

DIOCESAN CONVENTION ADDRESS
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Excerpts from:

"The Message of God's Grace"

The Right Reverend Rodney R. Michel

The grace of our Lord Jesus the Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. I am certain that there have been times in the 225 year history of the Diocese of Pennsylvania [and not just recently] that folks have wondered about "the gift of the episcopate" but we are Episcopalians and our polity includes bishops and at this time you are stuck with this particular Bishop as part of a great team of players that help this diocese live and move and have its being. The other words of the Collect for this day are poignant, as we prayed that "joined together in **unity** with our bishops and nourished by the Holy Sacraments **we may proclaim the Gospel of Redemption** with Apostolic Zeal.' This gives us a model for the work of the Church and the Kingdom: It is called teamwork and together we can do all things through Jesus the Christ. Together ~ Bishops, Priests, Deacons, and Laity ~ working together in this kingdom ministry. Think of the many team members who do the work of this Diocese. That would include the Standing Committee, the Diocesan Council, members of Finance and Property and the Church Foundation, the Deans and the outstanding staff at Church House who work together as a team to support and encourage one another and work together for God's Kingdom and the mission of the Church in this place. This astounding attendance at Diocesan Convention tells us that there is a new breathe of the Holy Spirit blowing across and within this Diocese and that God's People want to be part of getting on with the Mission of Christ and His Church. As we begin our 226th year of history let it be a Year of Mission and new beginnings as we address the many needs of our communities, our world, and the People of God whom we serve and encourage.

In our first reading today, from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear Paul preaching to the Christians at Ephesus: *"Now I commend you to God and to the message of His grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified."* "The message of God's grace" ~ and part of that message of grace is the message of reconciliation. In Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians chapter 5 verses 18 and following, we read: *"All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."* The ministry and message of reconciliation ~ the message of God's grace. I believe with all my heart that it is God's hope that all people be reconciled; and especially that those who bear the name of his Son be reconciled one with another. It is no secret that peace, harmony and unity do not prevail in our diocese. Unrest, unhappiness, suspicion and parochial isolationism run rampant as the H1N1 virus in the Diocese of Pennsylvania and it keeps us from being messengers of God's grace. The relentless undertow of anxiety and hostility tears us from our neighbors, from our kin in Christ and from our own deepest reality, drawing us out into the depths of strife, isolation, judgmentalism and condemnation, forgetting about kingdom issues. Part of the kingdom issues that Christ calls us to is to be bearers of reconciliation. Being bearers of reconciliation involves working hard at being one in Christ, overcoming our divisions, and showing Christ to a broken and hurting world. Holy Scripture says that we were made for fellowship with one another, for koinonia, for togetherness. Part of the plan of creation is that we become fully human only in relationship with our fellow humans and with our God - what African believers call *"Ubuntu"*. The Bible is laced through with the story of God's attempt to effect at-one-ment, to bring us back to our intended condition of relatedness. God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to God. Our creator wants to draw us back into an intimate relationship and so bring to unity all that has become disunited, and each of us is called to be an ally of God in this work of reconciliation and restoration.

Dorothy Day, who organized the worker movement earlier in the last century wrote: "We cannot love God unless we love each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet, and life is a banquet too ~ even with a crust - where there is companionship. We have all known loneliness, and we have learned that the only solution is love, and that love comes with community."

My friends, the sins of the fathers and mothers may be visited upon our progeny in the faith if we do not or cannot model reconciliation for them. Do we want the next generation of Episcopal Christians in the Diocese of Pennsylvania to enter adulthood thinking that the way to be the church is the way we have modeled for them of late? The church is not a resort for saints, it is an arena of reconciliation for all of God's people. The church is not a fortress to keep out those who disagree with us, but an open, available place where all who wander in are offered a seat at our table and are welcomed into our fellowship. As ambassadors of reconciliation we need to remember to keep close to our hearts the gospel of love and acceptance and healing that Jesus lived and died for. Everyone was welcomed into our Lord's life and into His discipleship, and that spirit must be valued and promoted by the church in this era. We are to be Christ's hands and feet and heart and mind and we cannot do that if we assume God's role of judgment. The judge's job is filled. God alone is judge! Those who would be Saviors of the Church and the people in it are also reminded that the Savior's job has been filled. Jesus Christ filled it once for all. Part of being bearers of reconciliation in our particular situation and within the larger church, is to remember that we are Anglican Christians. It is time that we recover our mythic consciousness, and rediscover our Anglican ethos. We need to remember a way of doing theology that honors scripture, reason and tradition as well as the variable of experience. My friends, as Episcopal Christians we are not fundamentalists. Dogmatism is not part of our vocabulary or history or ethos. Is there not still value in our Anglican identity and the vocation of our particular celebration of the gospel? Proclaiming the gospel takes large amounts of the not-so-se ret ingredients of patience, forgiveness, responsibility, compassion and diligence. We need to re-learn the meaning of "respectful and loving dialogue" and then practice it. If we are going to be bearers of reconciliation we need to strike the word "winning" from our vocabulary and replace it with "acceptance" and "risk-filled love." You may think my suggestions far too naive and simplistic but for me that is the only way to deal with the sometimes messy and ambiguous, rarely orderly or structured, drama of salvation. Following Jesus as our Lord and Savior is not easy but if the issues and concerns of our present brokenness, if our hopes and our dreams for the church, even our pain and discontent can be marinated in prayer, soaked in the Anglican brine of scripture, tradition and reason then we will be on the road to reconciliation and wholeness.

People of faith, it is time to pray fervently for our diocese and for one another. It is time to repent of the ugly hatred and mistrust of one another that has become almost pandemic. It is time to get serious about the business of being bearers of reconciliation and to claim the promise which is ours. Jesus will lead us to a new depth of faith and understanding and good will and peace ~ with God and with one another.

As the gathered Church we also remember that we have so much to celebrate. We have the wonderful Companion relationship with Guatemala where lives are being changed through the medical mission, the water purification project and gifts of money and human kindness. Our Youth Ministry has blossomed under the capable leadership of Andrew Kellner with City Camp, summer camping, Cathedral nights and a long list of activities and programs for the youth of our Diocese. A wonderful Woman's Ministry conference was held earlier this autumn with Jane Williams and Phoebe Griswold and others inspiring women of our diocese. The DCMM program, while underfunded, is an amazing work of mission and bringing Christ to challenged places through the ministry of our DCMM clergy. We have new hopes and dreams for urban ministry, a beautiful Cathedral with an innovative and exciting liturgical life and plans for outreach and ministry to the neighborhood it serves as well as to the Diocese. The Seamen's Church Institute has an amazing ministry to seafarers from all over the world. So many of our congregations have food pantries, feeding programs, and homeless shelters, and many of our congregations help struggling congregations and people in need in greater Philadelphia and around the world, but the need is so great, and as our Lord said: "the laborers are few." Our streets are filled with people waiting to hear the Good News, to have their wounded bodies and souls bound up, to be visited in the prisons, be fed and encouraged and cheered on the journey ~ the need is great and we have the message of God's grace to share, if we can but recognize it and then begin to share and live it.