

Bishop's Convention Address — 2024

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[The Bishop's Convention Address below is an edited transcription from video footage]

Hello Delaware!

As I begin my remarks, I want to first reference a [video message](#) I sent out to the diocese after the 2024 national election. In this message I noted we had just been through a long and bruising election season. There's no doubt about it, there are those in the Episcopal Church in Delaware who are happy with the results. There are also those in the Episcopal Church in Delaware who are not happy with the results. This is the reality of American democracy and I think it is reality of The Episcopal Church. It is a strength of our church that in diversity, we continue to gather in the same room.

What I ask in this moment in time is that all of us take the time after that difficult election season to be kind to ourselves, take a sabbath rest from all the chatter that's coming from televisions, across our phones, and through our news feed. In this time of sabbath, reflect on just how much time and energy we invest in the news and how much time and energy we place on listening to others tell us what we might think.

One rule of thumb I heard a preacher say is, "If I am spending more time listening to the news than I am listening to God in prayer, perhaps my priorities are in the wrong place." Also, please be kind to your neighbor. Whether you feel victorious, or you're feeling defeated, be gracious, and do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Our convention text is from Colossians 2, verses 6-7, and it speaks of the fullness of life in Christ Jesus. St. Paul wrote, "As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."

'Rooted and built up in him and established in the faith.' This speaks to our four mission priorities in the Episcopal Church in Delaware. These priorities were first introduced in late 2002, and there are four that you will remember.

1. Priority towards **growth**, saying that growing the church is and of itself a good thing — something in which we focus on and not just assume that it might happen if we do other good things. Growing the body of Christ is important, and naming it is important.

2. And with that, naming also the mission priority of **discipleship**, the work that we do together to deepen our relationship with Jesus Christ. We can't grow a church if we can't deepen our own relationship with Jesus Christ. Discipleship is one of those Bible words that so often seems so big it's hard to know what it means. Increasingly, I use the word discovering — discovering Jesus. A life of discipleship is a life constantly of discovering and rediscovering our Lord. We do that through prayer, through Christian education, through education that deepens our faith. That's part of the life of discipleship, of discovery, doing something new in Christ Jesus.
3. The third mission priority is to **serve**, to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, that we must be people of action to one another and to the wider world.
4. And the fourth priority is that we do this all together as **one church in Delaware**.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength,” that's our life of discovery and discipleship; “Love your neighbor as you love yourself,” our life of service and our pastoral care for each other; “Proclaim the good news to the whole creation”, Mt. 28, “Go therefore and proclaim to all the nations that which I have taught you, and baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit;” As one church, we are stronger together. Rom. 12 says, “We who are many are one body in Christ and individually we are members one of another.”

Fundamentally, understanding this blueprint is understanding this as a blueprint towards balance. All of these mission priorities are scriptural.

Scripture that I referenced (and more that I have not) points to the Lord's call on our hearts to act in each of these areas. I have not made something up; I'm merely harvesting what is coming from scripture.

How are we balancing our work and our common life among these mission priorities? All three are important, all are essential, and none are indispensable. But balance is not easy. A state of what many churches across the country have come to find is a place where service is our defining mission priority, and discipleship is something we work on, too. Growth, well, that's the thing that we get to if we get to it.

Could this be the scenario in your church? I want to reflect on this part of the struggle because nobody, certainly not me, is going to say that loving your neighbor as yourself is not important. As Christians, we know that it is important, and we know we're called to go out to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty. Not only do we know this, but we want to serve.

We're not alone in this work. There are many, many organizations who do service in the world. But the thing that makes us distinctive as Christians is not service, it's discipleship. Again, the thing that makes us distinctive as Christians is not the service, which is important,

it's the discipleship. We as a church have gone through a long period of numeric decline and we have fewer seminary trained priests, fewer folks who are teaching, and fewer people in the work of formation of discipleship. We've lost a little bit of focus on discipleship.

What do we do towards growth? At my Growth and Vitality Workshops we talk about the old growth model for The Episcopal Church and ask the question, "How is it that most Episcopalians came into the church throughout history?" You were born into it, weren't you? It was through birth, and that's how the church understood it had to grow — we spread the good news by bringing our children to church.

