

Address to the
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Alexander Fulton Hotel, Alexandria, Louisiana

“HOLY PARTNERS IN A HEAVENLY CALLING”

The Lord be with you.

“O Christ, you are the Good Shepherd of the whole of your creation and for this we give thanks. As sheep depend upon the love and guidance of their shepherd, we depend upon you to supply our needs. In your shepherding care, gather us to your side. There, in the flock of those who have heard your voice, give us nourishment for the labour of the day, peace for the evening hours, and rest for the night. In your love for all the world, invite us, as you invited Peter, to feed your lambs and tend your flock. As we have found rest and refreshment in your presence, so enable us to shepherd others – giving protection, guidance, and nourishment to all people whom you would gather to yourself.”

Amen. [drawn and adapted from All the Seasons of Mercy 1987]

We gather together this weekend as “*Holy Partners in a Heavenly Calling*,” a theme which has been drawn from the following portion of the Letter to the Hebrews. “*Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also ‘was faithful in all God’s house.’ Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honour than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was faithful over God’s house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope. Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion ...’* [Hebrew’s 3:1-8a] The author of this letter goes on to say, “*For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.*” [Hebrew’s 3:14]

Reflecting upon the life of the Church at present, and what we have shared in during the past five years, I was drawn to this passage from Hebrews. My thoughts during this time went back and

forth as to what we are experiencing within the Church, and in turn, our diocese, and what I feel God is wanting us to be about. It was during the process of seeking to interpret this that I realized why this passage was weighing upon my heart, and this being the message the author is seeking to convey to the people. For he is reminding them who they are and who Christ is. He calls them “*holy partners,*” and the word “*holy*” literally translating into “*set apart to God in an exclusive sense.*” In other words, we are a people set apart for God in keeping with the priesthood of all believers, and with this comes a responsibility and accountability.

This “*heavenly calling*” is a call from God himself, and we are reminded of this in Jesus’ words “*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear much fruit and that your fruit should abide.*” [John 15:16] Regardless of what is going on in the Church, it is essential to those who claim to believe in a living, risen Christ, that their faith rests in God. For each of us needs to understand that our responsibility is experienced in a personal relationship with Christ, that this invitation is from God himself and that we are being called to a life as redeemed, forgiven people. We are indeed, by the Grace of God, Resurrection people!

There is no other foundation upon which this can rest, and we are reminded of this every time we sing that marvelous and powerful hymn, “*The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord ...*” [#525 The Hymnal 1982]

I shared in the homily yesterday that six years ago, God called me to share in this ministry with you. We all know the past six years have not been easy, and with two General Conventions aside, we have shared in five hurricanes. In fact, when I arrived at the House of Bishops meeting in Salt Lake City, and this was right after our invasion on the part of Hurricane Gustav and Ike, I was asked how things were going. My response was that I had recently been told by a member of the diocese that “this was the fifth hurricane since you arrived, and before you came, things were much better.” Had this not been offered with a little levity, I might have had a tendency to read something into this.

That said, where do I begin this day? There are a lot of wonderful things happening in the diocese at this time, and yes, over the past five years. But there have also been difficult times, times that have been brought about through issues beyond our control – the actions of General Convention and The Episcopal Church leadership.

I will be honest and tell you that I wrestled about where to begin this morning, and decided this convention address was not going to end on a note of discouraging news, but rather one of Good News, and that being the things that are taking place here which truly glorify God.

During the past five years we have seen a continuing increase in the problems within the Church and aggressive action being taken by not only some bishops of the Church, but also in the manner in which some national leadership have chosen to address the conflict.

There are those within our diocese who feel that we should walk away from The Episcopal Church, and others that support the direction that is being taken as we work our way through the

process that is before the Communion. As for me personally, I know well there are those who disagree with what I don't do ... or do. There are some that to this day, who don't hesitate a second to do this, and interestingly, some of these have either left, or have not been a regular part of the Church for the past several years.

I trust you know that my position has not changed, and this dating back to the person you met during the election process, and from where I have stood since the action of General Convention 2003. My conviction and steadfast vision of keeping us in pursuit of a faithful proclamation of the Gospel and response to God's will for the mission of the Church as God stands as it has.

