

# Bishop's Address 239th Annual Convention

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One thing I am particularly excited about — this December we will hold our diocesan Lessons and Carols, which we have been doing now for four years. And it rotates from county to county each year. Last year we were in Sussex and the year before that in Kent, so we will be back up in New Castle this year. This year we will be at the old cathedral celebrating in that worship space and I'm personally excited about that.

As your bishop I never had the opportunity to worship in St. John's and I'm very eager to do that, as every year this Lessons and Carols is done jointly between the Episcopal Church in Delaware and the Choir school of Delaware, which as most of you know, got it starts at the cathedral, so it feels like a homecoming. So, if you are able to be there, it's the third Sunday of Advent in the afternoon, at 4:00 p.m., and I would encourage you to come and worship in Lessons in Carols in this beautiful space.

And I also just want to say a thank you to Jim Bimbi and his team and Cynde and those who created the convention video. I only saw that for the first time yesterday. I was blown away. Isn't that something else? Thank you! I like the view coming over the bridge right there, going down with the Indian River inlet coming into view and here we go! It's impressive that you can take an Eagles' song and work in Invite Welcome Connect, discipleship, and service growth. Well done — that's terrific.

Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/sjhT9luoZw4>

In my sermon earlier this morning I mentioned the theme for this convention from Ephesians, chapter two, where it says we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works. That's from the NRSV. From the Common English Bible it is interpreted slightly differently. We are God's accomplishment created in Christ Jesus for good things. Later, as we know, in that same book of Ephesians, Paul reminds us that this goodness to which we are created, to which each of us has been crafted, is not simply as individuals, but as a collective. Accept each other with love, Paul writes, and make an effort to persevere the unity of the spirit with the piece that ties you together. These words may be familiar. You are one body and one spirit, just as God called you to be. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all. We are created for good things, and we are called to do it together.

This time last year, I laid out the [blueprint](#) — a five-year plan. I laid out primarily mission priorities for us, and asked, would you as a diocese accept these? Do you accept these priorities to guide our growth, to help harness our energies collectively towards a new, good future the Holy Spirit has in mind for us? And there are four priorities. The first is growth. I am using the language that I used last year, and that is also in the printed materials that came

out last winter — growth. We commit to growing our church and bringing people to baptism. Footnote, that doesn't mean attracting people to church, that's just the start. We want to get 'em to the font, right? That's what we're talking about. This is a commitment to invest our time and energies in evangelism — joyful invitation and robust welcome to reach out to folks not in church and ultimately invite them to the farm. And I said, and this was a point I have made many times, your parish cannot assume it will grow if it does not create and nurture dedicated growth ministries.

I'd like to say that again. We as a diocese, your parish, cannot assume we will grow if we do not create and nurture dedicated growth ministries. You'll remember the story I told last year of my grandfather's apple trees, that he had a collection of those wonderful Lodi apples, and he wanted more trees. And he didn't decide that he was just going to wait to see if the existing trees would drop seeds in the right place and just someday, maybe more trees would grow. No, he cleared the land, tilled the soil, planted seeds, and watered so that more trees grew. Now we could continue to hope that we will grow because we do good things, but we have got to invest intentionally at the parish level — all 32 parishes devoting time in things that will help us grow.

The second priority is around discipleship. And I wrote, we commit to deepening our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And now we have a new way of identifying this last night from Dr. Meeks, and that is what she meant by starting close in. This discipleship piece is internal work that we do. Internal work that we do, and it takes a lifetime. We get to do it over the course of a lifetime. And we say that it is a mission priority because if we don't do this regular work, we're not going to be able to do the other work to grow the church and to help our communities. It is a focus on strengthening our spiritual lives, understanding that it is as essential for those of us who are in the church as it will be for those who come to join us as we grow. It kind of makes sense, doesn't it? You're thinking to yourself, Kevin, this is not rocket science. It is not, but it is not necessarily easy.

The third mission priority is that we will commit to loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. We embrace the gospel call to be living witnesses of Jesus's healing and reconciling love to each other and to the world. This includes strengthening our commitments to racial justice and reconciliation, to helping feed the poor, helping feed the hungry, ending violence, protecting the innocent, and caring for our planet. We share this work, not just among ourselves, but with organizations across our state.

