

A Pastoral Letter
From the Bishop of Central Florida
The Right Rev. John W. Howe
April 15, 2008

Introduction

Dear People of God: Brothers and Sisters in Christ, in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

It has been my privilege to serve you, first as Bishop Coadjutor and then as Bishop of Central Florida for a total of nineteen years. During this time I have ordained more than 250 men and women to the diaconate and priesthood. We have welcomed 189 priests to new ministries as Rectors, Vicars and Assistants. We have planted 14 new congregations (only two of which did not survive). In nineteen years a Diocese can grow and change dramatically, and this one surely has.

Sadly, in the past several months the Diocese of Central Florida has seen the clergy and some of the members of eight of our congregations choose to “disaffiliate” from The Episcopal Church and, therefore, from the Diocese, as well. This has been costly in terms of relationships and finances, and in diminishing the Body of Christ.

It seems fitting to pause to reflect on the questions: Who are we... now? What are the “core values” of the Diocese of Central Florida? Where are we going? What is God calling this Diocese to do and to be?

Jesus is the Way

Let me begin with myself. I promised, on April 15, 1989, to “guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church” to the very best of my ability, and to “proclaim Christ’s resurrection, interpret his Gospel, and testify to his sovereignty as Lord of lords and King of kings.” In a day in which many in leadership in The Episcopal Church and other churches are saying that Jesus is “*a way*,” or, perhaps, “*my way*,” I am committed to Jesus’ own proclamation that he is “*the way*, the truth and the life,” and “no one comes to the Father except through me.”

The Word of God

Every member of the clergy of The Episcopal Church has declared his or her conviction that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, containing “all things necessary to salvation.” I am committed to holding myself and the clergy of this Diocese to that declaration. And, in the words of the Prayer Book still in use at the time I became a priest (1968), I remain committed to my promise to “banish and drive away from the Church all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God’s Word.”

Discipleship

Every member of The Episcopal Church has renounced the world, the flesh and the devil, and promised to turn to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, putting our whole trust in his grace and love, and following and obeying him as our Lord. These are extremely significant promises, and

any diocese that truly upholds them will become as a shining city on a hill, and salt and light to The Episcopal Church, the Anglican Communion, and the larger community in general.

The Anglican Communion

The Diocese of Central Florida understands itself to be “a constituent member of the Anglican Communion, a Fellowship within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, of those duly constituted Dioceses, Provinces, and regional Churches in Communion with the See of Canterbury, upholding and propagating the historic Faith and Order as set forth in the Book of Common Prayer.” We have affirmed our overwhelming commitment to The Windsor Report and the emerging Anglican Communion Covenant. As a diocese we acknowledge our primary ecclesiastical allegiance to be to the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of Christ.

Evangelism and Worship

By the actions of successive Annual and Special Conventions, the Diocese of Central Florida has repeatedly and consistently affirmed the Faith of the Church as it is set forth in the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, and in particular, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God come among us as perfect man. We believe it is the mission of the Church “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” We understand evangelism to be the presentation of the claims of Christ in the power of the Spirit to a world in need by a Church in love. We are committed to taking Central Florida for Christ. We call all people to repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus, and we invite them to the waters of baptism that they might join us at the Table of the Lord.

Church Planting

We are committed to planting new congregations, and growing existing ones, extending the love of God and the welcome of his Church to every person, regardless of race, gender, social or economic status, or past behavior. In inviting people to know Christ and to make him known we also urge them and ourselves to become his true disciples: men and women, boys and girls who earnestly repent of our sins, seek to live in love and charity with our neighbors, and intend to lead new lives, following the commandments of God and walking in his holy ways, as revealed to us in the Scriptures, our ultimate standard and rule of life.

Social Context

We are committed to serving the communities in which we live, recalling the admonition of Jeremiah: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you...and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” From the support of Anchor House in Auburndale to House of Hope in Orlando, to Kairos throughout the Diocese, to Mustard Seed Ministries in Fort Pierce, to our companion relationship with the Diocese of Honduras, the Diocese of Central Florida takes an extraordinary interest in serving the needs of people in the local and international community with food, housing, advocacy, medical and psychological services, and a host of other things.

Youth Ministry

We are committed to ministry to the next generation, understanding that out of all the people who ever make a commitment to Jesus Christ, over 90% do so before the age of twenty.

