

Diocesan Convention Address 2010

The Right Reverend Thomas C. Ely, Bishop of Vermont

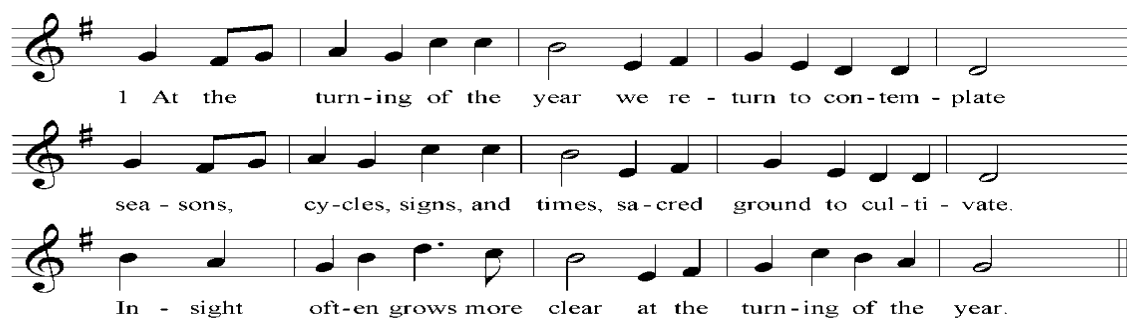
Our Diocesan Convention theme – *Praying Our Life, Living Our Prayer* – captured my attention some months ago and has engaged my imagination ever since. One place this contemplation has taken me is a deeper appreciation for the seasons and rhythms of life, as they are both prayed and lived. The Community Gardens at Rock Point have become for me a living metaphor of this theme. Day after day I walk (or drive) past and survey these gardens as the seasons come and go. The rhythms of seedtime and harvest play out their marvelous symphony on the Rock Point stage.

I have come to recognize that there really is no beginning and no ending to the rhythm of these gardens. Sure, you can name a beginning or an ending point, but that is an arbitrary choice at best since the rhythm is really that of seasons and cycles, and each is really important. The months when the land lays fallow, or covered with snow, are as crucial as the months of rain and sun that break open the ground to new growth and produce. The season of preparation – the tilling of the soil, the planting of the seed and the precautions taken against uninvited creatures – is as important as the season of harvest with its watchful timing for ripeness and careful awareness of approaching frost.

Such cycles play themselves out not only in our liturgies but also in our congregational and individual lives. That has been especially apparent to me this year and so I have chosen to reflect that in my Convention Address. First, I'll offer a brief look back over the ten years since my election as your bishop; next, an assessment of some present realities of our life as a diocese; and finally, a look ahead to where it is God may be calling us as a diocese in the divine dance of seasons and cycles. Along the way we'll mark some of these transitions by singing hymns I've picked to compliment the key themes in my address.

The four hymn texts we'll be singing are from a collection written by the Reverend Michael Hudson, and designed for use with the three year Eucharistic lectionary cycle. Each text is set to a familiar hymn tune, and the words will be projected on the screen so you can sing along. (You can even stand and stretch at those points if you care to do so.)

The first hymn is a general meditation written for Advent that picks up the theme of sacred seasons, cycles, signs and times. (Sing: tune = *Ratisbon*)



1 At the turn-ing of the year we re - turn to con-tem - plate
sea - sons, cy-cles, signs, and times, sa-cred ground to cul-ti - vate.
In - sight oft-en grows more clear at the turn-ing of the year.

- 2 At the turning of the year
waxing nights annunciate
warmer days that promise spring,
even as the sun migrates.
Hope sleeps in the husk of fear
at the turning of the year.
- 3 At the turning of the year
we look back and speculate
on the ebb and flow of life,
asking what it indicates.
Wisdom speaks, and some will hear
at the turning of the year.
- 4 At the turning of the year
we look forward as we wait
for the grace of God in time,
never early, never late,
always distant, always here
at the turning of the year.

