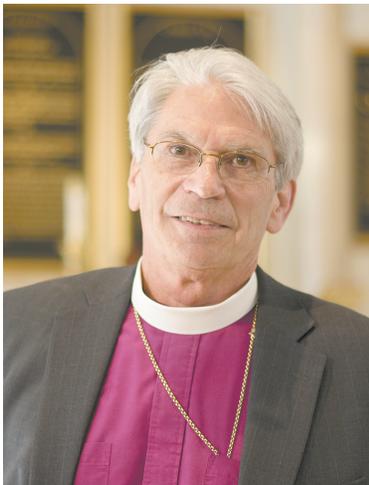


Bishop's Address—2018 “A Sower Went Out To Sow”

The following is the prepared text for the address Bishop Mark Lawrence, the XIV Bishop of South Carolina gave at the Diocesan Convention held at Christ Church, Mt. Pleasant, March 10, 2018. Note: This written version varies somewhat from the audio version.



Jesus said, “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path.... Other seed fell on the rocky ground.... Other seed fell among thorns.... And other seeds fell into good soil....” Do you hear the refrain in our Lord’s parable? A sower went out and sowed seed, and some fell along... fell on... fell among... fell into.... The Sower cast the seed generously. He’s casting it here and there and everywhere. There is nothing parsimonious about this preacher. No!—he’s trusting God and speaking the Gospel, speaking the Gospel and trusting God—sowing the seed abroad. For remember—he went out to sow. No staying in the barn, in the storehouse, or in the silos for him—no, he went *out*. Some scholars cite historical literature, which suggests that Palestinian farmers plowed the land before they sowed. Which suggests a radical almost reckless labor. Yet other early documents suggest they sometimes sowed first and then tilled afterward, embedding the seeds in the soil. In our Lord’s telling of this parable, in which he clearly means to describe his own ministry as well as giving a model for his disciples—the sowing is done as widely as possible, and I believe, before the plowing, leaving it to God to bring forth the harvest. For even with so much of the seed falling in fruitless soil the yield is still great—thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” Such hopefulness, such trust! And Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” I fear that I for one have been slow to hear! What is a bishop for, what is a diocese for, what is a church for if it is not to sow the seed—the seed of the gospel? This is always our highest agenda—to go out, and as one preacher has said—to name God in the world—“Trust God and speak the gospel, speak the gospel and trust God.” (David Buttrick)

Before I go any further with my purpose, let me get something out of the way. Call it litigation—legal updates—the financial challenges it brings. You may think it is the elephant in the room. I suggest to you it is not. Certainly, the most recent legal volley from The Episcopal Church is an attempt to bring every congregation of the diocese (and even those outside the diocese) into their crosshairs. But, it is not the elephant in the room. An elephant in the room is a metaphor for what many fear is a problem that is do not acknowledge openly. Frankly, the legal battle is acknowledged everywhere I go. Whether

at Bishop's forums, coffee hours, vestry meetings, church door handshakes, evening phone calls, or casual dinners. Then there is the related question, such as, "If we should we lose, who will stay with the building and who will not?" All I will say of this for now is what I hear in my quiet moments from the Lord that now is no time to lose my resolve! Therefore, by God's grace, I shall not. I suggest the same for you. But if your congregation needs a refresher course about the theological issues that led to our dissociation from TEC may I suggest you get a copy of the video that Al Zadig and Kendall Harmon are making at St. Michael's entitled: *"Why the Battle? Different God and Gospel."* Thank you, Al and Kendall.

So that said, I want to address what I believe *is* the real elephant in the room. I have been your bishop now for ten years. The first five years were in the context of theological and ecclesiastical struggles to remain "intact and in TEC": the last five in litigation to be "intact and out of TEC". As I reflect on this decade—just a mere one thirty-fourth of the time Anglicanism has been in Charleston and one twenty-third of the time the Diocese of South Carolina has been in existence, I realize I am sojourner among you. If the years that Anglicanism has been here were measured as one hour my years with you would be considerably less than two minutes. And in that hour there has been wars and rumors of wars. There have been rectors removed from their pulpits in the midst of British occupation and reinstated after the Revolution. There have been Union soldiers housed in our churches and surgeries performed on Southern gravestones. A Confederate submarine sunk in Charleston harbor and German submarines lurked off the Carolina coast. There have been fires and floods, earthquakes and plagues. The ironies abound. One of my predecessors in his Bishop's Address in the late 19th Century wondered what could be done about the declining churches along the coast, for some of the parishes could hardly stay open—all the growth was inland. Parishes in the Low Country were languishing. Now the Low Country and the coastal regions are so bursting with people moving in from elsewhere one can hardly navigate the roadways. Instead, we ask what we should do about our congregations in the small towns of the Midlands and the Pee Dee. It is they who struggle to keep their church doors open. The hymn writer, Issac Watts might well have had them in mind when he wrote:

