

*Bishop's Annual Address
Convention of the Diocese of Massachusetts
Saturday, Nov. 14, 2015
Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Boston*

Touching the Floor

In his consecration sermon last year, Mark Hollingsworth commented that the bishop's chair is the largest in the chancel because it reflects the greatest room for growth. The image which came to me was that of the comedian Lily Tomlin in character as Edith Ann, the feisty little girl whose diminutive size was emphasized by the huge rocking chair in which she always sat. She was dwarfed by that chair, hopelessly outsized, with her feet dangling high above the floor.

Over the past 14 months I have considered Mark's comment, and Edith Ann, and the image of a very small bishop in a very large chair. There have been moments when the image has felt altogether too apt – so much to learn, so much to do.

So I was relieved last week when the bishop's chair appeared in our remodeled cathedral, in advance of last night's Seating. I found that when I was seated, my feet could reach the floor! And if that is so in the broader sense – if we are underway together as bishop and people, finding a foothold to walk together as Christian pilgrims – well then, I can only thank all those companions whose grace and generosity have let me know that I am not just a lonely soul in an oversized chair. To the devoted staff at 138 Tremont Street, to the leadership bodies of our diocese, to my clergy colleagues throughout eastern Massachusetts, and to every one of you who serves and leads and prays and sings and makes sacrifice on behalf of God's realm throughout our diocese – I thank you for your companionship. I thank you for your patience and friendship. I thank God that we are journeying together.

The Maze and the Labyrinth

One sunny day in 2003 my family was concluding a vacation in New Hampshire. We were headed for the airport, but we had more time than we needed. So when along the highway we saw a sign advertising a Corn Maze, we stopped for diversion. The farmer hinted cryptically that the layout of his maze had something to do with the Old Man of the Mountain, the iconic rock cliff which had collapsed just three months before.

Into the maze we went, the corn high above our heads on each side. We wandered around, hitting dead ends, backtracking and trying again. After a while we grew hot and frustrated. The highway noise outside the dense corn suggested that we were getting no closer to the end. Around and around we went. Then just as we began to panic that we would miss our flight home, we turned a corner and were dumped out into the open. The end of the maze.

The farmer beamed with pride as he showed us an aerial photograph so we could see the pattern of the maze, and its loving tribute to the collapsed Old Man of the Mountain cliff. The path through the corn had been cut to form, in cursive writing, the phrase "In memory." Except that it was spelled, "m-e-m-e-r-y." So even if in the maze you thought you had divined the pattern – which it turned out Tricia thought she had – you became convinced otherwise when you hit that idiosyncratic spelling.

But this, of course, is the idea of a maze. It is designed to trick you, to confound you, to draw you into places that go nowhere. A maze is a challenge to be met, a conundrum to be puzzled out.

A labyrinth looks something like a maze. But a labyrinth is different. A labyrinth has only one path, which winds toward a central point and then out again. It has no tricks or dead ends. It meanders and doubles back, yes, and goes in directions you probably did not expect. But in the end, its pattern takes you inexorably to its heart, and then back into the world.

The labyrinth has served as a devotional tool in Christianity since at least the 12th century, in grand cathedral floors and outdoor gardens. The labyrinth is a type for the journey of life. It takes us on its twists and turns. We travel together, we travel individually, we encounter others. We enter, we sojourn, we depart. And at the heart of it all is the very heart of Christ – waiting to draw us in, waiting to send us out again.

Too often in life you and I are stuck in mazes. We experience twists and turns that lead to dead ends. We grow frustrated, even panic-stricken. But for the Christian disciple, life is not a trick to be figured out, not a puzzle to be solved, not a maze to be escaped. It is rather a path to be followed, individually and together; in the footsteps of others, yet in our own fashion; meandering but meaningful; with moments of loneliness and tedium, insight and arrival. And always with the love of Christ at its center.

Many churches of our diocese have a labyrinth – in stone, turf, or canvas. This cathedral has in its new floor a beautiful labyrinth. And I want to suggest that our very diocesan life together is a labyrinth, a path upon which we encounter one another and walk together, into the center, and back out to the world.

Engagement in Every Corner

For the past fourteen months it has been my honor and delight to walk with you the labyrinth which is the Diocese of Massachusetts. In its various corners are churches of every size and setting; churches with wonderfully differing worship styles – from Benediction to Benny Goodman, High Mass to jazz mass; from Taizé to reggae; from prayer cards in braille to humeral veil.

In the various corners of our diocese are faithful Anglican Episcopalians who worship in English and Spanish, Swahili and Bantu, Chinese and Haitian Creole, and every one of them is a part of us.

