

185TH DIOCESAN CONVENTION
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ADDRESS TO THE DIOCESE OF GEORGIA
FEBRUARY 1ST, 2007

Welcome to the 185th Convention of the Diocese of Georgia. There are times when I feel that I have been here most of those years, but I realize that it was only 43 years ago when I knelt in Christ Church, Savannah and was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church. It is hard for me to believe that I have just started my 13th year as your Bishop. As I prepared my comments for tonight, I thought of my journey as an ordained servant in God's church.

I look around me and see others just beginning that ordination process. At the present time we have 29 people in discernment about calls to the ordained ministry. We have 8 people in preparation to be deacons. We have 9 people in seminary - 4 of whom we plan to ordain at this convention. We have 4 others who are ready to go to seminary this fall and one new person will start the diocesan track to become a priest. We also have one postulant for priesthood who has completed seminary. In my experience this is the largest number of people we have had in the ordination process in Georgia. As I have talked to those folk, I have been made aware of their many gifts. I can think back to my journey and how I have been blessed by the ministry of the laity and the ordained.

In past conventions I have told the stories of the great ordained leaders of our diocese: Bartholomew Zouberbuhler whose long patient ministry built Christ Church, Savannah into an evangelical congregation who then moved out and built a diocese by supporting the growth and foundation of other congregations in the colony of Georgia.

Anson Phelps Dodge who came from New York to Christ Church, St. Simons, which had been destroyed in the Civil War and rebuilt it and from it established congregations across the southeast quarter of our diocese at his own personal expense and constant travel.

Deaconess Alexander, an African American, who working after the Civil War ministered to freed slaves trying to establish themselves as small farmers along the Altamaha River who was so respected and loved in her area that she became the United States government's agent for aid to both blacks and whites during the Great Depression.

Brother Jimmy Lawrence, who as Rector of Calvary, Americus, got on the train and preached at every stop, forming congregations from Bainbridge to Montezuma in the western half of our diocese.

And my own great hero, Albert Rhett Stuart, who became Bishop of a diocese stuck in the past and moved it into the forefront of ministry overcoming legal and cultural forces that kept African Americans separated from the American economic mainstream. He revived our church by making clear our particular gifts of worship within the American Christian spectrum.

Today I want to focus on some of the unexpected but great priest leaders who influenced me in this diocese. (There were and are many more priests who influenced my life. Many are here today.)

I will start with the greatest Southern gentleman I have ever been privileged to know. Dr. F. Bland Tucker was born into a leading Virginia family and became a priest who served as Rector of Christ Church, Savannah, for 22 years. A very humble man, when asked if he was kin to the then Presiding Bishop of our Church he would say “Distantly.” Well Henry St. George Tucker, the Presiding Bishop, was the oldest son and, if I remember correctly, Dr. Tucker was the 13th child in the family! He was loved by many.

I remember his going to his door during Sunday dinner to talk to street people and give them lunch money. Once I was sitting where I could hear the conversation and I said to Dr. Tucker when he returned “I heard that same story about going from Asheville to Tampa two weeks ago.” Dr. Tucker just smiled and said, “We don’t know what troubles people have that forced them into their kind of life.”

I preached one summer Sunday for Dr. Tucker. Having worked hard on the sermon, I stood up to preach expecting a Savannah congregation, looked around and realized I was preaching to five school bus loads of Girl Scouts from other parts of the country, a hand full of people I had never seen (tourists?), and the mayor of the city who was also the chancellor of the diocese.

In the old days residents of Savannah sent their families to the hills or mountains to avoid the summer diseases and the men who stayed in Savannah evidently didn’t go to church in the summer. The people of Christ Church continued that tradition into the age of air conditioning! Changes come with time. For some years now members of the congregation attend year around.

Dr. Tucker served on the committee that prepared the 1940 Hymnal. He was a good linguist and a wonderful poet so he both wrote hymns and translated hymns from Greek and Latin for the 1940 hymnal. He also served with the committee for the 1980 Hymnal. Then almost blind – concerned about each person and their situation. He was not a feminist, but he worked wonders when feminists objected to certain words in popular hymns. He had a knack not only for replacing the offending word for the feminist, but in doing so enriching the hymn by a word that added meaning to the text for everyone but didn’t ruin the poetry! Dr. Tucker has the third largest number of hymns in our hymnal after Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts!

