

Bishop Skirving's Address Transcript from the 140th Annual Convention of the Diocese of East Carolina

Again, welcome to all of you here in the room, to all who are watching online, and to all who will one day see the transcript or the recording. Grace and peace be with you in the name of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm not sure about you, but for me the last eight months since we gathered in June for convention have been a bit of a blur: in June, we had Convention, which was unusual timing and meant different rhythms and patterns of preparation and follow up; July was General Convention, and that also happened in a strange way, but for a bunch of us it was still another thing; in late July and early August, I went to the Lambeth Conference as Bishop of East Carolina, and that dragged on until nearly December. Actually, what dragged on was the COVID and kidney stones I brought back from Lambeth. Seriously, and I asked Sandy to verify this with me, by the time I was starting to feel anywhere close to fully recovered after the kidney stones we were into December. By then I had also stepped down as Chancellor of Sewanee, two years earlier than expected.

I want to start with a clear thank you to those who have been understanding, patient and supportive of me and of my limitations during much of that time. You know, we can live with hopes and dreams of what it is that we're going to accomplish, and then life happens. I've done the best I can, and I can honestly say that I've learned some new skills. My memory does not work like it did before COVID. Now, whether that's because I'm 62 instead of 61 or it's Long COVID, we'll never know. I use notes now when I speak, in ways that I didn't ever use notes before. Some would say, "that's probably a good thing, Bishop."

One of the key moments in my time in these last eight months was the moment from General Convention that has now been shared with you. That is the address, the sermon, that was offered by newly elected House of Deputies President Julia Ayala Harris during worship on the closing day of General Convention. I thought her words were powerful, but my first reaction was to acknowledge that I'm part of an endangered species, one who might need to get out of the way. Some of us need to be active in bringing more people to the table and in making sure that more folks are fully a part of the kingdom of God as we are living into it.

But I heard those words in the first instance as, "some of you older members of General Convention better get out of the way because the younger ones are ready to take over." Paul [Rev. Paul Canady of Christ Church, New Bern], was that the conversation that all of you 40-year-olds had? I'm just teasing, but I know Paul's worked with a core of younger leaders who've been invited to do so by our previous President of the House of Deputies and whom I hope will continue to be encouraged to provide good leadership at General Convention and across the Church.

I'm not so old that I can't remember being one of those younger leaders, and so I understand that it's critical that we find ways and make ways to invite to the table people who aren't normally there. So, at first I had a particular reaction to what the House of Deputies President had to say: not bad, but sharp. And, then I realized that what had happened was that I'd

been taken back to my studies from the 90s when I was doing some extra academic work. I was reminded of a paper I had written that was titled "Wanted: New Wine Skins." I used the same biblical passage that she'd used in her address as a basis for a study of the congregation I was serving, and the reality that some of the old ways weren't working.

We had new life bursting at the seams, and we weren't equipped to deal with that new life. At that time in my life and ministry, this was a passage of scripture that was very important to me. Since hearing her sermon, I have found myself continuously reframing much of what we face together: that life's change will be continuous; and that a part of life is always holding on to those old wine skins that contain the wine that tastes the best, that's been aged properly, alongside of the new wineskins that can be flexed and stretched and have room for the new wine that hasn't yet fully come to maturity.

Before we reflect on what might be some new wine skins for us as a diocese, let's take some time to consider the new wine that is showing itself all around us.

We see signs of God at work in our midst, always doing a new thing. One of my joys as bishop is to worship with a different congregation every Sunday. Now, a lot of you have also heard me say that being in a different congregation every Sunday is one of the strangest things for someone like me who used to be in a single community for all of the seasons of the church year, with devotional life built into those rhythms and relationships. But, honestly, almost every Sunday I visit another congregation, I have the chance to witness the new wine of God's love. Just since Christmas, I've been with the people of St. Mary's, Gatesville; St. Timothy's, Greenville; St. Francis, Goldsboro; St. John's, Wilmington; and St. James, Belhaven. Tomorrow morning at about 6:30 a.m., I'll be getting on the road to be with the people of Christ Church, Elizabeth City for a 9:15am Adult Forum, 10:00 a.m. with the Confirmation Class, and then Worship at 10:30 a.m. [Speaking to the Christ Church, Elizabeth City table] I'll get there and you'll guide me through it, right? You'll start when I get there? Thank you. As long as we are done before the Super Bowl, okay?

