

2013 Convention Address

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is with great joy that I welcome you to this, our 136th Diocesan Convention.

This is the fifth or sixth time we have gathered at Flatwoods for our gathering, and now my 12th Convention with you. I want to say that I am truly thankful to be here with you. I feel both proud and privileged to be the Bishop of West Virginia. It is a wonderful Diocese in a beautiful State, with great people! Our heritage is long and strong, and our future is bright, God being our helper! We continue to try things that are different, and our passion and strength for Christ and the Church is evident.

This weekend, we gather to do the business of the Church. We gather to discuss the budget for 2014, elect people for offices and to discuss a resolution. But, as I stated previously, and will repeat later in this address, the business of the Church is to praise and glorify God. Let us never lose sight of our purpose, and why we are here.

Before I go down that road, I want to just say thank you to the Diocesan Staff: I am blessed with each one of these people, and this Diocese is also.

Thank you Mollie Bailey, for your faithfulness and cheerful presence. She has continued to expand in her ministry, and she is a true presence of hospitality and humor. In many places around the Diocese, as I talk with clergy, administrators and Wardens, they all tell me how wonderful Mollie is. I am thankful that she is with us, and serving as wonderfully as she does! When I first arrived here, Mollie sat at her desk, and arrived at 8:30 am, and left at 5:00 on the dot. Not 5:01. Not 4:59. 5:00! She answered the phone, and greeted people. She did her job, and was good, but she didn't really do a lot of talking.

Now, she still comes in by 8:30...leaves sometime in the afternoon...often stays later, if necessary...and talks to everyone! She has additionally taken on new roles, as she prepares brochures, letters, meetings, conferences, reservations, etc...She has continued to grow in ministry, responsibility and grace!

Thank you, to Canon Faith Perrizo for your willingness to try to be in 3 places at once, and for your commitment to baptismal ministry.

Thank you to Canon Donald Vinson, who also is in 3 places at once, and who shows a continued desire for healthy, growing congregations.

Thank you to David Ramkey, as our CFO. He has been called upon to not only do our books, but also to help congregations assess their financial situations, and everyone who has worked with David has come away with great praise for his knowledge and presence!

Thank you to Annette Combs, who works tirelessly over the details. Together, David and Annette have again worked to make sure that the Diocese of West Virginia has a clean Audit, with no exceptions or notes! This should be the norm, but it had not been for a LONG time, and this is now the 4th or 5th year that we have had it!

Thank you to Linda Comins, who does such a fine job with the Dayspring, and all of the news around the Diocese. Together with Susan Barfield, who does the layout of the Dayspring, she continues to bring us all the news that's fit to print.

Thank you to Jason Beschinski, who has left the staff to go back to school to attain his degree. God bless you!

Thank you to Stephen Day for his work with youth.

To Daisy McBride for her efforts and vision for Peterkin!

To Sarah Lydick for her ministry at Sandscrest.

To Lori Osborne for her presence and ministry at HEP.

I also want to thank the many others who give so much of their time, for the good of the Diocese: For Christ and the Church:

Members of Council

All of the Commissions and Committees

John Hussell, Tyler Dinsmore and Karen Klein, our Chancellors.

Tom Farnsworth, our Treasurer - who took over at the end of last Convention!

The Trustees of the Diocese

Thank you to each and everyone of them, and to you, and your congregations, for the continued prayers and witness offered throughout the Diocese of West Virginia.

I want to thank The Rev John Hagan, and his Staff at St Matthew's, Charleston, Kathy for preparing the hymn books for this afternoon. I thank Ray Shackelford for his music this afternoon, and I thank the Rev Betsy Walker for the bulletins/booklets for this weekend.

I also want to thank Mrs Kelly McGhee, who once again has stepped into the position of Coordinator/Facilitator/Guru of Diocesan Conventions.

God has been very...very good to me. When I first called Kelly, a few years ago, and asked if she would consider this...her reply was that in her former life, she had done Conventions for Hyatt...who would have known? Since her arrival with us, she has watched over every detail of Convention...made the Host Congregations feel well prepared, and has made sure that our Conventions are run with Grace, dignity, love, hospitality and a focus on Jesus Christ!

