

Bishop's Address to Annual Council, 2011

The Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia

The Rt. Rev. Herman Hollerith IV

It is with great affection and a deep sense of privilege that I stand here today to address the progress of God's unfolding mission in the Diocese of Southern Virginia.

This Council marks the end of my second year as your Bishop – and I must say, it has been a challenging, yet deeply meaningful journey. Every day I spend working and ministering among you, I am reminded of just how blessed I am to have the opportunity to build relationships with you. As I travel about the diocese, I am continually impressed by your hospitality, your love of Christ's Church and your willingness to engage with me about all aspects of our common life. I am also impressed by the faithfulness of our parishes striving to move forward in these challenging economic times. So, thankfulness and hope are the two predominant dispositions that color my reflections today.

For the next several minutes – if I do nothing else, I pray it will be to offer the unique perspective that comes with the office of bishop. Needless to say, mine is not the only perspective and some might say a rather narrow one at best, but it is a perspective that is informed by a view of the broad spiritual and geographical landscape that defines us in Southern Virginia. It is not enough for either you or me to see things simply from sea level all the time. We must step to a larger observation platform in order to better understand where we are and where our Lord is leading us.

But, before we take that step, there are some things at sea level to address. The first and most obvious is this council event. We are doing a new thing this weekend. Over the years, a great number of you have requested an event that allows you to return to your parishes for Sunday worship. That desire, as well as expressed concern about the cost of a full weekend away, prompted me to change the format to what you see before you. Interestingly enough, Southern Virginia was one of the very few dioceses left doing Council over an entire weekend.

Now I know this change has not pleased everybody. I also know that we are bound to encounter various glitches in the system the first time we do this. I also know that our social time will be curtailed a bit and that we will not have the privilege – as we did last year – of having an engaging learning session. There are some price tags to this change. But, if we can remain open minded, above all patient with one another and focused on our work, it will be a wonderful two days. And if something doesn't work, we'll learn from that and move on the wiser – because that's what the people of God do. What I hope you appreciate is just how hard the diocesan and volunteer staffs work to make council happen for you.

This time last year I talked about the importance of a ship having its engine room in order before attempting to embark on a voyage. My first two years as your bishop have involved much engine room work. Since last year's Council, major changes have occurred within the staff, including Win Lewis returning to parish ministry, Jay Magness being elected to the episcopate, the resignation of the treasurer and changes in the communications staff. While some of the changes were welcomed and some unwelcome, all were inevitable and part and parcel of any new episcopate. As of this New Year, I do believe that we are finally moving away from engine room work. Canon for Transition - Michael Spear Jones, Canon for Congregational Development - Jeunee Cunningham, Communications officer - Ann Turner, and Youth Missioner - Ashley Scruggs have each brought their remarkable gifts to the diocesan team and are doing splendidly in their work. Also, in the next few weeks, I plan to announce the name of our new Canon for Diocesan Administration. I can tell you, I am looking forward to moving away from structural changes.

Let me remind you that while your diocesan staff is a small one – given the size of our diocese – it is a highly competent group of dedicated people. They have learned to do more with less and they are ready and willing to help you. The program staff in particular, is ready to partner with you around congregational development. I am sometimes surprised by how infrequently parishes take advantage of their expertise – especially in the areas of youth, spiritual formation and communications. So remember the resource you have in them.

The hardest part of doing an annual address is deciding what not to talk about. There are so many aspects of our common life that need to be addressed but will not be due to time constraints and the limit of most people's attention spans. But, there are two areas that must be mentioned – one is Talbot Hall and the other is Chanco.

As you know, this past summer was punctuated by open hearings in Norfolk around the Talbot Hall property. Those hearings were real eye openers for me and the Property Committee and for the whole diocese I suspect. In response, I asked the Property committee to create a task force to explore possible solutions to the challenges at Talbot Hall. The genuine and valid concerns about the historicity of the Manor House, about environmental issues of the waterfront and about neighborhood impact needed exploration and reflection. Under the able leadership of The Very Rev. Stan Sawyer, that task force has now completed its work and is in the process of presenting its findings to the Property committee. What I want you to notice is that - other than a brief report from Stan Sawyer - Talbot Hall is not on the Council agenda. We're not in any hurry and we're going to take our time and allow input from every quarter of the diocese in the time ahead. And if there is a decision to be made, it will be made with integrity and thoughtfulness.

Before I move on, I want to offer you an observation about Talbot Hall. Again, I want to affirm the genuine legitimacy of the concerns expressed by the Norfolk community around the property. Your voice is important. At the same time though, I believe that Talbot Hall is also symbolic of the huge challenges that we face in this diocese. In many ways it is a symbol of the fact that we are sometimes a people stuck between two poles - the pole of nostalgia for the past on the one hand and our fear of the future on the other. So, the real challenge for all of us, as the baptized children of God, is, as I see it, being guided singularly by the mission of the Gospel of Jesus. The Diocese of Southern Virginia with all its parishes and buildings exists for one purpose alone - to fulfill the Great Commission. All else must be measured against that highest of callings.

