

Pastoral Address of the Rt. Rev. Matthew Gunter, Eighth Bishop of Fond du Lac to the 146th Annual Diocesan Convention, October 24, 2020

Good morning, 146th convention of the Diocese of Fond du Lac. I am recording this morning's pastoral address here at the cathedral in Fond du Lac in the beautiful St. Augustin's Chapel.

It has been a crazy year since we last met in convention a year ago when we welcomed our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, as our guest. The following day, he was the featured speaker at our revival. That was a phenomenal day that did the Diocese of Fond du Lac proud and pointed all of us to a deeper commitment to receiving more of the love of Jesus and following him in his way of love. We're not a very big diocese, but we demonstrated a large spirit that day. The Presiding Bishop and his team told us that it was one of the best organized and most volunteer driven revivals they had held so far. So again, thank you to those who helped put the revival together, those who volunteered, those who participated in one way or another, and those who attended. Together, we made it a fantastic event. Well done, Diocese of Fond, du Lac.

Even better, I have heard from some members of the diocese that the revival did exactly what it was supposed to do. It encouraged them and their faith and prompted them to a renewed commitment to follow Jesus into the heart of God. That is something we can continue to build on. In fact, we had concrete plans to build on it in 2020.

But, of course, things got more complicated in March of this year. Our diocese and our congregations were confronted with the worst pandemic in 100 years. That has brought challenges for which none of us was prepared. Early on, we formed a task force made up of doctors and people with public health experience, hospital chaplains, and parish priests to help find ways to guide the diocese.

As we tried to find a way that was responsible and faithful through this pandemic the task force decided that it was better to make policies for the whole diocese as opposed to policies county by county or congregation by congregation. And so we have put together protocols and processes for the congregations of the diocese to follow so that we can seek to be faithful and responsible at the same time, not acting out of fear, but acting out of care – care for our neighbors, cares for ourselves, care for the larger community. In some ways the Task Force has been more restrictive than others, other diocese, other churches, and, in fact, more restrictive than the government has suggested. In other ways, we have been less restrictive than other dioceses or other churches. And for that matter, other than what the state has suggested, we have tried to chart our own course, listening carefully and looking carefully at the data and what the wisdom of those who are experts have been saying.

So we have had that Task Force and I am eternally grateful for that Task Force's work. It has helped each congregation sort out how best to go forward. And I have been pleased to see how each

congregation has found ways to go forward. I have been impressed with the creativity and determination of our clergy and our lay leaders and the members of our congregation as they have sought to find ways to be the church, even in these circumstances. Congregations have quickly learned how to use video and social media in new ways, live streaming and setting up YouTube accounts and finding ways to gather virtually for worship and fellowship. Congregations have done Morning Prayer. In fact, we might have had more Morning Prayer observed in the last year than it was done in 10 years before – Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer and Compline. There have been Zoom Bible studies and Zoom Sunday School and Zoom fellowship time. There have been pastoral care phone systems so that we could care for one another even when we weren't able to be present physically with one another.

None of us was trained for this. But we have – you have – found ways to be the church creatively in this situation that none of us would have chosen to be dealing with. We have not been able to gather as much as we would like, but that has not kept us from being the church through online worship, prayer, Bible studies, fellowship, and caring for one another. And our giving has continued. Your giving has continued. Almost all of our congregations report that their finances remain more or less stable. And that is because of your generosity, the generosity of the people, of the Diocese of Fond du Lac. And I encourage you to continue that, continue to support the mission and ministry of your congregation.

That generosity has gone beyond our congregations. When the Diocese of Masvingo in Zimbabwe, our sisters and brothers of our companion diocese, were in need and we heard about their need, the Diocese of Fond du Lac stepped up. We have raised over \$20,000 to support our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe. I know that Bishop Godfrey is exceedingly grateful to you, to the diocese of Fond du Lac, for helping them in this time of need.

Yes, it has been an unusual year, but we have – you have – found ways to continue to be faithful. And we will continue to be faithful in the next year. I want to name two wrinkles that we will be dealing with next year in 2021.

One wrinkle is that I was contacted by the Standing Committee and Executive Council of the Diocese of Eau Claire, our neighboring diocese to the West, asking if I would be willing to have them nominate me to be their provisional Bishop.

I spoke with our Executive Council and Standing Committee and they affirmed that it seemed like a meet and right thing to do. Eau Claire is our neighbor. They are our brothers and sisters and they are in need of help in this moment of transition as their current bishop retires and they discern what might be next for them. So, in this season of transition, they have asked for our help for my help. That will, of course, inevitably change some of the dynamics of our diocese, as well as theirs. I will be offering about one third of my time to the Diocese of Eau Claire and two thirds to the diocese of Fond du Lac. The Diocese of Eau Claire will reimburse the Diocese of Fond du Lac for that time. I will need to manage my time differently and delegate some responsibilities to others.