My favorite phrase in that hymn is “Hope sleeps in the husk of fear at the turning of the year.” To be honest, there was plenty of fear in this human husk ten years ago on November 18, 2000. That’s when you – the Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont – made a decision that would dramatically alter the shape and direction of my ministry. You called me to be your bishop.

Ten years later and with a few more grey hairs, two grandchildren, thirty years of ordained ministry completed, and my first ever hole in one, I look back and say, “Thanks be to God.” Thanks be to God for revealing the hope and joy and satisfaction that were sleeping in that human husk of fear ten years ago. For truly, I have come to know the great joy and privilege of serving as your bishop.

I don’t intend this section of this my Convention Address to be nostalgic. Instead I want to acknowledge five important commitments that have marked our journey together. These, along with countless expressions of faithful ministry by the clergy and lay members in our various Parishes and Missions, stand out as sacred signs of our common life, mission and vitality as a diocese. I think they are worth celebrating.

1. The first is our growing commitment to care for God’s creation through education and specific actions that reduce our carbon footprint, improve our energy efficiency, and make use of alternative, renewable energy sources. Each is a part of our commitment to sustainability - for our congregations and for our planet. As I said in my Convention Address two years ago, this is the number one theological, moral, ecclesial and political priority for me, and I believe for our diocese. Today, I renew my call for us to be attentive to this in all that we do.

2. The second sacred sign is our commitment to expand local and diocesan enthusiasm for outreach and social justice. This was demonstrated through our embrace of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and the 0.7% initiative; the establishment of our Diocesan Global Reconciliation Committee; and our participation in Vermont Interfaith Action and The United Valley Interfaith Project. It is rehearsed in the many local expressions of outreach that I read about each month in your newsletters; our role in birthing Kids4Peace Vermont and Camp Agape; our many mission partnerships around the world; our continued generosity in giving to the United Thank Offering and Episcopal Relief and Development and our giving this day (and beyond, I hope) to the Haiti Solidarity Initiative, an ambitious project of helping rebuild the Episcopal Church in Haiti. We are a small diocese with a big heart!
3. The third sacred sign is the continued commitment and leadership provided during this past decade to the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons in the life and ministry of The Episcopal Church. I am pleased that Vermont is one of the States assuring civil marriage equality to all couples, and I commend the excellent pastoral work of our clergy and congregations that embraces all couples who seek the assurance of God's blessing in their committed relationships.

All this represents progress and yet there is still much to do. We have only to recall the most recent incidents of bullying directed at GLBT youth, and several subsequent suicides, to know that there is continuing ministry for each of us to do. To live fully into our baptismal promise to "respect the dignity of every human being," in a society where that commitment is not embraced by all is demanding work. We cannot rest from that work! I know we will not rest from that work!

4. A fourth sacred sign is our determined commitment to baptismal ministry. It is in life-long Christian formation and the renewal of the Church through the support of ministry models that honor, value and bear witness to the gifts and ministries of all God's people, that God's life amongst us is revealed. No witness is more important.

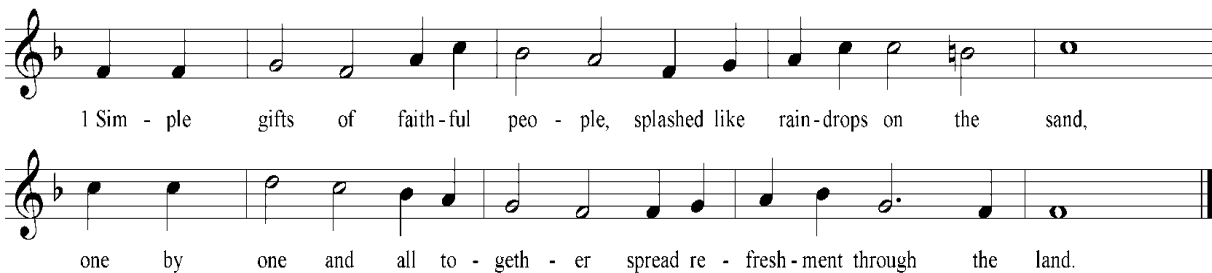
I have said before that the profile this diocese prepared for that election ten years ago reflected more of an anticipated way of thinking about mutual ministry than a description of the way things were functioning on the ground. I have experienced both joy and frustration in the past ten years as we've attempted to live into a truly liberated and fully functioning ecclesiology of total ministry, one in which the gifts of all – lay and ordained – are offered, received, valued and respected in our own hearts and minds. I am convinced God welcomes and embraces them all. I invite us to renew our commitment to that vision.

