

The Bishop's Address
126th Annual Convention of the Diocese of East Carolina
February 6, 2009 / New Bern, NC

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It is once again my honor, privilege and joy to address you as your bishop. I must tell you that I carry all of you with me wherever I go, and am always proud to say that I serve our blessed diocese as your bishop.

Let me begin by extending to all who gather here today – clergy and lay delegates, visitors and guests – a hearty welcome in the name of our Lord. Let me extend a very special welcome to our honored guest, the Right Reverend Santosh Marray, sometime bishop of the Diocese of the Seychelles. To practice hospitality and welcome in the name of Jesus is a primary ministry of every Christian and every congregation, and so it has been since Jesus gathered his disciples around him and invited them to sit down and join him for dinner.

Six years before the outbreak of our nation's Civil War, Thomas Atkinson, third Bishop of North Carolina (there was only one diocese for the whole state then), gathered in May, 1855 with clergy and lay delegates for the annual diocesan convention, held that year in Warrenton. In delivering his address, the good Bishop raised his eyes and spoke a vision of the Church becoming a true community of welcome and hospitality in Jesus' name and seeing the face of God in one another. Though Bishop Atkinson speaks in what sounds to us the stilted language of his day, what he says is fresh and current for our day too because the vision he delivered that day springs from the Gospel, and the Good News of Jesus is fresh for every age.

Bishop Atkinson said in his Address: "Every true branch of the Church of Christ must aim at carrying the Gospel to all men within the territory which is its appointed field of labor, and of all men, especially to the poor, for, as has been often remarked, our Savior cites this as one sign of His mission, that 'to the poor the Gospel is preached.'

Bishop Atkinson continues, "Concerning this, there has been going on of late among us a good deal of warm, and sometimes even acrimonious discussion. But surely no candid man can well deny, that on the whole our Church has not reached and leavened the mass of society any where in this country. In cities, villages or rural districts, if you enter an Episcopal Church, you find the congregation composed of nearly the same materials. There are professional men, merchants in the more extensive lines of business, the larger landholders, the retired men of fortune, official persons: these and their families are well dressed, well mannered, and according to the standard of their neighborhood, well instructed, these attend the services of the Episcopal Church. But where are the mechanics, where are the petty shop-keepers, where are the small farmers, where, at the South, are the overseers, where at the North, are the manufacturing operatives and the farm laborers, where, among us, alas! Too frequently, are our own slaves?"¹

To be sure, Bishop Atkinson was as much a product of and limited by his time and culture as we all are. But he was looking beyond what was, and he spoke a vision of what life can be in Jesus in any day or age.

Bishop Atkinson was calling his Diocese and our forebears to see the face of Jesus, not just in one another, for that is to only look inward, and looking inward to see the face of Jesus only in the face of those like us is to turn the Church into a mutual admiration society. Bishop Atkinson was calling his Diocese, and us as his spiritual descendants, to turn our faces outward and to see the face of Jesus in all people and to make the Church into a community of inclusion with room for all people. And to what end did our spiritual grandfather offer this vision in 1855? It was offered so that the Church might grow into becoming a community of welcome that excluded no one: the poor, the outcast, the forgotten, the "little people" of society as well as the "great folk", the overseers and the slaves, all gathered under one roof and around one Altar. Indeed, Bishop

Atkinson offers a Gospel vision that is as vibrant and alive and strong today and as needful of being realized as it was in 1855.

It is this same vision of welcome and seeing the face of God in one another that is portrayed in the powerful baptismal icon of Manteo and Virginia Dare. Above all, I pray that our Diocese of East Carolina continue to grow in our diversity and willingness to see the face of God in one another, and in the name of Jesus, to say, “Welcome! to each person and to all people”

When I think of seeing the face of God in one another and offering welcome, I think immediately of our Diocesan Staff, this superb team of diverse and talented people dedicated to serving the congregations and people of our Diocese. I give thanks every day for each of these devoted servants of us all, and I pray you do as well.

When I think of the hospitality Bishop Atkinson was describing in his Convention Address, I think of blessed Trinity Center and its welcoming staff. Trinity Center is a place of hospitality for all people, and for a diversity of people, and no Episcopal ID card or even proof of baptism is required for admission. The reach of our Church into the lives of people you and I will never perhaps see is broad and strong and, bidden or unbidden, God is at work in the lives of all who enjoy the hospitality Trinity Center offers in Jesus’ name.

Through the work of the Millennium Development Goals Committee (MDGS), our reach as a Diocese extends far beyond our corner of the world. Through our gifts and giving, people in other parts of the world are being fed, healing is taking place, education for all is increasing, and the status and rights of women are being protected and extended, as part of the lofty goals of the MDGs. Just yesterday, many of us spent several hours in this very room assembling meals for shipment to places of hunger through the Stop Hunger Now Program. No doubt in the face of the need of the world, our offerings and efforts are not large and will not achieve the eradication of hunger and poverty in and of themselves. But as Margaret Wheatley said, “What if we can’t save the world and all our efforts come to nothing? Neither frees us from the responsibility to act.”² Later this spring, I will be traveling to the Dominican Republic with a small group from our Diocese to explore the establishment of a Companion Diocese relationship. Brothers and sisters, let us continue to fulfill and grow in the call to mission we have received in the name of Jesus.