We are increasing the hours of our administrative assistant, Lisa Baltes, so she can help with some of the things that might arise because of this. This will change some of the ways things work in the next two years if they in their convention in November do in fact elect me to be their provisional Bishop. The plan right now is for that to be a two-year term.

Another wrinkle next year is that I will be taking part of my sabbatical. At one point I thought it would take the full sabbatical next year, but given the taking on of Eau Claire and other things, I've decided to only take half of the sabbatical next year. So, from the first week of Lent until just before Holy week, I will be on sabbatical.

Those two things will complicate things a bit, but they will not change the fact that we, as a diocese, will continue to seek to be faithful to our call to be the Church in this place, in this time. We will continue our commitment, whether in person or virtually, to worship together and to pray as we together orient our lives towards the source of our being, the source of our peace and joy. And as we glorify the one who we know has come to us in love and glory. We will continue to find ways to encourage congregations as we seek to be stronger as congregations. Faithful Innovation, the process we have been working with over the last few years, got sidetracked because of COVID this year. But it is my hope that we can find ways, even if virtually, to resume doing some work with Faithful Innovation to encourage and equip our congregations, to find new ways to be Church in these times.

In this time, in this context, we will find ways to support and encourage and offer resources to our congregations, to help them become stronger. And we will continue to find ways to share the good news of what God has done in Christ. One of the side effects of COVID-19 is the fact that we have begun to become familiar with and more agile with the use of media, social media, and other kinds of media. And that is a way for us to reach beyond our usual borders. Some of our congregations have had new members join because of their virtual worship and other things. Some people have had visitors coming to their Bible studies. Some congregations have had folk tuning into their virtual worship, not just around the area, not even just around the state or the country, but from around the world.

And that gives us an avenue to reach more people with the good news of Jesus Christ. In fact, I want to share one story with you. This is a true story. On Twitter I saw somebody asking if anyone knew if there was a good priest in De Pere, Wisconsin. Before I had a chance to respond, others responded, but I added my two bits. As it happens, we have just called a very fine priest to the congregation of St. Anne's, De Pere, Fr. Tyler Richards. And people mentioned this to the person who asked the question on Twitter. And here's the backstory. The person who asked the question is a priest in the diocese of Texas, David Peters has been playing around with social media. In particular, he's been playing around with an app called Tik Tok. I know about this much about Tik Tok, but Fr. David Peters has been using it and doing short videos that have been so fun to watch that they have gone viral and thousands of people have watched them.

Among those watching is a woman who, because she's been watching, has been checking out the Episcopal Church. She contacted Fr. Peters and said, "I'm really taken with what you're about and what the Episcopal Church seems to be about. But I live far from Texas. I live in De Pere, Wisconsin. Do you know if there's an Episcopal Church in this area?" Fr. Peters posted the question on Twitter. That woman has now connected with Fr. Tyler and is now interested in checking out St. Anne's. So, a priest in Texas connected with a person in Wisconsin through social media who now is connected to one of our congregations. And that demonstrates an opening to the world that we have through using the media that we are now getting used to using. And I hope that we can find ways and resources and to perhaps bring some people in who can help instruct us in how to better use that media. We have to reach out further and further with the good news of God in Christ.

We're also going to begin this year to lay the groundwork for campus ministry and to find ways to encourage and equip and, to the extent that we can, resource congregations that are near universities and college campuses so that they can begin to reach into that mission field and begin some kind of campus ministry or build on whatever campus ministries they already have going.

We also are a retooling, our Mosaic Task Force. One of the co-chairs of the Task Force, Erin Kirby, who was the rector of St. Matthias, Minocqua, has taken another call and gone to North Carolina. I have asked Fr. Christopher Wilkerson of All Saints, Appleton to take her place as Co-chair alongside the other Co-chair, Martina Mims of St. Thomas, Menasha. We are going to begin working afresh with that Task Force so that we can continue to address the realities, the ongoing realities, of racism in the society around us and in particular in our communities and in the Diocese of Fond du Lac. Events of last spring and last summer have reminded us that we are far from finished dealing with the scourge of racism. And it is something I'm committed to seeing us address more fully here in the diocese.

So, there's plenty still going on in the Diocese of Fond du Lac in spite of COVID. I expect that one way or another, more or less, we will be coping with COVID-19 well into 2021. But we will continue to find ways to be faithful to the One who has called us to be members of his body. The one who has called us is faithful. If we stay close to Jesus and keep our eyes fixed on him, if we continue to support one another in love, we can anticipate that the spirit of Jesus will continue to revive our souls and transform our lives. And through us, he will transform the lives of those around us, and indeed the world. My sisters and brothers of the Diocese of Fond du Lac. We are living through hard times, but God is faithful. Let us be faithful in response to his faithfulness and continue to find ways to be the church and to bear witness to the hope that is in us. God bless.