

“Moving Toward A New Horizon”

The Rt. Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton

2010 Convention Address for the Diocese of Maryland

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Helen Keller was once asked if, in her estimation, there was anything worse than being blind. She responded, “Yes, having no vision.”

The ability to see is a great gift, and should not be taken for granted. But sight, in and of itself, does not necessarily grant the seer the facility to capture the entirety of something in all its fullness. In the Scriptures, Jesus pointed this out on several occasions: the paradox of those with functioning eyesight not being able to “see”, while those who were ostensibly without sight could really “see” him and the hand of God at work in him and in their lives. Having *sight*, then, is not the same thing as having *vision*.

In this past year, the Diocese of Maryland has attempted to do something hard in order to accomplish something big. We decided to imagine a future that cannot be readily seen in the present, and – given the past – is not guaranteed to become a reality. This, my brothers and sisters, is called “vision”. “Vision,” according to the English author Jonathan Swift, “is the art of seeing things invisible.” Like the eschatological character of the New Testament itself, vision dares to imagine a future that is not yet, and what is more, insists that it has already begun to take place. This is astounding, especially since the evidence available for supporting that new vision is usually, well, *mixed*.

Let’s look at the evidence in the Diocese of Maryland. What can we see? On the one hand, we see evidence of growth, vitality and new life everywhere. Still less than two years into my episcopacy, I see amazing energy and seeds of growth in every region of the diocese. I see parishes adding worship services to their schedule, instituting Christian Education programs where there were none five years ago, making plans at various stages of development for expanding their facilities, increasing their stewardship giving to record dollar amounts, and giving of their time and resources to helping those less fortunate in their communities and around the world. I see these things happening in many, many parishes, from both the larger and the smaller congregations, from urban/metropolitan and rural/small town congregations, and from rich and poor

congregations. For example, from just one measure, in these troubled economic times, as of this week 16 parishes –

All Saints', Sunderland

Cathedral of the Incarnation

Catoctin Parish, Thurmont

Copley Parish, Church of the Resurrection

Good Shepherd, Ruxton

Holy Trinity, Essex

Middleham & St. Peter's, Lusby

St. Andrew's, Clear Spring

St. Ann's, Smithburg

St. David's, Roland Park

St. John's, Glyndon

St. John's, Havre de Grace

St. Luke's, Brownsville

St. Peter's, Lonaconing

St. Timothy's, Frederick

have all pledged to accept their original diocesan allocations for 2010, giving more to the diocese than the 2% reduction we were able to offer to all parishes after doing more belt-tightening. (St. Luke's, Brownsville, I might add, in their joy is giving even more than the original allocation called for!) I mention these by name not only to say that we are very grateful – knowing that every parish faces the same financial challenges that the diocesan ministries do – but also to point out the list includes small and large, rich and poor parishes, from all areas of the diocese. Signs of vitality, signs of generosity, signs of life.

Many of our non-parochial ministries – several of which are very dependent on support from all of us through the diocesan budget – are going strong and thriving. Our camps continue to show the love of God to at-risk kids. Our diocesan youth ministries and campus ministries continue to reach out to young people. Our diocesan conference center, Claggett, has had a banner year of offering hospitality and spiritual programming for thousands of people. Seafarers from distant lands are being welcomed as Christ. Legislators in Annapolis are being led to consider our moral and ethical principles before enacting legislation. Spanish language worship services are springing up in several parishes. People are being led to Christ through such ministries as Cursillo and

Emmaus. The hungry are being fed, the dying are being cared for, the elderly are being visited, the naked are being clothed, and the poor are being loved in Christ's name. Two thousand years after his earthly ministry, Christ is being proclaimed by word and deed in a thousand different ways by the Episcopal Church in the state of Maryland.

If we keep our eyes open, though, we can also see other thing that we would prefer to remain hidden from view. Some things are not pleasant to see, and admittedly they are painful to watch unfold before us. We can also see signs of *decline*.