5. The final sacred sign I want to name is our commitment to generosity in the stewardship of our human and financial resources for the mission and ministry of the larger Episcopal Church. It is evidenced in our work in the area of safer church training and anti-racism training; our engagement in the global dynamics of our partnership within the Anglican Communion; the number of people from Vermont serving in leadership roles in The Episcopal Church; and in our determination to pay our full asking in support of the General Convention budget. The Diocese of Vermont is fully and firmly devoted to being part of The Episcopal Church!

On the local level that commitment is demonstrated in many ways, but none more so than the financial commitment of each of our 48 congregations in contributing your full share to our diocesan budget through our shared and agreed upon assessment formula. It is the rarest of cases when one of our congregations is unable to pay its full share, and never in the course of my years as your bishop has it been for lack of trying, or as some expression of protest. Thank you for that and for the gift of being able to tell that story to my colleagues in the House of Bishops.

These five commitments, each a sacred sign of our common life, mission and vitality, offer a strong foundation for today and beyond.

With that, I think it is time to sing another hymn. This hymn text from Michael Hudson's collection is written to accompany the Mark Gospel narrative of the widow's generous gift. For me, it captures well the sense of the faithful, mindful, caring people in this diocese among whom it is my joy to serve. (Sing: Tune = *Omni die*)



1 Sim - ple gifts of faith - ful peo - ple, splashed like rain - drops on the sand,
one by one and all to - geth - er spread re - fresh - ment through the land.

- 2 Willing hands of mindful people
linked and pressing palm to palm,
like a reef around an island,
still the waves and aid the calm.
- 3 Liberal love of caring people,
given both to foes and friends,
makes in time the sea of difference
that the grace of God intends.

There is indeed grace in all of this, an important reminder as we look to our current situation in the Diocese of Vermont -- for that reality is both challenging and hopeful. Much of the challenge is related to finances, of course, as well as to the aging of our buildings and of our church membership. Perhaps our greatest challenge is the changing cultural realities of people's relationship to organized religion.

It may seem counter-intuitive to some, but in the face of these current realities I believe it is time for us *to invest more* in God's mission of reconciling love for the world. This is not a time to shrink back in either our personal or financial commitments, and I want to name three key places where that investment is especially important today.

First, our Diocesan Ministry Support Team. I think we have done necessary and appropriate work in scaling back our Diocesan Ministry Support Team in response to the economic crisis of the past couple of years, but to do more would severely cripple our capacity to serve you effectively.

The loss of dear and valuable colleagues: Jeanette Tweedy, Connie Saeger-Proctor and Thad Bennett from our team has led to a serious reimagining of the “what,” “who” and “how” of our diocesan ministry support system to congregations, committees, commissions and boards. I want to use this occasion of my Convention Address to publically recognize these three colleagues for their outstanding work on behalf of this diocese and its congregations.

Thad, as many of you know, has taken the “early retirement” option from the Church Pension Fund and is continuing to live in Vermont, and serves the church in a variety of ways as a consultant and purveyor of new and exciting ideas! I am happy to report that Jeanette has returned to full-time parish work at Trinity Church in Saugerties, New York, and Connie is now serving full-time at Saint Anne's, Annapolis, Maryland, overseeing Youth Ministry and Christian Formation. Even though two of them are not here, please join me in thanking them for their outstanding contributions and many fine years of ministry among us. (applause)

As part of the major reconfiguration occasioned by these losses, Lynn Bates has assumed a huge new responsibility for transition ministries, along with being my trusted colleague, confidant and Canon to the Ordinary extraordinaire! I appointed the experienced and talented Susan Ohlidal to the full time position of Ministry Developer. I have continued the full-time ministry of Angie Emerson as our outstanding Minister of Stewardship Development, and the half-time ministry of our award winning Communications Minister, Anne Brown. Julie Giguere continues her super-human, multi-tasking ministry as our Financial Administrator. Patrick Sims continues his amazing juggling act of serving as Executive Assistant to both the Bishop *and* the Canon to the Ordinary. Elisabeth Allison continues her invaluable volunteer ministry as our Diocesan Archivist and Historiographer.