We need to have eyes to see though, because sometimes in the places where we live and worship week by week, we don't see things as new. We may not fully appreciate that this is God at work and not just our own efforts. We may think, and I get this a lot, that every congregation does things the same way, or we might think we do it better than everybody. As one who gets to go from place to place, I can put that in perspective a little bit for you, but the truth is, I think we can witness new wine across the diocese, even as we gather here for Convention.

Hopefully before you got here or since you've arrived, you've had a chance to review the annual reports. I know a lot of you have attended workshops, and I've heard some really positive things of your experience with those. You've hopefully had a chance to visit with exhibitors. Hopefully you've listened to this morning's reports. I want to draw on a few I would call "Good News stories" or "God at work stories": new wine!

This year we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Interfaith Refugee Ministry based in New Bern and now having expanded to have an office in Greenville. There were a couple of years there where there wasn't nearly so much work for the Interfaith Refugee Ministry. The

number of refugees being welcomed into the country probably hit an all-time low for their years of ministry, but, in their report, they make clear that in 2022 they were able to serve 87 refugees from seven different countries, as well as 12 Ukrainians and one Afghan who'd come under different and special circumstances. And so, our thanks to Susan Husson and her team for the good work they continue to do, which certainly is new wine for those who were involved in it in the moment, for those whose lives are changed because of the kindness and commitment of people who share in that ministry, an interfaith ministry, not just us as The Episcopal Church.

I believe that we can draw hope and encouragement from the advances made by those working to establish our School for Ministry. Those of you who've been coming to Convention for a few years may have heard me speak about the need for this every year. I'm used to hearing people wonder, "So, Bishop, when are you going to stop talking about it and do it?" Well, there are problems with that question, because it's not usually just me. It's usually us. Have you heard the idea that if you want to move fast, go alone? If you want to move well, do it together? The moving together is always slower. I've sometimes spoken my ideas and my thoughts, and I'm so encouraged to now watch a council of people come together and start giving shape to a School for Ministry that will help us to prepare people for leadership in ministry across the diocese, both clergy and lay.

I hope you join me in being encouraged by the number of women and men who are stepping forward to offer themselves for ordained ministries in response to God's call. I think we ought to be getting excited as we witness the number of people, lay and clergy, who are willing to stand for election and serve important ministries of our diocese. I won't get into the details in grand scale, but those of you who joined in on our first Pre-Convention Meeting will have heard that there were still lots of spots open for nomination. And by the time we got to the last of our Pre-Convention meetings, we'd learned that we faced five contested elections, because of all of the people who were willing to serve.

We also have nominations that come from our deaneries and from me, and I think we've done as well as we've done in a long time in gathering people who are willing to serve and help with that work. I see that as a positive sign. Maybe we're finally coming out of the COVID realities of our lives in such a way as to be able to trust a little bit more in the path forward and commit ourselves differently than we felt we could commit for a few years. I'm excited to get to work with all of the folks who have stepped forward in this way, so thank you!

I think we can also see in the reports and presentations that there are a number of transitions happening amongst the leaders of some of our significant ministries, and I want to identify a few and say thank you, knowing that as soon as I try to do this, there will inevitably be some people I don't remember to name, or transitions that I didn't even know were happening.

From about the time I became Bishop, Hodges Hackney has served as the President of the Foundation of the Diocese of East Carolina. He's now led his last meeting, and we thank him for his service. Jordy Whichard will now take over the leadership of our Foundation.

John Pollock has been the leader of our Commission on Ministry for these last years [by the way, if you haven't heard it ... I think I shared this only with our clergy ... John had to leave

suddenly for South Carolina where his mother is approaching death; I ask that you keep John and his family in your prayers]. John's term on the Commission of Ministry has ended, and with his recommendation and support, we've invited Nathan Fynn to be the next chair of the Commission Ministry.