Since my arrival in the diocese in 1999, I have appreciated and supported the mission of our Camp and Conference center. Chanco is one of our important spiritual assets in Southern Virginia. This past year I made an effort to spend time at Chanco - especially during the summer camp session - and to understand its culture. Let me tell you what I have learned: First, and most importantly, that the Chanco Board is a group of highly dedicated individuals whose passion for the facility runs deep. I have also learned that Chanco has some real financial challenges, most particularly in the conference center area. While the summer camp program continues to be well attended and full of life, the conference center ministry is anemic and struggling. Also, the entire Chanco facility is looking at some serious physical plant challenges. And please remember, your diocesan budget still shoulders \$350,000 of debt on Chanco.

Needless to say, the difficult economy we find ourselves in today has had a negative impact on almost all camp and conference centers within the church - so we are not alone. But, we must spend the next few years intentionally evaluating the challenges at Chanco and investigating new opportunities. Is Chanco adequate for our needs? How does Chanco fit in to the overall strategic direction of the mission of our diocese? What is our long term vision for Chanco? We have some real work to do around these questions.

Now, in the meantime, as we move forward with our discernment, what the Board and I need you to do is *use the facility!* It is *your* camp and conference center and it must be supported by you. Please take this request home to your respective parishes.

While, there are things in our common life that frankly keep me up at night, there are also many things I find myself enthusiastically celebrating about our diocese and very, very proud of. One is the strength of our African-American congregations in Southern Virginia. Our diocese has something unique. We have a legacy of strong Black leadership in the Episcopal Church dating back over 100 years. Because of the life and ministry of people like James Solomon Russell, Black Episcopalians in Southern Virginia have impacted the life of the entire Episcopal Church.

Now that is rather amazing when you think about it, when you consider the fact that our area was also historically one of the worst areas for human slavery and for the social oppression of Blacks in post-emancipated America. The evils of human oppression are deep within the roots of our culture in this part of the world - make no mistake about it. In my mind this historical reality testifies to two very powerful truths. The first is the remarkable redemptive power of Jesus to liberate the hearts and minds of all of us, the power of God to resurrect us from our own death. And second, are the remarkable strength, faithfulness, vision and courage of Black Episcopalians in our diocese. We truly have much to celebrate and to be thankful for. In fact, our own James Solomon Russell will more than likely be included in the new *Holy Women and Holy Men* by the summer of 2012.

With these things in mind, I asked our Council designers to give us an opportunity to celebrate the gifts that Black Episcopalians have brought to our common life. Since this weekend marks the Church's celebration of one of our most important American saints, Absalom Jones, it seemed high time that we should do that here together. And so, tomorrow in our closing worship, we will!

As a final comment, let me just say that I hope and pray that none of us here are under the illusion that racism against people of color has ceased to be an issue in Southern Virginia. It is! And it is essential that we continue to come to terms with the sin of racism across all aspects of our common life – within the Church and outside of the Church. As part of our baptismal responsibility we strive to remove those evils that bar people from the love of God. Later in this Council, I hope you will listen carefully to the report of R-1 committee as they work on your behalf to creatively address racism in our diocese in the future.

Before I move on, I also want to tell you that I think this next year will be our opportunity to address another difficult issue in our life together: sexuality. It's time for us to open the conversation on how or in what manner we will move forward on this issue in Southern Virginia, specifically in regard to the blessing of unions between our Gay and Lesbian brothers and sisters. Frankly, I am not yet sure what form this conversation should take. I have been watching with keen interest what our friends in the central diocese have been doing and there are some things we can learn from them. But, we must also find our own way. Later this spring, in consultation with the deans, I will appoint a special committee to explore options and recommend a way forward.

If you will indulge your bishop a bit longer, I would now like us to step to a larger observation platform and reflect on where we are as a Church amidst the cultural landscape.

The clergyman/scholar Sam Pascoe once said this: "Christianity started out in Palestine as a fellowship. It moved to Greece and became a philosophy. It moved to Italy and became an institution. It moved to Europe and became a culture. It moved to America and became an enterprise!"

Most of are keenly aware that in the last few years Christianity has been a failing enterprise in our culture. Like G.C. Murphy's or Sears we have been losing business. The number of people who practice their faith regularly has rapidly declined. The Evangelical conservative Church alone has lost more members in the last ten years than the entire population of the Episcopal Church. But, we in the Episcopal Church have certainly suffered a similar fate relative to our size - as have all denominations.