The primary use of the blueprint and what I hold up to our governing bodies and parishes, is not a recipe of what to do next, but it is to ask if the things that we're doing now balance with building towards a future? And if they're out of balance, don't say, "Well, we've done it horrible in the past." But understand that getting into balance may mean investing more in an area where you're under-invested to help get back into some kind of balance.

Remember that your parish is not alone, and you don't have to do it alone. There's an Episcopal Church, likely just down the road, who might be struggling with the same thing and who might want to work with you. Perhaps they would like to share with you in your service or in your discipleship, your discovery of Jesus Christ. If we think that each of our 32 churches has to build individually in each of these areas, then we're just rehashing a past model that's not working.

Long term. I want to say this, and I hope that we hear it: we are looking to plant seeds that we realize that others may harvest. We know that we've seen numeric decline now for close to three generations in the church. I concur with our new presiding bishop when he says we will probably get smaller before we get larger. I do not think the Holy Spirit is done with us yet. But, I am also not naive to think that when we talk about growth, we're looking to set a numeric pattern or goal that says if you don't grow by this much in six months or a year, you fail. What we're talking about is planting seeds that we can later harvest.

What do I mean by that? Well, if you and your parish are not in the habit of doing some basic evangelism, then instead of saying how do we double our attendance or how do we increase our attendance by 25%, say how do we build a capacity to do this in a way that will outlast us? How do we put in place at our parish the kinds of processes so we know this work will continue?

An example I often use is our altar guilds. We all know how important it is that someone set the altar properly for Sunday, and we work hard to make sure there is a guild in our parish. We need to invest that same kind of intentionality in growth, making sure there are people who will outlast us doing the work of growth. Do they have the tools and training that they need? We will be planting seeds that others may well harvest.

In 2024, we experienced another eventful year in this diocese. As tempting as it is to name them all, I will only name a few key points. In the area of growth, our *Invite Welcome Connect* support team is firing on all cylinders right now, and I appreciate the support they are providing for our parishes.

The Rev. Canon Dr. Stephanie Spellers, our 240th Annual Convention keynote speaker, will lead an evangelism workshop during convention, talking about Embracing Evangelism. This program is a tool for talking about faith, and our entire *Invite Welcome Connect* team found it so compelling that they encouraged it to have a part in our convention.

Invite Welcome Connect nationally will soon be launching an on-demand service for bringing new tools for each parish to use and making diocesan-wide memberships available. Delaware is a charter member of this national organization. Because of our membership, every parish will have the “ability to get those updated tools from *Invite Welcome Connect* when they are released.

Also in the area of growth, this past year I’ve continued facilitating Growth and Vitality workshops. I met with five different parishes on five Saturdays throughout 2024. That now brings up the total to 17 Growth and Vitality workshops completed since 2019. In February, I held a workshop in Wilmington at St. David’s Church and at St. Mark’s in Millsboro; in March I was at St. Paul’s in Camden; in October at St. Nicholas in Newark; and in November at St. John the Baptist in Milton.

The workshops are important in that they help us name the fact that growth and vitality go hand in hand. A vital church doesn’t necessarily mean big — you can be a vital church at any size. You can be small and be vital. In fact, most Episcopalians prefer to be in smaller churches. But, any church that stops growing will close. If we don’t grow, there won’t be anybody left to do the service we love to do. This is what the workshops help us talk about.

Secondly, in 2024, there was a tremendous amount of work done in discipleship. We’ve had our first graduates from the Stevenson School for Ministry and several new aspirants for the diaconate. The Commission on Ministry led a terrific discernment day at St. Andrew’s School in October with more folks looking to see if Holy orders may be in their future. And, the amazing ongoing work of Camp Arrowhead leads and defines, in so many ways, a key part of our discovery, our discipleship work.

In service, our newly appointed global mission advocate, Fran Taccone, has hit the ground running doing tremendous work gathering information and coordinating the various responses across our diocese to global needs. I named Judi Gregory as the leader for Episcopal Relief and Development, which has been open for a few years. Together, Fran and Judi, will led a service workshop at convention.

The Racial Justice and Reconciliation Commission sent an ecumenical group of pilgrims to Selma and Montgomery. You can view the pilgrimage video [here](#). All Saints' Church thrift stores in Rehoboth continue to expand and presented a ministry report at convention about sharing some of their expertise as well as some of the donations they received with other Episcopal locations across the diocese. You can view their report [here](#).

