

# **The Pastoral Address of the Rt. Rev. Peter James Lee, Bishop of Virginia, to the 210<sup>th</sup> Annual Council**

*January 28, 2005*

I am scheduled for heart surgery on Monday morning, January 31. I have full confidence in God's healing power, in the leadership of Bishop Jones and Bishop Gray, in the service of a dedicated diocesan staff, and in you, the members of the Council. Pray for all of us. This diocese is healthy and strong and you are evidence of that strength.

What an empowering time to be an Episcopalian in Virginia!

For some months after General Convention in 2003, "empowering" would not have been the word used to describe life in the Diocese of Virginia. We have experienced very strong differences within our common life, we have experienced congregations unhappy with my decisions as well as congregations unhappy with our traditional policies.

From the volume of mail I received throughout the Fall of 2003 and into 2004, there were some who made it quite clear they wanted me gone and others who thought I had not gone far enough. I remain the Bishop of all people in this diocese, whether they are happy with me or not. I look forward to returning from a medical leave with new energy to serve all the people, churches and institutions of the diocese. And as I look not to the past but to the future, I think our differences enhance the opportunities and the promise of the Diocese of Virginia. As I have traveled across the Diocese in these last eighteen months, my best judgment is that about ten to twenty percent of our diocese are very upset about the decisions of General Convention in 2003; about five to ten percent find those decisions progressive and hopeful, and about seventy percent of our people are determined not to let differences over these matters distract us from mission or divide us from one another.

There are critics of the Episcopal Church who maintain that there is no longer any middle ground in the Church. My experience of the Diocese of Virginia, supported nationally by research by the Episcopal Church Foundation, is that not only is there a strong middle ground, but that middle ground is increasingly assertive and determined to focus on the mission of the church.

The middle in the church is not the midpoint on a line between two extremes. In the life of faith, the great bulk of our people are at the center, and that center is faith in the Risen Christ. I call on that center to reassert itself as an embracing community that acknowledges that differences are present but they need not distract us from mission.

The evidence is that people aligned with the center in Virginia are faithful and vigorous. Our diocese is growing. Twenty years ago, when I became bishop, we counted 82,000 baptized members. According to the parochial reports submitted in 2004, we now have over 90,000. Twenty years ago, we had 351 clergy canonically resident in Virginia; we now have 455. Twenty years ago, we counted 176 congregations; now we have 195 with more in the process of formation. Last September, we dedicated La Iglesia de Santa Maria on Arlington Boulevard in Fairfax County, the first stand alone Latino congregation in the Diocese of Virginia.

Our focus on the centrality of the Risen Christ empowers us to be a church that includes, embraces, and respects the differences among us. We must continue to engage in significant, even if sometimes contentious discussions of how human beings work out their lives of belonging to one another and how we do that in the church is a witness to the world.

We are empowered by the promise that these significant discussions offer to the mission of the church and to our relationships with the worldwide church.

The Windsor Report issued by the Lambeth Commission on Communion goes to the Primates of the Anglican Communion in the middle of February and later in 2005 to the Anglican Consultative Council. The Windsor Report is a sound, thoughtful expression of the nature of our communion. Reading it and praying through it, I find that it offers a different way of behaving than what has so often characterized the behavior of Americans.

Americans are known throughout the world for our tendency towards unilateral action. We are criticized for unilateral actions in military interventions, in foreign policy, in the spread of our media culture, and we have a reputation for little regard for the impact of our behavior on other nations and cultures. In contrast to the unilateral proclivities of our secular culture, the Risen Christ calls us to a different pattern of behavior with one another that can model to the world at large how to live with differences.

We stand at the foot of the cross. Our reconciliation is entirely the gift of Christ's outstretched arms and not the result of the victory of our own opinions over others. To take into our own lives the pattern of the cross means living lives of mutual submission to one another. That means, according to the witness of the New Testament, that we voluntarily refrain from actions that hurt our brothers and sisters or create stumbling blocks for others in the life of faith. In Christ we are indeed free but in Christ we are called to limit our freedom.