And the fourth mission priority is one where we name that we are stronger together in unity. We do this as one church in Delaware, and we commit to serving Jesus Christ as one church. And we know that our parishes and ministries are stronger when we actively cooperate and support each other than when they are working alone. We rolled this out last year and it's been with us now for a number of months. It seems important to offer it again.

And if you'd like copies of the blueprint, you've got one in the back of your convention guidebook, it is on the diocesan [website](#). So, with this blueprint in mind, let's talk a little bit about 2023 and the year that has been.

We talked about the good things that have happened in the diocese, and often when folks use the term the diocese, it's a kind of a quick shorthand. Sometimes you mean me, you mean the bishop. When you say diocese, sometimes you mean the mission support office. When you say diocese, sometimes you mean a governance body, like Council or Standing Committee or something like that. But we know that's a shorthand, that the diocese is this body in this room. You represent the diocese. So when we speak about the good work the diocese has done, I am talking about all of us.

So under our growth, our invite welcome connecting, you heard from the briefing earlier today about embracing evangelism and their commitment to this project developed by The Episcopal Church. And they are looking into this digital six-week course seeking to name and celebrate Jesus's loving presence and to tell the stories of all people and to seek people to more. And so our Invite Welcome Connect team is learning, becoming proficient in this work so that they can in turn share it with us. An important thing is that what they are modeling for us is that evangelism here is intentional — it's not secondary. They're getting out and doing and trying. And they are showing that a small group of dedicated people can help make the larger better. A little leaven goes a long way. And they set an Invite Welcome Connect contest to spark creativity.

Our communications team hosted a diocesan wide communications workshop. 50 some odd people came — I believe almost all of our parishes were represented — with a focus on video, Instagram, and reels. It was a real commitment to telling our story to the wider world — an investment by the parishes who showed up to using modern tools to witness and tell an ancient message in a modern way.

The Trustees invested in a pilot program for growth. Most of you are not familiar with this. We didn't make a big deal about it, but to look to see, under this understanding of growth, might there be some kind of professional outside source that could be of use to all of us? Is there a program that we might take a look at and see if it has merit? And, and if it does, would it work in our diocese? If it does work, great, and if it doesn't, then why not? And so before I went on sabbatical, I worked with the Trustees to identify a group that looked like it would be good for Delaware. You may be familiar with the church in Timonium, Maryland and the book called *Rebuilt* that the church wrote after their successful growth some years ago. We invited them in to talk to us, and I called two churches here in Delaware. I called the rectors of St. Martha's, Bethany Beach down in Sussex County and I called the rector of St. James' Mill Creek, here in New Castle County. I don't want to scare my priests, please answer the phone when I call, but I may have an ask! And I asked each of them, would you be willing to pilot this, would you and some of the folks in your parish try this out?

And they did. Let's think about what a great idea that is. It was not my idea — it came as a genesis of one of our trustees, Mark Parsells, who is used to doing this in a business setting. Before we commit to something, let's try it out. We've got a little bit of funds we can dedicate to this particular purpose. So over the summer, for five, six months, they have looked at this and we will have more feedback on whether or not it may work for us. But it's an investment in growth for all of us together.

Under discipleship, this interior work on ourselves, this close in work, we heard the wonderful presentation about the Stevenson School — 15 folks in this first cohort. If three people had signed up to be lay preachers, I'd have been thrilled.

We did get three people to sign up to be lay preachers and more — we have 15 total. That's an indication that there's a hunger, that there's a desire to do this ministry. And what we are doing is simply identifying the need, the hunger, the desire, the call in people to do this ministry; and then supporting it and saying that for lay members, for those of you who are not called to holy orders, but who are called to the ministry of worship in the church, that you deserve investment in your training. And that is what this is about. Working with the Commission on Ministry, we say you guys deserve investment in your training. It's not to say, oh man, do I have to go take some classes? Really it is to say that this work, leading worship in our church, is that important and we want to support you in that work. And the feedback from that first cohort has been fantastic.

