

# **The Pastoral Address of the Rt. Rev. Peter James Lee to the 209th Annual Council**

*January 30, 2004*

In 1992, I visited Northern Ireland as part of a sabbatical leave. My project was to observe Anglican churches at work in areas of extreme conflict. I had been to Jerusalem and Johannesburg, and Kristy joined me in Belfast.

The Archbishop and Lady Eames welcomed us and made certain nothing was left out of our understanding of the country. They took us to the central police station in Belfast for a briefing. We visited the forbidding wall that divided Roman Catholic neighborhoods from Protestant, and we went to a Christian community where Roman Catholics and Protestants worked and prayed together for peace. We passed through military checkpoints with the Eameses. We saw close hand their passionate and courageous leadership of a church committed to reconciliation.

The Eameses' extraordinary hospitality extended right to the bus station in Armagh. Our departure for the West Country of Ireland and the thatched roof cottage arranged for us by the Archbishop was in danger, but not from any political tensions. Our VISA was denied because the station agent had never heard of "NCNB," the North Carolina National Bank. The Archbishop kindly dug into his pocket and bought our tickets. We took it as another sign of his generosity...not daring to ask how badly he wanted us gone!

We welcome the Eameses to the 209th Annual Council of the Diocese of Virginia. They are here not to observe us in a time of conflict, but to rejoice with us in our identity as part of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

In 2007, we will mark the 400th anniversary of Anglican ministry in Virginia. It is our intention and our joy to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship through our service to the communion.

Most of our fifteen regions and many congregations have partnerships with overseas dioceses and parishes of the Anglican Communion. Bishop Gray and a mission team from our diocese will be in the Sudan next month to explore ways we can be of support to the church there as that war torn country enters what we pray will be a new era of peace. A team from Virginia is currently present in Kampala, Uganda, for the enthronement of the church's new primate. Teams from Virginia have been in Honduras and the Dominican Republic in recent months. I chair the American Friends of the Canterbury Cathedral in the United States. Bishop Gray has just completed his service as president of the Compass Rose Society, raising money for the communion.

We are a diocese thankful for our Anglican identity and committed to service of the communion, even as we acknowledge that our communion is living with significant differences.

When there are differences among us, as there have been in most periods of the church's history, we by our behavior toward one another need to affirm our belief in one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Because we are human beings with different experiences, different perceptions, and different interpretations of the truth that is in Jesus, we often exaggerate our differences in such a way that they become weapons to divide rather than gifts we might bring in humility to offer each other.

The ministry God has given me as your bishop includes recognizing and celebrating the diversity of gifts in the Diocese of Virginia. That shared ministry of honoring the variety of gifts among us is greatly strengthened by sharing episcopal ministry with my colleagues, David Jones and Frank Gray. We have differences among us, but I see them as gifts, not sources of division, gifts to be used in the building up of the Body of Christ.

Twenty years ago, on February 11, 1984, in St. George's Church, Fredericksburg, the 189th Annual Council elected me bishop coadjutor. It was not a landslide. I was elected on the eleventh ballot. Election of a bishop requires a majority of lay and clerical votes, the two orders voting separately. The lay delegates gave me their majority votes on the seventh ballot. The clergy required four more ballots to complete the election.

For nearly twenty years, we have worked together to strengthen the mission of Christ in the Diocese of Virginia. In the first months after my consecration I visited each of the fifteen regions, speaking to the clericus in each of them. I made one promise in each meeting. I said, "I will disappoint you."

The expectations of any new bishop, or new rector, are so varied from so many parts of a faith community that someone is bound to be disappointed. I have kept my promise.

You have exceeded my expectations of you. The Diocese of Virginia has grown in the last twenty years. Your commitment to Christ, expressed in the vitality of our congregations, in the health of our institutions, from our Church Schools, to our conference centers, to our retirement communities, to your commitments to our Fifth Century Fund all demonstrate that in all our diversity of activity and diversity of theological emphases, we hold to One Lord, One faith, One Baptism.

That central identity of affirming one Lord, sharing one faith, bound together in one baptism is a great strength of the Diocese of Virginia, reminding us that across the spectrum of theological opinions, it is the mission of Christ at our center and not our differences.

