



THE BISHOP'S ADDRESS
TO THE 116TH ANNUAL COUNCIL OF
THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF WEST TEXAS

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DIOCESE
of West Texas

THE RT. REV. DAVID M. REED, D.D.
BISHOP OF WEST TEXAS

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Introduction & Welcome

Good morning, and welcome! *Muy buenos dias y bienvenidos a todos.*

I give thanks to God for you all gathered here for the 116th Council of the Diocese of West Texas; and I give thanks for the great privilege of serving as bishop of the eighty-five parishes and missions, one church plant, one worshipping community, and twenty-six schools that you represent, and that *are* the life, mission and ministries of this diocese.

Please join me in thanking our gracious and generous host churches, All Saints', Corpus Christi, and Trinity by the Sea, Port Aransas. Don't let their laidback, toes-in-the-sand, "It's all good," beach vibe fool you; they have been working really, really hard for months getting ready for us. Thank you all.

I'm even more grateful than usual for the eighth Bishop of West Texas, Jim Folts, and for his wife, Sandy. He put up with me when I was one of his parish priests, and he has continued to be a strong friend and encourager, and even more so in recent months, helping "*more and more*" with Sunday duties. Welcome, and thank you, Jim and Sandy!

Nancy Hibbs, who is the widow of beloved Bishop Suffragan Bob Hibbs now with the saints in light, is with us, serving as a member of the St. Paul's, San Antonio, delegation. Please welcome her, too.

Meanwhile, my predecessor, Bishop Gary Lillibridge continues as interim rector of some humongous Houston parish. He sends his greetings and thinks he'll be released for time served this spring. Like the Prodigal Son, he will be glad and lucky to get home. The seventh Bishop of our Diocese, John MacNaughton, and his wife Shirley are prevented by infirmity from joining us at Council; I know their prayers are with us all. Likewise, Bishop Bill Frey, retired Bishop of Colorado and Guatemala, is no longer able to join us, but he remains a beloved presence at Christ Church in San Antonio.

I would ask that the diocesan Secretary send greetings from this Council to these faithful shepherds and spouses, and also to Madelyn Hauser, widow of Bishop Suffragan Stanley Hauser.

Special Guests

Throughout this Council, we will be graced by the presence of several very special guests. Last night, we heard the Rev. Becca Stevens preach Good News in her usual shy and hesitant manner. I called her last September in a bit of a funk, needing a little revival, hoping she would come and preach and light up Council as she's done before. She didn't hesitate, didn't even

check her calendar. She just said, “I’ll be there.” And in five minutes on the phone, she drew more beautiful meaning out of our Council theme than I’d managed in the two months since I thought of it. Becca is joined by her husband, Marcus Hummon, incredibly talented and versatile Nashville singer/songwriter, and they’re joined by two wonderful women from Thistle Farms. We’re glad y’all are with us.

Our luncheon speaker today is Dr. Scott Bader-Saye, Academic Dean and Professor of Ethics and Moral Theology at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin. He is a highly regarded teacher and author, and you’re going to wish you had more time with him. I asked him to talk to us about how to behave like Christians in a world gone crazy. He came up with a more refined title, of course. Scott, thank you for giving time to be with us.

Also, Bishop David Bailey of Navajoland is with us for a third year, as the friendship and partnership between that vast and challenging mission area and our own continues to grow. Bishop Dave is not overly impressed with all the miles I drive, as Navajoland covers 27,000 square miles of New Mexico, Arizona and Utah and there are a lot less people in between. He has an impossible ministry. And yet, this past fall, he called and said, “Let me know if I can help you out.” In hindsight, maybe he was just being polite. But I asked, and he arrived early to take last Sunday’s visit at St. Francis, Canyon Lake and will stay over to be with the people of St. Mark’s here in Corpus Christi on Sunday. Bishop Dave and Anne, Howdy, amigos, and “Ya-aht-teeh.” Welcome.

Bishop Rayford High, and his wife, Canon Ann Norman are with us, as well. He’s the retired Bishop Suffragan of Texas and former Provisional Bishop of Fort Worth. More importantly for us, he served at St. John’s, McAllen as Rector and as Rector at St. Francis Church in Victoria before we lost him for a while, but we’re delighted that Rayford and Ann are with us. And Rayford’s on his way to take two Sundays in the Valley. Welcome back and welcome home, Rayford.