We have had clergy and lay discernment days upstate and down. The trustees have made a grant, a wellness grant, for active priests and deacons to help them in their personal wellness. And we conducted an in-depth and thorough search for a new director of Camp Arrowhead. Yes, I consider this part of our discipleship, our self-care, our attention to our own inner life. A search team of dedicated stakeholders invested their time in this process. The two co-chairs are here, Jeff Ross and Joanna Carding. And the result is an amazing new leader for Arrowhead, Darlene Calton, who is also in the room. Later today, we will say a goodbye to Walt and Nancy LaFontaine. They have been at this business for about three years, I think. And we will say a fond farewell to them. But dedicating our time and energy and attention in a search is an intentional thing and it shows that this matters. This is close in work.

In 2023, under service, I named a racial justice and reconciliation minister, the Reverend Deacon Cecily Sawyer Harmon, from whom you heard earlier this morning. She briefed not on racial justice, but she did brief on the General Convention to come. Also, this year the Racial Justice and Reconciliation Commission passed its two-year mark. How about that? And we saw the transfer of leadership, which is a great sign in a group in an institution — a group that is going to continue and perpetuate. The founders helped to get it going and now handed off leadership to the next group. That is positive and an incredibly important sign that this commission is here to stay. It is a hallmark of a strong foundation.

And then I had the great idea, well maybe this was Cecily's, to go to St. Andrew's School and see if there were students there who wanted to be part of this work. And oh boy, are there! And now we have student representatives from St. Andrew's who are adding their vision and energy to the group. I draw your attention to the ministry report of the Racial Justice and Reconciliation Commission and see what they've been doing in 2023.

You heard about our leadership networks — the connection of our networks — of our wardens' network, the network of our parish administrators, and the network of our treasurers. We have invested in stronger ties in our community.

And finally, I like to believe that we have done this more and more as one church — to see ourselves as doing this all together. In March, I met with a combined meeting of those three leadership networks — your wardens, your treasurers, your parish administrators — to discuss this blueprint that was rolling out. I presented it to the group and there were good questions and good conversations, and one person talked to me afterwards. I was in this person's church for a Sunday soon there afterwards, and the person said, "You know, bishop, I never really, to be honest with you, thought of us as one church before, and when you said it, I don't know that I bought it." I'm paraphrasing, but that's what she said. She said, "I tend to think of **my** church, and when I heard you, I don't think I got it. I didn't buy it. But then my family and I went on vacation down to the beach and we visited one of our churches down there and I was very impressed by that church. And I thought we could really learn from these Episcopalians."

And I love the fact that what she said to me is that when I went vacation the beach, I visited one of **our** churches and I think we, her church, could learn from these Episcopalians. And I said, well, great, let me get you connected. Her point was that a good experience for a newcomer at one Episcopal Church in Delaware is a good experience for all of us. And a bad experience for a newcomer at an Episcopal church in Delaware is a bad experience for all of us. We are all in this together, whether we recognize it or not.

So we've been doing some work together, no doubt about it, and here are some real-world examples, quickly. Parishes share in the audit process and have been doing it for years, but we are really getting this down to a science with parishes swapping audit teams to help each other out. And just last week I was with one downstate parish leadership talking about the power and impact of launching a lay pastoral care team. And the leadership was so excited, and said, how do we do this? And I said, let me connect you to the church that is about 12 miles down the road who has been doing it for years, and they are thrilled. Now, if that is not wonderful, I don't know what is. Our greatest resources, our greatest friends, our greatest allies are the churches right around us. You are not in competition with each other.

I have seen in 2023, a renewed energy post Covid. Several of our parishes are reporting a return or close to return to pre-Covid levels. Others are not. Context definitely matters. Something I love to see is that our ECW had their first in-person meeting in several years —

a big group together. Also, I learned that our BCM, the Brandywine Collaborative Ministries, showed some interesting signs of new growth, except on the surface it may not seem like it. Of the three churches, Grace Church made the decision, and it was part of the agreement that they were able to, after these nine years to opt out of continuing in the collaborative. And they did this just as the agreement allowed. They did it with grace and honesty and passion. And the news was received that way by the other two parishes, Calvary and Ascension. I know because I was in the room when it happened.

