

# **Building the Beloved Community 2012 as a Year of Shared Learning**

## **The Bishop's Address to the 162<sup>nd</sup> Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of California**

**The Right Rev. Marc Handley Andrus, Eighth Bishop of California**

### **The Diocese of California – A Place of Possibility and a Time for Renewal**

Sister Maurus Allen, a Roman Catholic Benedictine was forty when the message from the great-souled Pope, John XXIII, arrived. Addressed to all the religious communities of the Roman Catholic Church, the message said in essence, “This is a moment of renewal, a time for you to look to the spirit and teaching of your orders’ founders, and a time to look at the needs of the world around you and to discern how your particular gifts can meet these needs in new and creative ways, true to your particular history and central values.”

The Pope’s words lit up in Sister Maurus’ heart, in her imagination. She became one of the first women Benedictines in the world to take advanced degrees in theology, in order to become a teacher for what she and her sisters believed would be the first women to be ordained in the Roman Catholic Church. Her studies took her in directions she had not imagined, and she became a prominent voice in the interfaith conversation between Buddhists and Christians. And forty years after the Pope’s hopeful call for renewal, Sister Maurus had become a wise, loving spiritual director, with numbers of Episcopal women clergy coming to her, and one Episcopal bishop.

When I had been nominated in the Episcopal election process here, in our diocese, part of my discernment was talking all this over with Sister Maurus. She was of two minds about my nomination here. On the one hand, she frankly said she didn’t want me to leave Alabama because of the racial reconciliation and ecological work we were engaged in. But she also said this, “California is the place of the greatest possibility. You must pay attention to this.”

I recently read about an inspiring, hopeful group of Roman Catholic sisters, from many different orders, located all over the United States who have made an alliance over their commitment to the care of God’s creation, the earth and all that lives on it. These Roman Catholic religious call themselves Green Sisters. Even in the scholarly article I was reading, the energy in the Green Sisters movement was palpable. How, I wondered, did these disparate religious communities, tied by their steady decline as much as by their denominational allegiance, gain this energy?

The author of the article had a similar question behind her research – what were the historical roots of the Green Sisters movement? Later in the article I learned this about the origins of the Green Sisters: the same summons from John XXIII that so inspired

Sister Maurus had also fired the imaginations of religious women all over the United States, indeed all over the world. From a small initial group at the inception of Vatican II, the Green Sisters has grown to be a vital movement numbering in the thousands. The author of the article, who interviewed many of the Green Sisters, including those who read this summons from the Pope, recorded the excitement these women who had been living lives of such moving faithfulness, even in the face of increasing dissatisfaction over modes of religious life that had ossified in many aspects. They felt their hearts soar that the Holy Father was calling them to renewal. While many things for which those religious sisters hoped, such as ordination for women in the Roman Catholic Church have not yet come to pass, the Green Sisters was one hopeful outcome of hearing this call that has gained strength and depth over the intervening decades.

Sister Maurus died before we left Alabama to come to the Diocese of California, and I wish that I could tell her that after five years here, my belief in the rightness of her perception has only gotten stronger. What I believed from afar, from reading the profile for the bishop's election; from the interviews and the walkabouts; from reading books about California now and the Diocese of California in the past, I now have thousands of experiences to confirm what I then came to believe – **this is the place of greatest possibility, for many in the Bay Area, and perhaps for The Episcopal Church. And, listening to hundreds of you, clergy and lay alike, I have come to believe that as a diocese we are asking God to renew our spirit, to help us love and serve anew. This is a moment of hope for us as a body.**

### The Mission of the Church – To Serve

But why did the religious orders of the Roman Church reach the state where they needed such renewal? More to the point, why has The Episcopal Church reached the point where it needs renewal?

First, the world changed broadly speaking, and some institutions were in the advance guard of that change, and naturally some were not. In the past, generations of Episcopalians didn't need to actively carry the Gospel into its neighborhood– people steadily came to the Episcopal Church, overcoming what might have been for them unfamiliar liturgies and difficult hymns, just as they came to the Presbyterian Church, the Methodists, all the Main Line denominations and Roman Catholicism. We no longer have a flow of people into churches, and as a denomination we have not adjusted our behavior to move from a receiving mode to a more active mode of engagement.