Kelly - I thank you!! WE thank you!

As we gather here in Flatwoods, I have to admit that I have been asked by more than a few people why we are here. If you look at the agenda, and the 'work' we have to get done, it is minimal. We have a budget that has been worked over by the staff, the Treasurer and the Council. There are no Canonical issues to be brought, at this time, and there is only one resolution. We do have to vote on some canonically elected offices, and then to elect, by ballot, our Deputies to General Convention.

"Couldn't you have canceled Convention?" someone asked me. I smiled and said I wished I could, but I don't have the authority to do that. Besides, we have signed a contract with the Days Hotel, and we are obligated to pay the bill, regardless of whether we use it fully or not.

"Could we have shortened Convention?" others have asked. I guess we could, but again, we're obligated to our contract, and when we signed the contract, we didn't know that this Convention would not be filled with other items on the agenda.

"Could we have done this via electronic voting, or proxies?" I suppose so, but again - contracts and Canons.

But as I listen to these questions, I am reminded of two things:

First, because of the size and geography of the Diocese of West Virginia, we don't have the opportunity to see each other with any regularity. Like a parish with more than 1 Eucharist on Sunday - where the 8 o'clock crowd doesn't know the 10:30 crowd, and the 10:30 crowd barely even knows that the 8:00 group exists, I am the one that sees the entire Diocese. But being there by myself, fails to connect us together. Conventions are more than just coming together to do the busy-ness of the Church. It is indeed a family gathering. It is a time to celebrate together our common life within the Body of Christ, and in particular, this Body, we call the Episcopal Church - the Episcopal Diocese of West Virginia. We come to celebrate our common bond in Jesus Christ! We renew friendships and relationships. We make new friends.

Secondly, I am reminded of the story I have told before:

A certain Episcopal Bishop from the United States was invited to an African Diocese for their Diocesan Convention.

He arrived and was warmly welcomed.

the first day of Convention, the people - hundreds, perhaps thousands, gathered as they sang spiritual songs...danced in the Spirit...celebrated Eucharist...prayed...read scripture...and sang more hymns, and said more prayers.

The second day, the people gathered, and sang spiritual songs...danced in the Spirit...celebrated Eucharist...prayed...read scripture...and sang more hymns, and said more prayers.

The third day, the people gathered, and sang spiritual songs...etc.

Finally, the American Bishop went up to the African Bishop and asked, "Did I miss something? I thought I was coming for your Convention. When will you get to the business of the Church - the Budget, the resolutions, the elections?"

The African Bishop smiled and said, "We are doing the business of the Church...singing and praising God."

And so, this weekend, we get the opportunity to really, truly do the work of the Church. We will not be bogged down by deep discussions about Canonical issues, liturgical practices (by which horn DOES one remove one's biretta?) or resolutions that go in the book, with little world changing impact.

Instead, this afternoon, we will do what is required of us by the Canons, and then we will remain to hear some meditations, hymns and prayers.

We will truly get to do what God has planted us on this earth to do: to praise and glorify God.

If you get restless, and wonder why we're 'hanging around,' please know that we're here as the Body of Christ, gathered for the praise and glory of God. Take a few deep breaths, and allow the Holy Spirit to calm your mind and spirit, and rest in Christ.

About a month ago, this nation celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington, and we heard about/ and we heard the "I have a Dream" speech, given by Dr Martin Luther King.

It was a speech about the future...some have said, not necessarily the future on earth...but an eschatological hope. That all would be welcomed...AAAALLL would be equal.

We have not achieved that Dream. In fact, we have a long way to go...But one's reach should always exceed one's grasp, and that's what's happening now. We see further than we can touch...and we strive for a better world and a better tomorrow.

With God's grace, we will achieve it.

I do believe that God has a dream for each of us, and for the Diocese of West Virginia. I'll get back to what I believe God's Dream (not my dream!!!) may be, later.

First, I want to talk about the life of the Diocese, as we know it...and to reflect on our Common Life.

On an overall basis, the first thing I want to mention about the life of the Diocese is that we have brought in about 8 new clergypersons: people either new to the Diocese completely, or some clergy who have newer positions over the past year (plus).

