

2023 Diocesan Convention Address
The Right Rev. Thomas C. Ely
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Let us pray: Creator, we give you thanks for all you are and all you bring to us for our visit within your creation. In Jesus, you place the Gospel in the center of this sacred circle through which all of creation is related. You show us the way to live a generous and compassionate life. Give us your strength to live together with respect and commitment as we grow in your spirit, for you are God, now and forever. Amen.

How can I thank you enough for the gift of that music and the singing and the words and the hugs and the love and the outpouring of your gratitude? You know, they don't have a class for this in seminary. It's about living. It's about receiving gifts that come from others. And tonight is one of those gifts that I will always remember. And cherish. And welcome to those who might be watching us online. We are grateful that you're here with us as well.

I did want to pause before I started my address and ask you to be in silence just for a moment, as we hold before Creator the heartaches of our world. You know them. The conflict in Israel, Palestine, the gun violence in Maine, the earthquakes in Afghanistan. The conflict in Ukraine, and so many others that we could name. Let's just hold all these heartaches that we have before Creator. And let our souls rest in the knowledge of God's deep love for us. Even as we walk through these shadows of the valley of death.

Amen.

I wasn't sure if I would be offering this Address to you in person or via Zoom tonight, and so I was most delighted on Monday when my medical team cleared me to travel to North Dakota, so that I am able to be with you in-person at this important Convention. I was so hoping that that would be the case. And it turned out, that is what it is. And I am even more deeply blessed by all that is here tonight.

As I thought about our Convention theme: *At the Threshold*, and the work of our New Season of Ministry Task Force, one of my favorite Bible verses kept coming to my mind. A Bible verse from the Prophet Isaiah. One that many of you know and perhaps share with me in great delight. Hear what Isaiah said: *"Behold, I am doing a new thing. Now it is springing forth, do you not perceive it?"* (Isaiah 43:19) I also connect this Bible verse to what Kim Fox wrote about in her recent Sheaf article when she was talking about liminality. She wrote: *"Liminal space is therefore the space between what is now and what is not yet. It is a time of possibility and an opportunity for new energy if we are willing to move through it in faith."*

Thank you for those words, Kim. I would say it is the place, that liminal place, where God is at work bringing forth God's new thing.

In the larger context of Isaiah's writing, the prophet's proclamation reminds his hearers, and us, of the great things God has done in the past. But the prophet also reminds the people that, as important as those things were, the focus for the present time should be upon what God is doing today, here, and now, right in our midst. God is doing a new thing, the prophet says, and God will continue to care for the people. In other words, pay attention to what God is doing NOW. Right here, in this room, in our Convention, in this time in the life of our Diocese. It was true then; it is true today! Pay attention to what God is doing now. Because that is about God's faithfulness, even in the face of the people's uncertainties, disobedience, and skepticism, and perhaps some of ours.

Having been privileged to serve as facilitator, or consultant as the New Season of Ministry Task Force like to refer to me, it is my conviction that this sentiment from Isaiah permeated their work, even though we never said the words out loud, at least as I recall. The task force was constantly aware that as a diocese we were, and continue to be, at a liminal time. A liminal time in our life together in which we're between the already and not yet of what God is up to in our midst. Through careful listening and open-minded thinking, the task force was able to name what they believe God is up to in the life of our diocese. They tried to give voice to the "new thing" that God might be holding out for us, and I believe they have done a most faithful job in that regard throughout this whole last year and a half. It has been my privilege to work with them.

What I am particularly mindful of and grateful for is that they began by listening. I always tell new pastors going into congregations or newly ordained people, the key to leadership is this: the four "Ls." Listen. Learn. Love. Lead. And do it in that order. So, the task force began by listening and in their listening they learned. They learned the voices, the hearts, the soul, the spirit of the people of this diocese. Then they began to have some goals that emerged from their listening and learning. And they tried to give voice to this new thing that God was holding out for us. They began to name some of these goals and priorities that they believed lined up with that listening and learning. And notably, at least to me, is the fact that they focused their attention, (I hope you saw this on the slides from this afternoon) on some of the most vulnerable, marginal, and fragile aspects of our common life and ministry: youth and young adults; our ministry with and among our Native American communities; our smaller congregations and their need for sacramental ministry support and development; and our common concerns regarding reconciliation and creation care. All these very fragile and sometimes marginal dimensions of our life were very much at the heart of their listening and their learning. And they did this, all the while, affirming the widespread desire that they heard loud and clear from you, that we maintain our identity as the Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota. And that we find our

way to the next Bishop Diocesan, whether that be a part-time or full-time person. And at the same time, while we do all that, we recognize and embrace the opportunities that are out there for collaboration and cooperation with our neighbors, with other dioceses, with those who want to share in our life together. To understand that we are not in this journey, we are not in this liminal space, that we are not paying attention to what God is up to, all by ourselves. There are others who care deeply about what happens here in North Dakota. And want to be part of helping us shape that future.