"Time like an every rolling stream bears all our years away; /they fly, forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day. /O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, /be thou our guide while life shall last, and our eternal home."

Indeed, are we not all sojourners? An ever-changing environment is the normal backdrop to life; change is the real constant. Hence there are always "good reasons" for the sower not to go out. This I believe is the elephant in the room. It is the main theme of this address. Jesus said, "A sower went out to sow." It did not matter to our Lord that there was uncertainty—he went out to sow. Uncertainty is arguably, why we need to go out to sow. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" so must we go out into the field. I have spoken about this in one way or another at almost every diocesan convention. It seems always to lose out to other pressing concerns. Sadly, I have let it. Today feel compelled to look briefly at two biblical texts, which over the last five years have loomed

troublingly in the back of my mind. I have pondered them often and spoken of them rarely. The Book of Acts is a missionary manifesto. Uniquely, of the books of the Bible, it reveals the Holy Spirit—in the words of the Anglican missiologist, Roland Allen—he is a Missionary Spirit. “Restlessly the Holy Spirit drives the church to witness, and continually churches rise out of the witness.” (Harry Boer)

Take for instance this passage from Acts 8: “*Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.*” (Acts 8:2-3) You will recognize that when Luke says Saul entered house after house he was not merely dragging people out of their homes. The church was meeting in homes. The persecutor, along with dragging individuals from their homes, was harrying the leaders of congregations. Clergy and lay leaders make note. When the Disrupter comes, he puts you in the crosshairs in order to disrupt the body of Christ. But our text then goes on to say: “*Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did... So there was much joy in that city.*” These disciples though driven out of their churches and homes in Jerusalem continued to preach the gospel of Christ. They are following their Lord’s example they are sowing the seed. The persecution actually spreads the faith and leads to Philip planting a church among the Samaritans. Later, the apostles visited Samaria to consolidate the crossing of a cultural boundary. Then the Apostles on their way back to Jerusalem also preached “*the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans*”. (Acts 8:25) And, so the Churches of Samaria were birthed out of the crucible of persecution. Uncertain times—you bet.

Mission—Consolidation, we shall see it again and again in the spread of Christianity. Mission—that is, the disciples go out spreading the seed and as they go, they cross cultural boundaries and the seed sown takes root. Then consolidation—the apostles visit to insure that the gospel that is taking root in the new cultural context is the apostolic faith.

My second text illustrates my point: “*Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, [Greek-speaking non-Jews] and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.*” (Acts 11:19-22)

The same persecution, which led to Philip planting a church in Samaria, led other unnamed disciples under the Spirit’s leading to plant churches in such diverse regions as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. If we had time, we could trace the disciples and apostles going out—crossing cultural boundary after cultural boundary, tribe after tribe, sowing the seed—trusting God and speaking the gospel: speaking the gospel and trusting God. The growth of early Christianity is the story of the gospel preached and churches planted. In the Book of Acts we catch glimpses of the Church in Jerusalem, the Churches of Samaria, the Churches

of Judea, the Churches of Galilee, The Churches of the Diaspora, the Churches of the Hellenists—on and on and on the fire of the Spirit spread the name of Christ. These churches meeting in homes, rented halls, and occasionally synagogues, had characteristics unique from one another, forming a rich tapestry, blending ethnic and cultural characteristics with the gospel of Jesus Christ. All because sowers went out to sow and let the seed fall generously where it would taking root in the most unlikely places. It still goes on today across one unreached people group after another.

Jesus sent the disciples to a world of overlapping cultures. In that respect, it was a lot like our world. I have said in previous addresses that our world today is made up of overlapping cultures. Christian who come from culture live side by side with Post-Christian, Post-Modern neighbors. Various tribes and movements, worldviews and perspective of what life is about and how things should be surround us daily.