Cursillo is a ministry that depends heavily on lay leadership. Carla Richardson has been the leader of this diocesan ministry [I'll say with words that we all understand and not give you the technical language from Cursillo] but her term of service has come to an end. Diane Hatfield, who has been with us all day, will be taking over that role.

Gene Wayman, who has ended up in the front row [maybe by choice because you've been chairing the convention committee ... was that deliberate, Gene? Gene replies, "Yes; yes it was." Okay, okay. Thank you. Good; good planning!], Gene is ending his time as chair of the Convention Planning Committee, and so we thank him for that service. At this point, the committee will sort out leadership in the year to come. As you'll see in a bit, we've got a full team ready to go.

As we celebrated earlier today, Ed Hodges is stepping down after five years, this time at least, of service as chair of the Board of Managers at Trinity Center. Barbara Whitesides will be stepping into that role. I don't want to add another speech to what was said well in the expression of thanks this morning, but I remember being really grateful in the midst of recovery from Hurricane Florence when Ed was able to go alongside the folks at Trinity Center and be supportive in the way that they needed at that time. With about 30 properties that suffered damage because of Hurricane Florence, it was just too much for any of us to handle alone. Ed did wonderful work then and with the challenges that accompanied COVID and leadership transitions. Ed, thank you.

This kind of natural transition is to be expected and to be celebrated and can be seen as an opportunity in a moment when new things can happen. Not every new leader or new team of leaders needs to be bound to doing things the way they've always been done. And we need to celebrate as new leaders bring us new opportunities. We are blessed in having so many faithful followers of Jesus ready and willing to serve and to lead in the life of our diocese.

In keeping with this idea of new wineskins where new wine is present, I'm very excited that today we bring for your approval a budget for 2023 that includes a new staff position, a position that we're calling, at least on a preliminary basis, Coordinator for Ministry with People of African Descent. In the responses to the work we did through our discernment that led us to the Mission Priorities, one of those things that would come up regularly was the need for us to be involved in the work of reconciliation and healing, bringing people together across races and backgrounds. We're following a model that's like the one that we have followed with the Rev. Fred Clarkson who coordinates our diocese's work with Spanish language ministry while based in a congregation. We look to hire a priest who will serve as Priest-in-Charge of one or more of our Historic Black Churches, while also supporting the ministry of the others of our Historic Black Churches. This will be somebody who will support the work of our Racial Healing Commission, not lead it, but support it. The lay members and the clergy who are part of that commission will continue to lead, but this person will be a resource and will help with that work.

This person that we intend to hire will help to challenge and equip all of us to more fully engage with the communities where we live and serve as we grow into our fourth Mission Priority, which reads, “Advocate for justice and peace for all of God's children, working together to remove obstacles that prevent equitable access to resources, while building bridges that work to reconcile and heal the divides between us.” With Convention’s adoption of the budget, and with the support and direction of the Executive Council afterwards, we will soon launch a public search to fill this position, a full-time position, but one to be shared between diocese and congregation.

Let me now get to some reflections on new wine skins. As we bear witness to the things that God is doing in our midst, we must also recognize the importance of being willing to shift our patterns, to reallocate our resources, all with the desire to build new wine skins to hold the new wine, new clay jars, to hold the treasure of God's great love and Jesus.

I believe that this is true for our congregations and for our diocese. By the way, I think it is also true for the whole of our Episcopal Church. COVID has interrupted our familiar patterns of the past, in some cases challenging us to recognize needs for change that predated the pandemic, but which we may have been unwilling to observe. This has not been only an East Carolina thing. Every aspect of our lives and our society has been affected. And, lest we live in isolation, let me share some statistical information from the life of the wider Episcopal Church.