My posture has remained the same on the issues before us, and I continue with my commitment of leading us in a path of faithful fulfillment of the Gospel. The mandate for this was undergirded by our extensive work in the area of reconciliation and healing, and in the passage of two resolutions that declared Windsor compliancy. In 2004 it was shared with you that I was committed to us seeing the work of the Windsor Continuation Group and the labour leading to the development of the Anglican Covenant through to fruition. This work has continued, and at present it appears that the Anglican Covenant will come forth in May 2009, and we pray that it will bear the language that will permit dioceses the option of adopting the Covenant in those situations where a Province may elect to not do such, and a number of us expressed such during the Lambeth Conference as we urged its inclusion.

This is important to many, and as I stated to the Primates in Tanzania a year and a half ago, and speaking on behalf of the then Windsor Bishops, *"we share a deep concern that should the General Convention of the Church elect to not participate in the Covenant process, and therefore 'choose to walk apart,' then we pray there will be a structure that will permit those who desire to remain 'a constituent member of the Anglican Communion and in communion with the See of Canterbury,' to be a part of this process. This is important to the approximately two dozen diocesan bishops that have affirmed the Windsor Report process and expressed the desire to remain in full communion with the See of Canterbury. This is important to laity and clergy across the Church who desire to do likewise."*

Fortunately for us, we do have the Rev'd Canon Dr. Gregory K. Cameron, Deputy Secretary General of the Anglican Consultative Council, and architect of the Anglican Covenant with us for convention, and we will look forward to hearing more on this from him this afternoon.

During the past year we have had several matters that have been handled by the House of Bishops that have disturbed a number of bishops within the House, as well as many clergy and laity across the Church. To begin with, two bishops, the Rt. Rev'd William J. Cox (retired) and the Rt. Rev'd John-David Schofield, (Bishop of San Joaquin) were deposed earlier this year when a vote was held under the direction of the Presiding Bishop. This action was seen by many, including me, as contrary to the Constitution and Canons of General Convention [2006], as Title IV.Canon 9.Section 2 specifically states that if the action is taken by the House of Bishops, then it must be *"by a majority of the whole number of Bishops entitled to vote, shall give its consent, the Presiding Bishop shall depose the Bishop from the Ministry ..."* (Note:

“majority of the whole number,” not just those in attendance) Additionally, precluded in this action was the inhibition of these two men as the three senior bishops of the Church failed to provide consent to the Presiding Bishop to inhibit them. The actions taken in both of these circumstances were done through a pre-emptive interpretation of the Constitution and Canons.

Following this action, which met much opposition post House of Bishops meeting, the Presiding Bishop called a special convention of the Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin for the purpose of electing a new bishop, an individual picked and nominated by her. This action, the calling of a convention by the Presiding Bishop, was also in violation of the Constitution and Canons of General Convention [2006] as it was done under the precept that there was no Ecclesiastical Authority as the Presiding Bishop had declared the Standing Committee invalid. This action, conflicts with The Constitution and Canons as they provide very clearly that the Standing Committee is the Ecclesiastical Authority when there is not a bishop, and in this particular case the Diocese of San Joaquin had a duly elected body to fill this responsibility.

I am saddened to report that this behaviour did not end here, as during the most recent meeting of the House of Bishops in Salt Lake City, the deposition of a third bishop was raised. The Rt. Rev'd Robert W. Duncan (Bishop of Pittsburgh) was deposed on the grounds of “abandoning the Communion” by virtue of a roll call vote with 88 bishops in favour and 35 opposed. I voted in opposition to the resolution to depose. Much time, in fact a tremendous amount of time was spent on this matter, which had been added to our original agenda. Also added was a “hearing” on this with the Council of Advice, and in my capacity as Chair of this body, presided over this 1/1-2 hour session. (I might point out that if you look at the vote from the standpoint of diocesan bishops, that is bishops with jurisdiction, the vote was actually 50 to 30.)

There was much debate over the rightness, or better stated, the wrongness of this entire allegation, and there was considerable opposition to the charge against Bishop Duncan. The resistance to the action being taken was centered more on what was seen as pre-emptive action pertaining to the interpretation of the Constitution and Canons of General Convention [2006] and failure to provide due process. The pre-emptive action as applied to the Canons, and failure for proper process, rest in the fact that Bishop Duncan was never inhibited, nor did he have the right of a trial made available to him.