And with our fourth mission priority 'one church', in 2024, I note that our mission support staff has been through tremendous transition. We spoke a great deal at our last convention in 2023 about retirements and downsizing at the Mission Support Office. It would be impossible to overstate the amount of change that we have been through. It has not been easy, and I think it could have been debilitating to a lesser group of folks. That's my way of saying there's a great group of people at your Mission Support Office.

Our old-timers pulled together, and our rookies, the Rev. Canon Brad Hinton and Dr. Teri Quinn Gray, stepped up like seasoned pros. Brad, our new canon to the ordinary, has a primary focus on transition, with a deep focus on our clergy and families. Teri, our chief operating officer, has skills in change management and in overseeing complex operations. Her financial oversight is but one piece of our overall operations, overall work, and overall ministry of the diocese.

We had an unexpected departure mid-year— our missionary for Racial Justice and Reconciliation, Deacon Cecily Sawyer Harmon had to step down due to health reasons. She is feeling better, and she appreciates our prayers and words of support. Her leaving means filling this position, which is a priority in 2025.

We also, in this past year, took seriously the results of the Mutual Ministry Review from 2023. In 2024, our governance teams received the full report back in January and February. Each group, separately, had certain key takeaways and actions that they might recommend. Over the summer, I chartered a working team, one member of each governance body, to take that group of recommendations and consolidate a common response across our governance bodies.

I thank our standing committee representative, the Rev. Shelley McDade, from All Saints' and St. George's who led the group; Stephen De Bellis, from Christ Church in Dover, and the Rev. Patty Downing, from Trinity Parish. The three of them recommended in the fall, five key areas of action, all around the area of financial transparency. They presented those five recommendations to each of their respective bodies, and it is a 2025 priority to work toward implementing those recommendations.

Those recommendations go a long way to extending the work that is well underway and the progress we have already made. Michael Wood, the chair of the Standing Committee gave a report of the Mutual Ministry Review during convention. You can view the report [here](#).

In the following we will review some of what took place in the wider church in 2024, outside of Delaware to the Anglican Communion. On November 11, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, announced his resignation, technically an early retirement. He ended almost all his duties immediately, with the remainder to be handed over to the archbishop of York on the Feast of the Epiphany on January the sixth.

The reason the archbishop is stepping down is that he, with other senior leaders, failed to act in a case of one of the Church of England's worst serial child abusers. A government report cited insufficient action by church leaders against a prominent member of the Church of England who committed repeated physical, sexual, psychological, and spiritual attacks on young victims in the late nineteen-seventies and eighties at youth camps associated with the Church of England, and as well as later in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

The archbishop admitted that the report was accurate in one respect regarding the Church's long maintained conspiracy of silence about these abuses and noted that while he had been reporting to church members and leadership, the church had failed to act. We can agree that the insufficient action makes a horrible thing so much worse, where the very institution that is charged to help protect those to whom it ministers instead turns to help and protect itself. His resignation has much to do with accountability of a particularly horrible failure.

Someone asked me the other day, "Well, how do they find a new Archbishop of Canterbury?" The King of England will make an appointment based upon a candidate recommended by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister will receive suggestions from the Canons of Canterbury as well as one coming from a committee called the Crown's Nominations Commission, made up of 17 people who are members of the Church. For the first time, five of the 17 will be from the Anglican Communion's five regions across the world, recognizing that the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury creates waves and has an impact well beyond the shores of Britain.

With regards to leadership of the Episcopal Church, this past summer we elected the Rt. Rev. Sean Rowe as our 28th presiding bishop. In a break from tradition, and at his direction, his investiture was a small ceremony held in the Chapel of Christ the Lord at the Church's headquarters in New York City on November 1. Many of you watched the service at streaming parties held at three of our churches. It is interesting to note that the first bishop of Delaware, Alfred Lee, was also a presiding bishop of The Church? He was presiding bishop number 10 at a time when the custom was that the senior-most bishop in the House of Bishops served in the role of presiding bishop along with their other responsibilities. So, he served as the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, the bishop of Delaware, and the rector of St. Andrew's church in Wilmington all at the same time. I have kidded Sean that I think he's an underachiever, and that he really needs to buck up. He no longer returns my calls.