When I was a youngster back in the 60's the Episcopal Church was experiencing rapid growth. Being an Episcopalian had a certain kind of social power about it within the culture. It was, as Garrison Keillor once described "the Church of wingtips and scotch and soda." All a church had to do was simply open its doors and people would come streaming in. Well, that generation and that time in history are long gone now and will never ever return. We are no longer a destination church and we certainly no longer enjoy the magnetism of social prominence.

Unfortunately, as the culture changed in this country, the Church continued to do business as usual. While it is fair to say that we remained progressive in our social ethics and theology, we did not engage in new forms of evangelism or in finding new models for ministry and community, certainly not on any large scale. The results are evident. Our pews aren't as full and the membership we do have is becoming increasingly older. While there are some exceptions, especially in the highly populated areas of our diocese, the majority of our congregations have been de-evolving. As a result, ministry is more about palliative care and self-protection than it is about mission. And palliative care and self-protection are always what shrinking institutions end up resorting to.

We could have several hours of debate about who's to blame for our situation, but I don't think that's going to move us forward the slightest step. I think we are better served when we listen for God's voice in all this and begin to focus on the opportunities.

Needless to say, our present situation is enough to keep this bishop up at night, I can assure you, but I can also tell you that despair is not what I feel and certainly not what you should feel. Now that we no longer have the luxury of the social power we once enjoyed, I believe we in the Episcopal have a real opportunity to embrace the true missionary nature of our faith.

Is there anyone here who can tell me the *real* name of the Episcopal Church, the official, corporate name? I will give you a hint: it's not "Ye old Historical Church". The official name is "*The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society*". I think that ought to really tell us something about who we are called to be!

This is what we know: In this day and age, young people, young professionals in particular are seeking three distinct things for their lives. First, they are seeking meaningful community. If a Church demonstrates powerful hospitality and a deep desire to create diverse community then young people are going to be attracted to it. Note that the kind of hospitality I'm describing is not the same as warmly welcoming a newcomer to come and adopt "our way of doing things". Rather, it's hospitality in which people are welcomed in to be who they are and are clearly appreciated for their own unique gifts and perspective. Its community created not from moving the outsiders in, but from the insiders moving out.

The second reality that the younger generations seek is a meaningful way to live, a way that makes sense out of all the craziness of the world. In short, they are seeking the Gospel message, even if they don't know what that message is. Meaningful spiritual nurture, creative liturgy, and rich spiritual formation are paramount for these seekers. It isn't enough to just hand someone a prayer book and wax on and on about the beautiful historical traditions of the Episcopal Church or make them new members of the altar guild. People are seeking more than that. They are seeking a *way of life*. And if a church community can offer them that way then they will seek to be a part of it.

And finally, the third reality is that young people will become part of a community only if that community is making a positive impact on the problems of the world. In other words, opportunities to do meaningful outreach are paramount to church involvement. People want to believe that they can make a difference in the world, that they can make the world a better place. Faith communities that are primarily inwardly focused will not offer any attraction.

The simple fact of the matter is this: if your congregation is not clearly and intentionally addressing those three primary realities in its common life with all due haste and commitment then your congregation is de-evolving. It's as simple as that.

In my thinking it's time for us to organize ourselves around a missional perspective in this diocese. The lynch pin of this perspective will be intentional development of the ministry of the baptized. The increasing cost of full time clergy in the face of diminishing economic resources means that we must be both deliberate and creative.

To that end, beginning in March, the Executive board and I will be initiating a diocesan wide strategic planning process. The purpose of this process will be to engage you in dialogue around the challenges and opportunities that are before you. We will meet in the various regions for organized discussion. Let me make this clear: the time is not to be spent discussing the policies of the National Church or debating theological matters. Rather, it will be time set aside for planning the future of our diocese for forming partnerships and setting our mission priorities. The Rev. Mark Wilkinson will go into some of the details later in our Council.

Overall, let me tell you just how proud I am of our Executive Board and their willingness to enter into this strategic process. All too often in the Church we commit what our Presiding Bishop describes as "suicide by governance". Your Executive Board is understanding its leadership role to be not just about governance, but also about mission. I find this very exciting. Perhaps one day in the near future our entire system in this diocese – canons included - will be organized around missional priorities rather than just governance. I think that would be a powerful step in the right direction.

There is no doubt that we face big challenges both in the Episcopal Church at large and in the Diocese of Southern Virginia. But, there is every reason to be both excited and hopeful. Why? I'll tell you why. First, this is God's Church and God is in charge. And second, when I look out and see your faces, my brothers and sisters, I see "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world". I know that as a community we have the gifts, the talent, the resources, and the faith to do new and wonderful things. It's all here in Southern Virginia. What we must find now is the *will* to do these things! But I am certain that we can! May God grant us the will and courage to embrace our future!