The ruling to place this before the House for deposition was made by the Presiding Bishop, and as I have previously written to the diocese, I was one of the bishops that challenged the ruling based upon the irregularities stated above. This required a two-thirds majority to overrule, and thus did not carry. This was subsequently followed by a request for a roll call vote being asked for by nine bishops, myself included. These things were not carried out in the form of a rebellious mood, but rather, with deep concern for the direction the Church is moving with total disregard for proper order, adherence to the Constitution and Canons, and a precedent being set that will enable the disruption of any bishop or diocese that does not subscribe to the present direction of General Convention or the Office of the Presiding Bishop.

Some, I am certain, will argue about the actions of Bishop Duncan and some of the people of the

Diocese of Pittsburgh, and seek to justify the action of the Presiding Bishop and the House of Bishops. My argument is not whether or not he did something, but the fact that we have a new rule of order that has evolved, and it has not been brought about by the Councils of the Church nor is in keeping with Canonical structure. As I have shared before, this is a precedent that is a danger to the dignified order of The Episcopal Church as we have known it, and this must be corrected.

Another element of much tension in the Church is related to the issue of property, and in particular, the Task Force on Property Disputes. This group, comprised of five bishops, and three consulting bishops, was brought into being by the then Presiding Bishop, Frank Griswold. The group has maintained an active profile since its organization, yet in the eyes of the present Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, they are not recognized as a body, and she is very quick to state that she has never provided for their continuation. On a number of occasions, and I know this for a fact because I was present, when a discussion comes up about the Task Force she makes the above comment about their existence. This, sadly, is another sign of the Church out of control.

It is my fear that should a correction not be forthcoming with all of these criteria, we are going to see more dioceses seeking refuge through realignment. San Joaquin has done this, and as of this past weekend, the Diocese of Pittsburgh has also, and sadly there are others anticipating this action in the not too distant future. The solution is not in continuing to dismantle the Church, but at present this is what is happening as a result of the direction The Episcopal Church is being led, and through the continuing changes being wrought by General Convention. We simply cannot ignore that which has been handed down to us, or in the words of Jude, I “*appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.*” [Jude 3]

I realize that some would like to see us follow suit and affiliate with this group or that group, but when you truly look at these other groups, and the options at this time, you will find the direction they feel called to follow is no more definitive nor at hand than that which is before us. Yes, there is talk of an “independent province,” but at this point this is at an unknown date and time, and could well end up being a new and unrelated body to that of which we are a part of within the Anglican Communion. Please note that I am not saying anything further about the two meetings I attended this past summer – GAFCON and Lambeth Conference – as I feel enough has been either previously said or written.

You have heard me say on more than one occasion that the Preamble of the Constitution states, The Episcopal Church “*is a constituent member of the Anglican Communion, a Fellowship within the One, Holy Catholic, and Apostolic Church, of those duly constituted Diocese, Provinces, and regional Churches in communion with the See of Canterbury, upholding and propagating the historic Faith and Order as set forth in the Book of Common Prayer.*” [Constitution and Canons of General Convention 2006]

It is in keeping with this that I am committed to us following through with the development of the Anglican Covenant, and at the point of decision and the action of The Episcopal Church, this

diocese is going to have to decide the direction forward. Yes, I will be here and provide leadership, but unlike some of the leadership of the larger Church, I know what the parameters of my canonical limits are, and making unilateral decisions that affect the life and ministry of this diocese is not within the scope of my authority. This is a decision that can and will be made only by a called convention of the diocese.

Enough has been said at the moment on this, now permit me to shift to other elements of my ministry as a bishop of the Church Catholic and the wider Communion. Many, I know, are aware that I have served for the past six years on the Council of Advice of the Presiding Bishop.

This body is composed of nine bishops representing the nine provinces of The Episcopal Church, and we are not appointed by the Presiding Bishop, but rather, elected from within our respective provinces. In our case this is Province VII. The major portion of these years was spent with former Presiding Bishop, Frank Griswold, and the latter part being since the election of Katharine Jefferts Schori as Presiding Bishop. The past year has also seen me serving as Chair of this body.

To serve in this capacity has drawn criticism from some and questions as to my sanity from others, but as I have repeatedly shared, this was a responsibility that the Church placed before me, and we are not always called into comfortable settings. I honestly feel that my presence has brought about benefit for the Church, but as with all things, there is an end. The end for me came during our most recent Provincial Synod, and prior to which, I declined several requests to stand for reelection. Thus, on Saturday, September 27, 2008 my role as President of Province VII, and chair and member of the Council of Advice became the end of this particular chapter of my life.