Earlier this year, I was elected president of Province 3, and I learned in August that I, along with the vice president of our province, would attend the investiture service of our new presiding bishop, which was a lot of fun. There were about 100 or so of us in the chapel. Here's the bulletin from the investiture, and here is a picture of Nathan, the presiding bishop, the presiding bishop's cross, and me there in the back. That's the best one that came up.

As part of this service, the crowd is dispersed with blessed water from the baptismal font. Each of the provinces was invited to send in water of some sort from their province. So, my first thought was to go into the pond in the backyard of Bishopstead and scoop up some water, because that would be easy. But I thought that wouldn't really represent Province 3, so I did a little research. The obvious answer is that there is one body of water into which rivers from every state in the province flows, and that's the Chesapeake Bay. It is obviously a major resource and a national treasure for us. So, I called the bishop of Easton and said, "Can you get me some water from the Chesapeake Bay?" And as every good bishop does, he called someone in his diocese to make it happen. He called Julia Connolly, who's the director of Camp Wright that is right there on the Chesapeake. She scooped up the water, she treated it as they asked, and she sent it in. So yay, Province Three.

I want to take a few minutes to tell you about a strange case of Delaware's gift to Alaska. Earlier this year, Mark Lattime, who is the bishop of the Diocese of Alaska, approached me at the House of Bishops meeting and said, "There's something I think you'd be interested in seeing." He said that he was recently on a visitation at one of the churches in Alaska, the second one to be formed, a tiny church called St. Thomas in Point Hope. On a credence table he saw a plaque that he had not seen before because the table is usually covered in books. I was pleased that he offered the plaque to me, and I now have it in my office. The inscription on the plaque states: In Memoriam, Rev. John B. Driggs, First Missionary to Point Hope, 1890 – 1908, who led the pagan eskimos from darkness into the light and glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance. Gift of Woman's Auxiliary, Diocese of Delaware.

I used Google Earth to give me a sense of where exactly Point Hope is located and found that it is north of the Arctic Circle. To get there you have to ride a ship or fly. It was the second church established in Alaska. The first church was in the Yukon Territory, up the Yukon River. Alaska was, for many decades, a missionary country, and the first locations weren't the big settlements that we would think of, Anchorage or Fairbanks, but they were much more remote.

John Driggs was born in 1852 in the West Indies. His parents were from a planter family, and he moved to the United States in 1870 when he was 18 years old, listing his address as Dover, Delaware. There's no reference to Driggs in the definitive history of the Episcopal Church in Delaware. We know through Wikipedia, that he was a medical doctor, he was trained in New York City, and that he went to Alaska when he was 38 years old. Missionaries were typically in their 20's.

According to the archdeacon of the Yukon, who wrote, in 1920, that the life in Point Hope was a life of brutal winters and very, very short summers. He went as a missionary of The Episcopal Church in a joint effort with the Department of Education, who was looking to send teachers. Driggs was a doctor and a faithful Episcopal layman, hoping to teach.

When he arrived on the beach in Alaska, he was deposited by a ship that was passing along with some basic supplies. Members of the ship helped him set up a crude house. He started looking at the materials he was given to translate the native language into English and found that nothing translated whatsoever, and that the natives treated him with suspicion, but not hostility.

The story goes, that in return for language lessons he offered baked cake to local children. Education for food worked as many kids showed up.

The testimony of a Danish explorer who sailed through the area some years later said that he had gone from a strange outsider to being beloved in the village. After 18 years, the bishop of Alaska had ordained him a deacon so that he could assist with baptisms and burials.

Diggs was removed from duty in 1908. He was unable to perform his tasks, but he did not want to leave. He moved up the coast to Cape Lisburne where there's an Air Force station. That's where he's buried.

He fell in love with Alaska and refused to call people Eskimos because that was a name that they did not use, but referred to them as the Inupiat people, because that's how they referred to themselves. And, he didn't refer to it as Cape Hope, that was the name that began with later English-speaking explorers, but he referred to it as Tikigaq, which is the place that we would call Point Hope.