Nationally, in one year (2007-2008), The Episcopal Church decreased by 91 parishes and missions, dipping below 7,000 congregations for the first time in many decades. We lost almost 60,000 active baptized members – more than the size of the Diocese of Maryland. Total average Sunday worship attendance (ASA) shrank by almost 23,000 people. All in *one year*. Of the 109 dioceses, only 12 in the continental U.S. showed any modest increase at all, and all of them were either in Sunbelt, Western or Plains states. In the last ten years, our national ASA fell by 16%. The only significant growth came from those dioceses of the Episcopal Church beyond our national shores – such as Haiti, Honduras and Ecuador. All told, not a very pretty picture in terms of numbers.

But we are not the only ones experiencing this decline. In every major poll tracking Americans' religious practices the last three years, we are seeing a major erosion of religion across all categories, with all but a few denominations posting declines in membership, money and attendance. Who declined? Mainline Protestants, as you might expect, but also Roman Catholics, Evangelicals (especially the Southern Baptists, Missouri Synod Lutherans, and the very conservative Presbyterian Church in America), and the predominantly African American denominations. Showing only slight increases were the Mormons, the Assemblies of God, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the small denomination called the Church of God (Cleveland, TN). The only group showing a significant uptick? The various "non-denominational churches", up by 4%.

We are experiencing in our country a major shift in attitudes about religion and spirituality, and substantial breakdowns in denominational identity. In statistics data compiled recently by Diana Butler Bass for the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops:

Denominational Breakdown, 30-40 years ago

- 90% said they believed in God
- 66% were Protestants (includes Anglicans, Mainline Protestants, and Evangelicals)
- 24% were Roman Catholics
- 2% were Jewish
- 2% were “none of the above”
- 6% were “other”

Denominational Breakdown, 2008 (PEW)

- 80% say they believe in God (69%, Parade Magazine; 80%, Gallup and others)
- 50% are Protestants
- 22% are Roman Catholics
- 16% are “none of the above” (includes atheists, agnostics, a-religious, and “other”)
- 12% are in other world religions

Church Attendance

- 40% say they attend weekly religious services (Gallup)
- 18-20% actual weekly attendance (Hadaway & Marler study; general social survey data)
- 28-50% rarely or never attend (wide range of polling data)

Those who say they have no religious affiliation

- 5% Greatest Generation (born before 1928)
- 8% Silent Generation (born 1928-1945)
- 13% Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964)
- 20% Generation X (born 1965-1980)
- 26% Millennials (born after 1980)