In anxious days such as these in the economic life of our nation and state, a spirit of inclusion and welcome becomes even more essential. I urge all clergy and congregations to be pastorally aware of and concretely responsive to those whose job may be at risk or those for whom economic hardship looms, either as individuals, families, or as a community. I urge us all, as individuals and as congregations, to support the work of homeless shelters in our communities, community feeding programs, shelters for victims of domestic violence (a sad byproduct of hard economic times) and any other avenues of alleviating human suffering on our local level.

As one effect of the economic recession, giving from parish to Diocese has suffered somewhat, and our Executive Council and Finance Committee have made the difficult adjustments to our budget; and further adjustments and perhaps changes in staffing configuration may be needed as well. I have already accepted the recommendation of the Finance Committee to delay filling the position of Canon Missioner for at least six months. I do urge each clergy and lay delegate at this convention to go to the vestry of your congregation and if it is not already doing so, to urge that your vestry honor the resolution of our 2007 convention to make a pledge of at least 10% of operating income to our Diocesan ministry budget. Just because pledging is voluntary in our diocese does not free any vestry or congregation from the moral responsibility of accepting the discipline of pledging at the standard adopted by our Convention.

On a more positive note, I am thankful for the fine work the Vestry Communication Task Force has done over the past year, and the increased communication among our congregations that has resulted. I am always eager to learn how we might pursue God's mission in stronger and more effective ways, both as a community of Episcopalians and as a Diocese. Thankfully, too, with the hiring of a Communications Officer, we now have more regular and enhanced communications within our Diocese as well.

This past summer, I attended the Lambeth Conference along with approximately seven hundred other bishops from throughout the member Churches of the Anglican Communion. I must confess that I was not particularly eager to go because the spirit and some of the outcomes of the 1998 Conference were not upbuilding in my estimation. At this point, however, I am glad now that I did attend this summer's Conference. We began the Conference with a three day retreat in Canterbury Cathedral led by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and then spent the next three weeks listening carefully and speaking honestly and respectfully to one another through all our agreements and disagreements. I was impressed once again with the immense breadth of belief and practice that exist within our Anglican Communion and the vast diversity of people and cultures that dwell together under the broad heading of Anglicanism. I came away from the Lambeth Conference encouraged that the life of our Communion is made stronger by our diversity and I came away strengthened in my ministry as a bishop. No doubt we are still in choppy waters as a Communion, but I am more convinced than ever that if we but hold to our Anglican tradition of unity without demanding uniformity; continue our traditional commitment to mutuality and autonomy within the context of interdependence; and prayerful conversation, I am confident the Holy Spirit will lead us in the right direction and to a deeper and stronger unity.

Within the broad themes of welcome and seeing the face of God in one another, let me address two matters that will draw our attention in the coming year. The first matter is that of congregational wellness and the second is that of seeing the face of God in one another.

I turn first to the matter of congregational wellness and vitality. Congregations, like every organism or human creation have a life-cycle. Some of our congregations are at a place in their life cycle in which growth is occurring and stretching; others are at a stable place of mission, worship and ministry; others may be nearing the end of a natural rhythm of effectiveness and vitality. I have spoken with the Executive Council and Department of Mission and Congregational Development and have requested that they undertake the task of assessing the strength and vitality of the congregations of our Diocese, and I am requesting your assistance in this work as delegates to this Convention. I am requesting the Department of Mission and Congregational Development to provide the Vestry of each congregation with the materials and tools to help in assessing the general health of the congregation. I am also asking you as Convention delegates for 2009 to take on the special function of meeting with your Vestry to conduct the assessment with the materials provided and upon completion to return the information gathered to the Department of Mission and Congregational Development which will make a report to the 2010 Diocesan Convention. As a separate task, I have also asked the Historic Properties Commission to visit a handful of parishes that appear to have reached or are nearing the end of their effective congregational life and mission (For example, All Saints, Fairfield, and St. Barnabas, Snow Hill since neither has had an active congregation for many years.) and in consultation with the Department of Mission and Congregational Development, to make recommendations to the Executive Council and thence to the Convention. Wrapped up in these considerations are issues of stewardship of resources, as well as matters of insurance and liability.

