more of a traveling ministry, moving among two or more congregations. There may be Sundays when a congregation says Morning Prayer instead of celebrating the Eucharist, because there is no priest present. But if common ministry has been fully lived into, these will be times especially to give thanks for the kingdom work that is going on in the local church, freely, joyfully, creatively, without benefit of clergy – which is how so many of our oldest and most venerable congregations in Southern Ohio began.

Now here let me say something about deacons. The diaconate is an ancient gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church, and we are privileged to be living in the time of its revival as an order of ministry with its own integrity and dignity. But we are far from understanding how to use this gift. One model in Southern Ohio has been to pair each deacon with a congregation. Although many of our congregations have benefited greatly from this arrangement, it has inevitably encouraged us to regard the local deacon as a substitute pastor, especially when he or she is filling in for the priest and even, in some cases, distributing communion when he or she was not around to celebrate the Eucharist. I am very concerned lest a move away from the paradigm of a priest for every congregation put added pressure on deacons to take up the slack. My own thought is that deacons should be freed up to be the essentially maverick order they are, circulating among groups of congregations or throughout the entire diocese, modeling the ministries of healing, reconciliation, advocacy and general service to the neighbor to which we are called as followers of Jesus Christ. Here again, common ministry seems to bring the ancient role of the deacon back into focus. Just as priests gather the baptized into communion with all other Christians, so deacons constantly goad the baptized into ministry, even dispersing them for this purpose.

Clearly, common ministry is a paradigm that we will be exploring and living into for a long time. For now, three practical implementations of it are or will soon be underway. First, we are exploring several places where a large congregation can partner with a smaller one for the purpose of shared ministry and the exchange of spiritual gifts. More on that after the New Year. Second, since the key to common ministry is the dynamic synergy between the full ministry of the baptized and the catalyzing function of the ordained, Canon Johanssen and Canon Karl Ruttan have developed a program for developing mission leadership teams at all levels. A mission leadership team is a group of four or five lay persons raised up in a congregation to provide pastoral oversight in collaboration with a resident or regularly visiting priest, and with the deacon or deacons operating in the area. We have recruited seven congregations representing a range of sizes and resources to participate in this course as a pilot project in 2010 and hope to offer it to all interested congregations in 2011. Check upcoming editions of the *Interchange* for news about this. Last but not least, I will be working with Deacon Douglas Argue, convener of the deacons, and a task force of deacons and others, to prepare a document on the diaconate and common ministry. This document will be the focus of our deacons' retreat in May, and will, I hope, issue in new guidelines and policies relating to the ministry of deacons in this diocese.

Now I'd like to mention some other developments that are just cause for celebration. Since common ministry is about shared ministry, it is also about our obligation constantly to look outside ourselves, to jump at every opportunity for collaboration, and to rejoice in the challenges that come with being stretched. In regard to collaboration, I am extremely pleased to announce that, after seven years across town from Diocesan House, Forward Movement is moving back onto the third floor, which has lain empty all this time. The historical bonds that unite us to this great Episcopal publishing house are strong and deep, and we are blessed to share space with them again. Their global reach will keep us honest about our own commitment to the big picture.

As for being stretched, nothing can do that for a diocese like a vigorous, two-way relationship with a companion diocese on the other side of the world. Thanks to the careful work of the Commission on National and World Mission and to Paul Rank, its chair, and to your input through a year-long process, Southern Ohio has been led to initiate an exploratory conversation with the Diocese of Liberia, in the hope

that we might find it mutually beneficial to enter into closer partnership. I am honored to welcome the Rt. Rev. Jonathan Hart and his wife Frances into our midst. We are looking forward to some reciprocal stretching. Bishop Hart will be addressing us later this afternoon.

But looking outside ourselves can also happen close to home. I know I speak for everyone here when I say how proud I am of our Bishop Suffragan's election as provisional bishop of Pittsburgh. Bishop Price will not be lost to us – he continues as Bishop Suffragan of Southern Ohio and will be doing about 20 visitations a year here. But I am happy that the Procter Fund has been able to join forces with Pittsburgh to make it possible for Bishop Price to devote his energies to giving our sister diocese the full attention, love and administrative acumen they need in this season of healing and rebuilding, and which he is able to offer in abundant measure. Please know that you and Mariann will be on our hearts and in our prayers.

Now, as you all know, Bishop Price's ministry in the Diocese of Pittsburgh means some reshuffling of the visitation schedule after Christmas. But God does not call anyone to new ministry without looking after those who are left behind as I know many of you can well attend. God has seen fit to give us Bishop Nedi Rivera, retiring Bishop Suffragan of Olympia, who with her husband is moving to Cincinnati in February, and has already agreed to take up some of the visitations Bishop Price cannot do. I am looking forward to your delight as you meet Bishop Rivera and get to know her. God is gracious indeed.

I conclude with three announcements, each arising in its own way from everything I've said so far.

First, about our beloved Procter Camp & Conference Center, faithfully administered by Penny Buckley and her staff. As you will recall, our exploration of common ministry is funded by a generous grant from the Jessie Ball DuPont Foundation. We are focusing on three areas of common ministry: in congregations, at Procter, and in ministry to college campuses and young adults. At the moment, we are still focused on congregations, but we will soon begin to turn our sights on Procter as a place where common ministry is fostered, formed and nurtured – or, as one might say – where we deepen our sense of connection with one another, with

the earth, and with God. In anticipation of a wide-ranging diocesan conversation about Procter, I have appointed a task force to assess Procter's current strengths and weaknesses. This task force is chaired by Chris Stires, and its other members are the Rev. Craig Foster, John Harris, Rob Konkol, the Rev. Eileen O'Reilly, the Rev. Robert Rideout, Marilyn Sesler and Randy Young.