Did you know that the median size of a congregation in the Episcopal Church in 2021 was 21? Half of our congregations across the nation had 21 or less people in worship, and half had 21 or more in worship. I'm guessing you're all measuring where you are. In which of those 50% segments do you find yourself? My experience is most people think that the norm is a large congregation and that smaller congregations are an exception.

Did you know that 90% of the congregations in the Episcopal Church had an average Sunday attendance in 2021 of 100 or less? That's 90%. Only 1% had an average Sunday attendance of 300 or more. The other 9% were somewhere between 100 and 300.

Did you know that the average Sunday attendance of all of our congregations in East Carolina together in 2021 totaled 3,476 people? By the way, 2021 is the most recent year for which we have records that we can use. Now, these numbers do not count online worship. We have statistics about that, but anybody who's looked at those kinds of statistics knows that those numbers raise as many questions as they provide answers. About 30% of the dioceses in The Episcopal Church saw more people than us on a given week in 2021, and about 70% of the dioceses saw less.

Don't let anybody tell you that this is a small diocese. Now in Province IV [20 dioceses in the Southeast of the United States] the numbers are a little bit different, and we're more at mid-range or on the smaller side. Across the nation, though, 70% of the dioceses saw less people on an average Sunday in 2021.

Now, here's the kind of number used by all of the wonderful media that want to predict our demise: from 2020 to 2021 in-person attendance on an average Sunday in the Diocese of East Carolina dropped by 28.7%. Now, I could be a little bit light with you and say with COVID out of the way, I expect we're going to see some numbers that go up in ways we haven't seen in forever. We'll see. About two-thirds of the dioceses across our country saw a greater drop than 28.7% and some experience drops of 50% and higher.

Did you know that in 2021, our income from plate and pledge was \$14,609,735? We are not a diocese without resources. We are not a diocese that should—none of us should—preach scarcity. There's an abundance in our midst. It's really more about how we choose to use that abundance, how we make decisions together. Only one-third of the churches across The Episcopal Church [in the United States only, in this case], saw more income in 2021. Again, in our Province, our region, 74% of the dioceses saw more income. So again, we can get a different idea of ourselves based only on looking at our closest neighbors.

For us in East Carolina, our 2021 income rose 7.1% from 2020. Did you know our income went up, our income in the congregations' plate and pledges together? That doesn't mean that each one of you experienced that, but, when I'm in conversation with some of you who talk about the great challenges of a drop, I often share: did you know in other parts of our diocese it's not like that? Across The Episcopal Church in the US, in that same one-year period, there was a 3.3% increase ...so a little bit less of an increase than ours.

Now, in other presentations, I've tried to point out to you members of committees that you can go to with questions. This time I want to name the Reverend Paul Canady of Christ Church, New Bern, not because he will necessarily be able to answer all the questions I might have raised with you, but because in his service to our wider church, Paul chairs the Task Force on the State of Membership in The Episcopal Church. They are deeply challenged now with finding right ways to measure our life and our ministry so as to help us make choices about growing in vitality and developing good strategy. Paul, thank you for your willingness to serve in that way. We have several people in this room who are leaders at General Convention. It's always good to go with them to General Convention, as deputies from the Diocese of East Carolina.

In East Carolina, I would argue we need some new language and strategy for our congregational life. The definitions in our Canons speak of congregations that become missions and parishes and while, at some level, we've set that language aside and don't pay so much attention to it as we might once have paid, we've got an awful lot of congregations that don't reach the standards defined for missions or parishes. They don't have enough members to be able to be a mission and/or they don't have a Rector or a Priest-in-Charge in the way that the relevant definitions require.

And you know what? If you are feeling less-than-valued by the language that the church uses, it's not a good thing. I would propose that as we continue to learn from the Small Church Project, the good work that's begun as we bring leaders together to share experiences, as we work to develop strategy, as we develop new wine skins, we're also going to need to change the language that we use when we speak of congregational life. I kind of like the language of I

Corinthians 12 when we talk about the body of Christ made up of different parts. I think you know that passage—and while we would probably not use Biblical language in the Constitution and Canons this way—I think the principles are solid. We'll leave this work to our Chancellor and to the Committee on Constitution and Canons.