It is that center that enables us to unite in the five priorities that guide the development of our budget and program.

The Fifth Century Fund through its Mustard Seed program raises money to further the priorities of the Diocese. We are committed to strengthening existing congregations. In 2003 and so far this year, we have given \$350,000 in Mustard Seed grants to twenty-six congregations to enhance their ministries.

We continue to emphasize church planting. We welcome at this council St. Gabriel's Church, Ashburn, as a diocesan mission. St. Clare's Church in Western Henrico County, and All Souls Church in Atlee, north of Richmond, are two congregations in the process of formation that began holding public worship in November 2003. Mustard Seed grants totaling \$158,000 were used for church planting in 2003 and 2004.

Our commitment to outreach is evident in the many efforts in our congregations to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and build a society where human dignity may flourish and abound. Since the Diocesan Fund for Human Need was established in 1989, it has given 130 grants to parishes and regions, totaling more than \$595,000. Sixteen Mustard Seed grants for outreach in 2003 and so far in 2004 total \$98,000. Others help us with outreach. The Jessie Ball duPont Fund gave us \$25,000 last fall to help victims of Hurricane Isabel and Episcopal Relief and Development gave us an emergency grant of \$10,000.

Ministry by and among young people is central to our life. Since the Day of Pentecost 2002, your Virginia bishops have given vouchers for short term mission trips to over 1,300 young people when we confirmed them. Young lives are changed when they encounter the vibrancy of Christian life in settings very different from their own comfort zones, on short term mission trips that can change their lives. Mustard Seed grants for youth and young adult ministries in 2003 and so far in 2004 have totaled \$80,000 in eight grants.

One way lives are transformed in Virginia is through retreats and conferences at Shrine Mont and the Virginia Diocesan Center at Roslyn. 2003 saw the opening of a new dining hall and three new residence halls at Roslyn funded through a six million dollar bond issue. Shrine Mont continues its program of renovating its houses and camping facilities. \$45,000 in Mustard Seed grants was used at Shrine Mont.

Each of these five priorities continues to guide our diocesan activity. And each has been affected by the reduction in giving that we have experienced since the General Convention of 2003. My prayer is that Virginians with different views on controversial matters can unite in supporting those mission priorities that can help bring us together.

Over the last several years, before the controversy stirred by last summer's General Convention, the level of parish giving to what we do together in the diocese has not kept pace with the level of giving by individuals to congregations. I believe the time has come for the people of the Diocese of Virginia to identify the extent and quality of what we do together as a diocese and how we might support more effectively the diocesan activities we expect. At some point before the end of this decade, I expect to call for a bishop coadjutor who will eventually succeed me, and any new diocesan bishop should reasonably expect the support for diocesan ministry to be secure and stable. I hope, therefore, that you will adopt the resolution submitted to this Council by the Executive Board to study diocesan support and present a recommendation to next year's council.

A task group on ministry continues to work on ways of improving ways the ministries of lay and ordained persons in our diocese may be more effectively empowered. I hope this council will adopt the resolution on the vocational diaconate so that its development may be part of the task group's agenda.

The Diocese of Virginia has often studied the implementation of the vocational diaconate through exploration by the Standing Committee and Commission on Ministry. There has been an historical reluctance to ordain vocational deacons because of anxiety that the ministry of vocational deacons might compromise the strong tradition of the ministry of the laity in Virginia.

I believe we have come to an understanding that the presence of vocational deacons in our common life will enhance and empower the ministry of all the baptized, rather than diminish that ministry. I am grateful to the Task Group on Revitalizing the Diaconate in the Diocese of Virginia, and I hope you will study carefully its report to this council.

We have experienced a vocational diaconate in Virginia in the past.

For many years, the Diocese of Virginia was blessed by the ministry of deaconesses in the mountain missions of Virginia. When the order of deaconess was revived in the late Nineteenth Century, we began in the old Archdeaconry of the Blue Ridge an effective ministry of teaching and community services through our deaconesses in the mountain missions. There are present at this council members of the diocese who knew and welcomed the ministries of those devoted women.

