

Remarks to the Special Convention of the Diocese of North Dakota – February 6, 2021

The Right Reverend Thomas C. Ely, Bishop Provisional

Dear friends in Christ: It is with a joyful, grateful, expectant and humble heart that I speak to you today in the name of the Risen Christ.

Thank you for formally welcoming me to share in this new season of ministry with you. And thank you, Bishop Ousley for being with us today in your capacity, not only as a representative of the Presiding Bishop, but in your ministry as Bishop for Pastoral Development. In that role, you have been an integral part of the journey to this day with the people of the Diocese of North Dakota and with me.

Following my remarks, prayers of recognition and thanksgiving for the work of various leaders and the whole people of God in the Diocese of North Dakota will be offered. The commitment of the Diocesan Discernment Task Force, the Standing Committee, the Diocesan Council and all the faithful of this diocese through this time of transition and discernment is something I deeply appreciate, and only more so day by day as we journey together.

The Report you adopted at Diocesan Convention last October is a clear and forward-looking expression of your hopes and aspirations for this new season of ministry in the Diocese of North Dakota. The trust you are placing in me to walk with you as bishop, coach and colleague in the implementation of that report and its priorities is something I do not take lightly, and something in which I hope I prove worthy. And so, I appreciate this opportunity to share few thoughts with you as we continue this journey into a new season of ministry together.

First, I want to emphasize that I see this as a *journey together*. There is good clarity in your common commitment to the priorities and recommendations of what I am calling “The New Season of Ministry Report.” I embrace those priorities and recommendations and I think I have some of the gifts and skills and experience needed to help reach those goals. At the same time, I have much to learn about the Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota, its various cultures, customs, peoples and heritage. I ask your patience with me as I orient myself to this new ministry and get to know you better. That task is, of course, made more difficult because of the pandemic in which we find ourselves. When it is safe to travel, I look forward to being with you in person for one week each month and I anticipate that time with great delight. Until then, Zoom is our friend!

Second, I know that the Covid-19 pandemic has taken its toll on all of us in so many ways. I am especially mindful of the loss of life that has impacted so many families, communities and congregations in North Dakota, most especially our native congregations. Please, please, continue to pray and care for one another, even as we hope for a return to whatever our “new normal” is going to be. Please be safe. Use all the tools at your disposal to stay safe – masks, social distancing, hand washing, etc. and get a vaccination as soon as possible. On the other side of this ugly coin, however, are the things we are learning about ourselves, our capacity for ministry and our mission as the church. With you, I lament all the hard and painful realities of Covidtime, and at the same time I encourage us to embrace the new ways we are learning to be the church and connecting with one another as caring, loving, compassionate people of faith. (Pause for prayer)

The third point I want make is about our common life as the Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota. As a priest of the church for 40 years, with nearly 20 of those serving as a bishop, I have witnessed, far too often in my ministry, an unhealthy, often cynical and sometimes conflictual relationship between congregations and “the diocese.” I don’t want to dwell on this very much today, except to say that I hope and trust that this will not be true of our ministries together. The “New Season of Ministry” report that you have embraced calls for a strengthening of local congregations with an appreciation for Total Ministry, Mutual Ministry, Collaborative Ministry, and a circular model of leadership. I enthusiastically embrace that, as well. To accomplish that will require trust and a deep commitment to one another and to our common life as the Episcopal Church in North Dakota.

You will often hear me say that a diocese is **not** some far distant corporate entity that demands loyalty and financial support from its branch offices. The Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota is you, its people and its congregations sharing and engaging in common ministry in service to Christ and God’s people, and indeed the whole of God’s creation. A bishop is a sign of unity and connection between all those local communities of faith and the wider church beyond North Dakota. Each congregation in the Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota - from the smallest to the largest, from the most rural to the most urban, from the east to the west, from whatever tribe, historical connection or local community you call home – each congregation is the local expression of the Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota and each congregation, indeed each person, matters and offers a valuable contribution to our common life. None of us can say, “I have no need of you.”

My fourth point is to stress the importance of the priorities you have set for this new season of ministry together, beyond those mentioned earlier. They include communication; rebuilding relationships; training and formation for the ministry of all the baptized, not just in church, but in our daily lives as well; youth ministry; and the healing and reconciliation work across the differences and divisions (racial, geographical, economic, political and historical) that hinder our common life and capacity to walk together in the Jesus Way of Love. All of these are important, and you have invited me to be among you as coach and colleague as together we work address these priorities. I plan to keep my primary focus on these matters.

Key to that is the importance of calling a full-time Diocesan Minister and appropriate Administrative Assistance to work as a team with me, as well as diocesan and local leaders, to accomplish these goals. To that end, I am pleased to announce that, in consultation with the Transition Committee, I have appointed the team that will work with me in the selection, and recommendation to Council, of this Diocesan Minister. The team includes: The Rev. Robert Hoekstra, Rector of Grace Church, Jamestown; Susan Owens, Vestry member at Saint Paul’s, Grand Forks; the Rev. Angela Goodhouse-Mauri, Deacon serving the congregations on Standing Rock; Leslie Ross, a member of the Leadership Team at Saint John’s, Dickinson; The Rev. Jamie Parsley, Rector of Saint Stephen’s, Fargo; and Robert Fox, a member of the Standing Committee from Saint Paul’s, White Shield. We will begin our work shortly and hope to complete this call by Holy Week, so stay tuned.

Finally (at least for today!), I am delighted to announce to the Convention, and to the people of our diocese, that we have a very special guest coming to North Dakota in 2022. 2022 marks the 150th anniversary of our Cathedral's founding. At the suggestion of Dean Strobel, I reached out to the Presiding Bishop, the Most Reverend Michael Curry, and he has graciously agreed to make a three-day pastoral visit with the people of the Diocese of North Dakota from October 21-23, 2022. That visit will include a celebration of the Cathedral's anniversary and much more. So again, stay tuned. I will be working with the Diocesan Council and the Cathedral Chapter on the details for this visit. I am very grateful that Bishop Curry was able to add this pastoral visit to his amazingly full calendar and look forward to welcoming him to North Dakota.

On that high note, I conclude my remarks for today and invite us to continue our liturgy with prayers led by several of our Deacons.