Dr. Tucker’s love affected many and he stood behind Bishop Stuart’s work for integration of the church and society. He brought to me a young Anglo-Catholic priest a new appreciation for the historic evangelical witness in our church. I remember him saying that he had changed some words in the Book of Common Prayer, which he thought were outmoded – leaving out of the prayers mention of prisoners of war (he didn’t think there would be any such people in the modern world). Then his brother disappeared into a Japanese Prisoner of War Camp when the Philippines were invaded, suddenly he realized that the long view of the church was correct! I had little appreciation for the strength of traditional low churchmen until I met the love of Jesus

in this gifted poet and priest. He never showed anger and he never spoke negatively of any other person.

Now a little of my experience of Fr. Gustave Caution of St. Matthew's. Going to my first clergy conference I knew no priests in the Diocese of Georgia except the Bishop. Arriving at Honey Creek, the manager said "Go find a bed in that cabin." Well, I went and found a bed without a suitcase and put my suitcase on it. When I went back to the cabin, I discovered that I was in the corner with the black clergy of Georgia next to Fr. Caution. He greeted me warmly. After a little bit the African American clergy returned to their conversations - soon I realized that they lived in the Afro-American Episcopal Church - they talked about what was happening in St. Louis, Washington and New York. I happened to know some of the priests and parishes they were talking about, but I realized the depth of separation segregation had caused. They really knew very little about what was happening in white churches in the Diocese of Georgia. Fr. Caution's brother was at that time the officer of what we would today call the Afro-American Desk of the Episcopal Church Center in the "So called" integrated North. But the distance we needed to move to overcome our separation North and South was vast.

Fr. Caution was a good pastor to this inexperienced young white priest. I thought of myself as an integrationist and had worked with poor blacks in Washington, D.C., but I had no vision of how isolated the educated blacks were in our church until I met and knew Fr. Caution.

Fr. Harry Babbit arrived at St. Thomas', Thomasville soon after I was called to Christ Church, Valdosta. Harry was a second career priest, one of the best pastors I've ever known. In fact he was pastor to the whole county. Once Jan and I were driving to Thomasville for a clericus meeting, when in Boston, Georgia, a very small town, my Buick blew a hose. In those days there were two filling stations, not national brands, so I pulled into the first one with steam pouring from under the hood. "No, we don't repair cars" the attendant said, so I went down the street to the next filling station and got the same answer. I asked if I could use their phone. They said "Yes" so I called Harry and he said I'll come pick up you and Jan. As I put down the phone, the filling station operator said "Were you talking to Mr. Babbit?" I said "Yes." He said "Your car will be fixed when you get back." Everybody knew and loved the pastor.

Harry really was not very comfortable with the very rich, but he loved people and our Lord. I used to ask him to come to camp at Honey Creek with me. He always said he had no gifts for that, but he would come when I persisted. Normally, he would bring a sailboat on which he worked during the free times. And there gathered around him would be a group of boys and girls who didn't quite fit. Harry, for many of them, was a grandfather figure, perhaps the only male they had ever really identified with. He listened to them and talked with them. I've never had Harry's gifts for meeting all kinds of folk, but I know what I am supposed to try and do because of his love.

The previous three priests Dr. Tucker, Fr. Caution and Fr. Babbit grew up in the Episcopal Church. There were also gifts of God to us from outside of the Episcopal Church.

Fr. Jack Berlin arrived in this diocese about when I did, but from a very different path. He was born in a Jewish family in Brooklyn. His first visit to Georgia came, not by choice, but by train

to Ft. Benning for basic training for World War II. Jack was trained, joined the special services and then parachuted into France before the allies invaded in order to link up with the French underground. He did. At the end of his life while on dialysis the French Government flew him to France to the village where he worked and there they presented him with the highest honor they can give a foreigner for his work in freeing France from the Nazis.

However, the story goes on because after Jack linked up with the allied forces following the invasion, he was deployed to the Far East and again parachuted behind enemy lines this time in China. There he was apprehended and spent time in a POW Camp.

Returning from the war he went to Harvard and then earned a Master's in Public Health from the University of North Carolina. He married a Brunswick, Georgia girl. Working for the State Department he went to Iran to help them develop sewage disposal systems. In Iran he met the Anglican Church and was converted! He came home and went to Virginia Theological Seminary.

He arrived in Augusta as a priest working for the Nursing School of the Medical School of Georgia. He assisted at St. Paul's and ran a counseling practice and later he was the Vicar of the Church of the Atonement.

Jack effectively used his gifts and experiences that he received for our Lord Jesus. His courage – his willingness to serve country and church with all that he had, will not be forgotten by me. He loved everybody. He was brutally honest and he fulfilled his promises. He was a great priest and a gift to us.