Second, I turn to the topic of seeing the face of God in one another. The population of our state is projected to grow by 30% by the year 2025. The ethnic and demographic makeup is changing as well, and the Hispanic population of North Carolina is projected to grow by some 50% in the next 12-15 years (U.S. Census Bureau estimate). As the Canon Missioner for Hispanic Ministries for The Episcopal Church said to our clergy this past October, "These people are here to stay." Hispanic Ministry is the great evangelistic frontier for the

Diocese of East Carolina over the next several decades. Seeing the face of God in our Hispanic brothers and sisters and inviting and including them in the life of this Church is part of the vision of inclusivity that Bishop Atkinson proclaimed in 1855. Thank God, too, for the work of the Interfaith Refugee Ministry which operates under the aegis of our Diocese and has brought thousands of refugees to our area and helped resettle them. When you go home, please advocate with your congregation to undertake the resettlement of a refugee family in your community as part of the mission of your congregation to see and respond to the face of God in our neighbor?

Seeing the face of God in one another goes even beyond welcoming our Hispanic brothers and sisters and the resettlement of refugees. With the arrival of several thousand additional military personnel and their families at Camp LeJeune in Jacksonville, and at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point in Havelock and at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville over the next few years, our Diocesan ministry and outreach to military families through the congregations in or near these communities must be strengthened and readied to offer the gift of welcome and inclusion to new members and families.

Seeing the face of God in one another extends to our Diocesan Anti-Racism Committee and its work to continue to heal the wounds of racism in our nation and to eradicate the sin of racism from our society. The General Convention of The Episcopal Church has condemned racism both in the church and society in a consistent way through the years. Anti-racism training is now a required by national canon for all clergy, vestry members and other leaders. I commend this work to you and I urge all Episcopalians in our diocese to take part in anti-racism training. Surely racism or prejudice of any kind is the denial that the face of God can be seen in one's neighbor. The outcome of seeing God's face in our neighbor is loving service. The outcome of refusing to see the face of God in our neighbor is in its extreme expression the Holocaust.

In last year's address, I reminded us that every Lambeth Conference since 1978 had urged the member Churches of the Anglican Communion to undertake a listening process to hear the stories and the pain of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are gay or lesbian. I invited congregations in our Diocese to begin listening in an intentional way, and at least one did. A couple of months ago, I gathered in one of our congregations with a group of about forty people, about half of whom are gay or lesbian and the others were family members of gay or lesbian people and some folk attended out of interest and a desire to be supportive. We celebrated Eucharist together, had a fine dinner and wonderful conversation. I heard clearly the pain and fear that many gays and lesbians and their families live with. I heard great stories of how The Episcopal Church and various congregations in our own Diocese have been havens of welcome and acceptance. Because this Church has seen the face of God in gay and lesbian persons, they were able to see the face of God in themselves. I will go back and have dinner with this group again. Let me renew the invitation to the congregations of our Diocese to begin hosting such groups in your own setting. This is one more dimension of the vision of welcome and inclusion and diversity that Bishop Atkinson expressed 154 years ago in his Convention Address. More than that, if you would like to explore how to begin such a group in your own congregation, let me know, and I will put you in touch with some people who can help. As we begin to see one another as God's beloved child and stop seeing one another as categories, the riches of what it means to be joined through baptism to Christ and one another will unfold richly in us.

This past November, I was riding a subway train in Manhattan on my way to take part in the service of rededication for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine to mark its reopening after a disastrous fire several years ago. I was dressed in my clerical collar and bishop finery, when a man sitting across from me looked straight at me, pulled out a Bible and yelled, "Everybody listen, because I'm reading to this man!" and pointed at me. Of course all eyes followed the direction his finger was pointing in and came to rest on me. (Do you know how utterly embarrassing it is to be singled out in this way on a New York subway?) He announced, "I'm reading from Hebrews, Chapter 7!" (It's the chapter about Melchizedek the priest and Jesus being our great High Priest.) He ended (a very long) reading by pointing at me once again as the train rolled into a station. As

he stood up, he looked at me and said (shouted, really), “Don’t you give up! Keep looking up! Hold on, stay strong!” The train stopped, the doors opened, and he was gone. His message, however, lingered in the air as my surprise encounter with the Risen Christ came to an end.

Even in the hard days of our nation’s and the world’s economic distress, the hardship of fighting two wars, and to all who suffer displacement, oppression, prejudice or racial hatred, our message to a hurting world must be the same: Don’t give up! Keep looking up! Hold on, stay strong! There’s welcome for you and me and all people in God’s heart, and there is room for you and me and all people. May the unwavering message of our Church be that Gospel vision of welcome, inclusion and seeing the face of God in one another as that vision was first announced in the baptisms of Manteo and Virginia Dare in 1587, restated by Bishop Atkinson in 1855, and pray God, proclaimed boldly by us in this, our own day.

¹ The Rt. Rev. Thomas Atkinson, Address to the Convention of the Diocese of North Carolina, Warrenton, NC, May, 1855

² Margaret Wheatley, "A Call to Fearlessness for Gentle Leaders," Shambhala Institute Core Program, June 2006