

## **Bishop McConnell's Address to 2013 Convention**

*The following is the text of Bishop Dorsey McConnell's address to the 148th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, delivered November 2, 2013:*

I have a lot of ground to cover in this address. I want to talk about all I have heard and learned from you in the last year, our ongoing healing from the split, our conversations on human sexuality, and an emerging vision for the future. I want to talk about my three priorities for the next ten years – namely proclaiming a Public Gospel; developing Missional Communities; and Forming Leadership, lay and ordained.

I want to talk about the 2014 budget; recent changes in our staff and in our diocesan family. I want to share with you something of my participation in the wider Church, both the Episcopal Church and aboard, and invite you into partnership with Pilgrim Africa. I want to talk about our upcoming 150th anniversary as a diocese in 2015. And, I want to talk about “the duck,” though I know given everything else I just mentioned, the duck will have to wait.

But allow me to begin this address with a shout out once again to the people of Good Shepherd, Hazelwood, who today resume active participation in the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh with their rector, the Reverend Huett Fleming. I could not be happier. I'd also like to welcome formally the Reverend Scott Russell, who is returning to this diocese as rector of St. Brendan's, Franklin Park. Wonderful to have you.

On a more solemn note, I'd also like to recognize the people of St. Andrew's, New Kensington. While the building has returned to us, it has become clear to me that there are simply not enough people to continue to worship in that beautiful place, though we will continue to maintain the building and use it for the benefit of the local community. Canon Scott Quinn is fond of saying that sometimes we have to figure out whether the future of a place is now, or whether the future is in the future. For St. Andrew's, I believe we have look to the future. So tomorrow, the Reverend Chips Koehler will preside at a Eucharist in the very place where he was ordained to the priesthood and I will preach on that occasion, and for the foreseeable future, that will be the end of regular worship there. We are grateful for the faith of the generations in New Kensington and we remember them as we wait in faith on God's future in that place.

I've completed a full cycle of visitations among you now and have spent a lot of wonderful time just getting to know you, listening to your stories – there are a lot of stories – hearing a lot about your hopes, fears and dreams. One of the many joys of being your bishop is the personal relationships I get to have across so many congregations. I get to talk with all sorts of people, from the children who always surprise and delight and invariably teach me, to the elders of your parishes whose memories go well back into the time of Bishops Appleyard, Thomas, and Pardue.

There is still so much I have to learn. I want to know how James Knight at Calvary makes his ribs. I want to know what's in the pickles Kathy Oglie gave me in Somerset, which my son declared to be the best pickles ever, leaving me exactly one to prove his point. I want to know how to run the riding mower at St. Francis-in-the-Fields. I want to know who had the great idea of putting a composting toilet at St.

Michael's in Wayne Township. I really want to know what Kris McInnes at St. David's does to keep that hair of his looking so fine all the time.

Every time I look at any one of you, or talk with you, I am filled with the knowledge of how rich and remarkable is the collection of our personal histories, here in the Body of Christ in Pittsburgh; how many paths have led us to the feet of Jesus; and I get a glimpse of how He looks at each of you, each of us, and then I get a glimpse of how He looks at all of us together, as He asks us – and I believe he is always asking us – the same question he asked of James and John, the same question he asked of blind Bartimaeus: “What do you want me to do for you?”

As I said in my sermon last night, I think if we could only see one another habitually with His eyes, so much of the pain and fear and mistrust we carry with us from the past would simply go away, and we might begin to become in reality the one Body that Christ declares we already are in the mind of the Father because of the prayer and offering of the Son.

Sometimes we actually do get to experience that reality. Certainly I've heard that was the case among the people who participated in the conversations on human sexuality over the last year. In many instances, they entered the room full of anxiety and then, in the next few hours of dialogue, found a grace that surprised them. They began to see the other, not as an opponent, but as a human being and a child of God, with convictions rooted in their faith in a common Lord. And they reported to me and to my co-chair, Dana Phillips, and to the other members of the planning team the hope that, as we move toward and beyond a decision on the matters of blessing and ordination for persons in same-sex relationships, the grace they discovered in those rooms may abound for others.