Through an abbreviated process, referred to as a Strategic Appointment, rather than a full blown search process, I have made the following appointments, and the vestries have accepted them:

The Rev Chip Graves - at Trinity, Huntington (was here last year as well)
The Rev Lisa Graves - at St John's, Huntington (was here last year as well)
The Rev Anne West - Christ Church/St Barnabas - Clarksburg/Bridgeport (last year as well)
The Rev Jon White - St Stephen's, Beckley (last year as well)
The Rev Josh Saxe - St James', Lewisburg - (appointed after last Convention), and now just elected Rector!
The Rev Randy Nairn - Emmanuel, Keyser, (an ELCA pastor, serving under CCM)
The Rev John Hagan, St Matthew's, Charleston
The Rev Chad Slater - Christ, Bluefield (newly graduated from Bexley Hall, and ordained)
Mr Brian Shoda - St Mark's, Berkeley Springs and Mt Zion, Hedgesville (in process)

Thus far, we are doing very well with these appointments, and I thank the clergy and individuals who have accepted these appointments, and the parishes and Vestries who have trusted me, and the 'appointment process' enough to accept these newly appointed people.

By doing this, we have cut down considerably on the vacancies and the time between appointments...and have saved literally tens of thousands of dollars in search money, which may now be used for direct ministry in the communities these parishes serve.

The process is not infallible, but it has proven itself well over the past few years. Other dioceses and bishops have also begun this method of 'call,' as it seems to work very well. The problem is that other bishops are now fighting over a limited number of clergy.

As good as it's been this part year (plus), we still have openings around the Diocese. St Peter's, Huntington, St Mark's, St Albans, St Christopher, Charleston, St John's, Charleston and Christ Church, Fairmont. We continue to look for clergy to serve in our smaller congregations, so that sacramental ministry may continue.

In a Strategic Appointment, we actively search and recruit clergy to come to us. It's been likened by some, to a Head Hunter's Search, or an Executive Search. The person being recruited may not even know that they had an interest is coming to this particular congregation, but we must tell them, and sell them on it, so that they wake up wondering why they didn't think of it before. I am hard at work to find the next clergy to come to the Diocese. I have numerous phone messages out there, and am waiting for a few of the candidates to get back to me on their part of the discernment.

So far, so good!

But, having reviewed our own discernment process, and ordination training, it was apparent over the past few years that something needed to be done. We rarely had a real process...instead, we had exceptions. So, we have begun to reinstate our discernment process for those who feel called to localized and specific ministries. I am in contact with two nearby bishops to see if we can work together to train and form new clergy together...thus expanding our horizons, understanding of the larger Church and enriching our learning opportunities.

Talking about education and formation; for the second summer, Reading Camps have sprung up around the Diocese.

Under the supervision and ministry of Canon Donald Vinson, scores of children have come to appreciate reading. Their reading levels have jumped, and they have encountered adult volunteers who take their passion of reading to the children!

West Virginia is not alone in the perception that our education levels are low...other states also carry that stigma. However, piece by piece...child by child, we can make a difference, and bring children to the joys of learning!

Thank you, Donald, and thank you to all of the volunteers!

We have much to be proud of in our Diocese - as we have been an integral part of the life of the State of West Virginia. Over the years, we have helped to shape who this State is, and we will continue to do that.

This past year has seen a lot of activity around the Diocese.

Peterkin

A great, but challenging, summer.

There is an emotional attachment to Peterkin, which carries with it some suspicion of any potential change.

But change must happen.

There is the old story in which one clergy person says to the other, "If the 1950's ever return, my congregation is ready!"

We cannot go back. Time marches on, and so do we.

We've paid off the pool. We've painted Gravatt and the Dining Hall. We have redone some of the older buildings, for new uses, and we have added a couple of new camps. We have a greater understanding of what it takes to run Peterkin.

Summer fees for Peterkin are some of the lowest throughout the Episcopal Church, by hundreds of dollars. We do not charge what it costs to attend Peterkin. We have slowly tried to raise the cost...but we get pushback from every side. Due to our changing society, we have been forced to change many of our safety policies, and again get push back from many.

When we look at the life of Peterkin, many remember the 'Glory Days' of the 1950's, 60's and 70's. There are two DVD's on the Peterkin table that highlight camp from 1956 and 1957. I invite you to go watch them, and enjoy.