Tambien, es un honor, siempre, para mi recibirlos nuestros amigos y hermanos de Mexico: el Primado de Mexico y Obispo del Norte de Mexico, Francisco Moreno y su esposa, Peri; el Obispo del Sureste de Mexico (por dos semanas mas, mas o menos), Benito Juarez-Martinez y su esposa, Angelica, y su hijo Eignar; y el sucesor de Sureste, Julio Martín.

(Translation: Also, it’s an honor, always, to welcome our friends and brothers and sisters from Mexico: the Primate of Mexico and Bishop of Northern Mexico, Francisco Moreno and his wife, Peri; The Bishop of Southeastern Mexico (for two more weeks, more or less) Benito Juarez-Martinez, his wife Angelica, and son, Eigner; and Bishop Benito’s successor in Southeastern Mexico, Bishop Julio Martín.)

Cuando vemos con los ojos de nuestros corazones iluminados, aprendemos que aunque en tiempos de division, con voces de violencia y colera, Jesucristo reina y la verdad es que Cristo viene para derribar las paredes de hostilidad, para hacernos uno en el, hermanas y hermanos en el Espiritu. En Romanas, San Pablo dice que no hay nada, ni nadie, que puede separarnos del amor de Dios en Jesucristo. Es la verdad. Bienvenidos, amigos.

(Translation: When we see with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we understand that even in times of division, with violent and angry voices, Jesus Christ is Lord, and the truth is that Christ comes to “tear down the dividing wall of hostility, so that we might be one in him, sisters and brothers by water and the Spirit. In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul says there is nothing and nobody that can separate us from the love of God in his Son Jesus Christ. It is true. Welcome, friends.)

The Diocesan Staff

I want to say a word about our diocesan staff. A member of the staff reminded me recently that, at Council last year, I spoke of the many transitions we’d experienced in the diocesan staff in 2018. And I boldly declared that those days were over and were behind us. Of course, since then, we’ve weathered six more retirements and departures, including our Bishop Suffragan, Bishop Jennifer Brooke-Davidson; longtime Bishop’s Executive Assistant, Laura Woodall; and Nancy Stinson, who among many other things, organized and oversaw the Annual Council for more than two decades. I am thankful for their good work. I am also thankful for this staff those who remain and those who have joined us in the past twelve months. They are an incredibly talented and dedicated group. They lead and they serve beautifully, day in and day out. And I’d say this team, this staff that’s made up of a lot of freshmen and sophomores, has done an amazing job putting together this Council. How blessed I am, and how blessed we all are, that they serve the churches and people of West Texas so wholeheartedly. Staff, thank you.

The Council Theme & The Psalms

I want to say some more about the Council theme, but first I need to acknowledge that I did not choose this theme all by myself. Last summer, I went to Senior High Camp A at Camp Capers and gathered with all the campers and staff there. I presented to them the three final diocesan theme choices, and then they had a “Shout-Off” – which means they yelled really loudly for their favorite one. Maddie Boutte, who’s here with the group from St. Helena’s, Boerne, reminded me this morning that I had said I would give them credit. And so, Senior High A campers, thank you. They chose the theme that we went with. Thanks be to God for them, and for their joy, and for the noise that they brought.

A few weeks ago, I was crossing Woman Hollering Creek on I-10 early Sunday morning, heading for Church of the Messiah in Gonzalez, and I wondered for the hundredth time what creepy event might have led to its creepy name. But then I wondered something else: How did Bishop Robert Woodward Barnwell Elliott, the first bishop of West Texas, get across that creek? At 75 miles per hour, I’m across and gone without a second thought. If it wasn’t for its name, I probably wouldn’t even be aware it’s there. But back in the 1870s and 1880s, Bishop Elliott would have come upon it slowly on horseback or in a buggy, likely following a wagon trail. No bridge, no weather app, no traffic advisory. He would’ve had to cross creeks like Woman Hollering all over the missionary district that’s now our diocese. Even if the creek was down, he’d still have to figure out how navigate the steep ravine. And if it rained? Who knows. Any way that he headed out of San Antonio, there were creeks and rivers to cross; there were obstacles, delays, frustrations as plans went awry.

