

**Text of bishop's address — 238<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Episcopal Church in Delaware**

Good evening, my beloved friends. Would you join me in standing that we may open our time together in prayer and invite my good friends from Camp Arrowhead to help us pray ourselves into this evening.

I cannot tell you how happy I am to simply to be in a room with a bunch of Episcopalians. You folks in particular. It feels so good to be together — so good indeed to be together. It was January of 2020 the last time we gathered as a convention, almost three years ago. And on the agenda at that time we were talking about something called sowing, tending, and sharing in a way we might do some collective work together. And we said, "Wow, 2019 is going to be a pretty exciting year." And we decided at that point that we were going to move our annual convention from January to November. That was going to be a big deal. And we did.

And we planned to do that and all of the things that have to go along with moving a convention. We did a lot of other good business, and then COVID hit, and we haven't been together since then. It is good to be with you. And so I want to ask the folks for whom this is the first time you've ever been to a convention, will you stand up tonight just so we can honor you at the first time that you come to an annual convention.

Now if you're a young adult delegate, would you please stand up? Whether it's your first time or not. Thank you so much for saying yes to this call to being with us tonight.

And thanks to all of us who said yes to the call to be in this place, to give of your time and your energy to come and hear your bishop talk.

I want to talk about the last five years and talk about the next five years. Can we do that? And when we look back at the last five years, I mean 2022 back to 2018. It's easy to get to COVID and stop and think that COVID defined everything. It did not. I want to take a minute to talk about it because it is important. There was a quote that I heard from a fellow bishop of mine when I was at the Lambeth Conference. Lambeth is a conference where all the bishops in the Anglican community come together once every ten years or so. We meet in London and then down in Canterbury, and we have a great bonding time together, getting to know each other, with lots of deep and rich conversation, prayer, and bible study.

And one of the many conversations I had was with a fellow bishop from the United States and we were talking about the challenges of COVID. He's very near retirement and has been a bishop for a very long time, and he said, "I've been a bishop for a long time. Before that I was a priest for a long time, and I've been in this church for a long time, and I have seen or dealt firsthand with many of the church's major challenges — diocese by diocese." He talked about the new Prayer Book, the so-called new Prayer Book from 1979. It came out in '79, but for those of us who remember, it took a while before it really got adopted, right? He remembers that, and the struggles in the church, diocese by diocese. He talked about how at the ordination of women. We're going back

to 1976, but it has taken a long time, diocese by diocese, before this was recognized, before the church came to understand it.

The ordination of gay and lesbian men and women, diocese by diocese, the church coming to understand and embrace the same blessings of same sex unions. And he said, of all these things, to him by far the hardest was COVID. And I said, "Really?" I honestly was stunned by that. He said, "By far — because in all those other things, they were all contained within the church. They were our problems, our issues that we were learning, and they were within." But I could go as a priest or a bishop somewhere else and have a respite. He said, "With COVID, there was no place I could go that it didn't follow me." And think about that — and I name it, just for a second because I don't want to dwell in COVID, but it was hard. There are people in this room whose spouses are not in this room cause of COVID, whose children, whose parents, whose friends are not here. And so we need to name that and honor it and just say, Church, well done! The way you stood up and responded is amazing.

And if we just barrel on here and talk about the next five years and we don't stop and look at what we did together, then shame on us. I hope you'll do it at your parishes too. Find a moment to stop and pause and honor what we've done together. We know that people stand up in times of adversity, and I'm proud of you. I'm genuinely proud of the Episcopal Church in Delaware for what we've done, how we responded, especially the clergy of this diocese and the folks who were in vestry leadership positions during COVID. I really don't know how you did it. God bless you. Thank you.

That was hard work in the midst of an invisible, contagious danger, and the fear that created in people. Do you realize just how afraid people were for a while, just scared? Can we go outside? Do I have to wipe down my Amazon box? Remember wiping down your Amazon box? I still do because it's fun! But remember that you just did not know. And in the diocese, we responded in brilliant ways. I called a number of people right off the bat. I called the leadership council, leaders of our various governance bodies, and no one called me and said, "Kevin, I don't have time for this." They answered the phone every single time. Many of you were a part of that. We put together a new normal task force, to help us as a church to decide how we were going to come back together safely. Remember before vaccines were out, but we were allowed to come back together and we weren't sure exactly how to do that?