In reality, Peterkin costs the Diocese approximately \$300,000 per year.

When I talk to people about this, I get varied responses...from 'spend more,' to 'close the place.'

On a business model, it probably doesn't make sense to spend that much money on so few people.

On a spiritual level, we see that by the ministry taking place at Peterkin, lives are indeed changed.

Since the 1970's the State of West Virginia has lost residents. The Diocese of West Virginia has lost members. We have gone from about 20,000 to about 9,000. Our camping numbers have declined from about 500 to about 300. We are indeed in line with the demographics of our state...it just looks different.

In addition, as our society continues to change, we have to look to see how that will be lived out. This past year, in Kanawha County, the schools re-opened in early August. Other counties opened later, and I'm told one or two counties are already working on 'year round school.'

If that happens...and Summer vacation is no longer as we once knew it, what will summer Church camp look like? What if different Counties have different opening dates for school, and not all of our children are available at the same time?

How will we/can we adjust for future changes? We are no longer in the 1950's, 60's or 70's. We're not even in the 20th Century any longer.

Constant change is before us...and we either accept and adapt to it, or we die.
How many Episcopalians does it take to change that light bulb?

You fill in the answer...

Change is a requirement at Peterkin, and throughout the Diocese.

At Peterkin, we must continue to take a serious hard look at the true expenses, and either raise the money through donations, or charge more in line with what it actually costs. Of course,

scholarships will still be available....but right now, everyone who walks on the camp gets an automatic scholarship of nearly \$500.00

In addition, I believe that we must continue to grow our plans:

Can we add:

A Gardening Camp?

Mother / Daughter Camp?

Marriage enrichment Camp?

Photography Camp?

Sports/Conditioning Camp?

Nature Camp?

All things are possible. Let us dream, along with God.

Let me be clear - I have always been, and continue to be committed to offering Summer Camp at Peterkin! We just have to do business differently!

Sandscrest

This past year has been spent on looking forward.

We have many opportunities, and Sarah Lydick continues to offer gracious Christian Hospitality, and warmth.

More 'outside' groups use it than Diocesan groups. We need to invite our own people and parishes to use it, and then open it to others.

If you've never been there, please know that it is probably the most beautiful, scenic spot in all of West Virginia! (and it comes with fantastic food!)

Because of some actions taken by the Board in the last 2 years, we have access to more income, and we are hopeful that through our work with the Trust Office at the bank in Wheeling, we will have more support to do the necessary work to market, prepare and provide many opportunities to the Diocese and beyond.

I am thankful to the Board for their work, and their labors over the years.

Sandscrest has been, and continues to be a blessing to us all.

HEP

The Highland Educational Program.

Begun more than 70 years ago, HEP continues to morph, as the communities around it change.

From a literacy program, to a program to teach people to build canoes (oops, we were teaching lake canoes for river paddling), to emergency assistance, to job training.

When I arrived in 2001, a major flood in Southern West Virginia had just rocked Welch, Keystone, Mullens and surrounding areas. HEP was about the only facility that remained intact. From that, we provided food and clothing distribution. We were the hands and heart of Christ in Southern West Virginia.

We also continue to work with neighbors in the region to provide assistance with the property. Outside work groups come to provide free labor and materials, to improve the physical lives of the residents.

This past year, we've also begun talking with the WV Housing Authority, to see if we can partner with them, to provide housing for teachers, or others who would like to move into the area. If you look at the Youtube video entitled 'Reconnecting McDowell,' you will see that there are a number of issues that continue to be unsolved. I do believe that in proper partnership with the State, the County and others, we can make a difference there. I have been in touch with the WV Housing Authority (who owns a part of the surrounding land) to see what they can do to partner with us...so that we can open houses to new teachers in the area, and make our Mountain to be a Mountain of educators, and those who care for children. An ongoing conversation is taking place.

Again, we must open our hearts to the dream of God, and Dream along with God.

This past Summer, we saw nearly 30,000 Boy Scouts descend upon West Virginia, in their new Jamboree site!

