

Reflections from the 239th Annual Convention

by Lola Michael Russell

The 239th diocesan convention was a time of contrast – of business well accomplished and feelings of mixed emotions. There was great joy in being together with friends and colleagues from across the diocese, and great sadness at the many farewells that were expressed. There were moments of great intimacy between participants supporting each other in personal losses and grief, and moments of shared laughter at jokes, some of which were appropriate. The bishop's address and the business presentations highlighted work achieved in the past year and looked at the changing landscape ahead.

The dichotomy of feelings was personified in the keynote speech by Dr. Catherine Meeks, a 2022 recipient of the President Joseph R. Biden Lifetime Achievement Award for Service and Executive Director of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing. Dr. Meeks has spent many years in the work of racial justice and reconciliation and in reflecting on this, instead of talking about the outward action steps people could take, she advised that we look inwards, to the Siberia within us. She quoted the David White poem, *Start Close In*, which begins, *Start close in, don't take the second step or the third, start with the first thing close in, the step you don't want to take*. Dr. Meeks's reflections on lessons learned from her mother stirred memories of lessons we have learned along the way, and her wise words gave us courage to start close, and to take the first step in the next miles of our personal pilgrimages.

Five retirees were honored: The Rev. Canon Martha Kirkpatrick, Canon Judi Gregory, Judy Barnes, and Walt and Nancy Lafontaine. Also recognized were two employees whose positions are being eliminated at the end of this year: Lola Michael Russell and Toni Snow. Walt introduced Darlene Calton, the interim executive director of Camp Arrowhead, and his emotional final convention address ended on a cheerful note as he led us in a rousing singalong of, *There was a Moose, who liked his juice!*

Other farewells were more somber. The reading of the necrology evoked beloved memories and at the back of the room, three grieving widows wept in shared embrace.

Resolutions were passed, including one in support of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem in this time of violence and war, and elections were held for diocesan governance committees. Delegates voted with new-this-year clickers which allowed for speedy results and the satisfaction of learning how to work a novel high-tech gadget.

The challenges of a tight financial budget were addressed, as were the goals and priorities of the bishop's five-year plan it will support. Along with farewells, new friends and connections were made during the dinner, lunch, and business session breaks. At the end of the convention, we left with hope for the future and the desire to look inwards, start close, and listen for God's still small voice.