We have seen too little of that pattern of mutual submission in the recent life of the church.

Looking back at the last year and a half, I see now that the Episcopal Church, in the confirmation of the Bishop of New Hampshire, acted without proper regard to the need for mutual submission to the concerns of the worldwide Anglican Communion. I regret that. At the same time, it is important to recognize that most of the churches of the Anglican Communion are deficient in their regard for homosexual persons within the church. The sense of exclusion that the behavior of some churches creates among homosexual persons is not a sign of mutual submission. To live at the foot of the cross, to emulate the outstretched arms of Jesus, is to live lives of mutual submission, taking into regard the concerns and the needs of all people whom God has placed in our care, whether those people are members of the churches of the global south or gay and lesbian people in our own midst.

Historically, you represent the vital center of the church in Virginia, the church that is centered on faith in Jesus Christ, respects differences, and walks together in common mission. It is an empowering time in the life of the church in Virginia because we have the opportunity and the invitation to demonstrate the dynamics of mutual submission, of taking into account the needs, concerns, convictions and consciences of each other.

Following the recommendations of the Windsor Commission, the Diocese of Virginia will continue its policy of refraining from public rites of blessing of same gender unions. That restraint, however, does not mean withholding pastoral care or denying full inclusion to gay and lesbian people in our midst. Gracious hospitality is a hallmark of a church that focuses on the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross. I will refrain from consenting to the consecration as bishop of any person living in a same gender relationship until there is wider consensus about the appropriateness of such a person for leadership in the church. We acted unilaterally in the summer of 2003. And some of our churches in response acted unilaterally in cutting off all giving to our common life in the Diocese or restricting that giving rather than practicing the mutual submission called for by the New Testament. Those of us who voted to consent to the consecration of the Bishop of New Hampshire did so out of conscience. I understand that some of our members and some of our churches in eliminating or reducing their giving to our diocesan life, have also acted out of conscience. I suggest to you that the New Testament practice of mutual submission to one another takes precedence over individual conscience. Unilateralism has no place in the life of the church. We are one body, one family in Christ, with individuals having

different convictions but submitting to one another out of a deeper loyalty to the lordship of Christ who calls us into life together.

My hope is that the practice of mutual submission will create a climate of loving restraint and of increased collaboration as we seek to model the reconciliation that we behold at the foot of the cross.

The promise before us empowers us to renew our common life and discover there is so much to be done as one. We can discover what those dimensions of ministry and mission are by mutually submitting to one another and thereby strengthening our common life.

The reduction in giving to our diocesan life since the fall of 2003 has had a significant impact on what we do together. We have not replaced most diocesan staff members who have departed during that time. Carolyn Moomaw Chilton is our new Program Director, in an imaginative, collaborative effort with both Shrine Mont and Roslyn. That is not a new position but it is an essential one. In the last eighteen months, in a normal transition of staff, the position of Director of Development has become vacant and so has the position of Assistant to the Bishop for Congregational Development. Both of those positions help strengthen the life of our congregations and we have not been able to fund them

We continue the servant pattern in our diocese with the episcopate and the diocesan staff focusing our energies on what strengthens congregational life in our deployment efforts, development consultation and leadership training.

My prayer is that in 2005, we can recover, through a disciplined acceptance of mutual submission to one another, more of our sense of unity and mission and more of the capacity of the office of Bishop to serve the congregations of the Diocese of Virginia. We continue to do so much. In 2004, \$272,071 was distributed in Mustard Seed Grants, strengthening congregational life. Largely through the energy of Bishop Gray, we have raised \$300,000 to assist the Church in the Sudan, uniting in ministry with Anglicans in an especially impoverished and difficult situation.

