

“Building Upon a Sure Foundation”
The Rt. Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton
Address given at the 225th Annual Convention of the Diocese of Maryland
May 2, 2009

I was trained, groomed and prepared to become a bishop in the Episcopal Church by the Baptists....Mt. Bethel Baptist Church in Washington, DC. There I was raised in the Christian faith of my African American ancestors and forebears – which meant I sang, clapped, shouted, stomped and “Amen-ed!” my way into following Jesus. By high school, however, I had fallen away from the church.

And then, on March 29 of last year, my life changed again...oh, what a year it’s been. Sonya and I have fallen in love all over again...only with you! You’ve incorporated us into your family, and I’ve driven about 10,000 miles visiting you all since last summer – in the hybrid car you’ve provided for the “green bishop”, of course!

Why do I love the Diocese of Maryland? Because of you, its people! I am, however, reminded of what the late Herb Thompson of blessed memory – he was the bishop of Southern Ohio – who once told me about a young man, fresh out of college who went to see his bishop about possibly becoming a priest. “Why do you want to become a priest, young man?” the bishop asked. The young man responded, “Because I love people, Bishop...I want to serve them, I get my energy from being with them, and I just love everything about people.” The bishop looked at him and said, “Young man, have you seen the people?”

This is a great diocese, based on many factors:

- The many Episcopalians I’ve met who are leaders in our cities and towns
- Our commitment to addressing important societal issues, such as racial justice and the environmental crisis, in light of the gospel of reconciliation through Christ
- Our continuing commitment congregational ministry in diverse languages and cultures, including Korean, Igbo and Latino ministry.
- Our high quality Episcopal schools and educational ministries. As you know, I have called for the diocese to explore the establish a new Episcopal school in the city of Baltimore specifically for the poor, and I’m very gratified that about 20 persons throughout the State have agreed to serve on a Working Group to study the feasibility of starting this new ministry. This short-term task force is in the middle of its work, and they will issue their report to me this summer, suggesting next steps for us to consider in the fall of this year.
- The large number of outreach ministries and related institutions in our Episcopal family, i.e. Episcopal Community Services of Maryland, Episcopal Ministries to the Aging, St. Mary’s Outreach Center, Episcopal Housing Corporation, Baltimore International Seafarer’s Center, Prison Ministry, Camp Amazing Grace, Rainbow Camp, Harford House, ERICA (Episcopal Refugee & Immigration Center Alliance), Joseph Richey House (the only hospice for adults in the city of Baltimore), the Corporation for the Relief of Widows and Children of Clergy
- Our renewal, retreat and fellowship ministries, e.g. Claggett Conference Center, Maryland Episcopal Cursillo, Church Club of Maryland, Daughters of the King, Brotherhood of St. Andrew (of which I am now a life member and chaplain)

- Our diocesan Public Policy Office has been formed by our Director of Public Affairs, Jack Pannell. He works closely with a very dedicated public policy working group that includes Don Schroeder, the Bishop's Deputy for Public Policy, Rev. Deacon Madeleine Beard and The Ven. Archdeacon, Lauren Welch. During the session of the Maryland legislature, the diocese helps fund a legislative advocacy office in Annapolis. We are the lead diocese in supervising and supporting this office, but have also now been promised some support from the Diocese of Easton and the Diocese of Washington for this important ministry. Also, we applaud the work of our newly named Jubilee Officer, the Rev. Deacon Madeleine Beard.
- Our reputation nationally in the Episcopal Church...besides the significant work we're known for in anti-racism and the environment that you learned of last night, here are a few more measures of it: Bishop Rabb's recognized leadership in the Episcopal Church in theological education, urban ministry and health ministry...We are one of the few dioceses that employ an Archivist, and we have been recognized as housing one of the best archives in the national church...And, because of our diocesan youth ministry, we had over 125 of our youth from 25 parishes attend the Nightwatch in NYC; 24 youth took part in Maryland Happening #1 at Claggett; we had the largest diocesan contingent of youth attending the national Episcopal Youth Event last year, and in the past dozen years almost 400 of our youth have taken mission trips to Honduras and Appalachia – and these are life-changing experiences!
- Globally, our commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, taking seriously the call for all churches and dioceses to commit 0.7% of its income to eradicate extreme poverty. Also, our commitment to global mission; yes, this convention marks the end of our companion diocese relationship with the Diocese of Accra which has run its natural course, but the beginning of a new era of global mission links with several dioceses in the Anglican Communion. I've called on Izzie Wynn and James Blue, in consultation with staff person Canon Mary Glasspool, to begin forming with others a new diocesan Global Mission Links Committee to guide these efforts, and report back to the next year's convention.
- The diocesan staff, many of whom serve nationally on various boards and agencies of the Episcopal Church, cement our reputation as one of the very best dioceses in the Anglican Communion.