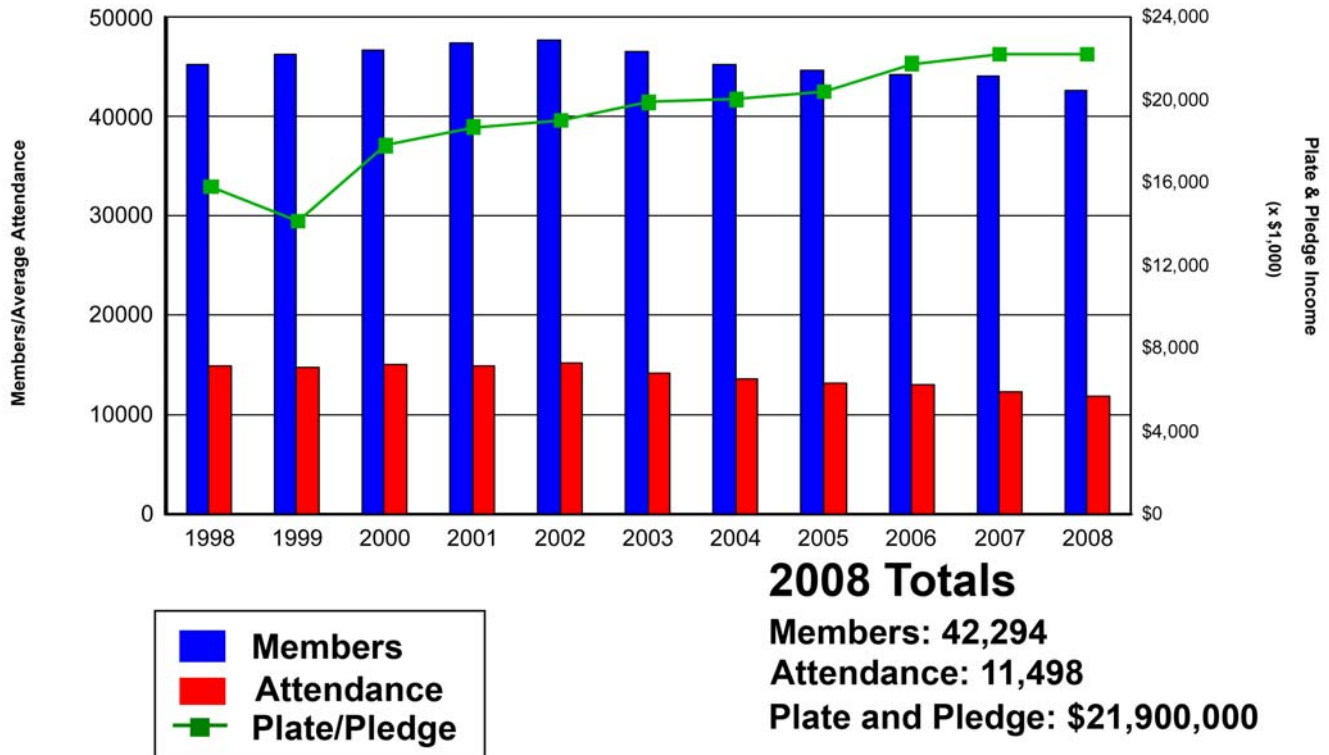
(Religion in the Millennial Generation, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, General Social Survey)

Negative Attitudes re “Christian” by Young Adults age 16-29 (Barna, in *UnChristian*, 2007)

outside church-inside church

- 91% - 80% antihomosexual
- 87% - 52% judgmental
- 85% - 47% hypocritical
- 75% - 50% too political
- 72% - 32% out of touch with reality
- 68% - 27% boring

What can we see? Let's look again at the Diocese of Maryland – this time by numbers.



Just one year can be a real eye-opener: from 2007-2008, our diocese shrank in Average Sunday Attendance by -3.9%.

So, what are we going to do about these challenges? As of today, May 1, 2010, the Diocese of Maryland says this: we are going to *grow!*

People, we are in a fight today. No, I don't mean the issues which take up a lot of our energy *inside* the church – our family fights over gender, human sexuality, leadership and ethics. Not that these aren't important issues, but I implore you for the next five years, let's focus less on those issues and more on the real battleground that all of us in the organized churches face *out there* – the battle to win the hearts and souls of millions of disaffected Americans who do not believe that the Church has anything to offer them. *That* is our calling...that is our mission...and that is a fight that the Diocese of Maryland has to engage in with everything we've got. We cannot let the status quo

stand, we cannot continue to do the same things we've always done in the past, and we cannot retreat in the face of the daunting task before us.

In the midst of darkest time for the Allies in World War I, the French Marshall Ferdinand Foch uttered these famous words:

My center is giving way, my right is in retreat; situation excellent. I shall attack!

And that vision changed the course of the campaign in the war. My brothers and sisters, the time has come for a new offensive. Our “center” is giving way. Our flanks have been in retreat for over a generation now. The spiritual and religious situation in our culture is daunting, but strangely excellent for a creaky, old institution like ours that dares to face the future with a bold new vision. *We are going to grow!*

The Horizons 2015 priorities that we just affirmed point us in a sure direction. We now have our marching orders. We will continue to fill our diocesan “jar” with all sorts of gravel and sand – the hundreds of ministries that we must maintain and nurture in order to be the Church – but we now have identified the Big Rocks that have to get into that jar first, or we'll never get them in! We are going to...