Many of you have also read of my involvement with Communion Partners, and I won't go into great detail here as this has been given much coverage in ALIVE! and on the diocesan website. But this is an effort being made by a group of bishops and congregations to work toward change and reform from within the Church. This work is designed to provide pastoral care to congregations across the Church that find their ability to function impaired. This plan was reviewed with the Presiding Bishop by three other bishops and me, and is being carried out with her full awareness, and is in keeping with the Constitution and Canons. Initiation of ministry support is at the request of the priest and congregation, and with the consent of the bishop of the respective diocese. At the present time there are about 15 bishops identified as Communion Partner Bishops and some of the dioceses that have had problematic situations are in conversation with the Communion Partners. The originating purpose of this endeavour was an effort to address some of the more volatile situations in the Church. A sign as to its importance on an international scale is that Communion Partners was recognized by the Windsor Continuation Group during Lambeth, and the Archbishop of Canterbury has stated he feels this initiative, along with the Pastoral Forum, will be important to the work of the Communion going forward.

Moving closer to home again, permit me to share some of the Good News that is taking place, and this begins with the fact the ministry of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour is alive and well

within the Diocese of Western Louisiana. Looking back over the past year, many positive things have taken place and continue to do so.

Susan and I experience the wide variety of creative ministries as we travel about the diocese, and are often reminded of the great number of people that are doing so much to the glory of God. One of these people in particular, was honoured by me last evening at the convention dinner with about two hundred people in attendance. It was my privilege last night to name Mrs. Mary W. McIntosh the recipient of the Bishop's Mount Olivet Award. This award was established by me after I became your diocesan, and is given to a lay person whose ministry is above and beyond, and truly exemplifies Christian living, witness and service to others. Mary, was the moving force behind the founding of the Shepherd Care Center in St. Joseph seventeen years ago, and has continued to provide the motivation needed to bring it into a community supported ecumenical endeavour. The ministry was incorporated under the name of Shepherd Center and obtained not-for-profit status six years ago.

With Mary's enthusiasm and persuasive manner, the Board purchased the building they were in, and under a \$77,000 grant from the State of Louisiana this past year, have undertaken major renovations. Through the ministry of the centre, which now boasts the support of thirteen local churches, those in need from across Tensas Parish are provided with food, household goods, linens, clothing, school supplies, toys, Thanksgiving and Christmas food bags, and through the ministry of Rose Kellum, a registered nurse and Episcopal deacon serving at the two local Episcopal churches, Christ Church, St. Joseph and Grace Church, Waterproof, people are able to obtain basic health care. Additionally, I was pleased to learn recently that the Outreach Committee of St. Mark's Cathedral has made a substantial grant to the Shepherd Center which is now under the supervision of Jane Barnett, who took over upon the retirement of her mother this past year. Please join me in congratulating Mary for this wonderful ministry achievement and her reception of the Bishop's Mount Olivet Award.

Moving west across the diocese, and in keeping with providing care for others, I am pleased to recognize the St. Luke's Medical Ministry that is sponsored by the Shreveport Convocation. This ministry which is based out of a mobile medical unit was founded by Canon Ken and Martha Cooper in honour of their daughters. A Board made up of representatives from the congregations in the convocation oversee its operation, and recently, the ministry offered for the first time, a health fair within the community as a part of providing medical care for those without appropriate access.

Last year, within the context of my address, I shared a continuing vision for the ministry at Grambling University and the prayer for the establishment of a full-time priest in this setting. The diocese and St. Luke's Mission have been blessed for several years by the faithful ministry of the Rev'd Edwin C. (Ned) Webster and his wife, Carol. I will confess that one of the things that concerned me most was how Fr. Webster would feel about this vision. When shared with him this past year, he was quick to express his pleasure due to the fact that his 84th birthday is coming up next month and since it has been 20 years since he retired last, he thought it was a good time to try retirement once more. I might add the Webster's also serve at St. Matthew's,

Farmerville and make a 130 mile round trip journey each Sunday in order to serve these two congregations. Please join me in thanking them both for their faithful service to the Church for these many years.