This is why for Anglicans, as for most Christian bodies, it is no longer one size fits all—if indeed it ever was. A changing scene surrounds us. I was at St. Paul’s, Conway this past Sunday. During the reception, I met one person after another who was new to the parish. Asking where they came from I heard repeatedly, “I’m from Connecticut.” I thought, “Is Conway becoming Connecticut South as Bluffton and Hilton Head and other places in the Low Country are Ohio South?” The new retirees, some high income some low income—are a mission field—but beyond that they are people for whom Christ died. And with new business moving into this region there are not just retirees in our midst.

If you drive around Charleston, Mount Pleasant, North Charleston, or Summerville to Eutawville on any road other than I-26 and you will see houses being built, condos and apartments in various stages of construction, preparing for an influx of all sorts and conditions of people. Johns Island for instance has doubled in population since 2000. Who are they? Where did they come from? Where are they going? What do they need? (Better traffic flow for one thing!)

In several cases we are responding well. Go to the Cathedral of St. Luke and St. Paul some Sunday and you will see a generational transition that is quite remarkable as the Cathedral seeks to reach its changing neighborhood of mid-town Charleston. It is quite different from the growing congregation of the Buckwalter Campus of The Cross, Bluffton; though both may have drums and guitars, they are reaching distinctively different tribes. Go another Sunday and witness the growing crowd at St. Philip’s, Charleston, where worship is led by clergy in robes, choir in procession, and a pipe organ leading choral anthems and hymns. Sometimes the traditional congregation is told they must cast aside the prayer books and hymnals, choir and robes, in order to grow. But that depends on so many factors that such directives are next to useless. Frankly, your mission, the mission at your doorstep, the mission that God has called you to fulfill should decide such decisions. In Tod Bolsinger phrase, “It is the mission that trumps!”

So circling back, you may say, why Bishop should these texts in Acts unsettle you? It is because I believe that many of us do so little going out, so little sowing beyond the walls of

our churches and our comfort zones. I am afraid issues of affiliation and litigation have distracted us from the sowing, driven us inward, into our ecclesiastical silos and storehouses. [After our dissociation from TEC I met with the clergy of the diocese and sketched the path ahead as clearly as I could see it. The acronym spelled **CAMEL**—Consolidation, Affiliation, Missionalization, Education, and Litigation. **Consolidation**—that is, who-will-be-with-us. This has remained remarkably constant. **Affiliation**—that is, with whom will we associate in the wider Anglican world. This we decided last year with our vote in March at Diocesan Convention and at the ACNA Provincial Convention in June. We are now part of the Anglican Church in North America. Praise God! **Education**—this too has had its day on stage; with the Anglican Leadership Institute, Next Level Leadership Initiative, and a new Continuing Education Fund for Clergy, not to mention a fine ongoing Vocational Diaconal Training Program under the direction of Canon Mike Malone. We have made significant progress. We will add a new lay component this spring when Dr. Kendall Harmon, our Canon Theologian, launches a theology course during the Easter season. St. Philip's, Charleston, will be the venue, but it is geared for laypersons throughout the diocese. Then of course, **Litigation**; this too, as you know, is ongoing.]

Yet what about a strong **Missional** thrust? This has languished in the diocese and in too many of our congregations. That is why these Biblical texts trouble me. I believe either we shall go out at the prompting of the Spirit trusting God and speaking the gospel: speaking the gospel and trusting God **or** we shall go out reluctantly, for the Holy Spirit restlessly drives the church to witness, and churches rise out of the witness. I pose to you the question that troubles me. What if the current legal crisis is God's testing of us in the balance? Either we use the structures for God's mission or lose the structures so we might engage the mission? A prophetic announcement? I will make no such claim. I will only say that as your bishop it is what tugs at me in my quiet moments. It is, for me, the elephant in the room. God has given us too many resources to squander in silos and storehouses. From Bluffton to Myrtle Beach and places in between the influx of people moving into these areas, with even more projected, is staggering. With just a few exceptions, as far as I can tell, most of us are not going out as sowers sowing the seeds of the gospel. The growth statistics just do not bear it out. Speaking frankly, some of us on the diocesan staff have retreated into silos; doing good work perhaps, but too easily forgetting we are here to serve the congregations of the diocese so that you can fulfill your calling under God. Jesus said, "Listen! A sower went out to sow."

