

Bishop's Address to Convention – Part Two
Reflection on Anglican Mark of Mission #1 – “To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom”
The 234th Convention of the Diocese of New Jersey
The Right Reverend William H. Stokes, 12th Bishop of New Jersey

Mark One

To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight”* Mark 1:1-3

I love the Gospel of Mark. I love its immediacy. I love its urgency. The opening of the Gospel of Mark gets right to the heart of the matter: *The Good New, Gospel, of Jesus Christ, the Son of God* (1.1). You don't have to guess about Mark's concern; its right there. Mark's concern is also our concern – the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

I was grateful for all those who went out on Ash Wednesday to impose Ashes for “Ashes to Go” This diocese is now blessed to have The Reverend Emily Mellott, Rector of Trinity Church, Moorestown as one of its clergy leaders. Emily was a pioneer in starting “Ashes to Go” in The Episcopal Church when she served in the Diocese of Chicago. It was a creative, out of the box initiative, that has been, I feel sure, a great gift to the church. I know it has been a great gift to me.

This past Ash Wednesday, for the fifth year, I went to the Trenton Transit Station to greet and pray with the morning commuters and to impose ashes on those who wished. A few quick vignettes:

I drove to the station and parked my car in the nearby parking lot across from the station. I was vested in my cassock and walked across the street to enter the station. (Yes, I know, some of you are envious that I get to be indoors – we found out that if we get a permit, we can do that). As I was walking toward the station, a man, sitting on a stone wall that leads up to the station called out as I went by, “Good morning, Father...”

“Good morning,” I said continuing to walk toward the station.

“Hey Father, do you know it's Ash Wednesday?” I heard from behind me.

I turned around and smiled, “Yes, I do, that's why I'm here.” I walked back to him and stuck out my hand. “I'm Bishop Chip Stokes, how are you?”

“Hi, I'm Steve....A bishop, my cousin's a bishop...I'm Catholic.”

“Steve, I'm going in to offer prayers and ashes, come on in if you like.” Steve followed me in. When I got in to the lobby and looked left, Jonathan Elliott, our Canon for Communications was setting up our Ashes to Go sign – X marked the spot!

I put my few things down, took my ashes and prayer cards, and started by praying with Steve and imposing ashes on his forehead.... “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall

return.” I gave Steve the prayer card. He sat for a while on the bench behind me, talked to Jonathan a little, and then left.

It was just after six a.m. and still a little slow. Two New Jersey Transit Police Officers were standing at a booth across from me. I went up and introduced myself. “Hi, I’m Bishop Chip Stokes of the Diocese of New Jersey. I’ll be standing in front of you all morning, so I thought I would say hello. Thank you for your service.” They introduced themselves. After the introduction, one of them asked me, “May I ask you what denomination you represent?”

I said, “I’m an Episcopalian.”

He responded, “Really, I grew up in The Episcopal Church...I went to St. James, Bradley Beach as a kid.”

“Wow, you know great things are happening at Bradley Beach right now...They’re working together with St. Michael’s in Wall and exciting things are going on...” We chatted for a little while longer and then I went back to my area.

There were flurries of activity. Dean Rene John joined me and I’m guessing we imposed ashes on over 150 people and gave them our Diocese of New Jersey prayer cards. These had a short message from me about Lent, as well as an excerpt from the exhortation from The Book of Common Prayer on the meaning of Ash Wednesday as well as two appropriate prayers from the BCP.

About midway through the morning, two young men, clearly students, approached me. It was evident they were friends. The first, taller than the second, clearly knew what this was about. He stood in front of me solemnly and confidently. I imposed the ashes, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return...” I gave him the prayer card and he stepped aside. His friend stood in front of me and looked a little more uncertain. “Would you like ashes?” I asked.

“Could you tell me what they mean?” he asked, looking at me with earnestness. “Sure,” I responded, and took a few minutes to explain the meaning of Lent and the love of God for us in Jesus Christ, the meaning of the ashes as a sign of our mortality... He listened intently “Would you like ashes?” I asked. He nodded his head, “Yes, please.”

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return...”

Not long after that, I saw Steve coming toward me again...It’s evident Steve is homeless and that the train station is a place where he regularly goes for warmth and safety.

“Do you remember my name?” he asked. “Sure, it’s Steve.” He turned to Jonathan beaming, “He remembered my name...He remembered my name!” I introduced Steve to Dean John. Steve asked where the Cathedral was. We told him about the many outreach programs the Cathedral offers...My hunch is, I will see Steve again.

As a church, we need to find creative ways to go out and make connections with people. Ashes to go is one good way. It is a living parable, short, direct, like the parables of Jesus, that offers lots of insights into the relationship of the world to the church and to God today.

We’ve been talking a lot about the missional church in the Diocese of New Jersey. Canon Rob Droste has developed the Way of St. Paul to help change the culture of the diocese of New Jersey into a missional culture. Rob is using a strategy of developing coaches who are trained in missional church thinking who can work with willing congregations to make the necessary turns. There are 17 coaches now. Rob is doing outstanding work.

Rob often quotes Reggie McNeal and the three shifts McNeal feels are necessary for the Church today if it is going to thrive – three turns that define the missional church. The three turns are:

- A turn from an inward focus to an outward focus

- A turn from a focus on program development to people development [I'm more specific and say "disciple development"].
- A turn from a focus on the Church as institution to a focus on the kingdom of God.¹

Dwight Zscheile, author of *People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identity* talks about "plunging" – a practice developed by the Christians of the Dutch Reformed and other predominately white churches in South Africa who, after the end of apartheid in South Africa, found themselves in a difficult position.² They could hardly claim the moral high ground for their proclamation. As Zscheile observes, they "have had to innovate new ways of being in relationship with their neighbors."³ As a result, they developed the idea of "plunging." Zscheile describes this as, "the practice of intentional relationship development with diverse neighbors through relying on their hospitality."⁴

He continues, "This often begins informally, with Christians striking up conversations with neighbors at a bus stop or some other public place. Rather than invite the neighbors to come to some event or program at church, they seek to be invited to accompany those neighbors to gathering places. The primary agenda is cultivating community, listening to people's stories and dreams, and beginning to share life together."⁵

Zscheile observes, "Plunging means leaving your comfortable turf and depending upon the good will of the neighbor. It means being in places which you cannot control."⁶

Today's ministry context demands Christian leaders – clergy and lay - who are comfortable "plunging" (and I mean more than toilets). We can no longer wait in our buildings, as open as the doors may be, hoping for people to come to us just because we invited them. We must be like Peter in that story I told in my first reflection, and go to them – go to their homes, go to their workplaces – go to the pubs where they hang out, go to the streets. (Fr. Matt Tucker, Rector of Christ Church, Bordentown has been doing this for years. Talk to him. Ask him about it).

The people of San Andres have been plunging for a quite a while. They have a great story to tell. Please welcome Leila Mello who will share with you what God is up to there.

¹ McNeal, Reggie *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009)

² Zscheile, Dwight *People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identity* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2012) Chapter 5 – A People... Seeking the World's Hospitality, Kindle location 1407 ff.

³ Zscheile, Kindle location 1431

⁴ Zscheile, Kindle location 1431

⁵ Zscheile, Kindle location 1431

⁶ Zscheile, Kindle location 1431