Numerous adults and scouts from around the State came for nearly 2 weeks, to an awesome experience! Matthew Blackwood, from St John's, Charleston, Johnnie McGee and John Canfield from St Matthew's, Charleston and Virginia and Perry McGhee were all active participants. I know there were dozens more, as well.

In the Faith and Beliefs 'region' of the Reserve, there were booths for many of the denominations present. the LDS had an entire booth. The Roman Catholics had an entire booth. The Episcopal Church had a small, unappealing display of our history, while all around us were groups offering 'hands on' things to do (the Muslims offered turban wrapping, with a line 10 kids deep).

Our booth was created, built and paid for by one man, on his own. The Episcopal Church provided nothing.

For the next Jamboree, I guarantee that the Episcopal Church will be present in a much more acceptable way! I am approaching both the Presiding Bishop and the Program Budget and Finance Committee for funds to pay for a nice booth, complete with some form of activity. If they don't come through, then we as a 'Host Diocese' must step up. We will need volunteers, ideas and money to make this happen.

The Good News about the Jamboree was that we were present. Had our own Tent for the Sunday Eucharist (thanks almost entirely to Virginia McGhee), and on that day, it was the largest worshipping community in the Diocese!

Being with the Scouts also reminded me of my roots.

Not my roots in Scouting (though I was one), but rather my roots of working with the youth in the Church.

In my parishes, as I've told most of you over the years, it was all about the kids.

When I came here, I said it was all about the kids (I used the McDonald's model...get the kids, and the adults will come - i.e. the toy in the Happy Meal)

Over the years, we have had Youth Ministers/Directors (and I am thankful and grateful for them)...but I have discovered that I have become more and more removed from direct ministry with the Youth.

So, at the last Diocesan Council meeting, I announced that I have just hired a new Youth Minister...Mike Klusmeyer.

It is not entirely fleshed out...but more time will be spent with the youth of this Diocese, as we expand our ministry and presence with Youth! Stay tuned!

The parishes:

This past year has certainly been a busy one for parishes around the Diocese of West Virginia.

A few years ago, Zion, Charles Town took a 'challenge' from me, and opened their doors to the homeless during the winter months. It has saved countless lives.

Now, the city and county look for a different place to provide for shelter.

I have been approached by a coalition, to see if I would lease/rent St John's, Rippon, as a location. I have to admit, it's not ideal, but it could be 'doable.'

No sooner did it become known that this might take place, then I was asked not to do it. Change is difficult...and we're getting our name out there...for good or for ill.

Grace, Middleway continues to improve their buildings, and their programs. Generous gifts have come from many people, to make sure that Grace is a place to be. Susan MacDonald, Bill White Grantham and others lead that community forward in mission.

The New River Episcopal Ministries continue to band together, through their clergy and their people, to provide literacy programs, be present at Bridge Day to give away free books, and to bless the rafts on the New River, for the summer.

St Stephen's, Beckley is growing, and I am told that they have had a significant - SIGNIFICANT - increase in their pledging, in one year. 50%! In addition, a joint ministry with the ELCA is being explored at Concord/Athens.

St Luke's Wheeling Island, continues to provide free meals to the local people. Several years ago, they realized that kids who were on free lunch programs at school, were ignored during the summer, so they stepped in, and continue to provide them.

Mt Zion Hedgesville has been in the local news lately, as they build a new parish Hall, to provide a space for Sunday school, fellowship and a community room. New bathrooms and a kitchen will be added. There are some in the community who are opposed, but the parish is moving forward.

St Christopher, without a Rector, continues to work with school children on the east side of Charleston, with an enrichment center. The gifts of the people, many of whom had educational backgrounds, are being put to work, and their presence is felt.

These are just a few of the things going on around the Diocese, for which we can all be proud, for as St Paul says, "When one rejoices, we all rejoice."

We are a proud Diocese.

We have much to be grateful for. As one of my old Bishops used to say, "There's nothing better. We have the Bible, we have Bishops and we have Jesus!"

So, where do we go from here?

As I said in 2006, we are called in the line of Francis, to Build Christ's Church! We need to do new things, and to look to the future as mission opportunity.

In looking around, I continue to see opportunities. Some of which I've mentioned already - like working with the WV Housing Fund to provide needed housing for teachers in McDowell County.