Through the Diocesan Fund for Human Need, we supported outreach grants of \$62,600 to our congregations. All of that extra money went to outreach, none to the diocesan budget, but all of it was processed by diocesan staff members who assured the safe arrival of that money at their intended destinations. And that staff is made possible by the budget.

I have rejoiced in the partnership with Bishop Gray and with Bishop Jones. We have different emphases, different convictions and we work very well together. We meet regularly, and I find myself supported and stimulated by these two colleagues. Bishop Gray, as he has long planned, will retire in July 2005, but he has graciously agreed to continue part-time at least through the rest of calendar year 2005.

I hope to secure the support of some retired bishops to help in visitations in 2006 and have already secured some help from them during my medical leave.

Strengthening ministry at the local level is at the heart of what we do as a diocesan staff. The Implementation Task Force on Ministry has been hard at work throughout 2004, developing a new discernment process that identifies, recruits and supports gifted, Christian leadership for the church. That task force expects to develop an Episcopal Leadership Institute for lay leaders in our diocese as well as to begin a program to raise up vocational deacons to support the mission of the church.

We have so much that is positive and hopeful in the life of the church in Virginia. We have a rich heritage, an engaged laity, dedicated clergy, and a common center in our faith in the Risen Christ.

I received this week a letter from the Rt. Rev. James Jones, the Bishop of Liverpool in the Church of England, inviting the Diocese of Virginia to explore a partnership relationship with the Diocese of Liverpool. We have already experienced joint ministry with Liverpool in the exchange of persons working on race relations.

In the years before the abolition of slavery, an evil triangle existed of ships with manufactured goods sailing from Liverpool to West Africa to trade for slaves they brought to the New World, including Virginia, then returning with cotton and tobacco to Liverpool.

Bishop James Jones and I have a vision of a new triangle of grace where the multicultural churches of Liverpool and Virginia can partner with churches of Africa for the building up of God's kingdom.

I will ask our Executive Board in 2005 to explore the possibilities of such a partnership with Liverpool.

In 2007, we will mark the 400th anniversary of the planting of our church in Virginia. We are cooperating with the Virginia Historical Society in the preparation of a history of the church in Virginia and we are in touch with Commonwealth authorities regarding commemorative plans.

Last fall, in a private meeting, I invited the Archbishop of Canterbury to come to Virginia in 2007 and my hope is that he may be able to be with us.

Our history is that of a church that engages the experience of the times in which we serve, and those experiences have included stress, change and growth. But always the Church in Virginia, whatever the stresses of particular generations, returns to the centrality of Christ.

Each year, I look back to an earlier time to see what were the concerns of the diocese in generations past. This year, I went back 150 years to the Convention of 1854, before we started calling the convention a council. At that time, the Diocese of Virginia consisted of 171 churches spread over all of what is now the Commonwealth of Virginia and all of what is now West Virginia. Bishop William Meade reported to the Convention that he was "absent from my home the usual period of six months on episcopal duties." I thank God and I thank you that that kind of constant absence from home is no longer expected of Virginia bishops. In April 1854, for example, Bishop Meade visited congregations in Norfolk, spent ten days on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, then made visitations in Mathews, Gloucester County, Yorktown, Williamsburg, Charles City and Charlottesville. At the Convention, the Bishop called for increased attention to clergy compensation. He pointed out that clergy are "debarred....from the lucrative pursuits of life, have everything to buy and nothing to dispose of." Some things do not change much. But the state of the church committee at that convention reported that "confirmations have increased and the missionary cause of the diocese has excited and increased interest." The health and mission traditions of Virginia were evident in 1854. The centrality of Christ was clear.

What will future generations say of our time? I strongly believe that the way we deal with current differences, following the way of the cross, mutually submitting to one another, and including all persons in our common life, will be the great and abiding gift that we have to offer to the future. Faithfulness to the crucified and Risen Lord who embraces us together is the hallmark to what it means to be a Christian. The centrality of that image in our common life empowers me as I look to the future, and it is to that image that I believe all of our people can say a resounding AMEN.