Grace Church made this decision because of the sense of their new context and the growth that they are experiencing. And I am happy to say that Calvary and Ascension have not thrown in a towel, their towel. They are still partnering, and I will be visiting with them the Sunday after this to discern their future together.

So if you wanted to just look very callously on the surface and say, oh, the BCM was, and now it's gone — I guess it failed, I wouldn't say that to anybody who is a member of the BCM. They will tell you otherwise — that this experiment in collaboration has made them all stronger. And we all have to realize the flexibility in the things we do in ministry have to be baked in, have to be ready to adapt and to change. And so I have supported the decision of Grace, and I support the decision of Calvary and Ascension to find next steps. And I challenge anyone to see failure in this creative and ambitious project. In fact, I am calling all of us as churches to look to see how we can partner, whether for one year, for nine years, for 20 years, or however many we want, partner with our fellow parishes. And I am convinced all three of these parishes will be stronger, and we as diocese are stronger for their witness.

Going forward in 2024, you have seen my announcement, we will begin with some very dramatic changes at our mission support office. In just over six months, about half of the folks who are currently working there will be there no longer. There's a loss of three positions and five people. Of the three positions that are going away, one is the retirement of Judy Barnes. Judy, are you here in the room?

I'll have more to say a little bit later about you and your retirement as I will have more to say about Martha Kirkpatrick and Judy Gregory. But for a moment, I want to talk about the two positions that we are losing and two people to go with them — Toni Snow, our director of service, whose name you've heard many times already in this convention, who has been instrumental to making this convention work, who is a key reason that we're all here today, and Lola Russell, our communications assistant, a key part of the growth of our communications team over the years, and the first person to stand up when I asked for a joke. That's gutsy and that's impressive. Is Lola in the room? Is Toni in the room? They are both amazing people — created for good works in Christ Jesus. Lola has personally written some of the finest draft statements for me. Sometimes if I sound smart, Lola probably helped me with it. She has been instrumental in the evolution of the weekly e-newsletter, the Net, and our quarterly magazine. And, as I said, she is ready with a joke or a smile.

Tony has been an amazing partner in this work, and she has been by my side with some hugely important initiatives. When I launched a racial justice task force in the crazy days of 2020, the first person I called was Toni. Who do I get in the room? Who do we talk to? From that task force was born a racial justice commission and a racial justice minister. Tony helped with the formation of the Invite Welcome Connect team, which is going gangbusters as you have already heard, and is a key part of our growth strategy with this diocese. She was incredibly helpful in the first conferences with Mary Parmer and Toni carries a strong faith of any person I've ever seen. It is a ridiculous understatement for me to say that I will miss these two soldiers. Both women have been impact players on the team and I could not be more grateful for them. So I ask that you stand with me, Beloved, and say thank you to them for all their work.

I mentioned that Judy Barnes is retiring, and her position will not be backfilled. So that is the third position that will no longer be part of staff.

She does a tremendous amount of work in the financial transactions for our office. She helps make sure we get paid. We are grateful. Thank you Judy. Not just for the mission support office, but for the two corporations that legally make up this diocese — the Diocesan Council and Trustees. She helps with finances on those as well as Camp Arrowhead, and so that work will continue. We will look to vendor that out — hire consulting firms, accounting firms that can help us. We will gain cost efficiencies. Yes, we are going to lose a funny and talented person down the hall.

We have got the retirement of not one but two canons. We will say thank you to you later in the day, but no doubt there will be major change in the mission support office.

Some of those I can announce now. The first is I will name a new canon for strategic mission, the Reverend Maryann Ell, who spoke earlier today, to serve as our catalyst and organizer for the mission priorities that you see here. Now, it is not her job to do all the mission priorities for Delaware, but it will be her job to help keep us moving forward. She will share with me the leadership primarily of the priorities for growth, discipleship, and service.

