

PASTORAL ADDRESS
Of the Rt. Rev. Russell E. Jacobus, Bishop of Fond du Lac
Given to the 135th Annual Diocesan Convention
October 24th, 2009, Minocqua, Wisconsin

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to those gathered at the 135th Annual Convention of the Diocese of Fond du Lac in Minocqua, and to those who will be hearing or reading this Pastoral Address, which is to be made available through your local congregation.

The Convention Eucharist observed the Feast of James of Jerusalem, the brother of our Lord. One of the gifts of this saint was his ability to unite people of different persuasions in the early Church, specifically Gentile and Jew. In the collect we prayed: "Grant, O God, that, following the example of your servant James the Just, brother of our Lord, your Church may give itself continually to prayer and to the reconciliation of all who are at variance and enmity."

That's what the Church is called to be. In the Catechism (BCP page 855) we are reminded "the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." Paul also said in his Second Letter to the Corinthians (5:18), "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."

I bring this to your attention as we prepare to do the business of our Convention, because I believe this is what we are more about in this diocese than anything else. Even though many in the Church seem to be drifting, I think we, in the diocese of Fond du Lac, are pretty good at keeping "reconciliation" our focus.

This past summer the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church was held in Anaheim, California. Four clergy and four lay deputies, and your bishop ably represented you at this national gathering. Our Convention will be asked to deal with two resolutions related to issues of the General Convention. I will leave those resolutions up to the Convention, but I want to make a couple of comments about this year's General Convention.

I was not surprised the church at our national level continues to move slowly in a direction that opposes my more traditional views. However, the one thing that made a difference for me, unlike previous General Conventions, was that the major resolutions moving the church closer to acceptance of same gender blessings and recognition of the ordination and consecration of persons whose life styles are not acceptable to parts of the Anglican Communion, seemed to consider this "ministry of reconciliation". Each of the resolutions included "resolves" that recognize and honor the traditional and historic positions of the Christian faith, while still recommending slow moves in the opposite direction.

My feeling is if this willingness to be comprehensive continues, all with differing opinions can be respected; not necessarily positions accepted, but people respected - as James recommended - both Jew and Gentile.

At the Convention Banquet last evening I thanked all who assisted with the varying ministries in and through the Diocese of Fond du Lac. This was quite a list, because there is a lot going on.

In my Pastoral Address each year I mention several of the many ministries of which we can all be proud. I also like to take the opportunity to challenge each and every member of this diocese.

As has been the case for many years, our youth programs are wonderful. Most congregations have only a few, if any, young people. That's why diocesan programs like our Summer Camp are so essential. This past summer we moved our location to Camp Lakotah in Wautoma, and our sessions were well attended. I hope all members of the diocese will be considering sending their children or grandchildren to Fond du Lac Summer Camp. The participants learn about the story of salvation history, by considering different aspects of the Bible. They also live within the context of a Christian Community, and learn what it means to be in relationship with God and one another, and about reconciliation when we have differences.

This past year we did not have any diocesan-wide programs to help us consider church growth or how we might be a more welcoming Church. I hope that you are still working on suggestions previously given by Andrew Weeks, Kevin Martin and others. This coming year we will be offering a program on "The Healthy Congregations" and what that involves. Watch for more information in future issues of the Clarion.

Speaking of the Clarion, I believe it is an outstanding communication tool for our diocese. I want to publically thank Dave Natzke, who will be retiring as the Clarion editor at the end of the year. Dave received recognition at the banquet last evening by being awarded The Bishop's Cross. (Fr. John Cell of Blessed Sacrament Church, Green Bay was also a recipient of The Bishop's Cross for his many years of service to the diocese.)

At the banquet I announced the appointment of a new editor for the Clarion, Mr. Gordon Brown of All Saints' Church, Appleton. Gordon will begin working with Dave so that a smooth transition can be accomplished. I also appointed Kate Allison Murray to assist Mr. Brown with specific responsibility for the Congregational section of the paper. With her experience working with photographic software, Kate Allison will also assist in preparing photographs.

Because of a reduced national church budget, Episcopal Life had announced they would be changing the format of their publication. We have now been notified that a newspaper version will continue, and our publication of the Clarion will not be affected. You can expect our diocesan newspaper to continue into the new year just as it has in the past.

One of the other things I am really excited about is our support of the United Thank Offering. Over the past three years our financial gifts in response to our blessings has doubled over the previous triennium. My first thought was that we were more generous, but I'd like to believe we are actually recognizing God's blessings more often. Thank you to all who have contributed.

Another piece of excitement is the opportunity God may be putting before us to consider junctioning with our Episcopal neighbors, the diocese of Eau Claire. I have spoken about this at many of my Visitations. At present we await Eau Claire's discernment for their future. Their Annual Convention meets in several weeks, at which they may come to a more specific decision. Please keep them in your prayers the weekend of November 6th and 7th.