And yet, in one of his last reports to the Missions Board in New York, late in his episcopacy and late in his life, Bishop Elliott reflected on how the spread of the railroads was changing life in West Texas. He recalled his first train trip from San Antonio to Laredo, and how he had made that trip in only eight hours. Before, he wrote, it might take him five or six days by horseback or buggy, each night sleeping under the stars. He wondered about this speeding up of life, and while the train was great, he worried how much people would miss seeing as they sped by.

If he could only see us now...

Isn't the speed of life a significant source of spiritual dis-ease in our time? And isn't the inability to see clearly what lies before us worsened in our culture by too many lights that never go out? And aren't so many of our treasured technologies that promise more human connection, promise more time and more knowledge actually having a very different effect? As bandwidth widens, perception and understanding narrow. Isolation and tribalism and division take root. We have more and more to do, that matters less and less. We are stuffed with information and go hungry for wisdom and insight. So many of us have a hard time looking up from our devices and stepping away from our screens to see life, to see one another.

So how do we hear and take to heart this Council theme, "With the Eyes of our Hearts Enlightened"? How might the Living Word take these words and break through our distraction? How do we look up and look around so that we can truly see with our deepest selves?

I mentioned yesterday that seeing "with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, seeing with "the eyes of our inmost self opened to God," was like using a telescope or a microscope to see farther and deeper. I want to offer another way of coming at it today.

Do you know what a "phoropter" is? *—It's not a dinosaur.*

A phoropter is that machine eye doctors use to determine your prescription for glasses, as they try to adjust your vision to 20/20. The doctor flips lenses back and forth as you squint at a sign on the wall and asks, "Which is better, this one or this one? This one, or this one?"

Consider this Council as one, big phoropter, trying to give us the optimal lenses through which we can see more clearly—see one another, see the world, see God, see the way Jesus would have us go. Word and sacrament, music and art, friendship and work, the Council Café and the Clergy Family Art Show, the Church gathered and sent—all are gifts by which we might see the Lord of life come among us. Consider the life of your own church as a phoropter: your worship, your ministries, your prayer, your outreach, your community life. All frame your vision, allowing you to see with eyes and heart lit up by the light of Christ.

I want all of us to see with eyes enlightened, not only for the sake of our souls, but for love of the world to which we're sent. And so, as a way to practice slowing down and looking, of "giving consideration" as Becca said last night, I'm inviting and encouraging you, all eighty-seven congregations, to study the Book of Psalms in 2020. Given the challenges that we face, that might not seem like much. But if you recall the sermon last night, with everything that was going on,

that was so volatile, Jesus said, “Consider the lilies, consider the birds.” Consider the Psalms now. We hear and pray from the Psalter every Sunday in church, so we know the psalms, sort of. They remain strange to our ears, opaque and often hard to get into, and so we move on to the next thing, the Second Reading.

But the Psalms are the first prayer book and hymnal of the Church. They were Jesus’ own prayer book and hymnal in the synagogue. They speak to the heart and express the full range of human emotion, exploring the height and depth of living, speaking great joy and profound communion with God. They also give voice to the worst impulses in us. They acknowledge the darkness that overtakes us and cry out at the absence of God.

They are honest prayers, and as Emily Dickenson said of poetry, they “tell all the truth, but tell it slant.” They let the light in at a different angle and draw us to see what we are in the middle of. The Psalms are like the lenses of the phoropter. When we pay attention, they help us see more clearly, get closer to 20/20 vision. So, which is better, “this one or this one,” to help you see more truly life around you, your own life?

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” (Psalm 23) Or “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear.” (Psalm 27) Or “Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea thunder and all that is in it.” (Psalm 96) Or “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me, and are so far from my distress?” (Psalm 22)

While the Psalms bring us strength and comfort in our personal lives, they are never only about personal piety. They are the prayers and songs of God’s people, and like our worship as a whole, they gather us together and they send us. They cry out in pain and protest against the sin, brokenness, and injustice of the world.

They also admit to our own sin and hard-heartedness. They are a way by which our deepest selves might receive light to see the beauty and the meanness, the bravery and the cravenness that we meet within us and around us.

The Psalms are poetry. Like good poetry, they don’t tell us, “This is how it is,” but they invite us to come inside, to consider, to look again, to be in conversation, with the text, with God, and with one another.