Jackie Risen left her post as Administrative Assistant at the end of 2009, and earlier this year we welcomed into the office two new and wonderfully skilled team members: Iris Darling and Josh Cheney. And, of course, we continue to mourn the loss of our dear sister in Christ and long-time Receptionist, Jan Lawrence, who died on March 15th.

Under the leadership of Susan Ohlidal, this year has seen the expansion and evolution of our Companions Ministry Program as an integral component of our ministry support network. Seven gifted and trained Companions now serve our diocese in a variety of ways, most especially in the work of transition and discernment in the calling of new clergy leadership in congregations. I invite others among us to explore the possibility of this ministry.

I am privileged to serve with all these talented and dedicated individuals, and I pray your patience and cooperation as we work into new patterns of service and support.

Communication is a second area of our common life and ministry challenged by changing circumstances where our investment is vital.

During 2010, the Communications Task Force, appointed by Diocesan Council, completed its work and recommended several strategies for our ministry in this key area. Those strategies include a continued commitment to the use of print media for publishing *The Mountain Echo*; increased use of email communication to the widest possible number of people throughout our diocese; a totally revamped, modern, accessible and interactive Diocesan Web Site; an effective strategy for supporting local and regional distribution of diocesan news and events; and the development and distribution of key evangelism messages about the beliefs, values and mission of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont, aimed especially at those who are “un-churched” or “de-churched.”

Recently, we learned that the Episcopal Church Center in New York made a decision to cease its print media operations and focus on electronic media as its principal communication vehicle. Anne Brown and others are now working to assess the impact of this decision on our commitment to print media, and some promising alternatives are in the works. One way or the other, we are committed to continuing *The Mountain Echo* in 2011. There will be some changes to format and content that we hope will be well received.

This coming Pentecost is the target date to launch our new Diocesan Web Site. It might happen sooner, and I recognize that for some of you it can't happen soon enough! If you want to join this project team, please speak to Anne.

Our commitment to communication is vital to our mission. Clearly linking our congregations to one another and creating more effective ways by which to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ to the world is an investment worth making.

The third area where our investment is crucial is our own ecclesial household here in Vermont.

This takes many forms, including our environmental commitment to reduce the carbon footprint of our buildings; our individual commitments to serve in leadership roles at the local and diocesan level; our financial commitment to maintain and expand our diocesan mission and ministry; and our spiritual commitment as disciples of Jesus Christ to deepen our faith through prayer, worship, study and service.

Later in the course of this Convention you will hear a report from Diocesan Council on our updated Diocesan Strategic Plan. It will, of course, take all of us working together at the local and diocesan level to carry out this vision. I commend it to you.

You will be voting today on a new approach to electing representatives to serve on Diocesan Council. While those who serve on Diocesan Council do so with great commitment and effectiveness, the current canonical configuration of Council is not serving us well. For several years now, we have been unable to have full representation from Deaneries. The proposed Canon changes are intended to provide a good structure for electing a smaller, yet still representative, Diocesan Council. The challenge will be agreeing on the Mission Districts from which the representatives will be elected! Members of Diocesan Council have created this plan and invite your investment. I hope we will give it a chance to succeed.

This Convention will also be making a commitment to invest in our future mission and ministry when you vote on the Diocesan Budget. As you know from your reading and the presentations at the Ministry Fairs, a new initiative is being launched that will invite individual members of the diocese to claim a portion of our common diocesan life and mission. This Annual Appeal, with its goal of \$100,000 is intended to supplement our congregational commitment to the many ministries that make our diocese what it is and to provide funds for new initiatives, including the kind of Fresh Expressions that Emily Scott invited us to consider.