And we as a diocese did that collectively together. I picked up the phone and made calls and you guys did it. We did that. We put together a rapid response task force, a group of people, representatives from every one of the bodies that has money in our diocese and who are separate, and we put them all together in the same room to be able to respond to your parish's needs right away, immediately. That's not rocket science. That's a pretty good idea actually, isn't it? We made immediate deposits in the rectors' discretionary funds right off the bat, no questions asked, so that rectors could in turn get money out to people. Think about that — that kind of response.

We created the role of a resource priest — something that doesn't exist in the canons. It's not outside the canons — the canons don't say you can't do it — but we did it. What's a

resource priest? Well, it was for parishes who didn't have a priest on staff and COVID hit. What were they supposed to do? Supply clergy is one thing, but about what about having a priest who was a resource to help out the vestry at times of making hard decisions? We did that and every time I picked up the phone you said yes. And I thank you, Delaware. We did it.

And every time I went off sideways, I like to think that you guys said, "Kevin, bring it back over here." We can do this together. Somehow, we figured out how to broadcast services, too. At the beginning of the pandemic, at my count we had four churches who were broadcasting services on a regular basis. During pandemic we had all but four somehow broadcasting services at one point. How about them apples? And you didn't wait for some outside tech expert to come in and tell you how to do it. You figured it out. And that's part of what I want us to go with today – that there's wisdom and there's power and there's strength and there's smarts in this room and in our churches. Amen.

The point's not to dwell on a pandemic. It did not define us. It will not define us. And we still have to be flexible in our response. We don't know what's coming around the corners. Go get your boosters. Amen. These last five years were much more than pandemic. In January of 2019, we met down at Dewey Beach and I had been a bishop for 13 whole months and y'all still came. You were probably looking to see what's he going to do next! And I offered a framework called Sowing, Tending, and Sharing. You may remember that. The idea to encompass all the work that we do as a church and using the biblical metaphor of a garden to understand that our life together and all we're doing is about sowing seeds and about tending that garden and then sharing the good fruits that we have made, that we have developed, that we have grown.

And there were two real fundamental impulses behind that. The first one is that we are stronger together as a church, that we think of Delaware as a garden collectively, of one church in Delaware. We introduced Delaware.church as a domain name for this entire Church to help us just think at a very basic level – we are the Episcopal Church in Delaware. We are all in the same Church. We just have lots of outposts.

But the second main thing around sowing, tending, sharing was to put growth on the agenda for us front and center, as an intentional action. Not that we had not been concerned about growth in the past, of course, but I'm talking about at a collective diocesan level, not parish to parish, that you're responsible for what it is that you do, but saying collectively we see growth as important. That sowing seeds is something to be done intentionally, not just assuming that somehow the church is going to grow because the seeds are going to fall.

I'm reminded of my grandfather who we called Dadoo – because my older brother called him Dadoo and he's the oldest grandchild – who was a ham radio operator, a farmer, and he had a small orchard, and he had Lodi apple trees. If you've ever had a Lodi apple, they're a little bit bitter, but man are they good, and they make the best applesauce you will ever taste – Lodi apples. My grandfather had three trees, he wanted seven. So he could have said, "I'm just going to wait till these three trees drop

apples and someday four more will grow." No, he went and he planted four more trees. Do you see where I'm going with this? It ain't rocket science. We can wait for the trees to grow or we can say, "No, we're going to sow seeds ourselves."

And so we started, these last five years, we began a concerted evangelism effort to invite, welcome, and connect, kicked off with a huge — was it a retreat, was it a conference, what was it at Christ Church Christiana Hundred, where every single parish in this diocese came, sent representatives, and we learned about Invite, Welcome, Connect? You remember? Man, was that a good time.

It was a happening. We developed an Invite Welcome Connect lead team and that IWC lead team has offered since then in the last five years to visit every single parish and to give them feedback on the work that they're doing. And in my visitations with you, I've met with your leaders with Invite, Welcome, Connect. We've taken this idea of sowing seriously, the idea of tending, that once the seeds are planted that there's work that we do to tend. In the last five years we began the growth and vitality workshops where I have gone and personally worked with parishes to talk about the struggles that they face and the options before them. By the end of 2022, I will have had 11 workshops which will have covered 12 different parishes. That's roughly 40% of this diocese. That's during pandemic y'all. We still kept going.

We have significantly changed the way that we do the search process for clergy in this diocese. This was in the last five years where you know, if you've been through a search, that you now have far more input as lay people into your choice of your next rector. That happened.

