



## The Bishop's Address to the 118<sup>th</sup> Annual Diocesan Convention November 9, 2019

Thank you for all your dedication to Jesus' mission of mercy, compassion and hope. Thank you for the time, effort and love you put into the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement that is out to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it. Thank you. Your work and prayer means so much.

In June I was at the Tri-annual gathering of deacons throughout our country which was being held in Providence. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry was there and, as always, he rocked the house with his keynote address. At one point he was talking about St. Paul and how everywhere St. Paul went with the message of Jesus, there was a revolution. The crowd was riveted as Michael brought that revolution of love and resurrection to the present day. He started shouting out, as only Michael can, to the bishops in the gathering. He would shout out the name of a bishop and say "can you imagine what a revolution would look like in ...and then names the bishop's diocese." He did this for several bishops –"Bishop- name- can you imagine what a revolution would look like in – name the diocese." The he gets to me. "Doug, can you imagine what a revolution would look like ...wait, there is already a revolution going on in Western Massachusetts."

When I die, please put that on my tombstone.

Michael never did go on to describe what is revolutionary about Western Mass. That leaves it open to me to speculate what he meant in this convention address.

Could it be the day to day commitment you all make to following Jesus? Could it be the hospital visits, the hours of sermon prep, the choir rehearsals, the bible studies, the pastoral counseling, the millions of prayers you say privately and publically, the loving care of church property, the reaching out to the lonely or hurting neighbor, the generous financial commitments you all make to the mission of the church? Faithfulness in this era is revolutionary. You inspire me.

Here is some other revolutionary activity in Western Mass. This is not an inclusive list. You will see other examples in the videos throughout the day.

In Western Mass, we dare to go where the people are and where the need is. We have chaplains to the Appalachian Trail – because if people are coming from around the world to walk from Georgia to Maine (or some part of it) you know they are searching for something.

We go to the challenged Main South neighborhood in Worcester through our Walking Together ministry - addressing the opioid crisis and addictions through Twelve Step programs, providing counseling and getting people the help they need, which includes a lot of prayer. And, sometimes, it includes saving lives with Narcan.

Our chaplains for the Women’s Correctional facility in Chicopee and to the Worcester House of Corrections fulfill Jesus’ revolutionary statement; when we visit the imprisoned we visit him. And we do that in another way with Reconciliation House in Webster – a facility for men coming out of jail with addiction issues.

Some revolutionary ideas are simple - like gathering veterans for lunch. A number of our churches do that once a week. Together we serve 500 vets every week. Some of those vets are doing fine and they come for the companionship. Others are literally living under bridges. And some suffer from PTSD and Moral Injury. I’m studying both those afflictions and I invite other church leaders to do so as well that we might listen with understanding and compassion. It is where our church is called to be.

There are many other revolutionary ministries that change lives like Lawrence House, outdoor liturgical communities, Laundry Love and others you will hear about in this convention.

But perhaps Michael Curry was referring to the revolution of his Revival with us last year. It was a phenomenal day with our celebrations in Pittsfield and Worcester - marked by inspirational music, witnesses to our faith and of course Michael reminding us that “if it is not about love, it is not about God.”

That revolution was not a one day event. We followed up on that day in many ways with Revival Year 2. And one of the lasting effects of Year 2 is a new spirit of collaboration in our diocese. For Easter Vigil this year, all the churches in the Berkshires got together in Lenox for one glorious service. The Church was packed and we had baptisms and confirmations and receptions. And then in Pittsfield on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, over 100 people from many different parishes gathered to put together 20,000 meals (yes, 20,000 ) for the hungry.

I invite you to consider continuing the revolution of Episcopal churches working together. This is not about mergers or closing churches. It is because we are stronger together. And it is a lot more fun. Christ Church Rochdale, Grace Church Oxford and St. Thomas Auburn are doing this right now. In the last few years the churches in Chicopee, North Grafton and Sutton, Wilbraham, West Springfield, Greenfield and Turners Falls have come together with their neighbors and it all looks like Resurrection.

A great example of this is the Small Church Summit which has had two very successful meetings of devoted followers of Jesus who have come together to share the challenges and opportunities of being small churches.

As a sign of my commitment to collaboration, how about this idea? For any neighboring parishes that want to do this, I volunteer to walk from one parish to another, ending with Evening Prayer, a meal and a discussion as to how those two parishes can work together. After all, you are in walking distance of each other!

Another collaboration that came out of revival is our Pilgrimage Project. Members of our Diocesan Council called every church in WMA and asked them about a ministry they are particularly good at. They range from food pantries to farmer's markets to Celtic liturgies and many others. If your parish is considering a new ministry and want to know how to do it, you are invited to a Pilgrimage to one of the parishes that is already doing it. It is part of an ancient tradition – go to a holy place and grow in mission and spiritual depth. Those holy places are right here in revolutionary WMA. You will hear more about this in the next issue of our diocesan magazine.

I'm excited to announce here that Bishop Mark Beckwith is our new Missioner for Spirituality and Leadership. Mark brings great gifts to our diocese. He is spending time in our congregations, preaching and teaching.

This is all part of a big commitment we all have to parish renewal. In past Convention Addresses, I have invited us to “double down” on social justice, and to “double down on prayer.” Let's add to that “double down on parish renewal. We have a whole range of ways to make this happen. Already 10 of our parishes have done Renewal Works, 5 are enrolled in the College for Congregational Development. One is doing Natural Church Development. 7 parishes are working with Peter Swarr and Sue Schneider in “Explorations of Christian Leadership.” And we have 11 coaches to work with parishes leaders to fulfill our hopes and dreams for the holy mission Jesus has given us. If you want to know more about any of these programs see Pam Mott. Yes, let's double down on parish renewal.