We have been blessed to be in a diocese firmly built upon a sure foundation – its bishops, priests, deacons, staff, lay leaders, parishes, ministries and missions. Our sacred bundles are sound. The question before us now, though, is what do we do to build on the foundation we've inherited?

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.” (Matthew 7:24-25)

As most of the clergy of the Diocese of Maryland know by now, in my office on the ledge near my desk, there are five large rocks on display by the window. Why, some of them have asked, do I have a bunch of rocks in my office? Well, here's why: because I believe that the key to happiness in life is for one to build one's and life and ministry upon a *sure* foundation – solid as a rock. And I know that if I am to be granted the spiritual authority by you to become your bishop not because of my title but because I've earned it, then it will be because I have identified and paid attention to the “rocks” of my ministry here, building upon a sure foundation. Let me explain.

I assume that many of you have heard of a now famous story by Stephen Covey, the noted writer and teacher on effective management, author of the bestseller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. In

his more recent book, *First Things First*, Covey describes what one of his associates experienced on a seminar. In the middle of the lecture the presenter pulled out a wide-mouth jar and placed it on the table, aside to some fist-sized rocks. After filling the jar to the top with rocks he asked, “Is the jar full?”

People could see that no more rocks would fit, so they replied, “Yes!” “Not so fast,” he cautioned. He then got some gravel from under the table and added it to the jar, filling the spaces between the rocks. Again, he asked, “Is the jar full?”

This time the students replied “Probably not.” The presenter then reached a bucket of sand below the table, and dumped it on the jar, filling the spaces between the rocks and the gravel. Once again he asked “Is the jar full?”

“No!”, the students shouted. Finally, he grabbed a pitcher of water and filled the jar completely, and then asked them what they could learn from that illustration. One of the participants answered, “If you work at it, you can always fit more into your life.”

“No,” said the presenter. “The point is, if you don’t put the big rocks in first, you will never get them in!”

Of course, that story can be applied to all aspects of our life, and most importantly, to our ministry together. As you know, last fall I published the five priorities that I’ve wanted to accomplish in my first two years as Bishop of Maryland. I want to share them again with you:

1. Get acquainted with diocesan people, programs and procedures
2. Earn trust
3. Maintain spiritual grounding
4. Expand mission links within the Anglican Communion
5. Strengthen the civic role of the office of Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland (including exploring programmatic initiatives in education and the environment)

These priorities have been my “rocks” of office in the past year, guiding my and my staff’s decisions about calendar questions. But what are our diocesan rocks? What’s in our jar in Maryland? Unless we spend some time discerning as a diocese what we want to become and how we propose to get there, then we may continue to do a lot of good things, but we will never achieve *great* things for the sake of the gospel. We simply will never get the Big Rocks in.

That leads us to this point: as a diocese, we need to focus this year on discerning what our Big Rocks will be. Why? Because we are followers of Jesus Christ, and Christians are always building! To keep doing the same things, without being open to the Holy Spirit’s leading us into the “new”, means that we will stagnate as a diocese. Not to grow, in Christian terms, means *diminishment*, and I will not be a leader of an institution in decline. As your bishop, I want to assure you of this right now: we are going to grow, and we are going to plan for that growth right now!