I have also called to be my new canon to the ordinary the Reverend Brad Hinton, who is currently serving as rector of St. David's and will be for just a few more days and has a farewell party tonight. He is a trusted priest in this diocese with a ton of experience and he will share with me in the support for our clergy and families, and this is among the most important work I believe we can do at this time. And he will share with me in the leadership of the fourth mission priority —one church, stronger together.

I also will be able to hire a part-Time Youth Missioner. This position was in our budget funded by an investment from the Trustees, a part-time position. And we will also hire the next director for finance and operations, Judi Gregory's replacement. As if anyone could replace Judi. Imagine filling her shoes. I think they will need some new ones. And then for those

continuing on staff, Kathleen, Pam, Cynde, and Deacon Cecily, it is a time of grieving to be honest with you. There is great uncertainty in the new work that is coming. A shock to the system has been experienced, and old work that we have enjoyed will have to be set aside. Some things will just not be done. I love the free advice that I often get. I know you get it too. Hey, just don't do the unimportant stuff. Oh, thank God I don't have to do that anymore. Thank God I don't have to do the unimportant stuff anymore, as if that's part of what we were doing to begin with. I know you hear that in your churches, you rectors in particular, just cut out the unimportant stuff. That's incredible. The blueprint doesn't change. The tools that we have to execute, we have fewer right now, but our priorities as a diocese have not changed.

Before I close, I want to look a little more at 2024 and say a couple of things about governance. First of all, you will hear later in the afternoon the reports about the mutual ministry review in which many of you participated earlier this year. The review took place in the spring and concluded just as I was going on sabbatical. And so it was tallied up by the consultant and then set aside until I returned from sabbatical. The Standing Committee is overseeing that process and the decisions around communicating that with the wider diocese. And the first step in the communication will happen later this afternoon with the former president of the Standing Committee. We have learned a few things from them, and you will hear about one of the bits of feedback that we got which was that in our diocese, while folks are not worried a bit about mismanagement of funds, there's a frustration sometimes that our finances aren't clear.

That is my paraphrasing — financial transparency. We use that term a lot. And I think like a lot of people, I always thought of transparency as meaning availability of the documents. But now after the in-depth review of our finances that I found myself doing in the last two months to try and make numbers add up that wouldn't, I began to realize that while the numbers were right, it took a lot of digging to get to the ones that I wanted. Our data is there, but I don't know that it's always easily intelligible. Are you with me? And I think that is what I'm hearing.

We also heard that our governance bodies are not effective or to that effect, which I believe is a meaning similar to the same kind of language around transparency. Again, not a lack of trust, but a lack of just understanding what is going on. The mutual ministry review told us that the North South divide continues to have some kind of traction that each feels the diocese, and I'm not sure if that's the bishop or the mission support office, or the Council, gives one or the other more attention. I get it from both ends, y'all. It's only the folks in Kent County who really don't give me any grief. So thank you Kent County.

It really does blow my mind in a state as small as we are that this continues to get any traction, but I will continue to work on it. But I do believe that if we take seriously our commitment to one church, we are going to get past the silliness, and I want to name it as that. So we are one church, and there will be times I am sure when my attention is devoted much, much more to Sussex County than folks in the North would like. And my attention and



my time will be invested much more in the North than the folks in the South would like. But overall, I can tell you that I and leaders of this diocese are invested in the entire state — all three counties. And if you are not feeling love on a particular day, I ask you to approach this with grace. And instead, if you are feeling the kind of urge to just sort of vent, approach it with a little bit of grace. Call your bishop, find out if your information is true, and let me know what it is that is not working well, okay? We are all in this together and I want to take seriously that sense of divide. I also want to know just how real it really is.

We also got feedback on your bishop. We heard that he's energetic and open to new ideas, but I think we also learned that sometimes, and I'm paraphrasing, you may have to clean this up Brad or verify it, but sometimes this energy and openness can wear folks out. I hear it, and sometimes an openness to new ideas can obscure a commitment to establishments, and I'm grateful for the feedback, and I'm grateful for the overwhelming sense of support that came through in this document.