I think that some of the principles that are built into our system need attention so that we can recognize the realities we face rather than just measuring ourselves and our life on old principles. During this past year, the continuing deans from the year before have worked together to reimagine the purpose of deanery life with the hope of finding ways that we can further support and strengthen networking and growth in ministry. Now, some will happily groan about the deaneries, because so many things have been tried, and some things have not always worked. My thanks to the group of deans who have done that work together and my thanks to the new full, strong team of deans that are already in place to begin this continuous work of developing new wine skins, what it is for us to support one another regionally. How do we strengthen that work? How do we do it better?

Across the diocese, some of our process is cumbersome and creates extra burdens for congregations. I'm not sure why it took me this long to see this. This is my ninth Convention. I've always experienced the frustration of being on diocesan staff as we get ready for Convention, and somehow—maybe because of the language that the President of the House of Deputies offered that stuck in my head—somehow this year I heard it and saw it differently.

If you took the time to ponder on this, you could acknowledge that one of the busiest times in the life of a congregation would be between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Advent is a busy time. Worship at Christmas is important, and often the time of the year when we see more participants in worship than any other time. Pastoral demands are usually higher because for many people that's a tough season emotionally. So why is it, do you think, that it's also the season when the diocese requires you to elect delegates? Why is it the time of the year when we expect your Vestry to make a pledge to the budget of the diocese even though you haven't even yet got your own year-end finances in order or fully formed your congregation's next budget?

I would argue that the things that we do in our life in a certain way because we've always done it that way might not make as much sense now as they once did. As an example, the diocese's Finance Committee works hard to make decisions about the money that you've all pledged. But just like you might do, in your own congregation, they wait to receive pledges before proposing a budget for Executive Council to pass to Convention for approval. By the time pledges are received from the congregations of the diocese they might only have hours before their proposal needs to be passed along. Hours, by which time we're already into the year for which the budget is being developed.

Perhaps the Finance Committee will be willing to consider the idea of building a budget on history or trends. You know what? No matter how often we ask you for 10% or 11%, almost every year we receive 9% or a little bit more in pledges. There's really good evidence to say we can count on that, and we have really good evidence to say that you are all faithful to your pledges. Almost without exception, the pledges of the people of East Carolina rise to the level that you've said that they would be.

At our upcoming Executive Council retreat, in the early part of March, we're going to begin a process of review of some of that structure, which I think I can easily be shifted in some fairly simple ways. I don't want to give away details now, because I don't want to be the one that presents them by myself. And I hope that, if not before, by next Convention we'll be able to come back with some ideas about new wine skins that will better serve our congregations in the ministries you have and our ministry together as diocese.

Not everything benefits from new wine skins. Let me be clear before you all want to rush the stage and say, "Bishop, what's wrong with the good old stuff?" Nothing. You know, some of the good old stuff is how we contain some of the treasures of our faith and tradition, which we carry forward with us, and we need to care for those wineskins and we need to treasure that rich wine. But, in our work, we also need to learn how to use both old wineskins and new—not every one of us, not all at the same time, not all in the same place—but together with the resources God has given us. Hold some traditions, add some traditions, offer them in parallel.

Now I come to the last section of this address. There's one word for the title of this section: the word "revival." All of this conversation about new wine and new wineskins is important and deserves our attention. But I've got to say, I'm expecting that the most exciting and important thing that happens in this diocese in the year to come is the revival that is scheduled with our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, and his team for Saturday, October the 21st.

Yes, you can put that one on your calendar: Saturday, October the 21st. Now, please do not rush the stage with your argument for why it should happen in your town or village. We'll get there. The real joy is that Michael (Excuse me for the informality), Presiding Bishop Michael Curry will be with us all week. As I announced last year at convention, he will be with our clergy for their conference through October the 19th. On the 19th and 20th, I imagine we're going to tour him around the diocese and help him to see some things and meet some people that maybe he hasn't seen or met yet. The revival will be centered on Saturday, October the 21st. Then on the next day, the Sunday, he will be with the people of St Joseph's Church in Fayetteville in celebration of their 150th anniversary.