We are deeply grateful for the “resurrection” of Camp Wingmann to assist in this ministry (in addition to Canterbury, which is geared much more to adults).

Human Sexuality

The Diocese of Central Florida has reaffirmed by a super majority in Convention the Church’s Biblical and traditional understanding of human sexuality. We adopted without dissent the canonical requirement that, “All members of the clergy of this Diocese, having subscribed to the Declaration required by Article VIII of the National Constitution, shall be under the obligation to model in their own lives the received teaching of the Church that all its members are to abstain from sexual relations outside of Holy Matrimony.” The canons and the code of ethics for the Diocese stipulate that “Clergy are to affirm marriage as the only appropriate setting for sexual intimacy.”

A Troubled Household

We are painfully aware that not all of these commitments are shared throughout The Episcopal Church. Because they are not, some of our members, clergy and lay, have chosen to “disaffiliate” from The Episcopal Church and align with other Anglican jurisdictions or alternative denominational structures. We respect their decisions, we are saddened by their departure, and we offer them our continued love and prayers. But we believe we are in the mainstream of historic Anglicanism, and the positions we hold are those of the overwhelming majority of the world’s Anglicans and other Christians today. We believe it remains our calling to be faithful disciples: Lay Persons, Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, members of faithful parishes and a faithful diocese within a troubled household.

Remaining Steadfast

We believe that unless we were required to do something that Scripture and conscience forbids, or forbidden to do something that Scripture and conscience requires, we have no reason to abandon the responsibilities to which the Lord has called us. We are committed to fulfilling the responsibilities to which the Lord has called us in our baptismal covenant promises and ordination vows.

Encouraging Each Other

We remain committed to making the Great Commandment and the Great Commission the twin priorities of the Diocese of Central Florida. We strive to encourage each other to remain faithful to Jesus, loyal to the Gospel, obedient to God’s Word, filled with his Spirit, rejoicing in his love.

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What is the purpose of these reflections, and how might they shape our life together?

First, I am recommitting myself to these core values on the anniversary of my consecration, and I invite the Diocese to reflect on these commitments that we might strengthen our common life and faith, and that we might bear a united witness to Central Florida, to The Episcopal Church, and to the world at large. I invite the clergy of the Diocese to join me in committing themselves individually and as a collegial body to these core values.

Second, I am calling our Diocese to a renewed emphasis on the teaching ministry of the Church with these core values as the foundation and standard. We have begun two projects at the Diocesan level of our common life. 1) The resources of Cathedral Tapes are being transcribed onto CDs and a digital library to be a lasting resource to the Diocese and the larger Church. 2) The Christian Formation Commission is beginning a project to identify and make available to all the “best practices” of the diocese in the areas of teaching, discipleship, baptismal, confirmation, marital, and parenting preparation, etc. We seek to develop a curriculum of teaching and practice that will be available to the Diocese and the larger Church.

Third, these reflections will be made available to any member of the clergy expressing interest in coming into positions of leadership in this Diocese in the future. This, I believe, is who we are, and we will look for support of and commitment to these values on the part of any who might wish to join us

Fourth, I encourage the leadership structures of our diocese at all levels from the Diocesan Board, Standing Committee, and Commissions to parish vestries, School Boards, parish commissions and committees to examine and evaluate their stewardship of the resources of Christ’s Church. We have been entrusted with an awesome and sacred calling. Our time, talent, and treasure must align around strengthening and preserving our most sacred commitments and stimulating progress and creativity for the fulfillment of the Gospel mandate: that all of creation unite under the one head, Jesus Christ the Lord. Let us contend as one to that end.

It is my fervent hope, and, I believe, the hope of many, that this diocese will continue in this faithful witness far beyond my own tenure as Diocesan Bishop.

A Prayer for the Church

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. *Amen.*

For the Mission of the Church

Everliving God, whose will it is that all should come to you through your Son Jesus Christ: Inspire our witness to him, that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

For the Diocese

O God, by your grace you have called us in this Diocese to a goodly fellowship of faith. Bless our Bishops and other clergy, and all our people. Grant that your Word may be truly preached and truly heard, your Sacraments faithfully administered and faithfully received. By your Spirit, fashion our lives according to the example of your love to all among whom we live; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*