

Address to the Convention Of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe

The Right Reverend Pierre W. Whalon

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Schloss Fürstenried, Munich, Germany

Dear People of God,

It has not been since 2007 that I have read aloud my Address to the Convention. It is at the request of the Council of Advice that I do so this year.

So now you know whom to blame...

This is my sixteenth convention among you. The first was when I was consecrated as your Bishop in charge, in St. Paul's-Within-the-Walls, Rome, on November 18, 2001. Not many of you here today were in attendance. In many respects, it seems to me to have been only yesterday. And yet much has changed.

You have changed, Beloved. At my first meeting with the Council of Advice, I was asked why I had not sent the agenda. I replied that there is no standing committee in the Episcopal Church that allows the bishop to set their agenda. Today, if I ask for an item to be placed on the agenda of a Council meeting, they will take the request "under advisement"... I was also asked for the draft budget. Again I replied that Episcopal bishops do not control the budget of their dioceses — that is for the council, and finally, the convention to approve.

Today, the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe is a completely self-governing jurisdiction of the Episcopal Church, with all the structures of a diocese. At my first meeting of the Commission on Ministry of the Baptized, an aspirant presented himself for ordination to the diaconate. "Why the diaconate?" I asked. "Because my discernment committee thought I couldn't do any harm if I were only a deacon," he replied. I asked the committee what they thought the diaconate was. "We were hoping you would tell us," they replied.

Today the COMB is quite clear about its mission, "*to guide and empower all baptized people in discerning their ministries,*" and they do it quite well, stimulating ministry for all with the vocational discernment conference, deepening lives of prayer with the spirituality conference, and shepherding people with dexterity through the processes of licensed lay ministries and ordination to the diaconate and priesthood. What a great chair Lee Williams has been!

On the night of my election as your Bishop in charge (June 23, 2001), Melinda, Marie-Noëlle, and I were taken to dinner by Bishop Jeffrey and Anne Rowthorn and Peter and Felicity Handford. Besides picking out the pattern for the Convocation crozier, which at first struck me as an academic exercise until I realized this was what I would be carrying across Europe, I was asked to commit to starting an education department. That night what we now call the European Institute of Christian Studies was born.

Its birth pangs were long. We tried to start with a director, who soon was stolen by a four-letter-word outfit in New Haven, Connecticut. The Very Reverend Joe Britten went on to a very successful deanship of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. (Today we have a postulant for ordination studying there, Stéphanie Burette, from the Cathedral.) A second director also tried, but the model was wrong. Felicity Handford, president of the Council of Advice when I was elected, stepped forward to build a lay-led board that would develop formation for both lay and ordained ministries. That has proven to be very successful, and today seminaries accept certificates from EICS. We have a well-attended Academy for Parish Leadership taught by top-flight people, Education for Ministry groups, and solid ordinand formation under Dr. Rosemarie Valentine and the hard-working board. Recently, the EICS and COMB put the finishing touches on joint documents outlining the entire process for licensed and ordained ministries in the Convocation.

Next year, Youth Across Europe will celebrate 20 years of excellent offerings for young people. The first event was held at the Cathedral, and was organized by the Rev. Kempton Baldrige, then Rector of All Saints, Waterloo, Belgium. Then it was under the aegis of COMB. Today three events are held, reflecting the deep understanding that the Youth Commission has developed: Juniors, Young People, and Young Adults Across Europe, for 10 to 29-year-olds. Of course, youth groups vary with the general congregational population. Some years we got 'em, some years we don't. But the steady leadership of Jane Döbler and her very committed board keeps adding to our ability to engage young people as full members of the Church. We now offer training for youth ministers, the ability to put on weekend Happening events, and generally to energize the whole Convocation for this vital ministry. Youth ministry is not an add-on program: it's part of the heart of every congregation!

St. Boniface, Augsburg, has been instrumental in bringing the Daughters of the King to Europe, where we now have three chapters. Despite its rather Victorian name, the Daughters actually provide to busy modern women and girls a very practical way to develop a daily prayer life. They also are wonderful supporters of congregational life. Furthermore, St. Boniface has inaugurated our first chapter of the healing ministry known as the Order of St. Luke. It is not only the great that lead, is it?

At the triennial General Convention of the Episcopal Church, the churchwide synod with 872 Deputies from 109 dioceses, along with all the Bishops, our Deputation has gained recognition as leaders to be counted on for sharing in the hard work of governance. Our Deputies routinely serve on legislative committees, and I am always receiving compliments from the President of the House of Deputies and the Secretary of the General Convention. (As for the House of Bishops, that is another matter...)