Many of us have also come to believe some stories that help keep us inside our churches. First, we believe that most people outside the church are spiritual but not religious. Secondly, if the un-churched should wish to move into a religion, it is not Christianity that they want. We believe there is a negative perception of Christianity.

While both of these narratives may be true for some, they are certainly not true for all. There are many people who yearn for something deeper, more meaningful than vague spirituality. They want to be in touch with wisdom, and practices that open up their hearts

and their minds. Many people are searching for communities that go deeper than social clubs organized around a shared activity or interest. And more and more people are isolated in the extreme as their job searches stretch out beyond months to years, and they face crushing debt, and no longer know how to support their families. Feelings of guilt and shame, not earned or deserved but real nevertheless, push people into deeper isolation. They are longing for community, for communion and it is highly unlikely that they will find the warmth of our parish and mission communities if we don't reach out to them. In the midst of need, and a world with greater isolation, I believe that many people are searching as well for Christian communities, not just any religious community. Perhaps they are confused and put off by messages of intolerance in the mouths of professed Christians, but how will those distortions ever be dispelled if we are not willing to be God's partners in doing so?

**I believe that in each of you is a treasure store of stories of faith that have transforming, saving power through the grace of God.** It is in part by remembering and sharing those stories that we become partners with God in working the miracle of life out of death. In the Diocese of California we have been learning more and more about how to tell our stories, using the method of Public Narrative that made its way into The Episcopal Church at the last General Convention. I was one of the people who received training in teaching Public Narrative and served as a group facilitator at the General Convention. I worked with a group whose members all came from the same diocese. Their most senior member didn't cotton to Public Narrative, grumbled through the first session and never came back again. I was worried that this negative response would sour the whole group, but no, instead, out of these old and young, conservative and progressive, lay and ordained, men and women deputies came the most surprising, affecting, powerful stories of Christ active in their lives and in their communities. **The same is true for each of us – not only is there a saving story in you, there are as many saving stories in you as are needed for the saving of your circle of life.**

And I think it is important to remember that as Episcopal Christians in the Bay Area we share many things with those who also live in the Bay Area but are not part of the Church. Think about the reasons you chose and choose to live here. A geography of stunning beauty, to which we feel a commitment of care; a place of unparalleled human diversity; a place of intellectual freedom and maximum personal creativity. All these values we share with so many others here. Even, then, in terms of secular life we have strong connections with our neighbors outside the Church, connections that rest on the deep foundation of what all life shares. If we reference these many points of connection, and are courageous enough to share our stories of Christian hope and transformation, we will find new partners in God's miracle of the renewing of the Church.

Let's invite God's renewing Spirit into our midst. A practical call, as Christ is always incarnating. So, we are not waiting for renewal as a supernatural miracle, but rather taking to heart the truth of what Desmond Tutu said in Grace Cathedral last winter: **God still works miracles, but as always, God wants human partners to work miracles.**

In light of our world where people are in spiritual and material need, and a world wherein the path to Christian community is harder to find – I have a call for our diocese. What we have before us, in this place of possibilities – is a year of opportunity. What are we to do, as a diocese, in the face of deep human need around us – for spiritual and material nurture? In our renewal, I call us to pray and to learn.

I am delighted to say that this call comes from me as your bishop and from the gifted, committed team of staff at DioHouse, and from the lay and clergy leaders who make up the Executive Council and Standing Committee of the Diocese of California. It is encouraging beyond measure to have worked with these people and groups over the past year to the point where we can issue this call to renewal in the Diocese of California.

### **DioCal Church Growth and Renewal is Based in Prayer.**

First, I want us to be grounded in prayer as we seek a new level of church growth and renewal. In the year ahead, I ask each congregation to focus prayer for mission. Providing a grounding for your church community and our diocese in prayer is essential. Sometimes I have slipped into a way of thinking that says, in the face of a friend's sickness, "Is there anything I can do other than just pray?" Of course, at one level I mean that driving someone to the doctor is in fact prayer, but at other times I am speaking from a place that is disconnected, unable to grasp that prayer is the foundation of all our thinking, believing and doing. Prayer is the first and essential thing we need for the renewal of the Church.