I share the same hope. I have been in extensive consultation with many of you, and I believe I will be able to issue a pastoral letter on the subject in the middle of this month, on or about the 15th, though it may actually be several days later given the particular demands of my schedule and the fact that the 15th falls on a Friday, not a particularly good day to issue a pastoral letter. I appreciate your patience and ask for your continued indulgence for just a bit longer and for your prayers always. I do hope that together we will manage to incorporate the results of this decision into our common life in a way that will put the issue behind us and allow us to focus together on the crucial matter of how we are to join God's mission in the world.

I will talk about the substance of that mission in a few minutes, but at this moment I want to acknowledge some of the people in new positions who will help us carry it forward.

In June, I asked the Reverend Canon Dr. Cathy Brall, at the time Provost of the Cathedral, to leave Trinity and join me on staff as Canon Missioner for the diocese. I am delighted she agreed, and since September she has been working with several congregations as they re-imagine their futures. Cathy is already making a huge contribution to the life of our diocese, as she joins Canons Scott Quinn and Jay Geisler as part of what I may call my extensive council of advice. There is, actually, no formal designation or boundary to this council of advice, and if you'd like to give me some, all you need do is write me an e-mail or pick up the phone, and you're there.

Father Tim Hushion has taken on the work of Priest-in-Charge here at the Cathedral, and I will be working with him and Chapter over the coming year as we shape the vision for Trinity and prepare to call a Dean.

In other staff changes, our Treasurer and Diocesan Administrator, Carl Hockenberry, left us in the spring to pursue his private practice, and I am happy to introduce, as we did this morning, our new Treasurer, Kathi Workman. I know that by canon there must be a Diocesan Administrator, and I will eventually name someone to that position. However, I want to assure you that all the bases are presently covered, and that the “team approach” to administration adopted under Bishop Price is proving workable. I cannot sufficiently thank the people who make that happen, especially Judi Rogers, my executive assistant; Marlene Rihn, in Finance; Dr. Joan Gundersen; and Rich Creehan, Director of Communication, who has stretched well beyond his job description to help us in the time leading up to this convention. And I’d like to thank our Youth Directors, Vickie O’Brien and Brent Hansen, and our website guru, Andy Muhl. We couldn’t get on without them and I’d ask you to acknowledge them with applause.

The gifts and devotion of these folks make the 2014 budget particularly difficult to talk about. I realized even before the “walkabouts” in 2012, as I first got a look at the financials of this diocese, that we would face a day of reckoning in January of 2014, and January of 2014 is here. Knowing this, last January, I asked the Budget and Assessment Working Group, in conjunction with Trustees and Council, to begin immediately the task of crafting a budget that would make substantial inroads on our deficit for this coming year. That budget is before you and it is painful, particularly in the sacrifices it requires of our staff and their families, and I am afraid the pain is not over yet. This work of reduction and consolidation will continue into the budget of 2015. However, I am hopeful that by then we will be in balance and will be also configured in a way most appropriate to accomplishing the ongoing mission of our diocese.

Now, about the mission. I am phrasing that mission, as many of you have heard, in terms of three priorities: Public Gospel, Missional Communities, and Leadership Formation. Three priorities, six words, for the next ten years. And since the first is public Gospel, it is time to talk about that duck.

I was in my office at the Cathedral a couple of weeks ago and had a rare, unplanned hour. I thought I would wander down to the Point and bless the duck. It was a warm and lovely afternoon, and at first I thought that was why people I ran into on the way all had such big smiles on their faces, as they were coming from the direction I was going. But as soon as I saw the duck, I realized it wasn’t the weather at all that was making people smile. It was the duck, and I could see why. Childhood associations are a powerful thing, and the moment I saw that duck, something in me went right back to what it felt like when I was six years old in a warm bath, playing with a rubber duck, and talking with my mother. It wasn’t just that it was fun, though it was; the feeling that washed over me through the gift of that memory was of a deep sense of safety, security, and peace. As I continued to look at the duck, I realized people around me were having similar associations. I was surprised I didn’t really want to leave and they didn’t either.