They are an antidote to the mean season we find ourselves in these days, in which verbal abuse and shouting pass for political discourse, and the goal is not to understand your opponents, but to demolish them. As a people, we have come to speak in flattened prose. Persuasive speech and civil discourse are dismissed as weak. Conversation falters and then fails as everybody reaches for their phones. We scatter to the false shelter of those who think just like we do. We echo the irony and sarcasm of sit-coms in our own speech; rely on unreliable news feeds to make sense of the world; use the blunt techniques of talk radio; follow too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have stopped seeing the other, stopped seeing Christ in others. And in our blindness, I think the first things we lose are the qualities of mercy and loving-kindness. We no longer see the glory and the wreckage trailing behind the people we meet.

So, it seems now is a good time to revisit the Psalms. Now is a time for poetry and art and music and even comedy; not to hide from all the craziness, but to let God's light shine on it; to let the power of Christ loosen the hold that the principalities and powers have on us; to tell the Gospel truth, but tell it slant, so that it catches the light a little differently. Poetry, art, music, and comedy take time to create, and they take time to be noticed and appreciated. We have to be willing to stop long enough to look and to see.

The Diocese will provide resources on the Psalms for you to use in your churches. But the best thing to do, of course, is to read them and pray them together. The Psalms are not about doctrine, but conversation with God, about prayer, so be more concerned with what words and images tug at your heart and make you wonder. Many of you will remember the "Sharing Faith Dinners" from a few years ago. People gathered in small groups, usually over a meal, in homes and churches. They drew cards, read aloud the questions of faith on them, and then they had conversation. The power and beauty of those gatherings wasn't in well-crafted answers that explained anything, but in the stories that were shared about life, about struggles and victories, about joy and sorrow, and how our faith sheds light and helps us make sense of life. The Psalms, like art and music and poetry and comedy, can be for us lenses to see with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, to see beneath the surface.

A Personal Word of Thanks

As recently as yesterday, I was asked, "How's Patti doing?"

As most of you know, the day after Easter, she became critically ill with a rapidly spreading bacterial infection, ended up in the hospital for a month, and for the first eight days was totally sedated and on life-support in ICU. She had two surgeries. When she got out of the hospital, she continued for six weeks in out-patient rehab. It was, as some of you will know first-hand, a nightmare.

But she is well now. Medically, she is free and clear. She hasn't fully regained her strength or her stamina, but she will tell you accurately that she's recovering. She has been incredibly brave and strong.

From the time we were sent to the ER until she was released from physical therapy two and a half months later, and beyond, we knew that we (and especially Patti) were being prayed for without ceasing. Such knowledge brought peace and strength, and it became a way by which the Lord's grace and healing prevailed. The ministry of prayer practiced by so many of you across this Diocese – from Sunday morning intercessions to Daughters of the King chapters to prayer groups and individual prayer warriors to the clergy family of West Texas – all of it, *all of you*, became like a knitted prayer shawl God wrapped around us. When Patti could communicate again, she wanted us to bring one of her favorite t-shirts from home. She couldn't wear it because of the wires and tubes, so she had us hang it in her room in ICU, like a prayer flag and a victory banner: "Love heals."

And it's true. Love heals, and we are witnesses of these things. Patti is well, and we are grateful to the Lord of love, and humbly thankful to you, his people. Thank you for asking, and thank you for your prayers.

The Suffragan's Departure

Patti and I had about six weeks of getting back to normal, *whatever normal is*, and then the day after Labor Day, our Bishop Suffragan, Jennifer Brooke-Davidson resigned to accept a call to serve as Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Virginia, after just two years as our Suffragan. Without revisiting all the uncertainty and the rearranging that followed her unexpected decision, let me say that I have never been more proud, *and I'm always proud*, of the clergy and lay leadership of our Diocese; I've never had more reason, *and I've always got good reason*, to be thankful for the diocesan staff; and I've never been more sure *and I've always been sure*, of the goodness and strength of this diocese than I have been since those days in early September.

I won't pretend that this has been an easy six months, or that I've dealt with everything wisely and gracefully. Much of what I intended to do last fall had to be put on hold. I certainly felt angry and hurt, was given to self-doubt, and had need to pray the Great Litany more than once. But I found, *as I've found before*, that at the limits of our competence and strength, we find grace. We find mercy, forgiveness, and kindness woven into the life of the Church, embodied in the sisters and brothers who show up, ready to help. The steady guidance and wise counsel of the Standing Committee and our Chancellor; the many ways the priests of this Diocese have rallied round to support and encourage; the notes and emails and conversations voicing support and promising prayer: All of that, *again all of you*, *β*have become a means of God's mending and repairing and renewing, not only for me personally, but for this diocesan family.