Let's collaborate with Episcopal Churches and with the Lutherans, Congregationalists, Methodists and anyone else that wants to share prayer and mission. Recently I was at a meeting with other “heads of churches” brought together by the Mass Council of Churches. We told stories of parishes working together across denominational lines. One example is that this year we are merging our popular Leadership Day with the UCC's “Super Saturday” where there will be dozens of workshops that can be helpful to any UCC and Episcopal church and there will be a few particular to our Episcopal Church. When so much in our world is coming apart, we are coming together.

Michael Curry has given us a clear definition of the Church. I mentioned it earlier. “We are the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement that is out to change the world from the nightmare it is

for so many, into the Dream God has for us.” Could our humble efforts at that be what he means by revolutionary?”

Religious scholar Thomas Cahill has written several books about key moments in the history of Western Civilization and how different communities contributed. He wrote *The Hinges of History* series, and *The Gifts of the Jews*. Twenty-five years ago he wrote, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland’s Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*. He tells the stories of how monks formed communities of peace and prayer, with farms to feed the poor displaced by the many wars. Monks spent their lives copying the bible by hand to preserve God’s word for future generations. Without the efforts of the Church, what was known as the “Dark Ages” might never have ended.

The Church responded to the needs of the time. We have not always. When the General Convention of the Episcopal Church met in 1860, they said nothing about slavery or the impending Civil War.

We now have another “hinge of history” moment. We face a climate change crisis. And as the monks saved Western Civilization, it is our challenge to save the earth. Listen to the words of our Michael Curry and Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and Archbishop Jackelén, head of the Church of Sweden:

“...the link of unprecedented climate change to human action rests now on insurmountable scientific evidence. In human societies, these climate changes compound social injustices, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable among us. Yet the burdens are not borne by humans alone: acceleration in the disappearance of species of plants and animals underlies the intertwined struggles of all life on Earth, and the destructive exploitation of resources leaves a diminished planet for all time to come.”

These religious leaders go on to say, “We claim the deep resources of our Christian faith to meet this challenge. We worship a God who created all that exists, who rejoices in its flourishing and blesses its diversity.”

They issued a call to action which involves: advocacy, education, prayer and collaboration. That sounds like the work that our Margaret Bullitt-Jonas has been doing for so long. Now I invite us to make a commitment to joining her in this earth saving work. One way to do that is for all our clergy and lay preachers to make a commitment to preach about creation care. And to do so in the spirit of Michael Curry who says, “We acknowledge the dire urgency of this moment not through the lenses of despair, but through lenses of hope and determination.” We will be providing resources on how to do this.

We have a public health crisis of gun violence in our country. Over 100 people a day die from gun violence in our beloved USA. Our diocese is acknowledged by the network called Bishops United Against Gun Violence as a leader in this cause.

One of The Episcopal Church's top priorities is racial reconciliation. Our Beloved Community Committee is working hard at education about white privilege. Several of our churches had services marking the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of African slaves in our country. They came from Ghana where we have a companion relationship. Friends, we have a long way to go in this work before we can be anywhere near revolutionary, but we are committed.

And we have a long way to go in being revolutionary in standing with immigrants and refugees – check all the references in the Bible about “welcoming the stranger” for why we do this. A shout out to Grace, Amherst for their embrace of a refugee family and for their support of the Congregational Church as they provide sanctuary for Lucio Perez, a father of four who has worked and paid taxes here for over 20 years. I went to the ICE offices with several UCC ministers and a rabbi to advocate for him. Thank you to our many churches that have signs saying “immigrants are welcome here.”

The mission before us is daunting which is why we need prayer and one another. Rachel Held Evans, a wonderful young Episcopal writer who died all too soon this past year, writes “The only way to work for justice in a sustainable way is to be rooted in the nourishing soul of contemplation and community.”

When we do that, really do that, we recognize God's presence among us. And here I want to thank our brothers and sisters who tell me I am too political. They tell me we should be about saving souls. In my heart I believe this work IS about saving souls. But I do thank you for faithfully calling us to a life of prayer. If we lose our center in Christ, our work for creation, addressing gun violence, welcoming immigrants and refugees, promoting racial reconciliation becomes about power instead of following Jesus who has merged loving God and loving neighbor.

A few weeks ago a video about a boy anxious about school and what his parents did about it went viral. They dressed him up as a different super hero every day. I think St. Paul would like that video because he had a similar idea. He told the early Christians to “put on Christ.”

Galatians 3:27 “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Ephesians 6:10 “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God.”

Romans 13:14 “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”

And 75 times we are told we are “in Christ.”

Prayer, deep, sincere prayer leads to a resurrected life. We know this from theologian Bruce Springsteen. You knew I was going to get Springsteen into this address somewhere. In “My City in Ruins” he sings:

Now with these hands, with these hands, with these hands, I pray Lord.  
I pray for the strength Lord.  
I pray for the faith Lord.  
I pray for your love Lord.  
I pray for the strength Lord.  
I pray for your Love Lord.

And then he sings “Come on, Rise Up.” Eleven times. Come on, Rise up.

You see, praying leads to resurrection - for our souls, for our society, for God’s creation.

My spiritual director often says to me “Doug, you are capable of more than you think you are.” And I say to all of us in the revolutionary diocese of Western Massachusetts – “We are capable of more than we think we are.” And if you don’t believe my spiritual director, believe Saint Paul, who in his second letter to Timothy wrote, “We have not been given a spirit of fear, but a spirit of love and power.”

We say that every time we pray Evening Prayer. It’s 9 am but let’s pray these words.

“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 for ever and ever.”

AMEN.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Douglas Fisher". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Right Reverend Douglas J. Fisher  
IX Bishop of Western Massachusetts