And just as I was looking for someone to take a picture of me, to memorialize the moment, there came along a camera crew from a TV station in Johnstown. You can’t make this stuff up. They said they were conducting person-on-the-street interviews and would love to talk to me about the duck. So, I did. I remembered, first of all, the admonition of Scripture to always be ready to give an account of the hope that is in you. And then I started in. I said, “I’m Dorsey McConnell. I’m Bishop of the Episcopal

Diocese of Pittsburgh. I had a duck. It was a great duck and I always felt very safe and secure with it. And when I come down here, I feel that now, deeply and truly. So, I thought I had come down here to bless the duck, but instead I find that the duck is blessing me.” I was going to go on, but the cameraman said, “Thank you very much, Bishop, that’s great. This was the best interview of the day.”

I was just kicking myself. I thought, “You get thirty seconds to glorify Jesus and you say something that stupid. Why not something about the New Testament? The Cross? Maybe John 3:16?” And as I stood there, I heard someone point out to her friend the dozen or so real ducks paddling contentedly in the shadow of the big duck, to which her friend responded, “Do you think they think it’s God?”

Then I realized that, actually, the duck was not a bad place to start. You see, sometimes you can’t start right away with the Cross. The point of a public Gospel is that sometimes you have to start before the Gospel to get to the Gospel.

This point was made for me when I realized how many of this generation have no connection, not only to Christian faith, but to Christian thought forms or even Christian symbols. We have no connection; the culture is slipping away from us.

Some of you know this story: I was in a line for TSA security this summer. I took off my pectoral cross and passed it through the security monitors. On the screen, I could see it, stark as day and night, showing up with the nails and the steel and the chain. Then I heard this conversation between a younger and older member of the TSA. The younger began,

“What is THAT!?!”

“It’s a cross.”

“What’s it doing there?”

“It’s a Jesus thing.”

“God, it looks like it’s made of nails. What’s the story there?”

“That’s how He died. They killed Him by nailing Him to a cross.”

“Ew! That must have hurt.”

“I expect it did. A lot.”

And then they both looked at it. The younger one broke the silence by saying, “Shouldn’t that really be a prohibited item?” The answer: “It’s not, yet.”

I put the duck out there as an image to come back to, an indicator of what I call the public Gospel. That little taste of what it felt like as a child to be safe, secure and at peace, was a small sample of something that every human being is after – an enduring peace. The New Testament talks about this in various ways. The peace of God which passes understanding is a phrase that sums them all up, and the Bible insists this peace is found only in an abiding relationship with Jesus Christ – who is our peace. But like the duck, this peace of God isn’t something bottled up in churches. The taste of it is already out there in all of creation and in the world of human society. Everyone and everything depend for their existence upon this peace that is woven into the fabric of the created order and shimmers just under the surface of all that is. As the Letter to the Colossians puts it, that is because this Jesus Christ, as incarnate word, the logos of God, “is before all things and in Him all things hold together.”

Even as wrong-headed and sinful as we are, as Saint Augustine points out, we yearn for this peace out of the very core of our being, for the simple reason that we can't do anything else, were made for it. And therefore, nearly everything we do – even in some of our worst moments – is in pursuit of peace, though we do not know, or at least consistently forget, that this peace can fully come to us only through the reconciling blood of Christ's Cross and the power of His Resurrection. The peace I feel when I look at the duck, or when I laugh with my son, or when I receive (for the millionth time it seems) forgiveness from my wife, is either foretaste or fruit of the lasting peace of Christ.

A public Gospel means getting the word of this peace out there in as many ways as we can, not simply waiting for people to stumble across the thresholds of our churches but actually enacting this peace in public, through word, sign and action. It may begin with an interview with a film crew from Johnstown that you hope is going to begin to open people's eyes to the great peace that Christ gives absolutely and eternally. It may begin by bringing ashes to distribute in Market Square at the beginning of Lent. It may begin with posting videos on our website that help people see the difference between the Cross and a smiley-face, or between the Resurrection and a butterfly.

The public Gospel begins today with some of our kids from the Pittsburgh Youth Initiative who are out there right now in the streets asking people what they would like prayers for, kids who will bring back those petitions to us and chalk those petitions into the flagstones outside the doors of this Cathedral; petitions we will offer later through the prayers of this assembly. The public Gospel will begin again on November 17th at the Franktuary in Lawrenceville, when I teach at an open forum applying the Gospel of grace to scenes from the AMC series "Breaking Bad."