In addition, I believe that the time is ripe for us to explore a group of Episcopal Service Corp. Young people, recently graduated from College, to come to West Virginia, to be boots on the ground for hands on ministry...in Wheeling...in Wyoming County, or some other place.

I have recently asked a group to explore a few new ideas.

We will have an Acolyte Festival in the Spring...in Morgantown. A gathering of youth and adult acolytes to learn, share and have fun. In the end, we'll break bread together, and praise God with a joyful noise.

I've asked the Health Ministries Commission to begin the work to have a healing mission in the Diocese. Bring in a member of the Order of St Luke, or some other person connected with the Healing Ministries, and let's get the word out, that we see the power of God working in our midst. Our world is in need of God's healing miracles...and I believe we can help show God at work in the world.

We are also looking at a Youth Confirmation Camp at Peterkin, in the Fall of 2014. Bring clergy and youth together, to have a concentrated few days, to talk about Christ and the Church. Confirmations may (or may not) take place at Strider Chapel.

Liturgical Celebrations: Many of you know that my tradition is of a higher churchmanship than has been historically found in West Virginia (or Virginia). While it is not mainstream, there is no reason why we can't have some truly 'High Church' celebrations around the Diocese. Why should the Roman Catholics have all the fun (and the press?)

June 19 is the Feast of Corpus Christi. Somehow, someday, we will have a Corpus Christi Festival in downtown Charleston, West Virginia...complete with Canopy, smoke, bells and a crowd!

Ashes to Go. I have to admit - I have extremely mixed emotions about this. Personally, and theologically, I do not believe that Ash Wednesday is just about 'smudging someone's forehead.' I believe that there is a whole lot more to the day, the event, the ecclesiology.

But...

But...

But I am also keenly aware that there are many who know of the practice, and have fallen away...but given the opportunity, we may literally, emotionally and spiritually touch someone, that might reconnect them with the void that presently exists in their lives. Can we provide Ashes to Go, in various spots in the State?

I believe we can.

That might lead to a public offering of a Good Friday liturgy...something, not hidden in our parish naves, but at the crossroads of our culture, like the original Good Friday...Outside.

Public

Something people can't miss.

Something to make people stop, look and see. Much of our society has lost track of the historical events, and the Biblical message.

We need to exit our buildings, and take the message to the streets.

Now...

Let's talk about another item of interest to many.

Over the past several weeks, I've had several people come up to me and say, "I understand you're going to say something about the Blessing of Same Sex couples at Convention. What are you going to say?"

I find it most interesting that for the past 9 or 10 years, I've been praying that we won't have resolutions at Convention about sex. I've been praying that we can actually do some other work.

Last year, there were none, and I felt pretty good about the work we did there.

This year, there are none, and guess what? I'm the one who's going to bring it up!

So...here goes!

But first..a word from our sponsors...no...

But first...as I talk, I know that some will be upset, and others will be happy. Some will feel like they've 'won' some battle, and others will feel like they've been betrayed.

This is not about winning or losing.

This is not about battles won or lost.

This is about the Body of Christ. For too long, the Body has suffered as we have fought over 'things.' Women's Ordination, Prayer Books, High Church/Low Church, (High Church always wins, by the way) Gays and Straights.

Over the past number of years I have tried very hard to hold to the middle ground..the via media...the Spirit of the Anglican Communion. I have tried to not get embroiled in the issues that have divided us, and I have been beat up by both sides. I'm too liberal for the conservatives, and too conservative for the liberals.

So be it! I am who I am, and I own it!

I do believe, or at least I hope, that most in the gay and lesbian community in West Virginia know that I have loved and respected them always. I have always considered them a part of the Church, and of God's love.

For a long time, I have spoken with people around the Diocese and around the Country about the issues of sexuality - not just homosexuality...but sexuality...I have spoken with (and listened to) clergy, laity, professionals, agnostics, bishops, youth, men, women, straight, gay...

Over the past few years, I have helped gay and lesbian couples have their relationships blessed, or helped them get married, in Dioceses and states that permit such blessings and marriages. The General Convention has asked us all to provide 'Generous Pastoral ' provisions. I think I've done that.