The resolution that will come before you later today, I think reflects what I've just described.

Resolution 2020-1

Resolution 2020-1 asks that this Council authorize the office of Assistant Bishop, and grant me permission to appoint an Assistant Bishop, for no more than three years. It is not a frantic attempt to patch things together, but it comes out of much prayer, and much conversation with laity and clergy. We have, by grace, tried to look with the eyes of our hearts enlightened at the situation created by Bishop Brooke-Davidson's departure more broadly, to step back and assess the challenges and opportunities of our life together, considering both the current health and the forward movement of West Texas. The Standing Committee and I, and so many others, have tried to keep our eyes on Jesus and to be faithful stewards of the mission and ministries of this Diocese. I believe this step, providing for an Assistant Bishop, is not a reaction against the unexpected and unwanted events of the fall, but a response to the Spirit's movement among us, as well as a reflection of ongoing healing and renewal. This resolution reflects confidence in the vitality and promise of West Texas, and gives us time and space to wait upon the Lord, and

ready ourselves, at the right time, for the next bishop's election. With your consent, I'll begin the search for an Assistant Bishop next month.

Meanwhile, I remain incredibly grateful to Bishop Folts; Bishop High, and Bishop Bailey, as well as Bishop Dena Harrison, retired Suffragan of Texas, who have all graciously taken on some Sunday visits to help out.

The Diocese in 2019

Life goes on, as it does. Worship and fellowship and mission and ministry in the Name of Christ have continued in eighty-seven places and a thousand ways around the Diocese of West Texas. In 2019, I was with forty-four of our churches for official episcopal visits, mostly on Sundays, and was with quite a few more of you for non-Sunday occasions. By my count (which of course is wrong), I spent time in 61 churches last year. So, let me tell you, I've seen some things.

When I'm able to look up from my preoccupations and see with the eyes of my heart enlightened, I see such beauty and hope in your churches. I see it in the steady rhythm of your worship and your life together. I see it in your determination to be the Church where you are, whether there's 400 of you or nine. I see it in your brave strivings and struggles to flourish where you are. And I see it also in your sometimes wacky and what-the-hell willingness to try something new and risky for love of Jesus and the people in your communities. I'd love to swap stories with you all day long, but let me report briefly on a handful of significant happenings around the Diocese in 2019.

St. Nicholas Episcopal Church

We, all of us, launched a new church in December. St. Nicholas moved from dream to reality after a year of really hard work by our church planter, the Reverend Beth Wyndham, her husband Jeremy, and a core team of disciples. You may remember that we prayed for and commissioned Beth and Jeremy at Council last year (2019). They spent much of 2019 gathering and building their team and scouting areas that might give the new church the best possible chance of success.

They settled on the Spring Branch area, which is about twenty miles north of San Antonio on US 281, twenty miles south of Blanco, twenty miles east of Boerne, and twenty miles west of New Braunfels. So, 20/20 times two; it's like extra good vision, or maybe double vision. Now that you know where it is, you should go check it out. We simply went where we were not, and where people, as always, need Good News; we could go anywhere. We could go anywhere. For months, the team spent time in the area, struck up conversations, got to know people, looked and listened carefully, while also praying, studying, and planning together. On December 8, they held their first public worship service. The good news of St. Nicholas isn't for that congregation only, or for just the people in the Spring Branch area; it is for all of us. To truly reclaim our identity as "a missionary people and a missionary diocese," we need to be paying attention: there is much that

we can learn, or can remember, about being the Church in an outpost of the Kingdom from those who are figuring it out as they go, guided by the Holy Spirit at St. Nicholas.

Not long ago, I asked Beth when she thought it would be the right time to begin talking about and planning for where we go next to plant the next church. I didn't want to start too soon, didn't want to shift attention from St. Nick's. Beth said, "it's never too soon." So, expect the conversation and organizing for the next church plant in West Texas to begin in Fall 2020. Meanwhile, I'll be looking forward to my first official visit to St. Nicholas Church on, can you imagine, St. Nicholas Day, December 6. You're all invited. And Beth will bake cookies for everybody.