These may seem like small encounters, like scattering seed on a hard road, but we know there is always fertile soil to be found and God uses any opening to help people begin to move away from the continuing prosecution of their own wars – the war against their children, their spouses, their bosses and co-workers, their enemies of varying descriptions, the war against their own souls, which is always in the end our war against God. A public Gospel announces to the world, in the terms of the world, that we find the path away from these terrors to the only one who can end all our war, Jesus crucified and risen who, as the Letter to the Ephesians reminds us, has broken down the dividing wall of enmity and brought all hostility to an end.

And these apparently small initiatives are foundation stones and precursors to a deeper movement of the Gospel to the healing of greater divisions in Pittsburgh and in southwestern Pennsylvania, which I believe we have been entrusted with. They call us to imagine what the Gospel looks like as it affects not only individual lives, but families, neighborhoods and systems; how this Good News of Reconciliation might actually change the terrible realities that surround us. Those realities are why a public Gospel must be carried out by missional communities – the second priority.

The word "mission" in this context is best understood as the spiritual, social and economic transformation of persons and places, in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Spirit, to look more and more like the Kingdom of God. It is the harbinger of God's fulfillment of the Lord's Prayer, in which we beg that the Father's will be done on earth as in heaven. A public Gospel begins that movement, but missional communities carry it out locally, sustainably and personally, in a way deeper than the mere scattering of Gospel seed in the public square can achieve.

That is the job that local parishes have been fulfilling for over fifteen hundred years. You may not think that is what you are doing, fulfilling the Father's will that the Kingdom come on earth, as you fret about the boiler and the roof. But that is what you have been doing, and it is what we all must learn how to do now in a new key. The stakes are huge. People are dying all around us and don't even know it. They have consigned themselves in many cases to lives in which their only course is to try to make meaning up for themselves, invent and re-invent themselves, become the masters of their own worlds and when that doesn't work out so well, they are left with the option either of resignation or despair.

But the love of God yearns over every one, yearns to reach out to every one, and we are the means, beginning from the 37 Eucharistic communities God has already established in this diocese. The only question is, can our communities become consciously more missional? Can we begin to change our mindset, so that we live not so much as settled, inward-looking religious families hoping for more people to come to church, but as vigorous, Spirit-filled, apostolic societies moving outward to meet the need of the world and transform it?

How we do it is an open question. There are as many answers as there are parishes, perhaps more, but each place needs a beginning. The Reverend Eric McIntosh, for instance, the new Deacon-in-Charge at St. James in Penn Hills, is beginning just by making contacts in the neighborhoods around the church and starting to form what he calls Holy Ground Block Clubs. That might look initially as just a way for folks to meet each other, but we know and he hopes that it will grow into a mission of God-led, Spirit-filled neighborhood advocacy. And, yes, there are funds available to support this kind of work, especially by means of the Mission Enterprise Zone grants available through the Episcopal Church Center.

The process for becoming more missional is pretty simple, really. I'm going to give you ten steps:

Step One: Pray.

Step Two: Take a look at the needs of the people around you. What are they? Unemployment? Poverty? Drug use? Broken families? Wayward kids? Abandoned seniors? Loneliness? Something else?

Step Three: Pray.

Step Four: Pick one. One need. Something that seems to call forth in your community an anointing to help people meet that need.

Step Five: Pray.

Step Six: Design a strategy to help people around you address that need under the power of God.

Step Seven: Pray.

Step eight: Act on that design.

Step Nine: Pray.

Step Ten: Rethink, revise, pray, and act again.

And if you need help, if you've got an idea, if you want to be in partnership with someone else, if you have questions, pick up the phone and talk to me, or call our Canon Missioner, Cathy Brall, because helping you become a missional community that acts on a public Gospel is what she is all about.

The final piece of this vision lies in the formation of leaders, both lay and ordained, to guide our missional communities in a public Gospel. One of our bishops is fond of saying the Episcopal Church is excellent at preparing cutting-edge leaders for the last generation. We need to be instead about preparing lay and ordained leaders for this coming generation, to work collaboratively in mission. Lay and ordained leaders. May I say that nothing in our parishes is going to change culturally if it is not led by lay leadership. Clergy can help you, pray for you, equip you. But unless it is the laity that is leading this transformation, change is simply not going to happen.