- ... proclaim the gospel and grow the church
- ...we are going to evangelize
- ...we are going to make a difference in our local communities for social change
- ...we are going provide quality Christian formation in every congregation, and
- ...we are going to help poor children to receive an excellent education in this state.

In order to guide our efforts into these priorities, I submit to you that there are three essential movements that we must keep in mind. The first movement is to *pray*. “Prayer,” as defined in the Book of Common “is responding to God, by thoughts and by deeds, with or without words.” (p. 853) When we pray we are reminded that all that we are and all that we do is in response to God's loving initiation. God does the real work, and we are the instruments of God. Without prayer, however, and especially contemplative methods of prayer in which we avail ourselves to God's presence and action in our lives, then we inevitably give in to the most insidious idolatry of our times: the subtle inner belief that *we* do the real work on earth, and God is the instrument for accomplishing *our* plans. As Richard Rohr so brilliantly puts it in his book *Grace in Action*:

“Contemplation, in non-mystified language, is the ability to meet Reality in its most simple and direct form. When I let go of my judgments, my agenda, my tyrannical emotive life, my attachment to my positive or negative self-image, I am naked, poor, and ready for The Big Truths. Without some form of contemplative surrendering, [we] see little hope for breakthrough, for new ground, for moving beyond the hysterical ideologies of Left and Right, the small mind, and the clutching ego. Action without contemplation is the work of hamsters and gerbils. It gets you through the day, it gives you a temporary sense of movement, but the world is not made new by spinning wheels going nowhere. Yet even educated people seem content to stay in that place.” (p. xiv)

The second movement is to *prepare*. Preparation is essential to placing us where we need to be in order to receive what God has in store for us. We prepare so that we are not caught off guard when God honors our prayer, and actually begins to grant us – sometimes to our surprise and consternation! – what we have been praying for. In other words, don’t pray for growth without *preparing* for growth. Remember, though, that preparation is not the same thing as planning. The tendency of the Church all too often is to “over-plan” a desired result rather than preparing itself for what the Spirit has to give. Our church year calendar helps us to know the difference; we approach the celebrations of Christmas and Easter by first going through a season of preparation, namely, Advent and Lent. In both of those seasons, note that we “prepare” for the future celebrations not by overheated activity, planning and anxiety, but by slowing down, waiting, subtracting rather than adding, listening and hoping. Meditate, my brothers and sisters, on the following wisdom saying: “the future belongs to those who prepare for it, not those who plan for it...the kingdom is a future that is already present.”

Finally, the third movement we must engage in is to *perspire*, to engage in the necessary work of building up the kingdom of God. To get the job done, we need workers from every parish to hear the call of God in their lives, roll up their sleeves and do some work. Everyone in the Diocese of Maryland needs to ask themselves beginning today: what is God calling *me* to do in my parish – and perhaps with others in my diocese - to make this vision a reality? In Luke 10:1-2 we read, “The Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;

therefore pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Is God appointing *you*? Is God sending *you*? I invite you to prayerfully consider filling out a Volunteer Information Form to indicate your passion for any of these priorities. Please don't try to calculate or predict in this early stage of Horizons 2015 what would happen if you volunteer your willingness to participate. We simply cannot guarantee that everything we have affirmed today will in fact happen exactly as we have envisioned. But this we do know: if we have faith, if we are bold enough to name our vision, if we plant the seed, if we water it and care for it...there *will* be a result, there *will* be some measure of growth. But if we do nothing, *there will be no result*.

The road ahead of us, my friends, is long. Carrying “Big Rocks” is difficult work. We will undoubtedly know some setbacks these next five years as well as successes. But we will not turn back, we will not falter, we will not waver, we will not despair, and we will press on. I leave you with this short simple prayer from the poet Gail Brook Burket:

“I do not ask to walk smooth paths nor bear an easy load.
I pray for strength and fortitude to climb the rock strewn road...
and transform every stumbling block into a stepping stone.”

May that be our prayer as we move toward a new horizon in the Diocese of Maryland. And may God bless us all on this journey!