With something this big and important, you'd think we would have been working at this for years. Well, I have got the emails from 2019 that demonstrate we were right on track, and then what's the word we always say? COVID. The meeting we would have had—the next meeting that would have brought our folks together—would have been for dates that didn't end up being possible. And so, as the pandemic seemed to clear and the Presiding Bishop's office was getting back to scheduling things instead of not scheduling things, we got our dates on the calendar, and through a wonderful God story that I won't share now [maybe sometime later] it took us this long to get the leaders from his office together with us.

This week, a core of leaders from the diocese will be meeting online with Jerusalem Greer and Canon Stephanie Spellers from the Presiding Bishop's evangelism team. We will steadily build our team from there. We have a set of guidelines that have come from that team, and I want to read a little bit to you about revivals as they understand them, because we all have

different language. Some of us will cringe, because we associate revivals with folks we see on TV or whom we've encountered at other times.

Here's what they intend:

“Each revival seeks to ...

- Revive the hearts of Episcopalians in the host diocese and through the wider church, stirring love for Jesus, for each other, and for creation
- Proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in the language of the people
- Equip and send Episcopalians to share and listen for stories of Jesus' loving presence in daily life through training that may occur before, during, and after the event
- Organize people for reconciling action and justice that embodies good news in the context
- Gather a diverse body that intentionally crosses lines of age, race, class and or culture
- Engage in intensified prayer and preparation before, during and after the event, including gathering and equipping a diocesan network of intercessors.
- Call Episcopalians to intentionally, personally invite and welcome people who are not actively following Jesus 1) to attend the revival and 2) to join the Jesus Movement.”

We have a lot of work to do and decisions to make, like where will the revival happen? What focus should it have? Normally that conversation happens before location is selected. Those are the conversations, the decisions that our organizing team will be led into this week, and we will just keep building from there, bringing others in as we know more clearly where we'll be, what we need to do, what kind of music, who's going to lead the prayers, who can do the prep, etc., etc.

There is prep work not just for the event, but prep work for our lives as we get ready to host a revival. There is the event itself. I have no idea how many people to expect. Last time he preached publicly in this diocese—well, I don't know if we'd count my ordination—it was in an equestrian center not far from here, or if it might have been at the 200th anniversary of the diocese when it happened at Christ Church, and that didn't really feel like it end up being a really public event. We had to manage things a bit. I think there's a reason to expect a lot of people to be with us. My wife is part of a Bible study at home in Kinston, where everyone but her is a Presbyterian. They're already excited about Michael Curry coming to the area.

The idea of us inviting others is serious, and the idea of us praying is important. So please hold. Saturday, October 21st in your calendars. Start to put that on the calendars of your congregations. Get the idea out there. We'll be doing lots of communications as we know more details and sharing those as carefully as we can. For now, please pray for God's Holy Spirit to lead us. Please watch for a steady stream of communications and information. Please plan to attend the revival, and watch for other ways to participate. And, please count on new wine.

In closing, last evening I offered words of thanks to all sorts of people. If you weren't here last night, just watch the video: I'm not going to repeat them all today, but I meant it. There are a lot of people that contribute to our gathering, and everyone's contribution is to be valued. But, I want to offer just one more word of thanks that I didn't offer last night, and that is to the current and former members of the Standing Committee of the diocese who, as part of their responsibility, understand the care of the bishop to be a priority. And so, I had a three-month sabbatical planned for 2020. And then...COVID, so that really functionally ended up being two weeks. They've affirmed that I should be finishing my interrupted sabbatical from 2020, and so my thanks to them. I still have some significant doubt about how that can happen in the same year as we have a revival. I guess if it becomes clear that it can't, then I'll connect back with Rob Richardson, the President of the Standing Committee, and we'll renegotiate. I'm grateful for their support and for their care of me on your behalf.

And so now, Glory to God, whose power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen. Thank you.