I believe our support of the Rock Point Summer Camp, the Cathedral Chapter, the Mountain Echo, our outreach and social justice commitments, the work of our Earth Stewards Committee and our Dismantling Racism Commission, our involvement in ecumenical and interfaith ministries, and the support offered to congregations through our Ministry Support Team—indeed our entire diocesan mission and ministry—are worth our personal investment in addition to the investment we make through our parish assessments. As part of our personal stewardship, rooted in thanksgiving for the generosity and grace of God, Ann and I stand ready to lead the way in this personal investment. We invite you to join us at whatever level you can.

I think it is time to sing another hymn. It is (not surprisingly) a meditation on Matthew 25: 14-15, 19-29 – the parable of the talents. It calls to mind the Gospel invitation to risk generosity. (Sing: Tune = *Deus tuorum militum*)

1 To think like Je - sus is to risk
 the man - y gifts we have from God,
 not guard or bu - ry se - cret - ly
 our trea - sure in con - gen - ial sod.

- 2 God gives us wealth of soul to dare
 ten thousand good, creative deeds;
 still there are times when saints decline
 to grow the gifts the Spirit seeds.
- 3 We hold a story that explodes
 with news God's mercies never fail.

Why speak the words as if they made
a merely cautionary tale.

- 4 We can live boldly with a God
who ventures grace so dauntlessly
and learn to take, like Jesus did,
the risk of generosity.

Calling to mind the invitation to live boldly with God, following the example of Jesus, brings me to the final chapter of this Convention Address.

Our future will be the briefest section of my Address, not because I don't have lots to say, but because what matters most is how we will live and shape that future together. The decisions we make, the direction we take, the risks we accept, the choices we embrace over the course of the next several years will significantly determine the viability and vitality of this diocese well beyond my time as your bishop, but not beyond the time of the young people who worshiped with us this morning. It is that future that must concern us **now!**

Many of us have given time, attention, and study to what is called by many Emergent Christianity, or the Emergent Church, or Fresh Expressions. I wrote about this in the Mountain Echo last June. Changes in the culture and in the church are both challenging and exciting – and for some quite scary! Change is upon us, and we need to participate in the conversation in order to engage in shaping our mission and ministry for an uncertain future. Many of us in this diocese are being aided in that effort by reading and discussing the book, *Changing the Conversation*, by Anthony Robinson. I commend that book to you, and I encourage conversations among you in Vestry meetings and other congregational group settings.

The author will be with us in Vermont the weekend of June 4-5, next year in conjunction with a special Diocesan Convention that I will talk about in a moment. For now, be aware that the future shape of the Church is at its heart a matter of spiritual formation and connection. It is about relationship and community. While these are matters we know well, our greatest risk is in NOT trying to understand the world around us, not rethinking or reshaping the patterns of our institutional life in order to respond to what God is up to in our midst. Of course, if we do enter the conversation, we risk being changed ourselves, and perhaps that is what frightens some of us the most.

One other thing I want to say about our future together concerns the prospect of a Capital Campaign for our Diocese. Later today you will hear a report from the committee which has been hard at work discerning God's call to us and what might be included in a Capital Campaign, if that is your will. The current draft of the Case Statement, which you will have opportunity to discuss in regional gatherings around the diocese, holds up much of what I have been talking about in this address: Spiritual and faith formation; our stewardship of the earth; our energy consumption and our carbon footprint; communication tools and messaging for a changing church and a changing world; as well as the valuable property resources we have in this diocese, including Rock Point, in Burlington and Mission Farm, in Killington.

Later, you will hear about the timeline with which the committee is working, leading up to a Special Convention, which I am now officially calling for the afternoon of Saturday June 4, 2011, here at our Cathedral. The purpose of that Convention is to hear from the committee and engage in conversation and action in response to their recommendations.