In 1905, he wrote a book called *Short Sketches from Oldest America* where he cataloged tons of stories from the Inupiat people. The publisher who wrote a preface to this says, "We will say that Dr. Driggs is a man of iron constitution, strong physically and mentally, an excellent shot, and one who hardly knows the meaning of the word fear. In years to come, his name will rightly go down to history as that of a hero."

It's important to note this gift to St. Thomas was from the Women's Auxiliary of the Diocese of Delaware. And as so many of you know, the Women's Auxiliary across The Episcopal Church is the predecessor organization to the Episcopal Church Women that we know and love today, and that the women's Auxiliary was called at the time, the Church's most important and effective fellowship and mission organization. The women of the church knew how to organize and get things done.

The Auxiliary was founded in 1890, close to the time that Mr. Driggs made it to Alaska. The Auxiliary was centered on supporting education, health, childcare protection, and poverty alleviation. This organization was an engaged group in Delaware for a very long time, a force for mission and ministry. An edition of The Smyrna Times from 1909, talks about our good friend Driggs and how the Auxiliary is raising money for his efforts — clear evidence of a Delaware-Alaska connection.

I bring this before us because I'm fascinated by it, and I imagine there's something about it that you may find interesting, too. The idea that there is so much history that has come before us, generations of people looking to make a difference here and across the world.

I'm fascinated in claiming that missionary's spirit for adventure, a willingness to step out of what I assume was a comfortable medical practice in Dover and go all the way above the Arctic Circle to a place where no one can even understand a word you are saying. And, to do so primarily to teach and to heal. Yes, he baptized and that was important, but contrary to what that plaque suggests, he was not sent to convert the pagan esquimos. He was really sent to teach and to heal them, and through that, to introduce them to the way of Jesus Christ. Now that's what growth is supposed to be.

I also want to claim that missionary's zeal for adventure, for stepping out of what is predictable and comfortable and known and do it with a pilgrim's humility of spirit. Shape our witness so that the world can hear us and not try to shape the world to look like us.

In 2025, I want to reflect on how Delaware might take this plaque and celebrate the connection with Alaska. To be honest, I'm not exactly sure what the answer is yet. I'm not interested in just taking this plaque, tossing it out, and replacing it with a modern version. It's part of this legacy that we're all working on — what we do with bits of our history that teach us about ways we did things in the past, knowing we would not do the same thing again, but with learning from our history, without throwing it out. I think it involves at least a second plaque and the people of Point Hope as well.

We need to reflect on how we might celebrate this gift with different language, how we, the enlightened and generous saved the wretched and the lost. Not to erase our history. We don't want to forget how a church that considered itself white once treated a non-white world. The article from the Smyrna Times, references his distance from civilization as its distance from the nearest white man. It's just the way people thought. It's not an excuse, it's a reality. How do we learn from that history and how would we share with Point Hope today?

In 2025, beloved, I hope we will continue to plant seeds, plant seeds that others may harvest. We'll want to work with the standing committee and our diocesan historian to understand more about John Briggs. We'll work with our task force on governance to implement their recommendations. We'll work to implement the MMR recommendations. Our new task force on governance, which I've not even mentioned yet, will begin its work. It is the

task force that I spoke about this time last year and said I would form. It has now been formed and they are looking at the very governance structures of the diocese that we've all inherited, and looking to see if these structures are serving us now for the mission and ministry that we need to do in this time and place.

We will look hard in 2025 at the way we manage and consider property. Your trustees are taking seriously this charge and looking to see if we can do even better management of our existing properties through better capital planning and budgeting, and the new properties that come to us, particularly churches that find themselves closed.

We'll continue across all our bodies, council, and Camp Arrowhead in particular, with our capital budgeting that we've seen such great work with in 2024. At the mission support office, I will name a new missionary for Racial Justice and Reconciliation and a new youth missionary.

Mostly we are going to continue planting seeds, continuing to till the soil. There is no major new initiative, but rather consistency of purpose, consistency in our work towards growth, consistency in our work towards discovery, and consistency in our service together as one church.

So, Delaware, let's keep moving forward. Seeking with a missionary spirit for adventure to which God calls us. What is new and unexpected in this work? How can we shape our witness to the world so that the world hears what we have to say? St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, "There is fullness in life in Christ." Continue, my sisters and brothers, to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in the faith just as you were taught. Amen.