And I believe if we remain committed to following Jesus Christ, we collectively will get this right. So this work will continue in 2024. We will look to see what we learned from, the mutual ministry review and look to the governance bodies, how to discern the changes to be made and how to implement them. The second thing I want to note is you will notice that there were two spots on Diocesan Council for which there were no nominees — a clergy spot and a lay spot — and I can assure you that this was not from lack of attention. Huge work went into recruitment from our nominations team — Michael Wood and the entire nominations committee. They then recruited the secretary to make phone calls. They recruited me to make phone calls. They may have recruited you to make phone calls, I don't know, but I know they worked very hard.

And so sometimes you have got to stop, as Dr. Meeks said last night, as you're plowing forward, stop and look and see what's going on. And I will tell you right now that I know that there are many parishes, if not all, who are having trouble filling vestry spots. Some parishes have decided that the vestry that used to be 12 people now feels that nine is the best size now because of the size of the church is.

So in 2024, I plan to name a task force to study our governance. Our current diocesan structure was established, if my math is right, in the early seventies and at that time we had more parishes. We had more clergy. We had more people. That was a time before Zoom. It was a time before iPhones. It was a time before Route One. So Route one is newer, I believe, than our Constitution and Canons at their core. So maybe it's time to update them, I don't know. But I want to ask the task force to look at this, not to fix issues with nominations, but to look more deeply. Is the structure of our governance serving our mission and ministry? Is it strengthening our people, our parishes, and our witness? And ask them to report to this convention next year with what they found. Now, there is always a risk to this kind of work, and I want to name it. And that is we began to navel gaze if we are not careful. But what should be attention to ourselves and doing inner work about strengthening ourselves could

then become our project. And that our commitment to growth and into personal discipleship and a relationship with Jesus Christ, our commitment to service, can get set aside because why? We're going to fix governance. I'm a process geek. I get it. It matters. But this is not the kahuna that we are after. This is to support that. Are you with me?

Next slide please. This year was a good year for the Brown family. I got to go to on sabbatical for four months and it is a gift. The highlight of it was a month in Ireland. And I am profoundly grateful for this time and for your support of this, and for the mission support staff and governance bodies who ran things without a hitch while I was gone.

Now one picture there on the bottom right is of the majestic Skellig Michael, taken from the ferry that took Caroline and me and one of my seminary buddies over, and we're now leaving the island headed back on the eight-mile trip to the west coast of Ireland, County Kerry. And our hike of that of that island was a highlight of the trip, and as Caroline I both say it was a highlight of our marriage. So that's a good day!

There is a monastery up there from the sixth century and it is stunning that anyone ever went there to worship and to pray, but at the time, the monks were trying to find the edge of the earth to get away, much like the desert fathers did. And in the Middle East they went out to the desert. They were looking for the deserts and there are no deserts in Ireland, but there are some remote islands off the coast and that's where they went. The other two pictures are from my own pilgrimage, done individually on a motorbike along the Irish coast. And you can see in those two pictures the bike a little bit and you can see just a sense of how beautiful that coastline is. And you can also see the absence of guardrails on the roads in Ireland. Oh my gosh! And there's a sermon in there somewhere. I haven't written it yet, but in that middle picture, that bike is not far from tipping over into the North Atlantic Ocean. What I see when I look at these pictures though, is not so much the bike or the coast, but what I continue to see over and over is the road itself. The joy of being on the bike, the challenge of carrying my provisions and being exposed to the elements, which I have to say, it did not rain a single day I was on the bike. It looked like that every day, so when I say I was exposed to the elements, they were awesome elements. But it was the joy of the road itself — a new path and a new challenge.

God and I did a lot of talking on the west coast of Ireland. I did a lot of talking and a lot of journaling, but I tried very hard to listen so that God could get a word in edgewise. I tried to focus on the road, which is essential if you are riding a bike, and listen to my soul. Much of what I take away from Ireland, from my entire time away, is this: that. I return from that pilgrimage, from that sabbatical, stronger, happier, and more committed to this work than I have ever been before. And I thank you, and I feel that there is a blessing in me that I am called to share — where I, like you, have been created in Christ Jesus for good works. Not good works just for me, but to share with a world that is aching, to know this peace. Amen.