Congregational Development

It's always helpful to remember that every church in West Texas is a church plant. That is, there once was a time when there was no church where your church is. And it's only because of the faith, vision, and tenacity of those local saints, saints of God who are folks just like you, it's only because of them that your church is there now. But plants need tending. They need light and air, cultivation and pruning and room to grow. They even need fertilizer. The ground needs to be worked.

And so, for all your holy gardening, I offer you the tool shed that is the Diocese of West Texas. It's all related to congregational development. We have a staff committed to supporting the health and growth of your church. We have clergy and laity across the Diocese offering their gifts and talents. We have a Department of Congregational Development and an Evangelism Committee; a World Mission Department, Stewardship Department, a Christian Education Committee, and a Communications Team; Military Ministries and campus ministries and Camps and Conferences for all ages; Happening and Cursillo; and Habitat and Kairos and Texas Water Mission and Good Samaritan Community Services.

We've got people who would love nothing more than to get you out of your comfort zone and onto a mission team. We've got people who'd love nothing more than to have you meet Jesus in the faces of *los pobres* camped just across the Rio Grande, and people who can help you meet your neighbors down the street. And I know for sure we've got people who are going to find me after this address and ask why I didn't say anything about what *they* are doing. There's just not enough time. But know that this diocesan family has churches over *here* that are really good at things that churches over *there* really want to learn how to do better.

With all the lenses to look through here, the workshops and the worship, the art and the music, the ministries and exhibits, all the churches and people, and all the possible conversations, they're all here for you, the children of God. For you, the children of God, this Council should feel like a giant toy store. There's just so much here for you.

So, somebody ask the people of St. Matthew's, Kenedy about why they're dreaming up a new church entrance. And somebody ask the people of St. Nicholas about their "5K for Jesus." And

somebody ask the people of Santa Fe and St. Thomas', San Antonio, about the messy blessings of tamale-making. Somebody, ask the people of St. Andrew's, Port Isabel about the spiritual rewards of offering ESL classes in your parish hall. Somebody, ask the people of St. Philip's, San Antonio about the power and hope of marching in the MLK March every year. Somebody ask the people of St. Philip's, Uvalde, how they're bold enough to say God calls them to be a public face of Christ in their town. Somebody, ask the people of Trinity, Junction or St. John's, Sonora, how in the world they get so many adults to Bible study. Somebody, ask Good Shepherd, Corpus, or St. Mark's, San Antonio, or Christ Church, San Antonio what makes their confirmation classes so successful. I've got seventy-six more examples to share with you, but if you tell me you understand what I'm saying, I'll stop. Do I need to keep going? Do you get my point? Ask somebody what they're up to.

*Every church in this Diocese has the capacity to be a resource to other churches. Even knowing what you don't have, **I am convinced that God has given your church everything you need to be Christ's Body right where you are, right now.***

What does it take to be the Church where you are? Stripped down to essentials, it's not much: the Bible, water, bread, wine, people. Okay, so we're Prayer Book people, so you need a Prayer Book. that on the list. Pray God, give us eyes to see right where we are; to see the abundance we have in our congregations. Pray God give us wisdom to look carefully for opportunities to invite people into the adventure of following Jesus. Pray God, give us courage to do something, *something* Eastery, for Christ's sake.

Stewardship

If it's all congregational development, then it's also true that it's all stewardship: "all we do, all the time, with all we have." In 2019, the Diocese reinvested in our Department of Stewardship and hosted major stewardship events around the Diocese, led by Richard Rogers of Horizons Stewardship. The good news of Christian stewardship as spiritual discipline and habit is that it brings joy and freedom. We become a lot less anxious about what we don't have. To be generous is to participate in the very nature of God. Practicing stewardship, giving generously, tithing, leads us from fear to freedom, helping us see the missional bottom line beyond the financial bottom line. We are stewards with fiduciary responsibility for nothing less than the mission of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The biblical tithe, giving of a tenth, remains the standard of Christian giving in our Church, and if we are not tithing, we're encouraged to give intentionally and proportionately as a means of working toward the tithe.

As others have pointed out, if we all tithed, all our churches' financial problems would be problems of abundance.