It will mean leadership across the board that is entrepreneurial, highly relational, focused on applying the Gospel to particular local circumstances and opportunities, and adapting the means of delivery of the Church's mission to meet the needs of the world. What this means in practice is a huge question. A leadership training institute in which lay and ordained leaders are developed together is something I hope will become a reality in this diocese, focusing especially on new modes of training and of training lay leaders, deacons, and priests in the same setting, although perhaps on somewhat different tracks, but in the presence of each others' context so that we are no longer creating silos of ministry but rather one united approach to leadership in the one Body of Christ. And, I hope especially – and you'll see a related resolution coming on this later today – that out of this, we will actually begin to address the serious question of racial inequities and absence of leadership of color in this Church as we orient ourselves to serving and empowering historically underserved communities in this diocese. We will be working with the Dioceses of Northwestern Pennsylvania and West Virginia to develop something in common. We are only beginning this work and ask all of you for your prayers and your input.

So, there are the three priorities, in six words, for the next ten years. Public Gospel. Missional Communities. Leadership Formation. I have called together a rather large team to help develop strategy and support for this work. At last count, there were 26 of us. Part of the job of this group will be following up on and implementing the recommendations of a previous strategic task force, but they will have more to do. So I have called them the Strategic Task Force 2.0 and asked Bob Johnston and Sue DeWalt to co-chair this group. After two meetings, we have divided into three working groups: one to manage our existing physical assets; another to help existing communities develop missionally and to plant new starts in non-traditional modes; and the third to work on the question of leadership formation. This is an open "sandbox." If you would like to play, then just come on in. Talk to me, talk to Bob or Sue, and you are welcome to play an active part.

A few words about our relationships beyond Pittsburgh. I am very grateful for the privilege of participating in the wider Episcopal Church. It is still news in some quarters that the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh has come roaring back. Whenever I show up at the House of Bishops or in other contexts, and people learn who I am and where I'm from, they are so grateful and so overjoyed to hear what is going on here, and so proud of the work. You give the rest of the Church hope, sisters and brothers, and I couldn't be more proud of you.

I want to let you know that the House of Bishops is meeting next fall in Taiwan, so I ask your prayers for that. I know that is an expensive trip, and yes, I am going to ask the Presiding Bishop's office for some

assistance, but it is very important that we are participating in not only all the canonically required aspects of shared leadership in the Episcopal Church, but also in responding to many other invitations as well. I will be preaching at St. Paul's Cathedral in London at Solemn Evensong on December 29 and will be speaking at Duke University in March at its Anglican Episcopal House of Studies.

I also continue to be active in the wider church through my work with Pilgrim Africa, working principally in northeastern Uganda. Now I know that whenever the Church in Uganda is mentioned in this setting, I notice a few people who take a step back and look nervous. I want to assure you that Pilgrim Africa is a pan-Christian, non-denominational relief and development organization working for public health, sustainable agriculture, and education in the northeastern Teso region. We do have wonderful, strong, and cooperative relationships with the Diocese of Soroti and with many other local churches. It is an indigenous organization, alongside of which folks like me come and help with logistical, financial and administrative support. Anyone who is interested in going with Betsy and me this coming July, as we take a team over, is welcome to join us. If any of these priorities of working with war-affected kids, with malaria control, or with sustainable agriculture and food security strike your fancy, please let me know.

I believe we are heading in a great direction. We are being richly blessed. I believe that by 2015, which is our 150th anniversary, the signs of that blessing will be all around us, and we should start planning for it now. Plan for it, as we rethink the vision and funding of this cathedral, as we rethink the vision and funding of our diocese, and as we invite others in the world to join us on the road.

As we do, we're going to need to get the word out. You'll need an elevator speech. I realize those six words – Public Gospel, Missional Communities, Leadership Formation – are not going to win you folks from the world. So here's an elevator speech. If someone says to you, "What's the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh about?" you tell them, "We're about mercy and hope." And if the next question is, "What kind of mercy and hope?" you might say, "The mercy and hope we're about isn't a 'what', it is a 'who.' The mercy and hope we're about, well, His name is Jesus. You may know more about him than you think you do. Come along with me and we will find out the rest together."

To God be the glory, this day and always. Amen.

+ Dorsey McConnell, D.D.  
Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh