

Address to the 92nd Convention of the Diocese of Eau Claire

November 14, 2020
236th Anniversary of the Consecration of Samuel Seabury

Dear Family and Friends of the Diocese of Eau Claire,

This, my final address to Convention, is a bittersweet moment for me. As human beings we are aware of past, present, and future. I am appreciative of our past journey. I give thanks for this present moment of one last time when we are together. I also am looking forward to my own future in some kind of retirement. I know you also give thanks for what we have accomplished. You honor the present moment, and it is right for you to look past me to the future. When I first became your bishop, Bill Wantland, 4th Bishop of Eau Claire, told me, "Jay you will enjoy this job; it was the best one I ever had." I agree completely with Bishop Wantland. This is the best job I have ever had. You have been wonderful to me, and I am proud of the many things we have accomplished.

Early in 2013 Bob Weathers and I wanted to reduce apportionment from 15 to 10%. Bob wanted the parishes to keep more money, so they could meet their needs. I wanted to end an "us versus them" mentality, so every member would feel he or she was part of the Diocese just as being a member of a parish. Reduction to 10% began in 2014. In appreciation, for nearly every year of my tenure, each congregation has paid full apportionment—something rare in the Episcopal Church.

As we made the Diocesan budget live within the means of 10% apportionment, we found that fiscal restraint brought financial choices. As a diocese we chose to focus on developing ministries towards young people. Today the Diocese sends any child of the Diocese to Camp Horstick for free, and that camper can bring a friend who will also go for free. I thank Drew Lorenz, Alexandra Lorenz, and Marlene Hogue for encouraging young people to attend. As we relocated Camp Horstick to join with the Diocese of Fond du Lac, we have lost campers. This needs your attention. Please advertise Camp so your young people will attend. In addition we have funded any young person who wanted to attend the Episcopal Youth Event. Four young people attended EYE in Oklahoma City in 2017. I thank Bill and Jackie Broughton for being our adult leaders in 2017 and in planning for the next EYE which may occur in 2021.

A legacy of Provisional Bishop Ed Leidel was to combine the Executive Council and the Standing Committee into a leadership council. He wanted a single unified body. As bishop I prevented this because I am by national canon chair of Executive Council but not permitted to serve on the Standing Committee. Instead we retained the hybrid system left by Bishop Ed. We have a Standing Committee agenda, an Executive Council agenda, and a Bishop's agenda. We vote separately but discuss matters as a full council. The result respects our separate responsibilities while we think as one body. I give thanks to Mike Greene, Kathy Charles, Guy Usher, and Tim Donohue for their leadership in making a good concept a reality.

Another Diocesan body I am most thankful to have is the Commission on Ministry. This advisory body has provided me wise counsel especially in evaluating persons considering ordained ministry. I am pleased to report to you that throughout my time as your bishop, I never objected to any decision the Commission on Ministry made. Skillfully chaired by Jo Glasser, our meetings were times of wisdom and love. Attending was a joy to me as I believe it was for all who were or are now members.

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What the Buffington Trust Board has accomplished since 2013 is incredible! Under the skilled leadership of first Bob Gadwill and now Bill Smith, the Board has expanded the number of residential units owned by the Trust from four to sixteen. With Bob Weathers cranking out numbers of what was financially prudent, and Jim Pelish's legal work, the Board made this expansion possible. With growth we have learned not only how to evaluate new residents but also how to improve ways to relocate residents who no longer can live independently.

Our Treasurer, Bob Weathers, and our Chancellor, Jim Pelish, have regularly supplied me with wisdom and skilled counsel. After working closely with them on numerous issues, I regard them and their spouses as good friends. They have been essential to my well being and effectiveness as your bishop. I am thankful for their presence in my life...even if they are both Army guys! I have not hesitated to ask them to do the unusual. This occurred in 2018 in regard to the properties in Ashland and Bayfield.

Since the 1990's, St. Andrew's in Ashland had lived off its endowment. By 2013 the congregation was down to eight members. We brought in Mark Ricker, and the Diocese helped pay his salary for 12 months. The congregation grew to 35-40 parishioners. After Mark left in early 2017 and a brief time with Michael Newago, Tanya Scheff became Priest in Charge. With great patience and kindness she first won the hearts of her people. She then guided them to come to the decision to leave a structure that had been dear to the congregation for generations. I wanted the congregation to move to Bayfield and transform what had been a diocesan chapel into their new church building. One thing I needed was support for Tanya from the Diocese. I asked Bob Weathers and Jim Pelish to drive to Ashland and Bayfield and visit Tanya. I wanted them to know her and what she needed from the Diocese. Bob and Jim returned deeply appreciative of Tanya and resolved to do whatever was necessary to help her accomplish her work. The result was Tanya's helping St. Andrew's Church to come to its own decision and move to Bayfield. The building in Ashland was sold, and the congregation relocated in 2019. The people repaired the Bayfield church, painted its interior, claimed it as their center for worship, and took pride in calling their parish The Episcopal Church of Chequamegon Bay at Historic Christ Church, Bayfield.