As I've looked around the Diocese and the Church, and seen what General Convention has done, I realize that the Church gives the Bishop the absolute and ultimate control and decision about liturgical matters within his or her own Diocese.

According to General Convention Resolutions, the Bishop has the right to say "no," and that would be final. The Bishop has the right to say "yes," and it becomes the 'norm' within that Diocese. And whichever a Bishop chooses is to be honored and recognized as being within the scope of our Tradition.

In previous Diocesan Conventions, there have been resolutions that spanned the realm. In 2004, there were resolutions that condemned the Episcopal Church, and others that praised the actions. These resolutions showed the diversity in our Diocese. More recently, resolutions have been presented 'telling' (almost ordering) the Bishop to permit Blessings.

While Convention has a lot of authority...this is not an area in which it has any authority. As Chief Liturgical Officer and Bishop, It is the Bishop's decision alone.

So...each Bishop is left to his or her own decisions in this matter...guided by prayer, pastoral sensitivity, theological and historical study, as well as an understanding of Episcopal Ecclesiology.

Over the past year, I convened a small committee.

Last year, when I announced that I would form a group, I had a number of people approach me, and tell me why THEY should be on the committee.

Some told me they could 'argue' their point. (that was their word) Others told me that they represented a certain faction, or group within the Diocese.

In the end, I decided that this was not to be a 'Politically Correct' committee, but rather this was a committee that I needed to tell me the truth. They needed to be in touch with the Diocese. Some older members, some newer. Some active on Diocesan level, others active on parish level.

It was a small group, and they spoke honestly and openly. They gave me great insight, but in the end, they too knew it was my decision to be had.

They helped me, and I thank each of them. I have not shared their names, but they know who they are, and each of their insights helped me along the way. If they wish to divulge their names to people...I have no problem with that.

One of the things we looked at was the varied responses around the Church.

It appears that, as of a few months ago, about 30 of the Diocese have permitted Blessings. About 15 have not, and about 60 are undecided, or no action has been taken.

As I think I mentioned last year, it has been most interesting to see how the Bishops around the Church have responded.

Some who voted no, at General Convention, have approved them in their Dioceses. Others who voted yes, returned home to say, "In the Broader Church, it's fine, but not in this Diocese."

One Bishop who voted no. Said no, in his Diocese, but has arranged with bishops from neighboring Dioceses, to permit his clergy to Officiate at blessings in the neighboring Dioceses. (interesting and creative)

I've talked with people around the Diocese who were most upset around the actions of General Convention 2003, who have had their own personal lives and convictions turned upside down, when they have found that this issue strikes very close to home, and that family members are affected but these discussions.

When I've spoken to several Bishops from Africa, I get the response that babies born during the rainy season have a mortality rate of nearly 100%. Issues of sexuality are not even on their radar screen. They're dealing with life and death of babies.

Questions that were raised here in West Virginia, by the Committee, as well as by others were:

What about persons who were married previously?

What if a parish has more than 1 clergy person, and the Rector declines, and the Assistant is willing?

What if there are more than 1 parish in a town? If one priest is not willing, and the other Rector is...what kind of dynamics would this set up?

How does this stand within the laws of the State of West Virginia?

Is the Diocese ready for this? Is the State of West Virginia ready for this?

Would all clergy be required to perform blessings?

If the Bishop doesn't permit them, what about the faithful gay and lesbian people in the Diocese? Would there be an alternative?

How many angels really can dance on the head of a pin?

And the list goes on.

About 2 weeks ago, the State Journal Newspaper had an article, quoting My Chancellor, about an IRS ruling, which states that couples who were legally married in a jurisdiction which recognizes same sex marriages, who reside in West Virginia, should file their State Income Tax for 2013, as 'Married, filing Joint Return,' since that would be their status on their Federal Returns.

This road has had many twists and turns...and I'm sure none of us have considered all of them.

And so...Here we go:

The time has come. As of Advent I, 2013, I will be permitting the Blessing of Same Sex Couples within the Diocese of West Virginia, with several caveats.

First, this is permissive...not prescriptive. No clergyperson is required to do it! And those who choose not to, will be respected and honored!