I can say a lot more about you. I have made it my business for the past fifteen years to talk about you and your accomplishments constantly, at church meetings, in columns for Anglicans Online, on Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, and most recently, Instagram. And it has not been hard to boast of you, for all along these past fifteen years lay and clergy leaders, and our congregations and commissions, have done exemplary ministry that speaks well of the Episcopal Church and our way of being part of the Body of Christ. Today I am proud to note that all our congregations, small and large, have risen to the challenge that I issued with the Council of Advice last year to develop new and existing ministries to refugees and migrants. The news services of our church and the Anglican Communion regularly publish stories of this work among you. And for good reason.

That said, I want you to know that, unless I am called away before, my last day among you as Bishop will be July 31, 2019. This will give the Council of Advice and all of you the time to do what is necessary for the election and consecration of a new Bishop in charge.

This will require, first, the visioning process that we will work on at this Convention. The Council will then take the materials you give them, and design a strategic planning process, which I will not be involved in. This plan will certainly include a blueprint for the next fifteen years, including a plan for reaching financial autonomy at the end of that time. Then, working with the Presiding Bishop and his staff, advised by the Board of Foreign Parishes, a nominating committee will go to work to develop a profile for the next Bishop in charge. Finally, a slate of candidates will be presented to the October 2018 Convention, taking place at All Saints, in Waterloo, Belgium, if the convention rotation is followed. When the bishop-elect will have received a majority of consents from the dioceses of the Episcopal Church, the Presiding Bishop will take order for the consecration at the Cathedral in Paris, in the spring of 2019. My resignation on July 31 of that year will give the new Bishop and me time to get him or her on the rails for this complex ministry.

So first things first. We need to do the visioning work now. Last month, all vestries and bishop's committees were sent questions developed by Council, to be considered along with every delegate here today. You delegates are to bring forward the conversations around those questions, and Council members will gather the results from your small-group discussions.

Second, we initiated a conversation among the Board of Foreign Parishes, the Presiding Bishop's office, and ourselves concerning the need to reach financial autonomy. This means being able to provide a bishop for ourselves. We had already begun planning for financial autonomy with Vision 2012. Now it has been mandated by the General Convention for all overseas dioceses. Already last year's General Convention eliminated the \$11,000 annual block grant we had been accustomed to receiving. This was explained to me as a sign of being serious. But we were already ahead of the game...

This conversation was interrupted by a change of senior staff at the Church Center, and should resume in the next few months. What you need to know is that traditionally, dioceses receiving financial support have made covenants with the Domestic & Foreign Missionary Society (the legal name of the Episcopal Church) for reducing support over a period of years. I am suggesting fifteen years, or at least ten, after my resignation, which would mean my successor would still receive support. The Letter of agreement between the Presiding Bishop and me remains in force until then.

Therefore, Beloved, you must elect clergy and laypeople to the Council whom you trust to lead you through this process. To paraphrase John's Gospel, the Council's role must increase, and mine must decrease, at least as far as electing a new bishop goes.

At this point you might be asking why now. I could stay as Bishop for another nine years, until the canons require me to resign. But I fear that doing so, while it would certainly be more comfortable for Melinda and me, would begin to chip away at what we have successfully built with so much effort. Good leadership means, among other things, knowing when to leave.

To put it another way, I was called to help you build a functional diocese, so you could be completely self-governing. We are there now. It works. Now the question you need to ask the Holy Spirit is, why were we called to build it? What is it for? What does God expect of us now? Where are we to go?

These questions are for you to ask, in prayer and in consultations, so that the next Bishop in charge will be called to do that work along with you.

Some of you know that I am a finalist for Bishop of Los Angeles. So my departure may come in the middle of next year. But the timetable I outlined can still be adhered to by requesting that the Presiding Bishop appoint an interim bishop to see you through until the consecration of the second elected Bishop in charge.

I had also been asked earlier this year to serve as provisional bishop of the Diocese of Haiti, to lead them out of a difficult moment, but the Presiding Bishop met with their bishop and standing committee, and the offer was rejected. So —

So, enough said about this for now.

I have described where we were in 2001. Where are we now?

Times are difficult across the board. Several of our churches are dealing with lower attendance. We have long been demanding that we be counted in the annual figures compiled at the Church Center on the state of the Episcopal Church. I am happy to report that we are at last appearing in these, but I have no explanation for the wide variations in statistics, other than to say that we are all getting used to the system. We have routinely used 4,000 as a general statistic of our population.