We've reoriented the Mission Support Office, so it's focused towards parishes and not towards governance. We've made major investments in lay ministries. We collectively have done this. For a while there was this thing we called the Academy Project — that was kind of the code name for it at the Mission Support Office — but all it was was building leadership networks. So now there exists here in Delaware, and this ain't rocket science, there are networks for all of our wardens to get together, for our parish administrators, and for our treasurers. Not too shabby.

Our Commission on Ministry took the responsibility towards raising up lay ministries very seriously and led not only the Fire and Formation Project in 2021, but also the recent Discernment Day here in 2022. And now we are working with the Diocese of Central Pennsylvania with their Stevenson School collaborating with fellow dioceses to continue to raise up lay ministry.

We simplified and approved governance. In 2019 we rolled out this thing called Zoom. I don't know if you're familiar with it. It was edgy. I remember explaining to people, Zoom, what it'll do will be to allow us as a diocese to meet remotely, to which most sane people said, why would we want to do that? We thought maybe one or two meetings a year would be done remotely. That investment paid dividends. We got lucky because when pandemic did hit, we had Zoom accounts ready to go and lots of

your churches used diocesan Zoom accounts in order to do your business and we were glad to make that possible. We got lucky when we were trying new things.

I could keep going. I'd love to keep going – how we changed our annual convention, completely changed the way that this is put together. How we changed our governance committees to start with an orientation. There exists now an orientation. If you are elected to a governance body, you are going to get an actual orientation. It ain't rocket science, but it helps. We did this in the last five years. We took sowing seriously, we took tending seriously, and we took sharing and caring seriously.

In the last five years, we have raised up the first ever Racial Justice and Reconciliation Commission this diocese has ever had. Amen. It is our responsibility to ourselves and to our neighbors. We have launched a youth ministry team – shout out to the youth ministry team. We began those leadership networks that I described. How much do you want to hear about what we have done? We can go on and on. It excites me, because while it's easy to think of COVID, how time gets lost – if we don't stop and think about people who've hurt and have been lost, we've lost something. And if we don't think about what we have done in this time, we've lost something. Well done, Delaware.

I'd say that we have been busy in the name of Jesus Christ. Now not everything that we rolled out has worked exactly as planned. I rolled out some growth and vitality meetings with clergy in 2018 with lots of excited clergy doing this work. And it was a great idea except I added those meetings together with our regular College of Clergy meetings, so now clergy who were all on board had ten extra meetings they had to go to. Thanks Kevin, we appreciate you, we love you, but we got to dial this back, right? Good idea. Got to dial it back.

The Leadership Council, which began with great fanfare, was great and very helpful during COVID. I thought this would be great, let's keep it after COVID. And we did it a few more times and just didn't need it. So we quietly said thank you, good and faithful servants, we're done.

We rolled out the Southern Delaware Collaborative during COVID as a way to bring those parishes who did not have a full-time or even part-time regular clergy a way to come together. And that is multiple times over the last few years so that the work that those parishes are doing now is very different than what they were doing back in 2020, but they're still together.

So sowing, tending, and sharing, did it work? Sort of. To be honest with you, kind of, but not really. And I'll tell you why. For two reasons. One is it's kind of hard to remember. Are we sowing or tending and sharing? It's just not catchy. I didn't talk to the marketing guys first to say I need some punch to this. But really fundamentally, it's not about that. I'm being silly. The problem is it's too big. It talks about the entire garden, sowing and tending and sharing and all the stuff that we do, but it doesn't set priorities. And so if everything's important, then nothing is really prioritized.

And so as I'm looking at the next five years, I don't think sowing and tending and sharing, as helpful as that may have been, is the way to go. Because I think our calling

now is to set some priorities about what are the things we really need to be paying attention to? Of all the stuff we're called to do as a church, and we are called to do so many things, where are the areas of priority? To try new ideas and see what we learn. So if you're with me, I want to talk a little bit about the next few years to come. Are we good?

All right. I don't see anyone heading for the doors yet. We haven't had to lock the doors. Let's talk just about 2023, a couple of just simple things that are really important. First, a shout out to Camp Arrowhead, and the entire staff of Arrowhead. Thank you. If you need someone to help sing an opening prayer, let me tell you who to call. Arrowhead continues to be a jewel in the crown of this fine diocese. We have begun this year a search for the next executive director because after one or two years, Walt and Nancy are retiring and stepping down and we're going to celebrate them at next convention. They're still here for a while so we're going to really celebrate. But we're not going to wait until next convention to start the search for the next executive director.