We've had a wonderful response around the Diocese to the 2019 stewardship initiative. But, there's a tendency in the Church to think that when a program ends, that we've completed the work, met our obligation, and so, it's time to move on to the next thing. Although this

stewardship program with Richard Rogers is ending, for the love of Jesus, please do not regard stewardship, not even your church's fall "Every Member Canvass", in this way. Stewardship is all we do, all the time, with all we have in grateful response to all that we have received from God. How we live our lives, and how your churches live their lives, are acts of stewardship. So, please keep practicing.

The Bishop's Youth Commission

As I said in the Pre-Council meetings, I'm recommissioning the Bishop's Youth Commission in 2020. It's been at least ten years since we had an active Youth Commission. I'm restarting it *not* because nothing's going on in the way of ministry to and with our young people, but because we've got so very much going on, *so very much* to offer. Our youth camping programs at Camp Capers and Duncan Park draw hundreds of teens from our churches. Happening Weekends are full. Many of your congregations are blessed by active, vibrant youth groups. And yet, there are many young people in our churches scattered across the Diocese who don't know about, or have access to, regular sustained ministry *to, for, and with young people*. They may rarely see another Episcopalian their age.

For All Saints' Day last fall, I visited All Saints', Pleasanton on a Wednesday evening. There were two high school students to confirm – a brother and sister. I had a chance to visit with them over supper before the service. Wonderful young people: personable, busy with numerous school activities, leaders in their school, very much at home in their church. They had never heard of Camp Capers, never heard of Happening, probably didn't know what a bishop was. They were the first confirmations in Pleasanton since 2005. It was a joyful night, and I wonder how their life in the faith, how their formation as disciples, will continue.

Now, that's not a commentary on one church, but a description of what's common in many churches. I'll give the Youth Commission plenty of freedom to identify their work and set priorities, but one thing I'll ask is that they take a serious look at how we as a diocesan family can give our young people a clear sense of belonging in the Church, equipping them with a faith strong and tender enough to navigate this life, helping them to slow down and look with eyes enlightened. I know this is being done well in many of your churches, and so how can we extend that and offer resources and support in other places? How can we assist our churches in making room for young people and giving them real things to do, things that matter, so that they can put to good and holy use the gifts and energy that they bring?

Immigration & Migration

I wrote a personal letter to our governor, Greg Abbott, in mid-January. Sent it old-school, snail-mail. I can't remember writing to a Texas governor since I was in fourth grade: John Connally was in office, and the whole class requested photos of the governor and state maps for our Texas scrapbook project.

My personal letter followed The Episcopal Church's public criticism of Governor Abbott's decision to close the door to the resettlement of refugees in Texas, many of whom are fleeing religious persecution. This is a separate issue from the chaotic immigration situation along our border. Resettlement groups, almost all of them are faith organizations, work with the State Department to receive and resettle carefully vetted refugees all over the country. My letter echoed one sent to the governor by all the Episcopal bishops in Texas last summer, beseeching him to decide differently than what he eventually did.

I didn't pretend to speak for you, for the Diocese, but I want you to know that I did this. Our Church was not alone in protesting his decision: Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics also joined with conservative evangelical groups and Jewish groups in opposing his decision, which was also contrary to the decisions of almost every other state governor. For more than a hundred years, our Church, primarily through Episcopal Migration Ministries, has tried to respond faithfully to Jesus' words in the parable of the sheep and the goats, which is also about seeing and not seeing: "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or sick or in prison and visit you?" And the King will answer, "Truly, I say to you, as you did that for one of the least of my brethren, so you did it for me." (Matthew 25:37-40)

In my letter, I told the governor that I believe him when he says that he is a serious Catholic Christian, and said I would pray that the Lord would change his heart. And I have been doing that.

But here's why I'm telling you this. In my letter, I offered him the greatest resource the Diocese of West Texas has to assist him in seeking a better way forward with refugee resettlement. I volunteered y'all. Y'all have hearts as big as Texas, hearts filled with compassion, and you're so smart it's scary. And you love the Lord. So, I offered you.

Now, you're probably thinking I'm foolish. And you're probably right. I have not heard back from him, haven't even gotten a free state map. I don't think I will. But I tried to see Governor Abbott, not as a powerful politician, *which he is*, but as a Christian brother trying to make hard decisions and in need of grace and light, just like all of us. I'm sure he got a flood of letters and emails denouncing him and calling his mother bad names. I doubt he got many letters that both criticized his decision *and* offered to work with him on a better way forward. If he calls, I'll let you know.

