

Bishop's Address to the 2016 Diocese of Eau Claire Convention November 12, 2016

Dear Clergy and Delegates of the 88th Diocesan Convention,

In 2014 Phyllis Tickle wrote a book entitled, "The Age of the Spirit." One of her themes was that every 500 years Christianity goes through a time of major change. As the printing press revolutionized how people in the 1500's received information, the internet has done the same to us. The Protestant Reformation of the 1500's caused great changes in western Christianity. We as the Church of our time are seeing changes as well.

Frequently we hear the phrase of many Americans, "I am a spiritual person but not religious." What does this mean? Tickle says, that Christianity, is finally moving into the Age of the Spirit. Our history as a Church has been one of at best confusion about the Spirit and at worst a desire to control it. The Spirit lends chaos to the Church as an institution. It also moves us closer, in sometimes strange ways, to what God, the Father, and God, the Son, want of us in making sense of life on this earth.

It may seem that being a faithful Christian in the Age of the Spirit is license to do or be anything you want. I believe it has an opposite effect. No longer does the Church in most instances tell us what to do or how to behave. Instead, we must have the discipline to know what is right within ourselves and act accordingly. Senator John McCain once said, "Honor is doing the right thing when no one is around." Being faithful in the Age of the Spirit is living in accordance with God's will whether we are noticed or not. While the joy of the Holy Spirit opens us up to creative and wonderful possibilities that can lead to an incredibly meaningful life, the Holy Spirit also demands of us sacrifice, hard work, and even aloneness.

When I was ordained your bishop in 2013, there was some discussion as to whether it was an ordination or a consecration. The overall service, as with ordinations of deacons and priests, is called an ordination but the actual laying on of hands portion is known as the consecratory prayer. In many respects these words are opposites. Ordination means the person is raised up to God as the choice of the community. Consecrate means the person is called out by God into a separate relationship, so he or she can care for the community on God's behalf.

Phyllis Tickle in an earlier book, "The Shaping of a Life," which was her spiritual autobiography, wrote that a serious relationship with God brings separation. This means that if we are to live fully into the Age of the Spirit, all of us must accept the reality and responsibility of being consecrated. This implies that we are different from the general population; we may even be different from our friends and families. The price is we may be viewed as weird and outside the norm. The blessing is we become a beacon of hope and helpfulness when other people are in need or despair. As we walk with the Holy Spirit we don't quite know where we are going. We don't supply ourselves with ready made answers and solutions, but we do discern how to ask the right questions of ourselves and for others. This in itself guides us into new understandings that surprise all of us.

2.

Where does the Diocese of Eau Claire fit into all this? By Episcopal Church standards we are an institution. We have a history. We follow canon law. We have a bishop, clergy, wardens and vestries. At first glance we are like every other diocese, but if you explore further we are different—vastly different. By institutional standards we shouldn't exist. When measured by traditional ways, we failed. We have too few parishes and people to be a “real” diocese. Our finances are meager; we have a part time bishop. We are too small to continue.

My brothers and sisters, WE ARE RIPE FRUIT TO BE PICKED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT! With our small numbers and finances, we have become a great experiment. It is fair to ask, how can the institutional Church transition to remain useful in the Age of the Spirit? The answer is to find a diocese willing to leave the old model and transition to a new one. We are the Episcopal Church's bridge Diocese. For whatever reasons the Holy Spirit has selected us to chart the path of change. In the next few months it is our responsibility to understand what we have done right so far, and what we need to do next.

It is valuable for us to first take stock of ourselves. In 2015 the Episcopal Church showed a decline in membership. 95% of our Dioceses declined. The Diocese of Eau Claire had very modest growth—an increase of 30 members and a decline of Average Sunday Attendance of 2 persons. Perhaps the important question here isn't why have we grown, but why, unlike the vast majority of the Church, have we not declined? The answer could be flukes of attendance numbers and no recent purges of parish rolls, but I think there are deeper answers.

A major reason is we have been on a deliberate course of decentralization. In finances we have reduced apportionment to 10%. This means parishes control their financial priorities as never before. Discussions about the relationship between diocese and parishes have moved away from a “we versus they” mentality to one of community. You as members of respective parishes also think of yourselves as members of the Diocese of Eau Claire. In this context, I and your Leadership Council of Standing Committee and Executive Council, as well as your clergy, have called for innovation as standard operating procedure. In short, you are not only free to experiment, you are urged to do it! This means that when Trinity Church in Lugerville tries something new, the rest of us want to hear about it because it may be useful at Grace Menomonie.

The Holy Spirit also calls us to open our eyes and see what is already happening among us. Phyllis Tickle writes of the Emergent Church. For a long time Bob Hoekstra has developed Chapel of the Resurrection as part of Chippewa Manor in Chippewa Falls. He doesn't think of it as Emergent Church. He would say it is a bunch of people who come to worship at a nursing home/retirement center facility. I can understand that when it is a few people, but how are you supposed to describe what Bob has done in leading a community with average attendance of around 80 people on a Sunday? I call Chapel of the Resurrection a new model of Emergent Church in the Age of the Spirit!

3.

In January I accompanied a team of professionals to revamp the medical program at St. Marc's parish in Jeannette Haiti. Last month a second trip took place. The result is the Diocese of Eau Claire is now assuming responsibility for developing local leadership for a Haitian medical program with a reputation for health care equal to the excellent reputation St. Marc's School has attained throughout that nation. What are folks from Eau Claire's frozen northland doing in tropical Haiti? This makes no sense except the Holy Spirit wants us in Haiti, so forget the geographical distance! To Haiti we go!

As we live further into the Age of the Spirit, let's grapple with some questions:

1. What is the nature of the Holy Spirit?
2. What is in us that causes us to fear the Spirit?
3. What are the consequences of ignoring the Spirit's loving call for us to enter into new ventures?
4. As parishes, what institutional traditions block our ability to live into the Age of the Spirit?
5. Where specifically have we innovated as parishes in ways that are in keeping with the Spirit's callings? How has this changed us as congregations and as individuals?
6. As a result of our innovations, what are we to do if the Spirit unloads an abundance of its blessings upon us? What would be our next steps?

I don't know the full answers to these questions. I doubt if you have the complete answers either. The point is the Holy Spirit wants to partner with us and dares us to explore. As we seek solutions, let us study and and ask a final question:

7. Can we discern a process by which the Holy Spirit shapes us? What can we do to be available so the Spirit will reveal this process?

I believe the process by which the Spirit engages us is the core of who we are as a diocese, and what God in his deepest love wants us to be! With my love and best wishes, I remain,

Your brother in Christ,

W. Jay Lambert
VI Bishop of Eau Claire