### **A Year of Learning that is Content Rich and Relational**

Secondly, I have asked each congregation, through its rector or vicar and vestry or bishop's committee, to consider making a commitment to monthly learning opportunities for "best practices" that support church vitality. Diocesan staff will provide and/or facilitate monthly workshops that a congregational team can attend in person or on-line. There are two key aspects to our year of learning – it will be content rich and also relational.

Among the content that will be available is a diagnostic for mission effectiveness developed by Jim Forsyth and Michael Barlowe, which can help each congregation hold the camera a little outside of itself and take a picture of its current status, for example, the condition of buildings, stewardship, attendance, among other variables. We have been preparing for a time of enriched learning, and teams of your peers, lay people and clergy have been trained to consult with you and your congregation to do this essential diagnostic work.

Other best practice seminars will support our work and learning together in the areas of stewardship, telling our stories, and enriching our common life. Some of what we learn in our monthly seminars will come from people who have studied relevant subjects deeply and care about the Church and want to share what they know with us. A great deal of

what we learn you will teach each other. That is, we are creating places, actual and virtual for you to say what it is you'd like to learn, and to share what you've learned that has worked well for you with each other. How can a pre-school function as a ministry of the congregation? How do you create the best Christmas pageant ever? How do we do year-round stewardship? How do we learn what people in our neighborhoods need? How can we share our stories with people in the circles of our lives?

And so, our monthly seminars will be content rich, and relational – affording not only a sharing of best practices from subject matter experts but also an opportunity for you to share with one another.

### **Church Growth and Vitality is an Invitation**

I understand that churches may feel strained in terms of lay and clergy having the time to take this on – but I extend the invitation to each congregation. I'm asking you, the Diocese of California, to make commitments to renewal. I am asking you to form teams to learn and practice renewal. I'm asking your teams and your congregations to pray for the mission of your congregation and of your diocese. I'm asking your teams to share what they are learning with other congregational teams. I'm asking you to set goals for your congregations, things you'd like to see happen in your congregations, and some way of measuring the degree to which those goals have been met in a year.

### **Hope for the Diocese Of California, and the Enduring Courage of the People for the Mission of God**

**I believe in you, diocese of California.**

**I am asking you most of all to hope and to believe. Hope in the Word made flesh, Who remains with us, and calls us to a new future. Believe in your diocese as a place of greatest possibility, a place where God can call a beloved community into being.**

A quote from Nikos Kazantzakis, from the *Ascetic Exercises*, describes well the movement of renewal -- “Every person has a particular circle of things, of trees, of animals, of people, of ideas – and the aim is to save that circle. No one else can do that. And if one doesn't save, one cannot be saved ....The value of this transient world is immense and immeasurable: it is from this world that God hangs on in order to reach us; it is in this world that God is nurtured and increased....

Where you are seated at this moment, you are in the particular circle of things, of trees, of animals, of people, of ideas of which Kazantzakis writes. But the circle as we see it here in this room, or in the supporting walls of our churches is incomplete, a dotted arc extends invisibly from where we are out into the wider world. And the circle that extends outwards from you is distinct from the one of the person sitting next to you, or from me. You alone can complete that circle.

I used to go early on Friday mornings to share Eucharist with the Franciscan sisters living on Cesar Chavez here in San Francisco. Several other folks would make up the group that gathered with the sisters, arriving by foot, bicycle, and car, taking their places in the small, intimate, and wholly beautiful space that is the sisters' chapel. The practice of the sisters in sharing the bread and wine was for us all to stand around the Holy Table and for each person to pass the bread and wine to his or her neighbor, and on around the circle. It came to me one Friday that the words of administration, "This is my Body... This is my Blood," take on a fullness of meaning as the circle of communicants is completed. But not even completed then, is it, only completing. Completing, Christ incarnating further into our world as I reach out beyond the circle of those able to gather at the table and fill in the circle that only I can fill in. Christ incarnating in thousands of circles of being, circles of loving. This is one way to envision the renewal of the Church.