Therefore, at this convention I call for the Diocese of Maryland to embark upon a new journey for the next twelve months to imagine, focus on and enact a new vision for what are going to accomplish as a diocese. I call for us to dream big dreams, and then discern which of those dreams we will choose to direct the bulk of our energies and resources. I propose that we leave a legacy for future generations that will make a difference in their lives, in the church and in the world. And this new vision does not mean that we will disregard the past, tossing out everything old. On the contrary, we will take special care to return to and draw upon our diocesan history and traditions, be guided by our received “sacred bundle”, and learn from our past mistakes as well as past successes.

The Mission Strategy Group, a committee of the Diocesan Council instituted many years ago to keep the diocese true to its stated goals - “the Five Directions” - has worked diligently since last summer to design a course of action for the diocese as a whole to engage in a new visioning process. Here is a summary of the process that we will undertake:

1. The key to the process is the formation of a broad-based “Horizons Gathering” whose charge is to discern new Vision and Mission priorities for the diocese.
2. In order to achieve widespread participation, we request that every parish, mission and institution in the diocese send one person to serve on the HG. We specifically ask that this representative be a lay person, chosen in any way that the church or institution desires. The Bishops, with an eye toward diversity and balance, will appoint other clergy and laypersons to serve in the process as well. We are looking for prayerful people who can work with others in a discernment process that results in shared priorities. It is envisioned that the total number of people serving on the Horizons Gathering will be about 150 persons.
3. The Horizons Gathering will have two separate all-day meetings at the Bishop Claggett Center: **Saturday, October 3, 2009 and Saturday, February 27, 2010.**
4. The Rev. Dr. Chuck Robertson, Canon to the Presiding Bishop, will facilitate the Horizons Gatherings, and the Mission Strategy Group will serve as the steering committee for the entire visioning process. The Bishop Diocesan will have a crucial role in both articulating his mission priorities as well as synthesizing what he hears from the HG.
5. The MSG will prepare a report for diocesan convention in 2010, summarizing the work of the Horizons Gathering, and presenting new Vision and Mission priorities to the 226th Convention of the Diocese of Maryland for ratification.

As you can see, the Diocese of Maryland is one the move. We are building upon a sure foundation of faithful ministry for 325 years in this beautiful land on the eastern seaboard in this great country. We are in continuity with our past, and we are confidently facing our future. We are reminded of the words of St. Paul:

“I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors...all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.” (I Corinthians 10:1,3-4)

Jesus is the Rock...He is our sure foundation...the first-born of all creation, the head of the church, and the author of our salvation. It is to Christ our Rock that we live, and move, and have our being. Let us proclaim Christ with boldness, confidence and exuberance as we move into a new day in the Diocese of Maryland.

Finally, I want to conclude by repeating the statement that I gave to the diocese on March 29 of last year, accepting my election as the 14th Bishop of Maryland:

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am both honored and humbled to be elected your bishop in the wonderful Diocese of Maryland. I and Sonya look forward to being among you as fellow travelers in this exciting journey!

I would like to express my hopes and dreams for our new ministry together in the form of a prayer. We continually give thanks to God, who in Christ makes "a new creation...the old has passed away, behold, all things have become new." In gratitude let us pray for God's guidance for a blessed future; let us pray:

O Lord our God, look with favor upon your pilgrim people in the Diocese of Maryland. Help our bishops, priests, deacons and lay ministers lead lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called, with all humility, gentleness, and patience. May our life together be infused by the grace of truth and the spirit of reconciliation; in times of celebration may we freely rejoice, and in times of distress may we listen to and forgive one another in love, always eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Open our hearts to receive the Living Christ in our midst; may we never tire to seek him in prayer and action, and in works of mercy and justice throughout the world. This we pray in the name of Jesus our Savior, Amen.