I could spend a lot more time on the exciting things going on in each of the congregations. We shared some of these at our pre-convention deanery meetings. I hope each congregation will continue to share their exciting programs and accomplishments with the rest of us through the Congregational Life section of the Clarion. I'd share more, but I need to take some time with the challenges in this year's Pastoral Address.

The economy has certainly been a challenge, and I'd like to say how thankful I am for those who have continued to sacrificially support God's work through their congregation.

During the past year several congregations have had changes in clergy. As this occurs, we undertake a review of the congregation. A self-study is done, and we look at how the

congregation is doing spiritually, programmatically, and financially. We are beginning to see some trends that lead me to believe we are approaching a turning point.

As you probably see as you look around your congregation, we are not growing. Parochial reports indicate that in the past ten years the total membership in the Diocese of Fond du Lac has dropped 20%; from just over 7500 members to just over 6100 members. The Average Sunday attendance is down over 12% in that same time period. And even though total operating income for all of the congregations is slightly up, the total operating expenses exceed that increase by about 5%.

We are approaching a turning point - and we need to begin thinking and acting differently. Every member of every congregation must become active and involved.

One of my deepest concerns for the future is congregations that propose major deficits in their budget. Also congregations that spend principal from their endowment for operations profoundly concern me. You can't do that very long - and the result is terminal.

We are approaching a turning point - and we need to do things differently. But how?

Let's begin by asking "What does God need of us?" This is the place to begin. What does God need of us? NOT what do I need of God.

Often I hear members of congregations say things like: if we only had a fulltime priest our congregation would grow; if only we had the Eucharist every Sunday, and Bishop it needs to be Sunday not Saturday night, then my family would be more active; all I need from my church is for it to be there when I die - I've been a member all my life and want to be buried from St. Swithins. Those things sound like, "What do we need of God and God's church?"

What does God need of us?

The Great Commission calls all the baptized to "Go and make disciples of all...teaching them to obey everything that I commanded you." God needs each of us to bring others to a knowledge and love of the Lord.

How often do you talk with others about Jesus? How willing are you to share what God means in your life with friends and strangers? This last Thursday, on "Good Morning America", a employee who was robbed at gun point was interviewed. This woman, while a man with a gun asked for the money in the store, began to share her belief that God wanted something better for this young man. After they prayed together, the gunman turned over his gun and gave himself up.

We need to focus on what God needs of us - what God needs and what others need on God's behalf. Others, like the gunman, desperately need to know that there is a better way of living - following God, not following the trends of culture.

What does God need of us?

In addition to bringing the peace and love and grace of God to all people, God needs us take an active part in the life of our Christian Community - the Body of Christ of which we are a member. God needs each and every member of each congregation to be active and involved.

I have often said in sermons that just because my mother was a devout disciple of Jesus, that will not get me into heaven. The faith of my grandfather who was Sr. Warden at my home parish for over 20 years will not benefit me when I reach the pearly gates. The faith that will benefit me is my faith.

God needs the faith we have to lead us into action - both within our congregation and through the congregation to the communities in which we live. The letter of James reminds us - "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers." Are we doers or just hearers?

Next time you're in Church, pray for God to show you why you are there? Is it solely for your benefit? Or does it have something to do with worship and praise of God, and love in some specific way for your neighbor?

What does God need of us?

God needs us to display a commitment to being a disciple of Jesus Christ; a commitment that is obvious in all we are and all we do; a commitment that will be an example and will draw others to a similar relationship with our Savior.

I'm often asked why the mega-churches are growing and we are not. I believe it involves commitment. The mega-churches ask and expect a real commitment from their members - as if this Christian life is actually important. What kind of commitments to the Lord and to the building up of God's kingdom do we expect of people in the Episcopal Church?

At my Visitation last Sunday I was excited to welcome into a year-long process of study and preparation 13 young people and adults who promised "to be regular in attending the worship of God and in receiving instruction." This was so different from the bulletin I once read that said "The Bishop will be here next Sunday. If anyone needs to be Confirmed or Received, please let the Rector know."

Which congregation do you think is going to have a stronger commitment from its members?

What does God need of us?

There are so many things God needs of us that I could go on for the rest of the morning - but I won't. You know what God needs without my even mentioning them. What we need to do is just start doing them. Time for consideration is over; time for action is here.

We are at a turning point in the diocese. If we don't start doing what God needs from us, rather than what we need to get from the church, our congregation won't be there - for us or for others who need it.

I mentioned the Catechism at the beginning of my address. I want to conclude by quoting one more statement from the Catechism (BCP page 856). "What is the duty of all Christians? The duty of all Christians is to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God."

What does God need of us? What does God need of each and every member of a congregation?

Follow Christ.....work.....pray.....give.

If we want a fulltime priest - if we want the Eucharist every Sunday - if we want St. Swithins to be there for our funeral - this is where we need to begin - and now is the time to begin.

Amen.