Looking to the future at St. Luke's, it brings me great pleasure this day to announce the selection of a priest not only new to Grambling, but also to the diocese, the Rev'd Thomas Nsubuga, whom I have appointed this past month to serve as vicar and campus minister. Under his leadership and ministry we will be expanding the ministry of the mission and the Canterbury work on the campus. Fr. Nsubuga and his family will be making the move to Grambling from their present home in Oakland, California in the near future. Please join me in welcoming him and his family into our diocesan life.

The Canterbury ministry is not new to Grambling, and the presence of a full time priest at St. Luke's, will not only provide a broader ministry to the community, but upon the campus life of the university.

I rejoice in being able to report that a number of our Canterbury ministries have taken on a new form within the past months, and had the opportunity to hear first hand, the report of a student whose life has been impacted by the ministry at McNeese University, Lake Charles. Susan and I continue to enjoy being a part of the kick-off worship service and dinner at Canterbury House at Centenary College, Shreveport, and then to gather with the students as the academic year draws to a close for their final Eucharist and dinner before graduation or summer break. My thanks to the Rev'd Ben Songy and the Shreveport Convocation for the strength of this work.

Not to be overlooked are the Canterbury ministries in Natchitoches, Ruston, and Lafayette. The program in Monroe is presently in hibernation, and I trust this will be able to be reinitiated in the not too distant future.

Visible signs are witnessed as we see the continued growth of the Episcopal Church Women as new groups are formed or restarted in some of our congregations. A highlight each year is the Time for Joy weekend, and not only do Susan and I get to be a part of the weekend, but also get to witness first hand the enriching experience that so many young women have over this three-day event. Another important weekend sponsored by the ECW is the Celebration of Women's Ministries, and this again being something that Susan and I are privileged to be included in. This past month however, the program had to be cancelled due to the Hurricanes, Gustav and Ike. While many were disappointed in this, all understood. My thanks to Sandra Edwards, communicant of Holy Trinity, Sulphur and president of the ECW, and all the members of the ECW Board.

Speaking of hurricanes, and I did mention this at the outset this morning, although we, as a diocese, did not suffer to the extent we did three years ago with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, much damage did occur. This time around it was more the result of water and the tremendous surges that ravaged the southern coastline. We are still in the process of distributing funds to many of those who have suffered from these storms, and I truly give thanks to all of you - both

individually and as congregations - for the tremendous financial support provided to the Diocesan Disaster Relief Fund. Through your generosity, people from within and outside of the Church have been assisted. My report about the disaster relief would not be complete without my acknowledgment of the Rev'd Liz Ratcliff of Calvary, Bunkie who serves as Disaster Relief Officer and Episcopal Relief and Development representative for the diocese. She did an outstanding job with the coordination of evacuation and relief, and for this I am ever grateful.

The Diocese of Texas suffered severely as a result of Ike, and virtually lost Galveston Island and the surrounding area. In Galveston, Trinity Episcopal School was invaded by more than five feet of water through the school and obviously much has been lost. What has not been lost however are their spirit and enthusiasm to rise above this and return to the important task of educating children. I am happy to say that on behalf of you, the diocese, a check in the amount of \$10,000.00 was sent to them to aid in their recovery.

Continuing to look at the visible signs of ministry, the Commission on Spiritual Formation, under the leadership of the Rev'd Paula Claire Hall of Redeemer, Ruston, has continued to provide excellent programming and the attendance at their annual retreat has reflected this growth. The Commission on Addiction and Recovery, while small in number, offered another meaningful retreat this past summer, and my thanks go to Reece Middleton, chair of the group and member of Holy Cross, Shreveport.

With a great commitment of time and effort, the Commission on Christian Formation, which is chaired by Dr. Cheryl White, St. Mark's Cathedral, Shreveport, has just about completed a curriculum on Confirmation preparation that will be available to all congregations of the diocese, and will be distributed very soon. This was developed at my request in response to the many small congregations that were in need of this resource, but is designed in a manner that will facilitate all congregations regardless of size. I am truly grateful to the members of the Commission for their work on this.

Also in the area of Christian education is a wonderful new book published by Beverly Easterling, Holy Comforter, Lecompte. The book, "*Feed my Lambs*," is written and designed to make the scriptures and lectionary come alive for young children. Her book is being well received across the Church, and you might even find her nestled in the exhibit area waiting to share this with you.