A dream of Art Hancock was to have a cluster ministry in the northern part of the Diocese. St. Luke's Springbrook and St. Alban's Spooner were already accustomed to working together and were happy with Dave Bauer as their Priest in Charge. When Christopher Senyoni came to Grace Church in Rice Lake, the three parishes cooperated further. In 2019 Church of the Ascension in Hayward decided to join. Aaron Zook began to work with all four congregations and successfully recruited Meghan Farr to head what is now the Northern Highlands Benefice. Within the Benefice each parish retains its finances but sends money to the Benefice Board to pay the clergy. Currently Meghan, Dave, and Marlene Hogue provide Sunday worship. What I most want the Benefice to achieve is a mindset that when one parish has an important event, the other three congregations will heartily attend. The effect of this covenanting together is an attendance for the event equalling that of a large parish. I believe that the development of the Northern Highlands Benefice will be an exciting next chapter in the life of the Diocese of Eau Claire.

During my tenure, the Diocese has looked beyond its borders to overseas ministries. The Diocese of Milwaukee Haiti Project began under Bishop Horstick, 2nd Bishop of Eau Claire. This mission to St. Marc's Church and School in Jeannette has been a wonderful story since the 1960's. The school is a premier center for elementary and secondary education in Haiti. A new and beautiful church building recently opened. The third arm, the medical clinic, had been a different story. The Haiti Project asked volunteers from Eau Claire to solve this longstanding problem. Coordinated by John Meacham, volunteers from our Diocese began in

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2015 to take charge of the clinic. I visited in 2016 and helped John, Deb Lorenze, Ellie Allison, Edie MacDougal, Cinders Polgalz, and Jo and Jim Glasser clean out the old clinic of expired prescriptions and trash caused by neglect and yes, rats! In short time the clinic became functional. Today it is a spic and span facility staffed by a physician and several local nurses. Congratulations are in order for all our Haiti Project volunteers. I salute you! Bravo Zulu!

In February of 2015 Mike Greene asked me to drive to Nashotah House and meet Bishop Chad Gandiya of Harare, Zimbabwe. Mike opened up for May Ruth and me one of the most exciting chapters of our lives. Harare and Eau Claire became Companion Dioceses. Mike, May Ruth, and I visited Zimbabwe in June of 2015. In August Bishop Chad sent four students to Nashotah. It became my job to insure their adjustment and well being for the next two years. May Ruth and I delighted in having Friar Joshua, Naboth, Cleopas, and Ishea become part of our family. In February of 2016 Bishop Chad and his wife, Faith, stayed with us for three weeks. Our son, Alex, lived with Bishop Chad in Harare for five weeks in June and July of that year. He shadowed Bishop Chad and helped establish a computer network for the Diocese.

In June 2017, Mike Greene, Peter Augustine, my niece Charlotte Smith, and May Ruth and I attended the Bernard Mizeki Festival where our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, preached to over 20,000 people. At the service's offertory the people were singing for over 20 minutes. When I attended the same service in 2015 the offertory singing was about 3-5 minutes. I asked Bishop Chad why it was so long. He said, "They are honoring the preacher!" This was one of the best moments of my life. I realized that the people were not only honoring Michael Curry but also the Episcopal Church and the United States of America. The four priests have been a treasure to the Diocese. They regularly served at St. Mary's in Tomah. May Ruth and I still keep in touch with them. They call her "Mama May"—a name that delights her.

In June of 2018, Michael Curry came to LaCrosse to celebrate the 168th anniversary of the first Christian and Episcopal Church worship in LaCrosse and the renaming of Christ Church's parish hall in thanksgiving for the ministries of Patrick and Myra Augustine. This event not only celebrated the life of Christ Church LaCrosse but also the Diocese of Eau Claire. In June of 2019, Peter Augustine and I accompanied Myra and Patrick to Bor in South Sudan. We participated in the ordination of Patrick as Suffragan Bishop of Bor. While in South Sudan I met and became friends with the Primate of South Sudan's Episcopal Church as well as the Archbishop of Bor. I came away with a good understanding of that country's complicated national and church politics. If the Coronavirus had not postponed the 2020 Lambeth Conference, I might have been able to serve as a bridge person in improving relations between our Church and the Episcopal Church of South Sudan.

Covid-19 has caused shut down and limited reopening of our churches. It has forced us to have this virtual convention and created financial difficulties among our members and citizens of Wisconsin and the nation. Most importantly the virus has brought illness to over 10 million people in our nation and over 240,000 deaths. I am thankful that I have been your bishop through this difficult time. Working with the Clergy, the Leadership Council, and the newly formed Coronavirus Task Force we have evolved to having congregations choose whether to remain closed or carefully to reopen and possibly close again using the Task Force's guidelines. I thank Paul Chase who has chaired this Committee and members Steven Burns, Bob Hess, Kathy Charles, and Jo and Jim Glasser. Jo has been most diligent in posting new cases and trends each week. I salute all members of our Diocese for their cooperative spirit regarding the pandemic. It is hard to provide clarity of purpose while contending with a disease that we are still trying to understand. As we find ourselves in the darkest stage yet of the pandemic, this week's announcement of an effective vaccine bodes well for our returning to a somewhat normal life in 2021. Meanwhile, most parishes have installed equipment to facilitate

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worship through Zoom and other technologies. This will do much to expand our worship and ministries in the future.