What Going Out Might Look Like

So what would it look like for the diocese and our congregations to step out more fully in mission? First, I believe we would seek to engage our local communities in relevant, sensitive witness and evangelism; secondly, that Matthew 25 ministries would proliferate among us; and thirdly, we would partner with one another to plant churches that plant churches. Three of our Pre-Convention Workshops focused on one of these areas: The Demographic workshop, the Matthew 25 workshop, and the Church-planting workshop.

Let us remember, however, that there are conscious and unconscious forces within a congregation and diocese that are resistant to change even when the leaders recognize that change is both needed, and desired. Tod Bolsinger in his book *Canoeing the Mountains* vividly describes this internal resistance:

Families, companies, organizations and congregations are wired for homeostasis. [The organizational components]...naturally work together to keep things the same. The church leadership who calls a young pastor to reach young families thwarts every new initiative. The evangelistic pastor who attracts outsiders to the church is accused of not caring for the church membership. The preacher who was called to bring intellectual depth is chided that she should tell more stories and offer more practical teaching. The elder board that commits to a new vision for ministering to their neighbors will place all the plans on hold in order to attend to denominational issues that have simmered for generations. This is normal. It's natural. It's what Edwin Friedman calls "the persistence of form." Or in the famous saying most often attributed to Edwards Deming, "your system is perfectly designed to get the results you are getting."

Frankly, a congregation that begins to recognize that it is in a changing town, city, community, or even neighborhood, not to mention a post-Christendom world, may decide it would rather die than adapt. With less and less people like them from which to draw, they choose to be nothing more than a spiritual hospice for those who remain. The chief concern becomes whether the parish church will be there for them in their later years and, of course, for their funeral. This may be all that some congregations can muster. It should not be, however, the norm. And even such congregations with just a little leadership and intentional effort can do far more than they presently imagine.

Before concluding, let me say a brief word about these three ways of going out to sow the seeds.

Engaging our local communities in relevant, sensitive witness and evangelism. This can begin with vestries and leaders becoming more familiar with the changes in their community. MissionInSite is a resource that we have recently purchased for the diocese. It has a wealth of information regarding the neighborhood and zip codes surrounding each congregation. What places of business, who lives there, who is moving in, are they low income or high income retirees? Are they singles? or starters? Couples with children? Couples without children?—What is the belief landscape; religious affiliations and preferences; the local church landscape? This is data that clergy and lay leaders can use in seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance for crossing boundaries; making contact; befriending; touching needs; and sharing the gospel. What may be needed first, however, is a change of heart—our hearts not theirs. Call it repentance that one has cared so little for the lost and those outside our personal circles. I name myself too often among the guilty. So often pressed for time, I have allowed issues of consolidation, affiliation and litigation to blind me to the needs of those outside the church. I need church growth eyes—eyes that see the soul that hides itself; eyes to see the city, the town, the college, the neighborhood through the

eyes of Jesus. Perhaps I am not alone. As John Stott suggests, there is such a thing as “holy worldliness.” He goes on to advocate, that in some cases church-based activities need to be reduced so members can be more active for Christ in the community. Data demographics is an important step; heart repentance is another; but as Jesus said—“A sower went out to sow.” At some point we must go out from the walls of the storehouse with the seed of the gospel to sow and, if nothing else, let the seeds fall and take root where they may.

Matthew 25 Ministries. A few years ago, I was meeting with our vocational deacons for a day of fellowship and sharing. I was astonished to hear the breadth of their ministries. It was like listening to the words of Jesus in Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25. *“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me—I could almost hear the Lord saying—in as much as you have done it to these my brothers and sisters you have done it to me.”*

Vocational deacons are called not only to a special ministry of servanthood. They are also called to model the servant ministry that is the calling of every Christian. One thing that is clearer today than ever: the world and especially the younger generations among us, are looking for authenticity in the lives of Christian leaders, both lay and ordained. We have a new group of vocational deacons who will be ordained this June. There is no lack of places from them to serve. But the needs are far too great for any such number of ordained deacons to meet. We must find ways to release the body of Christ for ministry in the world. The Anglican Church in North America has a ministry of matching funds to help jump-start dream projects of outreach to the least, the lost, the poor, and the neglected. We can learn from what others are doing in meeting Matthew 25 needs.