Looking further at the educational offerings in the diocese, the Diocesan School of Theology, which is located at the Bishop's Centre for Ministry in Shreveport, reports the experience of their largest enrollment with the class registered this Fall. The Dean, the Rev'd Dr. William G. McBride, continues in this roll while fulfilling his responsibilities as rector at St. Matthias, Shreveport. Also housed out of the Centre for Ministry is the Institute for Lay Ministry under the direction of Canon James D. Boyd, M.D., and the Institute has just completed the worship training with more than three hundred lay people in four of the five convocations. A session will be scheduled in the last convocation, Lake Charles, in the near future.

Not to boast, but I do say proudly, Hardtner Camp and Conference Center had one of their best Summer camping sessions yet over this past summer. Congratulations are indeed in order for the Rev'd Whit Stodghill, chair of the Summer Camping Committee and the members of this group, and to Pat Higgins, executive director of Camp Hardtner and his staff. The Rev'd Deacon Boo Kay and the Board of Trustees are continuing to look at ways in which the camp can be better utilized. We will hear from Pat a little later today and learn more about what is taking place.

Other ministries continue to reach out and touch people in a multitude of ways, and this includes the Commission on Stewardship who sponsored an outstanding Stewardship conference this year. Brenda Milam of St. James, Alexandria deserves the credit for this, along with credit for the Education for Ministry program which she coordinates across the diocese. Through the ministry opportunities of the Daughters of the King overseen by Anita Luff, St. Andrew's, Moss Bluff; The Brotherhood of St. Andrew, and especially Kevin Bordelon, St. Timothy's, Alexandria, national coordinator for our diocese; Cursillo, currently chaired by Karen Nash, Christ Memorial, Mansfield; Kairos which draws many from across the diocese; Louisiana Interchurch Conference and the ecumenical presence of Fr. Wayne Carter; the Commission on Ministry, for whom I am ever grateful for their work in the discernment process for the ordained ministry, and chaired by Herschel Richard, St. Mark's Cathedral, Shreveport.

Our youth ministry continues to offer a variety of events for youth and young adults, and my thanks to Monet Brashear for not only heading this up, but for also serving with the Provincial youth network. And while I am speaking of the youth, my thanks to the trainers for our "Safeguarding God's Children" program and my appreciation for the almost two thousand people in this diocese that have taken the training. Through this offering we can indeed make the church a safer place.

The Commission on Evangelism endeavours to capture every opportunity to spread the word about lives being changed through Christ, and in the event you are interested in their program offerings for congregations, there is a handout document on the literature table outside the convention room. My thanks to the Honourable Canon Dee D. Drell for his leadership.

My gratitude is offered with great thanksgiving for the work and ministry of the Commission on Liturgy and Music and their leadership at diocesan events. A fine example of this was the liturgy shared yesterday at St. Francis Xavier Cathedral, and it is important to acknowledge not just the commission members, but the Diocesan Altar Guild for their fine work, and the leadership of Dr. Frank Fuller in the absence of Canon James D. Boyd, M.D. On a personal note, I ask your prayers for Jim as he undergoes radiation treatments at this time. I know he was with us in spirit and prayer at the opening Eucharist yesterday, and our gathering this day.

The Commission on Anti-Racism, chaired by the Very Rev'd John Clark, of Trinity, Crowley and St. Barnabas, Lafayette, and members of the commission, presented an excellent all day workshop this past Spring that drew people from across the diocese. The Mission Department of Diocesan Council sponsored a much sought after conference on "Small Churches" two

months ago. My thanks to Canon Larry Wilkes and the members of the Mission Department for their work on this.

Not to be overlooked is a commission that is not really visible in the diocese because their ministry is exercised in far off places, and this is the Commission on International Mission which is chaired by Tom Dalton, St. Paul's, Shreveport. The missionaries are members of congregations from just about every corner of our diocese and their work reaches out to Africa, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras. We will be honoured to hear more about this work from Tom later today, and are blessed to have Edwina Thomas, director of Sharing of Ministry Abroad, here with us to enlighten us further about the importance of mission work. I have personally known Edwina for more than twenty-five years and am pleased to have her with us today.

In addition to the things shared here, there is a continuing opportunity to read about the variety of ministries and activities that are being offered for the benefit of all. ALIVE!, our diocesan newspaper, is moving in a direction of focusing more on the life of the diocese and not only what has taken place, but also that which is to come. Bob and Maryse Harwell do so much for us, and all of this on a part-time basis. For their commitment and labour on behalf of us all, I am most thankful.