The history of the Diocese of Virginia is told most effectively by the stories of people who have witnessed to the Gospel and worked faithfully over many years in our diocese. One such servant of our common life was Wilmer Moomaw, who died on January 13 and was buried in the Cathedral Shrine of the Transfiguration at Shrine Mont on January 19. Wilmer served as director of Shrine Mont from his appointment by Bishop Goodwin in 1950 until he retired in 1988. But he had worked at Shrine Mont since he was a young man, helping the founder, Dr. Woodward, pull stones down the mountain to build the Shrine. He served with five of our diocesan bishops. There have only been twelve since 1790, so Wilmer's service spanned much of the life of the Diocese. His total service to the diocese was sixty-five years.

To his widow, Nellie, and to his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, we express our sympathy and thanksgiving.

Another servant of this diocese I want to recognize today is Karen Glasco.

Twenty-years ago this May, Karen came to work as my administrative assistant. She was a young single woman, a Baptist, a member of a politically prominent Henrico County family. I have had the privilege of officiating at her wedding, and watching the growth of her delightful son and daughter who are now students at St. Christopher's and St. Catherine's Schools. Whatever reputation my office has for prompt responses to mail and messages is largely due to this talented devoted woman who has now spent nearly half her life in service to the Diocese of Virginia.

The rich stories of our diocese are told through the lives of people like Wilmer Moomaw and Karen Glasco. They are also remembered in the journals of the annual council. At his first council as diocesan bishop in May 1903, Bishop Robert A. Gibson, the sixth bishop of the diocese, who became diocesan upon the death of Bishop Francis Whittle in June 1902, reported on the tendency of church controversies to distract us from mission. The controversy in 1903 was a national proposal to drop the word "Protestant" from the name of the Protestant Episcopal Church. Bishop Gibson was clear: "the controversy is not of our seeking," he said..."we do not desire to raise or to discuss or to entertain the question. It distracts our attention from work for the Church in which we are profoundly interested...." (Journal of the 108th Annual Council, 60-61)

For Virginians, our Protestant heritage, was--and is--a valued part of our identity and Bishop Gibson saw the controversial proposal to change the name of the church to be a distraction from mission.

The church's current debate over sexuality is a controversy we may have no desire to discuss, and we do disagree, but it is a debate that distracts us from the mission that unites us. The reality is that serious Christians in our diocese differ over numerous traditions of Biblical interpretation that underlie our differences.

I appeal to members of this Council to see the unifying power of Christ in the midst of our differences and to take no actions to exacerbate our differences.

I hear the pain and grief expressed by those angered by the election and consecration of Bishop Robinson of New Hampshire and by my role in that.

And I hear the pain and disappointment of gay and lesbian members of our diocese who are frustrated at the lack of availability to them of rites of blessing.

Members of a Christian community bear one another's burdens. Listening to each other and finding those areas of mission where we can unite are important patterns of discipleship.

I appeal also to members of our diocese who are tempted to separate from our body because of their anger at what we have done or disappointment at what we have not done to stay the course and to learn of Christ's desire for our unity through our engagement with one another.

James I. McCord was a twentieth century Presbyterian leader and scholar who warned his students: "If you must make a choice between heresy and schism, always choose heresy. For as a heretic, you are only guilty of a wrong opinion. As a schismatic, you have torn and divided the body of Christ.

Chose heresy every time!" (The Anglican Journal, January 2004, p. 15)

Now, I hope we will avoid both heresy and schism. The best protection against heresy is the breadth of the community of faith, wrestling with the interaction of scripture and tradition with the stresses and questions of contemporary life. Schism diminishes the corrective power of differing opinions.

I am aware that some of our congregations are so unhappy with my decisions at General Convention that they will not welcome my visits to them. I remind you that Christian communities often consist of solidarities not of our choosing. Our faith teaches that people with whom we differ often have important truths to teach us. So I want very much to remain in touch with those who differ with me. I am willing to ask another bishop to come into a parish for pastoral and sacramental ministries, but I believe deeply that God has called us together to ministry in Virginia, and we have gifts to offer each other. We are one body, not a federation of individual, isolated congregations, and I am committed to serving the whole body.

There is One Lord, One faith, One baptism, and we are called perhaps especially at times of difference, to affirm that our unity in Christ transcends our differences. Claim that unity and pray that God will reveal more fully the bonds that bring us together.