Now here comes the disclaimer. Of course, there is no guarantee that what the Task Force has proposed is *the* “new thing” that God is doing. Not necessarily even the only “new thing” that God is doing. But isn’t that what discernment is about? It is doing our best to pay attention. And then to bring out of that discernment, the very best that we can. Well, we are living in that liminal space between the already but not yet of God’s divine mystery and love. And isn’t that what it requires of us? To live faithfully there. Is it not what it is about in terms of taking risks for the sake of what the gospel calls us to. The Gospel calls us to take these risks over and over again, not just for ourselves but for the life of the world. As we perceive this “new thing,” this new chapter, this new season of ministry that is here and now, on which we are standing at the threshold tonight, will we decide to invest in this future possibility or not? And that becomes our question. Not just the question of the task force, but the question for every Episcopalian in the Diocese of North Dakota.

And so, I devote the first part of this Convention Address to that work that has brought us to this place at this time tonight. And I begin this convention address grateful for the work of the New Season of Ministry Task Force, confident that God is not done with the Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota, and in fact is leading us toward God’s “new thing.” Do we perceive it? Will we perceive it? Do we believe in its possibility? Will we walk side by side and hand in hand into that future – larger churches and smaller churches, churches in the East and churches in the West, Native churches and non-native churches, churches with financial resources and churches struggling to pay their bills, churches speaking the truth in love to and with one another, so that, in the words we will hear in tomorrow’s epistle, *“we might grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.”* (Ephesians 4:15-16). That is my hope for us. That we will be that community that walks that way. Together. Into that future that God has in store for us. So, thank you task force for bringing us to this threshold. For naming for us our goals, our priorities, our hopes, our dreams, and for setting us on a course that we might realize so much of that.

Let me briefly continue and conclude with just a few other items.

First, regarding my health, let me say how deeply grateful and humbled I am by the amazing outpouring of love, care, support, and prayers that I have received since sharing with you my surprising diagnosis of Stage Four Esophageal Cancer. I know many of you have walked your own cancer journey, and that of loved ones, and so you have some idea about the disruption such a diagnosis carries with it. I have a great medical team. You hear me, if you follow my blog at all, that I talk about Agnes all the time. I am not sure I have the capacity to make someone a saint, but she's really close right now in my book. And so is my oncologist and the rest of my medical team surrounding me. And of course, I have an enormous loving family, group of friends, colleagues, all over the world who are joining in the prayer for my health and healing. It's beyond my wildest imagining. Maybe some of you can relate to that from your own experience of one of those times in your life when, beyond anything you can imagine, you felt the profound love of God in the lives of the people whom you meet. And tonight, oh my! Nothing more powerful than that. I can imagine. So, the road ahead is a challenging one and I am trying to face its reality with faith, hope, and confidence in God's healing grace. And your prayers help so very much in that regard.

That said, there are some real-life implications that will now impact the balance of my ministry among you as your Bishop Provisional. My hope had been to finish out this calendar year with two more pastoral visits to North Dakota in November and December, and to support the Standing Committee as they work with Bishop Todd Ousley from the Presiding Bishop's Office of Pastoral Support to call your next Bishop Provisional. Unfortunately, because of my treatment schedule, and the way it is aligned, I will not be able to travel to North Dakota for those visits, including the first meeting of the new Diocesan Council in November, and three scheduled services of Confirmation, at the Cathedral, at St. John the Divine, and at St. Paul's in Grand Forks. My medical team barely let me travel for this Convention.

But, alas, all is not lost, and God is good (all the time). There is a provision in our church canons for the appointment of an Assisting Bishop, as those of you who heard John's presentation this afternoon learned. Bishop Keith Whitmore served with you in that capacity before I became your Bishop Provisional. I am pleased to announce that the Right Reverend Brian Thom, who retired as Bishop of Idaho in 2022 after 16 years of episcopal ministry, is willing to accept my appointment, subject to the consent of the Standing Committee, to serve as Assisting Bishop for the Diocese of North Dakota. In short, what this means is that I will continue as Bishop Provisional until the next Bishop Provisional is in place, elected by you, and that Bishop Thom will cover my week-long scheduled pastoral visitations to North Dakota - taking all the appointments that I had and being in all the places that I was supposed to be on those days, which to me is a great relief especially for those awaiting Confirmation. And, especially for the start of the new Diocesan Council. And I should also mention that Brian is also open to being a candidate

for your next Bishop Provisional, should that be the direction the Standing Committee and Convention choose to go.