As your bishop I feel a strong connection with each of our parishes. Every congregation has a unique and sometimes quirky story. I have had the privilege of hearing these accounts and at times learning from and laughing with you. When a diocese has a Cathedral, the bishop and the Cathedral instinctively have a special relationship. This has happened between me and Christ Church Cathedral in Eau Claire. Benjamin Thomas has guided the congregation into a new sense of itself. This renewal has brought energy and optimism. At the Cathedral May Ruth and I have had the privilege of making many friends. While I can't mention everyone, I am especially thankful for the love and support of George and Cindi Stamm, Ken Van Es, Missy and Jeff Stepanek, Deb and Jim Lorenze, Ron Hall, Mary Gadwill, Christa Cates, Bill Smith, and Jacob's (my Collie dog's) beloved companion—Jany Chumas.

The Chrism Mass at the Cathedral in March 2013 was an important event for me. In giving my first sermon to the clergy I emphasized that I came to them from a parish where I had experienced a belly full of infighting and squabbling—nearly all of which didn't involve me. I ordered your priests and deacons to look inside themselves. If they had a problem with someone to go to work right away and resolve it. At that time I wanted us as a diocese to avoid negative behavior. I didn't think it possible that through our mutual love of Jesus your clergy would not only refuse negativity but would become positive and incredibly supportive of each other. If I leave any legacy, this spirit of mutual respect, love, and collegiality is my most important achievement. This is an attribute that is not only about our clergy but of our lay membership as well. The extremely high quality of our relationships is the greatest accomplishment of my Episcopate. To say I am proud of this is an understatement.

Every bishop needs support. When down it is essential to know there are people who care about you. All along I have been able to go to any priest or deacon of our diocese and be greeted with kindness. I wish to single out seven clergy of whom I am particularly appreciative. I like to call Peter Augustine our Diocesan Holy Man. His quiet and loving nature, his humility and sense of service, always calms me down. I remember fondly our trips to Harare and South Sedan. Jo Glasser has been a joy to have as our Archdeacon. She is organized, efficient, reliable, and kind. She also has proven herself flexible which she says is sometimes hard for her. Whenever I needed something done, Jo has always been ready to get on it.

Guy Usher has become a dear friend as I have worked with him on transition issues. We listen to each other, vent together, and do what we can to support each other in tough times and celebrate in good times. Scott Kirby has been the senior wise priest who could be described as my "Minister without Portfolio." He has always been attentive to my well being. He checks with me regularly to see how I am. When I bounce an idea off of him, his counsel is wise. In short, Scott is protective of me. Just knowing how much he cares is comforting. I am also extremely appreciative of both George Stamm and Kathy Charles. Along with Scott, they have had my back and taught me much of the history of our Diocese and how things were done in various congregations in the past.

I cannot say enough about Aaron Zook. As I have mentored Aaron, he has learned not to take all of my advice, but he does listen to me. More importantly I have listened to him. His knowledge of canon law and his skills with deployment are exemplary. In a crisis, a bishop could have no better companion. The Canon to the Ordinary position is a hard one. You become a lightning rod for criticism while the most important work you do is private and unnoticed. Aaron has an uncanny ability to know what is important and what isn't. Most of all he is my colleague and friend. In leaving the Diocese, I will miss him.

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There is one last person I must thank. That is May Ruth. I fell in love with her on February 9, 1968. We were both 19 years old and sophomores in college when I met her at a dance. I kissed her within ten minutes. She didn't mind. In six weeks I asked her to marry me. Now, after 51 years of marriage, we celebrate our three children. Since my ordination as your bishop in 2013, we have added two wonderful sons-in-law to our family. We also have a two year old grandson and a one year old granddaughter with a second grandson due in March. In the midst of our family stands May Ruth as the wise and beloved matriarch. Meanwhile, May Ruth to me has always been the same. She remains my lover, counselor, and delight of my life. What Tobit on his wedding night said of his wife Sarah in praying to God best describes my love for May Ruth. Below is Tobit 8:7:

“I take this kinswoman of mine, not because of lust, but with sincerity. Grant that she and I may find mercy and grow old together.”

In saying goodbye, I ask that you keep one thing front and center. In the spirit of Jesus, love one another. Place ultimate value on the great relationships you currently have with each other. Treasure this, for what you have is unusual and extraordinary in our Episcopal Church. This doesn't mean that you can't have opposing opinions. Do not regard an opponent as your enemy but a friend with whom you have a dispute. Remember that an opponent on one issue can be your supporter on another. When everyone keeps this in mind the Gospel is served and the Church becomes the institution that carries out Jesus' will. Rest assured, God is pleased with the good work you are doing! May God bless you, and I will remember you always with deep love and thanksgiving for having the best job anyone could have. May you always have fair winds and following seas! Amen.

William Jay Lambert
6th Bishop of Eau Claire