So. To make it as simplified as possible, for today, there are 3 stages, before someone can do this:

1. Is the Rector willing to consider providing blessing rites for same sex couples? If yes...He or she must study the General Convention material, including the theological material, and the liturgy itself. After the Rector has studied this,
2. The Rector will inform the Vestry of the need to begin their own study of the General Convention materials, and to have discussions among themselves (and others?)

In some of my own discussions with clergy in West Virginia, it has been interesting to find some clergy who are firmly convinced of the rightness of the blessings, but have said that they

couldn't do them in their congregations, because the vestry wouldn't support it. (or they would not be able to face the neighbors who might get upset).

Let me be clear about this step. The Vestry ultimately has no authority to deny the Rector from Officiating at such liturgies. But one would be ill advised not to listen to the minds seated at that table, or those seated in the pews. Know your congregation!!!

In addition, the congregation must be engaged in the same kind of study and discussion.

Upon a decision by the Rector, with discussion with the Vestry and parish, the Bishop will be notified of the decision.

3. The couple:

At least one member of the couple MUST be an active baptized member of the parish for at least 6 months prior. They must too study the theological material. They must enter the same form of counseling that heterosexual couples do. If there has been a previous marriage of either or both, a judgment is required from the Bishop.

And a Registry will be maintained in the Diocesan House.

There will be more details coming out to the clergy about the specifics. This will be coming in October or November, in preparation for Advent I.

Honestly, we are not the only ones in West Virginia who are either providing for blessings, or considering them.

The ELCA West Virginia/Western Maryland Synod provides for the Blessing of Gay and Lesbian Couples, and I believe the Presbyterians do, also. There is also another denomination which allows them, and to be blunt, I know that the Methodists are at least considering this...but are constrained by the international polity and decision making of their Church.

So, we are not alone. We are walking with our brothers and sisters from other Faith Communities.

I know that some of you are now elated.

Some of you are saddened.

Some of you are possibly confused.

In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if a few emails or tweets have already been sent out to people around the Diocese and the Church, and the newspapers.

Again...

This is not about winning or losing.

This is about being the Body of Christ.

Archbishop William Temple is quoted as having said, "GOD REIGNS...WHEN WE DECIDE RIGHT, GOD REIGNS...
WHEN WE DECIDE FOOLISHLY GOD REIGNS.
WHATEVER HAPPENS, GOD REIGNS."

This is true...always...past present and future.

God reigns.

And we remain together, as we have in the past.

In some of the dioceses around the country, people have left the Episcopal Church. In many of those congregations, people who disagree with the decision to leave, have also left, and joined the others. When asked why, they respond, "These are my brothers and sisters. These are my family. I've worshiped with them forever. I can't leave them.'

We are together.

Many years ago, I attended a CLP (Clergy Leadership Project) conference in Memphis, TN. On Sunday, we attended the Missionary Road Baptist Church, and were told to 'spread out.' We did.

During the service, I watched as a member of the choir was slain in the Spirit. She bounced and danced, and fell to the ground. The ushers quickly picked her up, and she did it all over again.

Then the Pastor looked out, and directed us to stand. So, please stand.

He said, Look to the person in front of you, and say, "I love you, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Stand and say that to the person in front of you.

Now, look to the person on your left, and say, "I love you, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Now look to the person on your right, and say, "I love you and there's nothing you can do about it."

Now look to the person behind you, and say "I love you, and there's nothing you can do about it."

That is God's love.

He loves us, and there's nothing we can do about it.

Tonight, we will gather as a family, and we will literally break bread together. We will drink at the bar. Share stories, and uphold one another.

Tomorrow, we will gather in this space to give thanks to God for God's Son, Jesus Christ, and for the salvation of our sins. We will rejoice in the gift that is Eternal Life. We will be joined together, as a sign to this broken world, that Jesus Christ conquers all.

I would once again quote the great theologian, whom I have quoted before:

James Brown.

He said,

"I feel good."

I believe we can feel good, if we let God reign

If we let God reign

In our hearts

In our lives

In the Church.

I know that I feel good. I feel good about the future of the Church, and about the future of his Diocese.

Come, and dream. Come and dream the impossible dream with God.

And then share it! Share the hope...share the promise...share the dream.

Amen.