Tony Van Ham was born in the Netherlands. He first went to sea as a cabin boy when he was twelve. At sixteen he jumped ship, Germany having invaded the Netherlands, and joined the Dutch underground. Arrested and jailed he escaped and survived. Through one winter he lived by eating nothing but tulip bulbs, which he said were pretty awful. After the war he went back to sea and became a good chef specializing in Indonesian food. I suspect that he jumped ship in Houston after the war, but somehow or other, he became a chef for a cafeteria at Shell's Headquarters in Houston. From there he moved to New York with a job selling baking equipment to large bakeries across the United States. Having found the Episcopal Church, he felt called to be a priest so he went to night school at a seminary run by the Diocese of Long Island.

He came into my life when he arrived from a congregation in Florida to be the Vicar of St. Barnabas' in Valdosta. Tony never met a stranger. He knew that good food helps people to meet their neighbors. Always planning meals and inviting people who didn't know each other, he brought many into our part of the church. Tony did not labor just for his congregation, he shared it with meals for area clergy and for helping other congregations develop meals for hospitality and community building. In retirement he served St. James' in Quitman, but he did much of his pastoral work in the aisles of the Publix in Valdosta. Like Fr. Babbit he knew that we had good news for everybody and he shared it with everybody.

Think about these priests: One that spent a winter surviving on tulip bulbs and hiding from the Gestapo and one who spent time behind enemy lines and then in an enemy POW Camp in China. Neither one of these priests grew up in the Episcopal Church or even in an area where they knew about the Episcopal Church. Fr. Berlin discovered the Episcopal Church in the minuscule Anglican Church of Iran. Both Fr. Van Ham and Fr. Berlin ended up serving the people of God in Georgia in the United States of America with imagination and love. They carried the pain of the suffering they had seen around the world, but were clear that Jesus' love heals all who come to him.

Condensing what made these fine priests special for me in a couple of paragraphs is impossible. But I hope I have given you some sense of the variety of persons who are called and serve Christ as priests in our diocese. Each used his gifts and his experiences, which were very different. None of them pleased everybody. None of them was perfect.

All were serious about worship - but their ideals about how worship should be conducted varied markedly – all were open to accept less than perfect people as friends and parishioners – but they appealed to very different folk. All were committed to God's word in the Bible, but they heard it through very different theologies. All believed Jesus forgave their sins and failings - and were able to convey forgiveness to us who sinned.

They would not have agreed with each other's or my theology. However, they knew Jesus and shared that love with me.

Some people want to believe that in the past everyone in our church agreed on theology and that all orthodox people would use exactly the same language all the time. The truth is Elizabeth, the Great, Queen of England, allowed the development of a church in which the test of membership was worshipping together not agreeing to theological unanimity. The "Articles of Religion" in her Book of Common Prayer attempted to find a mediating place between the Pope's, Luther's and Calvin's theologies. I believe it came close to accomplishing that. But American revivalist theology had not yet been born. Many other theologies followed. Most are based around some part of biblical truth that was neglected during the 16th century. Most have enriched our lives by returning some part of the faith of the millennia to the common faith of the 16th century, which was not comprehensive of all ages.

Our roomy denomination allowed considerable variety of theologies. In the 18th century when the Episcopal Church was formed the Enlightenment was in full bloom. Many of our leaders here and in England were very close to being Unitarians. Look at Bishop White's, (our first American Bishop), Proposed Book of Common Prayer which has no mention of the Trinity! That Book of Common Prayer did not become official, but I certainly knew priests when I was young who never mentioned the Trinity. Times have changed and today anything less than a doctrine of the Trinity seems too small to describe the richness of our God to most of the priests I know.

I have every confidence that Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and in the Father is leading our church. Mistakes of theology or morality will be corrected in the life of the church, though other errors will arise through the sin and partial vision of our human leaders.

My thoughts tonight have been focused on the contributions of the ordained ministry, but I recognize none of those ministries would have been effective without strong lay leadership. From the great ordained leadership of the past – Bartholomew Zouberbuhler, Anson Dodge, Deaconess Alexander, Jimmy Lawrence and Albert Stuart to some of the priests who have influenced and inspired me directly, Bland Tucker, Gustave Caution, Harry Babbit, Jack Berlin and Tony Van Ham there has been a diversity of talent, direction and theology. But each has moved the diocese forward and has worked to unify God’s people.

This convention will feature some sharing by deacons and some by congregations of the existing ministries for Christ happening this year in our diocese. These ministries are a partial representation of a great variety of exciting ways your parishes are serving Christ in this year of 2007. I wish Bland Tucker were here to now set our hearts to song as we proclaim “Together We Grow.”