So that has started. I signed a contract with the Episcopal Camp and Conference Centers, ECCC, to help lead us in that search. And they are sharp and they're going to be great. We have a retreat for stakeholders this December down at Arrowhead and I am confident based on their leadership that I will be able to call a new executive director by this time next year and that we will have the best possible sendoff for Nancy and Walt that you can imagine to celebrate them.

Less exciting but also important, we have a mutual ministry review this year, 2023. That's part of the work that I'm going to do with the Standing Committee. Our president of the Standing Committee, Brad Hinton is right here. The Standing Committee has agreed to be the container for this mutual ministry review. It was scheduled for 2020 but then, well you know what happened, so now here we are. And the Racial Justice and Reconciliation Commission is continuing to expand its good work, and I call out their table to you. Please go and see the good work that they are doing. Talk to the Racial Justice Commission. I applaud the hard work that they have done and continue to do.

In 2023 I'm taking a sabbatical. I'm going to take off from mid-April to mid-August. I'm not sure exactly where I'm going to go, exactly what I'm going to do, but I think it's going to involve Ireland and a motorcycle. So there are going to be a handful of parishes, especially those who are accustomed to seeing me from April to August, who are not going to get a bishop's visitation. Please, no applause. Please. My ego can't handle it. But we will have a couple of regional confirmations that I'll do before I leave for folks who've got people in the pipeline. We'll find a way to get folks confirmed and find a way to have a bishop on call for Title IV kinds of things. We're working on all the details, but mainly I want you to know that I'm going to take a sabbatical in this year, and I encourage my fellow clergy to take their sabbaticals.

And for any of you lay folks if you're offered an opportunity for a sabbatical in your work, I encourage you to take it. We all need rest, especially after the time we've been through — to rest and rejuvenate and reconnect with our Lord and Savior.

So, as I look to the next five years now, I don't have a crystal ball and as you know, I have never bought into the idea that a bishop comes into a diocese and tells you what to do. I said earlier that the wisdom is in the room. The wisdom is in this diocese. So we've got to find ways, and I don't think we've always been good about this as an Episcopal Church, to find ways to listen, to find out where the Spirit is, and to lean into it. We do pretty well, but we're going to try that even more.

Sowing, tending, and sharing is too broad, so I want to really focus and prioritize a couple of things. I want to offer for us four mission priorities. That doesn't mean the rest of the stuff that we do is not important, but four priorities to help us say this is what we need to be doing right now – all of us in some way – four mission priorities. And the first is we've got to have a conversation about committing ourselves to growing the church. Now that's for the sake of the gospel, not just because we want to preserve an institution – the Episcopal Church was great in 1950. We just want to make sure it's here in 2050. That's not the point.

We want a church that is stronger, that is a stronger witness for Jesus Christ. And isn't that what we're about? But it's not part of our DNA actually to think of growing the church as a good in itself. And if any of you have an in-built resistance to that, I get it. Because that's not really the way we have been wired. Now if I ask any of you, "Do you want to grow?" every single one of you will say yes. If I ask any Episcopalian, any Methodist, any Baptist, any Christian, all denominations are seeing the same kind of reduced numbers that we are, just about everybody, and everybody wants to grow.

But most of us, I think if we're really honest, when we think about growing, we think back. I think in my own heart, of going back to Grace St. Luke's Episcopal Church when I was in my early 30s and newly wed, we had been married five years, had two young daughters, the church was full, the choir was amazing, and my life was so rich, and I think I want to go back, or at least I want that for everybody. And there's nothing wrong with that.

But you see, if the sense is remembering back and we're not looking to grow, we're looking to repopulate. And we have to let that go. We're not trying to repopulate the church with more people to fill in where the people that aren't here anymore have gone, we're actually looking to grow. And it's a growth that means change, and people like to say, "Well, nobody likes change." I disagree with that and it's completely wrong. If everyone feared change, then there would never be a lottery ticket sold in this country. Think about that. If you feared change, you wouldn't be playing the Mega Ball. Is that what it is, Mega Ball? Megatron?

You would not be playing the lottery if you were afraid of change. What we're all afraid of is loss, right? We want change if it comes in the form of a million dollars. Growth does mean change, but it doesn't necessarily mean loss. It could mean gain. We have to not equate the two things. I think we all want to grow, but we have to understand that true growth, not re-population but growth, means we're probably going to be different. Just like the acorn falls, it is very different by the time it grows – profoundly different. More acorns eventually get made, but not until it is ripped apart.