Meanwhile, human migration and immigration continue to be volatile, divisive issues in our nation, and around the world, and certainly along the 400 miles of border our diocese shares with Mexico. But Lord have mercy upon us if all we can see are issues to choose sides over and not see the human beings right in front of us. Last year, when we gathered for Council a few miles from the border in McAllen, the flow of people was strong and overwhelming, emotions were high, and political rhetoric left complex truth in the dust. We heard several presentations and perspectives on the crisis, and highlighted ministries that our churches lead and participate in. Not much has changed, though the spotlight for now has moved on, and government policies now keep people, including asylum seekers, on the Mexican side of the border until their

applications can be processed. With a backlog of maybe one million people, many will be waiting up to two years for a hearing. Whether the Migrant Protection Protocols, or “Remain-in-Mexico” policy is a success or a disaster certainly depends on your perspective.

What is observable, though, is that there’s now another humanitarian crisis just across the river, where asylum seekers—mostly Hondurans and Guatemalans and Salvadorans, and a great many of them women and children—have created pitiable tent cities near bridges and along the riverbank. A great many of them are suffering, and they are vulnerable to kidnapping, sexual assault, and other violence. Most of them will have their claims denied, and they will be returned to their home countries, where whatever danger they fled will still be waiting.

A number of our congregations continue to minister to the basic human needs of these displaced people. Episcopalians and others from around the country are coming to the border to see what they might do, in the Name of Jesus. Our people continue to host groups who want to help in some way, but also who seek a clearer understanding of the complexities of the varied viewpoints.

One ministry, Team Brownsville, started by retired school teachers, has a booth in the Exhibit Hall, and I designated half of last night’s offering to their ministry of humanitarian aid, which includes delivering food and clothing, conversation, prayer, and holding school among the tents for the children. We cannot do everything, and our efforts will not “solve” the global migration crisis. We could argue all day long and still disagree about immigration policies and border walls. But Jesus has something to say about what we can do. The Living Word tells us we can pray to see with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, to “seek and serve Christ in all persons,” searching for him among those who suffer and live in fear. The complexities are daunting and the scale of the suffering is overwhelming and can cause our hearts to grow hard and scarred. But the power of resurrection is far greater, and the light of Christ scatters the darkness. He alone can heal our hearts, so that we can care again.

Conclusion

In Genesis 15, God takes old Abram outside under the desert night sky and says, “Look up at the stars.” Ever since, God has been trying to get us to look up, to pay attention, to really see. He says to several of his prophets—Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Zechariah, at least— He says to them, “What do you see?” And when they tell him the ordinary things they’re looking at, God tells them to look again, to look more carefully, to reconsider, to see signs of something more enduring and eternal. And when Jesus’ disciples ask, “How come you always talk in parables? You’re confusing us. Why don’t you just say what you mean,” he answers, “The people look but don’t see; they hear, but they don’t hear. Their hearts have become calloused.” And so, he’s got to tell the truth slant, so that people might see and hear again.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have been born anew to a living hope. There is a promised new heart for us, the promise echoing back to Ezekiel when God says, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of you the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh, and I will put my spirit within you.” (Ezekiel 36:26-27) And this new heart, this new life, brings with it eyes to see, and ears to hear, and hearts to love. “With the

eyes of our hearts enlightened” by the power of his resurrection, Jesus invites us to get up and follow, walking in love, keeping our eyes open – not just for the obvious beauty and goodness that surrounds us on every side, if we’ll only slow down enough to notice. Not only that, but also looking more deeply for the beauty and goodness of God’s amazing grace and saving movement, even in the least likely places, in the least likely people, and even in us.

I tell you this a lot. I wish you could see what I see as I travel this Diocese and am with you in your churches. I hope and pray that you’ll use this Council like a big phoropter, trying on lenses to sharpen the eyes of your hearts, so that, when you get back home, back to your church back to your community, back to your normal life, you’ll see the stars and you’ll see Jesus.

I invite you to join in praying together, from Psalm 36:

**Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens,
And your faithfulness to the clouds.
How priceless is your love, O God!
Your people take refuge under the shadow of your wings.
They feast upon the abundance of your house;
You give them drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the well of life,
And in your light, we see light. Amen.**

Thank you. And thanks be to God for you.