Second, Bishop Price's ministry in Pittsburgh leaves a huge hole in a diocesan staff that has already been stretched by cuts and a freeze in new hiring. In effect, having gone from three canons to two, we are further reducing the senior staff by one. This was never my intention or that of Diocesan Council, which in its proposed budget for 2010 meant to maintain our senior staff at its present level, not to reduce it further. As proud as I am of the ministry Bishop Price is taking up in Pittsburgh, I am very concerned about our ability to carry on effectively with him gone much of the time. To be sure, we will be able to keep the ship afloat, but will we be able to explore new territory, respond to new challenges and develop new initiatives?

Therefore, in order to ensure that we do not lose our focus on coordinated mission efforts as they relate to stewardship, evangelism and congregational development, I am calling for the creation of a Canon for Mission, who will focus on diocesan mission initiatives (for instance, Latino ministry, collaboration with local farmers at Procter and elsewhere, inner city work in Cincinnati, Dayton and Columbus, campus and young adult ministry, and diocesan partnerships in North America and abroad). This person would also work with congregations in transition and tend to the care and feeding of those in training for mission.

This position will add nothing to the proposed budget for 2010, since it will be funded by that portion of the convention budget which will be freed up by Bishop Price's work in Pittsburgh. It will be freed up as follows. I have proposed to the trustees of the diocese that the difference between Bishop Price's total compensation package and what the Diocese of Pittsburgh can pay him be covered by the William Cooper Procter Fund, for as long as Bishop Price is serving in Pittsburgh. The trustees assure me that this proposal will be favorably received at their next meeting in December.

Finally, after much prayer and consultation, I have decided that the time has come for Southern Ohio to adjust its policy regarding the blessing of same-sex unions.

As you all know, in the forums that preceded my election as your diocesan bishop, I was very clear that I thought the church should bless the godly, faithful and life-long union of two persons of the same sex. Moreover, my views on this matter have been expressed in two published books. So my own views will not be a surprise to anyone. At the same time, as I also stated in the forums, I do not wish to act in isolation from the Episcopal Church. So since I became a bishop I have upheld the policy I inherited, which did not permit the blessing of same-sex unions under any circumstances. It is my view that the recent General Convention resolutions D025 and C056 have altered the terrain, by reasserting the possibility of godly unions between persons of the same sex, and by inviting bishops who have jurisdiction in states that have offered some form of civil union to gay and lesbian couples to exercise “pastoral generosity” in offering the church’s public ministrations to such couples. In so doing, the Episcopal Church has effectively acknowledged that the godly union of two persons of the same sex – by which I mean the union of two persons who have vowed lifelong fidelity to one another, and accept accountability to the faith community as a faithful household – can be blessed by the church. I am convinced that in fairness to our fellow Episcopalians who have entered into such unions or who desire to do so, we must move deliberately toward the implementation of a policy that will permit and govern the blessings of such unions in Southern Ohio. On this basis, I am lifting the prohibition on the blessing of same-sex unions in this diocese, effective Easter 2010.

I am aware that there are some in this diocese who will be unhappy with this change in policy, and that there are clergy who cannot in good conscience officiate at such blessings. It is important to underscore that no priest within the Diocese will be under any obligation – now or at any time – to perform such blessings, and the position of those who wish not to perform any such blessings will be respected and honored. I wish to do whatever I can to allay any fears on this score.

Although it will take some time to work out all the details of this policy, here are a few parameters which I will be imposing from the outset. No blessing of a same-sex union shall occur without my written permission. I will consider each request individually and will require 60 days notice in each case. I expect that at least one of the two persons seeking a blessing within this church will be a confirmed or received Episcopalian in good standing, and that adequate counseling with the

officiating priest (or an agreed-upon substitute) will be required prior to the blessing. I acknowledge that these requirements may seem discriminatory to some. They are however necessary at the present time, in order that I may exercise pastoral oversight as we venture into this new territory for the diocese. Similarly, I will be expecting parish priests who wish to perform such blessings to engage in significant conversation with the congregation or congregations they serve before they move in this direction. In asking for this, I do not intend in any way to suggest that the appropriate exercise of the priesthood is subject to any other oversight than that of the bishop's, but to ensure this policy be a matter of open conversation, and that all local voices be heard.

In any case, no blessings of same-sex unions will be permitted before Easter 2010. This will give me time to finalize the policy and answer the many questions that are sure to arise. I have appointed a group of advisors to help me in this task. It should not be assumed that any of these people is happy with this policy as I have laid it out. They are simply a group of clergy and laypersons who have been kind enough to offer their wisdom and perspective. They are: the Rev. Eileen O'Reilly, the Rev. Douglas Argue, the Rev. Pam Elwell, the Rev. Canon George Hill, Nanci Koepke, Gail Payne, Joe Dehner, the Rev. A.J. Stack, Lisa Wharton, the Rev. Trevor Babb, the Rev. Bill Carroll, Marti Rideout and Don Reed.

So there it is. Many new challenges lie before us, but also many new possibilities.

I have suggested that common ministry is ultimately about connection without coercion. Or we might say, freedom in connection. Surely, the more we extend our common life in Christ, the more we will taste the perfect freedom that lies in serving God and one another with no strings attached, no attachment to pedigree, no fear of fresh perspectives from unexpected quarters, no agenda save to be close to Jesus, who leads us anywhere and everywhere. May his light guide us, may his splendor irradiate us, may his star rising within us offer hope, in and through us, to a waiting world.

Please pray with me.

Grant us, Lord, the lamp of charity which never fails, that it may burn in us and shed its light on those around us, and that by its brightness we may have a vision of that holy City, where dwells the true and never-failing light, Jesus Christ our Lord.