I served with Bishop Thom in the House of Bishops for the 12 years during which our respective episcopates overlapped, and we have continued as colleagues and friends ever since. Brian is a man of many gifts, those of you who know him can attest to that, including having the heart of a ministry developer, and a collegial, collaborative commitment in ministry. He likes the idea of coaching. We served together as coaches in the House of Bishops, so he brings that gift along. Brian was born and raised in Portland Oregon and served all his ordained ministry in the West, so his orientation learning curve to North Dakota will be different from mine, coming from the East coast! I don't know who will have it easier, but it will be different. I am grateful that he is willing to step into this new ministry and have every confidence that he will serve our diocese well. I am going to keep talking about it as "our diocese" until I'm no longer your bishop provisional. Maybe even after that. I know you will welcome Brian warmly.

Second, I want to say a word about our human and financial capacity as a diocese. During my time as your Bishop Provisional, I have been blessed to work with so many, many talented people, who give of themselves with great devotion to our common life and ministry. That includes the members of our diocesan Ministry Support Team – Steve, Jess, and Kim – along with all the volunteers who provide leadership throughout our various committees, commissions, boards, task forces and working groups. My word of caution to you in that regard is that we need to keep expanding this circle of leadership. We need to keep expanding that and not just relying on the people who have stepped up to the plate so often. My hope is that those of you here and when you take word of this Convention back to your congregations, that you will step into some of those leadership roles. Maybe you might consider being elected to the Diocesan Council tomorrow at the luncheons that will be hosting those elections. Or maybe reading the reports that are in the back of the document that you received about the various ministries going on, you might find something there that says, "hey I have a gift that I could give to that ministry. Let me step forward." I know it's not necessarily the North Dakota way to put yourself out. That you sometimes just wait for someone to encourage you. Well, I'm encouraging you right now. I'm encouraging you, I'm asking you, I'm saying please find your place in the leadership of this Diocese. It will be critical for the next three years especially to have as many people in leadership roles as possible. And the same goes for your local congregations. I know you all are very active in your congregation. So, you must go back and encourage others to take up the mantle of leadership as well with you.

I think as we expand the circle of leadership, we discover that the gifts and talents of many provide us with a richness that is just not ours when it's only a few who are stepping up to do the work. I think if the Episcopal Church in North Dakota, one of the

smallest dioceses in The Episcopal Church, and if we are to maintain our identity and be ready to elect our own bishop within the next three years, we need to have solid, stable, well-informed leadership functioning in every single congregation.

The same can be said on the financial resources side of things. One of the wonderful things that happened this past year is that we exceeded our WoDakota Appeal goal of \$50,000. I think some of the council looked a little bit with crooked eye at me when I suggested that we might be able to do this, but we actually raised over \$52,000 in that appeal. Thanks to the gifts of so many of you. And there is still time if you haven't! But because we were so successful, we have also put that into next year's budget. So, be thinking about how those of you who have the capacity to give over and above your local giving (this is not to take away from your local giving) can do so to this appeal. This will help us fund our ministries.

Further, as you know, the New Season of Ministry Task Force is recommending that we make a significant financial investment in our future as a diocese. Make no mistake about it, they're asking us to do something big. They are asking us to use some of our reserves that have accumulated over the past few years, along with available endowment funds, to help fund two positions that align with the goals set by the Task Force. The hope is that these investments will pay dividends, but of course nothing is for certain. But this is where they are leading us and calling us. That is why our human investment is as important as our financial investment, as we make a common commitment to these ministries. And not just say, "oh well, now that we have this missioner and that missioner, we can step back and there's nothing more we've got to do around here." No. That will never work. They will need all the support we can give them. And so, I ask you to keep that very much in your thoughts.

Finally, on a personal note, I want to say how rich and rewarding an experience it has been for me to serve as your Bishop Provisional. Coming to North Dakota was never on my retirement radar screen, except in the capacity of tourist. Instead, the Holy Spirit was at work bringing us together for some important work, and I am glad I said yes! And that you said yes!

When I was approached about the possibility of serving as Bishop Provisional, I looked closely at the documents produced by the Diocesan Discernment Task Force in which you said what you were looking for in this current season of ministry. It struck me that you were looking for a coach who could help rebuild some of the administrative structure of the diocese and help build a more collaborative, collegial, and circular model of leadership, focused on some very specific goals and priorities. You were looking for someone with the heart of a ministry developer and for someone who would work with you, across differences, in the spirit of building a beloved community. You invited me

into your agenda for your future and I am glad you did. My life and ministry have been enriched by and through our relationship and I will continue to do all I can in support of your new season of ministry and the “new thing” that God is up to among and through you. Please continue to pray for me, as I continue to pray for you.