I am not sure where things will stand when we come to June 4th, but I trust that God is at work in this process and that something good will come of it for our diocese and its future. I remind you that the investment made through the last Capital Campaign this diocese undertook resulted in the creation of the several McClure Discovery 2000 funds. Since then nearly \$700,000 in grants and hundreds of thousands of dollars in low interest loans have been awarded to congregations of this diocese, and every single congregation has benefited in some way.

If it is your will that we move forward with a Capital Campaign for our Diocese in the next couple of years, then I am prepared to give that effort my very best and fullest attention. Please hold this discernment work and the members of that committee in your prayers.

Before the conclusion of my Convention Address with our singing of one final hymn, I want to offer you this four-fold charge, which is really my prayer for us in this season and in all the seasons and cycles of our lives:

Remain: Remain rooted in God and God's compassion, justice and reconciling love;

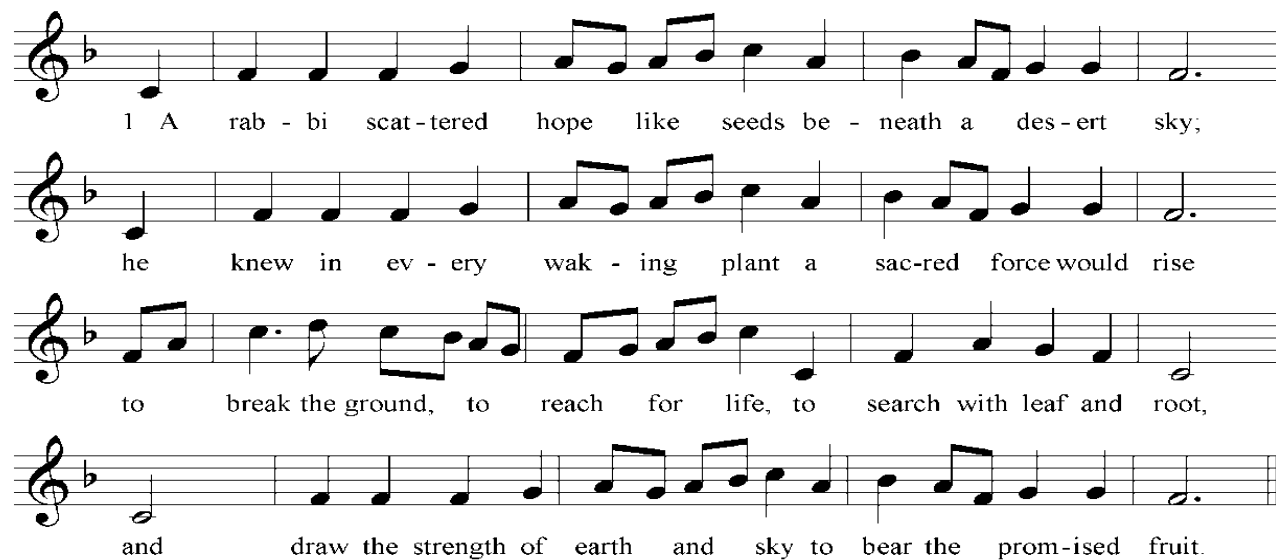
Proclaim: Proclaim to all God's Good News of radical welcome, inclusion and unconditional love;

Sustain: Sustain our witness to being a lively faith community and sustain this fragile earth our island home.

Claim: Claim God's abundance and blessing in the faithful stewardship of your many gifts and talents.

Thank you for the gift of your support, encouragement and collegiality in the common work of mission to which God has called us in this Diocese. Amen.

(Sing: Tune = *Forest Green*)



1 A rab - bi scat - tered hope like seeds be - neath a des - ert sky;
he knew in ev - ery wak - ing plant a sac - red force would rise
to break the ground, to reach for life, to search with leaf and root,
and draw the strength of earth and sky to bear the prom - ised fruit.

- 2 The rabbi saw the desert bloom,
the Eden of his prayer,
a garden ripe with hope and life
and also ripe for care.
“So come,” he says, “my friends, with me
to tend, to sing, to plod –
the earth cries out to celebrate
the greening love of God.