Now I don't know if the church needs to be ripped apart. Don't take the metaphor too far, but my point is that growth does mean change. So when we're talking about that, that's what I mean. When having an honest conversation, move us past saying, "Yeah, we want to grow, to get back to a kind of thing that we knew and loved because it was good, but to something different that the Holy Spirit has in mind for us." And we have to commit to that together. It cannot just be a few, it has to be all of us to commit to that together.

So I'm already having conversations with clergy and with the governance leaders of this diocese around this understanding, is growth the mission priority for us? Or if it's not, then what we're saying is that we're going to do some amazing things as a church, but we're going to let growth happen as a result of those other amazing things, which takes me back to my grandfather's apple trees. We're going to do great things, we're going to let the apples fall because we do great things, but growth is secondary. Are you with me?

I certainly lean towards the front, the first of these. But if I, as your bishop, have been pushing us as a diocese to a place that you do not want to go, you need to tell me that. Because if we say we will not change, we don't want to change, or it is too hard, you need to tell me that. I need to hear that. Because we need to find someone who will then take you where you want to go. I am convinced that we can do this, but I'm also convinced that it won't be easy. But I'm convinced we can do it, because the wisdom is in the room. Mission priority one – growth.

I promise you this won't be so long. Dinner awaits. The second has to do with focusing a commitment on discipleship – that when we grow that means inviting and welcoming people to our churches. Discipleship means sustaining them and us for this lifelong journey of faith. What are the things we do to sustain each other in this room? We talk a lot about baptism in the church. In fact we as Episcopalians love our baptism covenant, we tend to quote it like scripture. We notice. What I'm looking forward to is when we're inviting people to the font with the same energy and passion that we quote our covenant. We tend now to say as Episcopalians, how do we attract people to church? How do we reach people? And the question we've got to learn to ask, and this is the growth and discipleship question, is how do we baptize people? Not against their will. We're not tricking them. This is not at the tip of a spear. We're not going to tell them they're going to hell if they don't get it. None of that stuff. We're going to do it in our way, but we can no longer be satisfied with just attracting people to our church. Our end goal needs to be baptizing new Christians.

And I would love it if by 2050 the Episcopal Church in Delaware became known as the diocese that baptizes Christians. Think about that. Not against their will, not by coercion or trickery, but because if we believe that this baptism covenant changes our lives, then we have got to share it. We have got to tell the world. It makes me a better person and it will you too, and I want to share it. Come to the font. Oh, sweet Jesus, come to the font. So we have got to work on our discipleship, our invitation, and our discipleship.



Our third area to work on is in our service out for the world. And all of this gift of God is not for ours just to hold onto for ourselves, but to share. Share with the world. Loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. Our racial justice work is a great example.

And the fourth area of emphasis is reaffirming that we are one church — stronger together — and to continue the work we have done the last five years to break down the kinds of walls that we've learned to separate the parishes one from another, the kind of competition we all inherited, that churches are somehow in competition with each other. We all know that's insane. We're making progress, but I want us to commit to it.

So of these four priorities, you could raise your hand and say, "None of this is new, Kevin," and I would say, "You're right." Very little of the gospel is new. But it's what I see right now as the priorities that we need to set. It's the priorities you'll see, for example, in the budget for next year. I'm asking us to do this collectively and together and then find out when I'm wrong for you to tell me, "Kevin, you're off in left field, bring it back." Let's do this together.

It is not so much about any one of us dictating a vision, as tempting as that is, but about all of us calling that vision out. So I'm bullish on our future, very bullish on the future of this diocese and of the Episcopal Church in Delaware because I believe that the Holy Spirit is alive in this place. The Holy Spirit will not, however, just take us and transform us. The Holy Spirit is not going to simply just take the church and say well we have been in decline for now almost 60 years, and suddenly we're not. But what the Holy Spirit does, and you know this, the Holy Spirit gives us the tools, gives us the resources, and gives us each other to figure it out.

But what I do want to hold up for us is that the answer is not going to be calling a savior other than Jesus Christ from outside Delaware. We have the knowledge, we have the spirit, we have the know-how here. Will we listen? So I hope you're with me. I am convinced this diocese has a bright future ahead to preach love, to teach, and to learn mercy and compassion, and invite the world to the font, because it can and will change their lives. God bless you, Delaware. God bless you.