Earlier in this address I touched on the wide variety of exciting ministries that Susan and I encounter that are taking place in a number of congregations in the diocese, and this brings me back to a point that I have raised on a number of occasions. What I am about to say is not to minimize the conditions within the larger Church, but to bring home a fact about the conditions here in Western Louisiana. I have found over and over again, the congregations that are focusing on ministry, rather than getting bogged down in that over which we have no direct control are growing. They have not gotten caught up in the ditches on either side of the road, but rather, are about the mission of the Church, the ministry to which God has called us, continues to call us, and will always call us! To this end, over this past year, confirmations across the diocese are up 55% and the number received is up 98%. Thinking of this I could not help but think about the words of yesterday's Gospel at our opening Eucharist, *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."* [John 15:1-2]

My brothers and sisters, this is what happens when we are willing to share a vision and desire to be *"holy partners in a heavenly calling."*

Turning back to the Letter to the Hebrews for a moment, we find the following words of counsel, *"For you have need of patience, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised."* [Hebrews 10:36] Bearing these words in mind, I will tell you that on more than one occasion I have told people that never in my life would I have believed that God would bring me all the way to Western Louisiana to teach me patience, and to use a chapel built in 1858 to accomplish this. But I tell you, if ever I have had to exercise patience, it has been with the restoration of Mount Olivet Chapel and the renovation of the parish house. I stood here last

year and reported how frustrating it was for things to be moving so slowly as a result of architectural delays, but hopefully something would happen soon.

Well, let me tell you, things started, and I cannot thank our contractor, Ratcliff Construction, enough for the wonderful job that is being done and the expedient, yet careful manner this is being carried out. Robert Ratcliff's personal attention to the project is for the benefit of us all. The time line at present is for completion sometime late May and with us moving back into Diocesan House by early June. Unfortunately the delays and increase in costs related to hurricane recovery have added about 20% to the cost, but fortunately unrestricted funds given to the diocese will cover this shortfall. As shared before, once completed, the chapel will be used as a Bishop's Chapel. The work necessitated our move to temporary quarters for diocesan operations, but thanks to the gracious support of Sammy Dunbar of St. James, Alexandria, we have the benefit of comfortable and efficient work space at Dunbar Plaza in Alexandria.

Lastly, let me say a word about All Saints' Episcopal School in Vicksburg, Mississippi. I believe most know the history of this school and the fact that it is owned by four dioceses, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Western Louisiana. The school has been closed for about two years and efforts have been made to dispose of the property, but this has been long coming. It pleases me to say that I received a telephone call this past Tuesday from Bishop Duncan Gray of Mississippi to report the property is being leased by AmeriCorp, a federal program, as a regional location for their program. The lease, which was signed this past Wednesday, is in the amount of \$835,000.00 per year, and further, they have been authorized and funded for up to \$2.2 million dollars in renovations and upgrades. This arrangement will not only take care of paying the outstanding liabilities over the next couple of years, but leaves us with the property, and in a much improved state at that.

In closing, permit me to say once again that it is my honour to serve as your Bishop, and to share with you in this ministry, a ministry that is not ours, but our Lord's, a ministry that has been entrusted to us. Or as is read in Hebrews, "Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ was faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope." [Hebrews 3:5-6]

I began with the statement from Hebrews about "*heavenly partners*," and I will end with an expression of my appreciation for those who share in the partnership of our diocesan office. My thanks go without bounds to Dianne White, Kathy Richey and Canon Larry Wilkes for the support in the ministry and work that we are about, and the work of my two chancellors, John McLure and Steve Yancey, and our treasurer, Gray Easterling.

The last person to be recognized is a person you all know well, and that is the beloved "*heavenly partner*" that God blessed me with, Susan. She does much for not only your Bishop, but for all of us in Western Louisiana, please join me in thanking her.

Now let us pray.

“O Christ, all people are your flock, all the world your pasture. Lift our eyes beyond the borders of this diocese to the far horizons, that we might feel urgent deep compassion for your weary world and the care of your Church. As a shepherd cares for and knows each sheep by name, we now pray for those we love, and those we would love with your help, Lord, hear our prayer for all your people.” Amen. [drawn and adapted from All the Seasons of Mercy]