Giving is down, too, though remaining members are valiantly working to make up the difference. And while such challenges happen when a congregation is in conflict, these declines are not due to parish fights. For instance, the Cathedral in Paris has seen some of its American members most able to support its ministry, who already pay taxes to the United States as well as France, leave the country after hearing then-candidate François Hollande during his 2012 campaign promise a significant tax increase. Tourism has suffered, as well, in light of attacks in the past twenty months, and so there are fewer visitors, as well.

However, no one should ever evaluate a church purely on the basis of its statistics of attendance and finances. The fact that every one of our congregations has developed new and existing ministries to migrants and refugees is proof that we are doing the work of the Church. This is how Jesus described it: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” [Matthew 25: 31-40]

What can I add, except to say, “Right onward!”? The massive increase in refugees and migrants, Brexit, the rise of populist movements in virtually every country in Europe, budget cuts affecting employment, and the withdrawal of international corporations, have all had effects in our churches. There is no getting around the fact that our clergy and lay leaders are under stress.

We need to continue to trust that, if we seek to do the work God has given us to do, as faithful witnesses to Christ, our necessities will be provided for. Not without planning and good management, of course — that is why we have vestries and bishop’s committees and Councils of Advice, as well as clergy leadership, and yes, even Bishops. But in the end, God must provide, for in God is our hope. “And we shall never hope in vain.”

So fear not, little flock! It shall be well with you.

What does the future hold? As you know, I always say that your future — my future, our future — belongs to God. This is the ground of our hope in Christ.

In her *Revelations of divine love*, Dame Julian of Norwich writes, “He wills that we know that not only He takes heed to noble things and to great, but also to little and to small, to low and to simple, to one and to other. And so He means what He says: ALL MANNER OF THINGS shall be well. For He wills that we should know that the least thing shall not be forgotten.”

Three weeks ago, I attended and addressed the synod of the Old Catholic Church of Germany. I was very warmly welcomed, for even though I was appointed an assisting bishop, this was the synod I’d attended in 14 years! Better late than never... Speaking of the future, I believe that we must make every effort to work most closely together with the Old Catholics. You know that we took over the Italian congregations under Madre Longhitano from them. I have raised the idea of closer collaboration in Germany concerning financing our churches with Bishop Mathias Ring. And Archbishop Joris Vercammen has over the past three years followed up on his pledge to us at the 2013 Rome convention about perhaps sharing a bishop.

I believe we need to be especially kind to the Diocese in Europe, after the Brexit vote. Speaking as a citizen of France, I thought it was a disastrous decision, which will have serious consequences for Great Britain as well as the European Union. These will also affect the Diocese in Europe, which had just been able to revise its status with the Church of England for greater support, including housing Bishop Robert Innes within his diocese — even if it is still non-geographic. I cling to hope that a way will be found around what is a non-binding referendum, and the genie put back in the bottle. But our fellow Anglicans in continental Europe are already feeling the pain.

Now that the Episcopal Church has agreed with the Swedish Lutheran Church that we have always been in full communion, I urge us all to take advantage and get to know our Swedish sisters and brothers better. I will never forget the lengths to which the Swedish Church went to have us buy the building for All Saints, Waterloo, which was the inspiration for my resolution to the 2009 General Convention to explore our full communion. They could easily have sold the property to other buyers for a much larger sum, but really wanted the Episcopalians to have it. Let’s reach out and start having joint services and projects with the Swedes. Full communion, after all, means interchangeability of clergy...

Lots to look forward to in the future. In looking back however, as I have done in this Address, I also have to note that my greatest disappointment has been that we have not planted more churches. Of course, we saw Christ Church, Clermont-Ferrand, become a parish, and St. Boniface, Augsburg, may be on the verge as well. The ministry of Madre Vittoria Longhitano among Italians is exciting, and the development of a form of Carmelite spirituality along with it holds real promise, as well. Work in Italian and Spanish has progressed under Madre Mercedes Tutasig and Father Francisco Alberca, as well, under the watchful eye of Father Austin Rios. I am overall satisfied that our other existing mission congregations are on the right track. Grace Church in the Hérault had a tragic split, from which it continues to recover, led by the determination of Mary Faigle and her committee.