Planting Congregations that Plant Congregations. It is hard to argue with the fact that the most effective way to evangelize overlapping cultures is to plant churches. The data proves it. New congregations have the contextual elements that enable them to speak to previously unreached groups or cultures. According to Tim Keller, “... a key aspect of a healthy church...is that church planting must be natural and customary, not traumatic and episodic.” Keller goes on to assert that “with the exception of the original persecution of believers (Acts 8) there was no ‘unnatural church’ planting in the Book of Acts.” Perhaps so, yet it was only the persecution described in chapters 8 and 11 that led to the movement which eventually carried the day. I know that there are many parts of the diocese where to speak of planting churches could hardly be more irrelevant. Greater Charleston and the Low Country is not one of them. Keller, in his book *Center Church*, delineates types of church planting. Some are less than ideal, such as the *Defiant Church Plant*, where an unhappy division leads to a new congregation. Another is the *Reluctant Church Plant* where growth or the need to reach other generations force church leaders to plant a church almost at first against their will. These he suggests are usually traumatic and unnatural plants as distinct from the *Pioneer Church Plant* such as what the New Testament Church in

Antioch did in sending out Paul and Barnabas on their ground-breaking mission to plant churches where none existed. The other form of natural church planting he identifies as *Churches Planting Churches*. We have seen each of these here in the diocese.

We have also seen satellite plants such as Holy Cross, Sullivans Island, Daniel Island and I'on and The Cross, Bluffton—one church with two campuses. We see another hybrid with the venture from St. Paul's Summerville and the diocese working jointly with Gary Beson in the planting of St. Timothy's in Cane Bay [Tripp]. My dream is for these not to be exceptions but increasingly the normative mindset in our diocese. For as Keller explains, "Churches societies will have to maintain vigorous, extensive church planting simply to stay Christian." I love the answer the Methodist missionaries and church planters in 19th Century Oregon sent back to the "great agnostic" Robert Ingersoll when he suggest soon all would be over with Christianity. They sent him their reply in telegraph—"We're building three a day dear Bob. We're building three a day. All hail the power of Jesus name, we're building three a day."

I know that there are many priests in this diocese serving their Lord and congregation faithfully and sacrificially. I think of Greg Kronz who has served as rector of St. Luke's Hilton Head for 25 years—preaching and pastoring in season and out of season. God bless you, Greg. Some are newly arrived in their parish. They have much to do in just righting the ship, learning the congregation or community or in equipping the saints. Their focus now needs to be preaching, teaching, discipleship, and pastoring. The planting of a new congregation or the establishing of some Matthew 25 ministry may be sometime in the future, but not now. I understand. But the focus on engaging the local community should beg for at least some of our attention. The new convert or the new member so often brings a new glow to even the most staid and stuck church.

Jesus said, "Listen! A sower went out to sow." He cast the seed here, there and everywhere. Generously sowing. . Trusting God and speaking the gospel: speaking the gospel and trust God. What else is the church for? Some seed fell along the path, some on the rocky soil, some among the weeds and some seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and hundredfold. Such hopefulness. Such trust! He who has ears to hear, let him hear." I leave today with a prayer from St. Brendan.

St. Brendan's Prayer

***Shall I abandon, O King of mysteries, the soft comforts of home?
Shall I turn my back on my native land, and turn my face towards the sea?
Shall I put myself wholly at your mercy,
Without silver, without a horse, without fame, without house?
Shall I throw myself wholly upon You
without sword and shield, without food and drink, without a bed to be on?
Shall I say farewell to my beautiful land, placing myself under Your yoke?
Shall I pour out my heart to You,
Confessing my manifold sins and begging forgiveness,***

*tears streaming down my cheeks?
Shall I leave the prints of my knees on the sandy beach,
a record of my final prayer in my native land?
Shall I then suffer every kind of wound that the sea can inflict?
Shall I take my tiny boat across the wide sparkling ocean?
O King of the Glorious Heaven, shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?
O Christ, will You help me on the wild waves?*

Beyond most of us? Perhaps, but Jesus said, "Listen! A sower went out to sow." So I think I will go out to sow. You come too!

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