And in saying that, I wish to take special note of St. Augustine of Canterbury, Wiesbaden, which, under the excellent leadership of Father Christopher Easthill and inspired lay leaders, has redeveloped into a healthy, outward-looking parish.

Long ago, the Convocation had churches in Düsseldorf and Dresden; in Amsterdam and Luzerne and Lisbon. They are no more. But over the years I too have had to close mission congregations: Good Shepherd, Darmstadt, Holy Trinity, Ingolstadt, Bon Pasteur, Rouen, la Mission Saint-Martin, Bordeaux, St. Martial, Paris, and I've had to let go of St. Victor, Toulon. We also had a house church in Almaty, Kazakhstan, for a season. Most of you have never heard of these, I imagine. Each of these had its own reasons for being born, and for withering away. In each I worked hard, and learned much. The first lesson is that all churches have a life cycle. A very few, like St. Martin's of Canterbury, founded around 570 AD and still open today, have very long lives. Some are very short. A congregation is born, God acts through its people to transform them and the people around them by the power of the Spirit. In God's providence, then, the circumstances of their planting and their growth are circumscribed, as well as their closing. "Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth," wrote St. Paul to the Corinthians (I Cor. 3:7).

Nevertheless, in the mystery of the Church we are always confronted with the paradox of God acting, and acting through us. In other words, while "we wait upon the Lord," as Scripture says, God also waits on us to get up and go do the work we have been given to do. The Holy Spirit acts to make conditions favorable; provides vision and resources, namely people; attracts others through the power of the Word preached and the sacraments celebrated; and guides us every day: and yet we have to do the work with every ounce of intelligence and energy we can muster. Furthermore, Jesus said, "When you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" (Luke 17:10)

So while I express my disappointment that we do not have 40 churches instead of 20, yet I do believe that "we have done what we ought to have done". For in the ministry that is given to you and to me, formation is needed. We have to learn how to do it. Furthermore, failure is instructive. We only learn by making mistakes. So I can say that personally I am very well educated!

We are re-forming the Committee on Mission Congregations, whose task according to our canons is "for the purpose of support and oversight of current and future missions." (Canon 3.7, Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe) I expect that they will help the Council and me develop strategies for new congregations, as well as helping existing missions flourish.

As I mentioned these past little churches, it is important to remember that these came to us. They were not a result of a mission strategy that we developed together. And while remaining open to the Spirit sending people to us who want to start a church, as in Poland, for instance, we also need the balance of seeking to plant churches where we see the need, as well. So this is the charge to the Committee on Mission Congregations: determine where we can put parish and Convocation resources in order to continue the work we have been given to do. We have been given the commission to “make disciples among all nations, teaching them all that Jesus Christ has commanded, and baptizing them in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” (Mt. 28:19) And that, my friends, means planting new churches.

One aspect which makes our common life and my ministry as Bishop complicated is of course our multinational, multicultural reality. Our churches do not function identically in each country we minister in, for the laws, history, and church culture are different in each one. Furthermore, we have been challenged since Mission 2000, passed at the Nice Convention in 1999, to do this work in languages other than English as well. I think we have made progress, for one barrier for some of those missions of yesteryear was how to work with people whose primary language is not English. We were not ready for real multicultural life 15 years ago, for we could not imagine then how to incorporate clergy and congregations who do not use English.

Today I believe we are more multicultural, in the sense that we are more willing to be open to and respect others than people of our own culture — whatever it may be! The Anglican Episcopal way of being Christian, as evidenced in the 166 countries of the Anglican Communion, works in every language and culture. It is not Anglo-Saxon; it is universal. In the long run, the test of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” will be how well we learn to live into the reality of and take advantage in our multicultural situation for the sake of God’s mission.

Today we can take stock and see that we have built a missionary structure that allows us to govern ourselves like an Episcopal diocese, but that we have decided shall remain a flexible enterprise for the sake of that missionary call. Our policies and procedures are well grounded, our finances are sound, our ability to form people, young and not so young, for lay and ordained ministries is tested and strong. As a result, all of our congregations are able to reach beyond their walls to touch people in their local communities, in the countries they minister in, and people “away to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), as God has intended and equipped us to do.

I close with Dame Julian’s words again: “ALL MANNER OF THINGS shall be well. For He wills that we should know that the least thing shall not be forgotten.” Our future belongs to God, for our lives are in the hand of God, our hearts and our minds belong to Jesus, and we are part of the Holy Trinity’s life by the power of the Spirit, who will never let us go.

And so —

“Right onward!”