In its various corners are Christians engaging with their communities and their world in ways reflective of the gospel mandate. Some of us are engaged in bringing access to quality education for all God's children. Some of us are seeking liberation for victims of sex trafficking. Some of us are committed to elder care, in all its dimensions. Some of us are passionate about Creation Care, determined to bring us back from the brink of self-destruction. Later in Convention we will celebrate a milestone in their advocacy.

In recent months many of us have been made newly aware of the plight of global refugees. The escalation of violence in Central America's Northern Triangle and fratricide in Syria, in particular, have demanded our attention to those in flight. Many have been asking how we as parishes and a diocese might respond. Together with Bishop Gayle, Laura Walta, Project Director for Global Mission, and Holly Hartman, Deacon for Global Partnerships have been laying plans.

Receiving and sponsoring refugee families is a significant and long-term commitment, requiring the proverbial "village" approach, perhaps with neighboring Episcopal or ecumenical

partner churches. A diocesan resource seminar on such sponsorship, entitled “Refugee Ministry 101,” is scheduled for December 12. A flier with details on this event is available today, and will be on the diocesan website. Deacon Holly Hartman is here today to speak with you during breaks or lunch. Both Holly and Laura Walta will be glad to hear from those exploring potential sponsorship.

Intertwining Evils

Events of the past year demand our continued response to the intertwining evils of gun violence and racism.

Gun violence is a scourge on our land which must and can change. As people of faith we are compelled to respond. One translation of Leviticus 19:16 commands: *“Do not stand idly by while your neighbor’s blood is shed.”*(CEB) Our diocesan B-PEACE group, together with Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, is joining a nationwide campaign for increased gun safety called Do Not Stand Idly By. The effort takes a less legislative and more economic approach, working with law enforcement agencies and gun manufacturers, building relationships, calling for transparency in gun sales, and development of (so-called) smart gun technology. Do Not Stand Idly By has been well organized in several parts of the country; we can add Massachusetts to that list.

B-PEACE will host a training on Sunday afternoon, January 31, for all individuals and congregations interested in joining this effort. Details on this, and other information, will be made available via the diocesan website.

Meanwhile, as regards racism and systemic racial injustice, our diocesan Anti-racism Task Force meets monthly and regularly conducts trainings, supporting congregational events, day long workshops, Lenten study groups, dinner conversations about race, tours of the Royall House slave quarters in Medford, and more. The Task Force works with the Province I Cultural Competency Project across New England, and others. I know that many of your congregations, and groups of congregations, are finding their own ways to engage this essential conversation.

The writer Ta-Nehisi Coates has written a hard and important book about race, entitled *Between the World and Me* [Spiegel and Grau, 2015], which is getting much-deserved attention. I am struck by this passage in his book:

It does not matter that the “intentions” of [people are] noble. Forget about intentions. What any institution or its agents “intend” for you is secondary. Our world is physical. ... Very few Americans will directly proclaim that they are in favor of black people being left to the streets. But a very large number of Americans will do all they can to preserve the Dream [for themselves.] ... The point of this language of “intentions” and “personal responsibility” is broad [communal] exoneration. Mistakes were made. Bodies were broken. People were enslaved. We meant well. We tried our best. “Good intention” is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream. [p. 33]

I call upon us all to engage the work of anti-racism, and to keep one another accountable, that we not settle for “good intentions” only.

|Discerning the Way Together

As we walk our labyrinth paths together, the year ahead will include some vital work for our diocesan life. The canons require the development of a Mission Strategy, or renewal of a previous one, every three years. Last November we delayed for one year the beginning of that

mandated process. (One or two other things were happening last year.) Now, we begin that process in earnest. Later this morning a team appointed by Diocesan Council will describe for you the process for developing our next Mission Strategy, conversations all over our diocese to listen for the direction of God's call, here and now.

I want this to be a time for us to share passionately our dreams, our convictions, our hopes – each of us from our own life experiences, from our own faith perspectives, from our own corners of the diocese – so that together – like St. Paul's image of a body with all the necessary and complementary parts – we can be a whole and complementary diocesan community.

We know that as individuals and households we often have to decide how to use our time, how to use our resources, how to arrange our priorities. The same is true of congregations. The same is true of our diocese. That is the goal of setting our Mission Strategy together.

Over the past 10-15 years, this diocese heard a call to renew its commitment to children and youth, and a call to ensure that young adults would experience the vitality of Christian faith and take their place in the leadership of the church. It would be difficult to overstate the effect that these strategic goals have had on the vigor and health of our diocese. It matters, this setting of mission strategies. It matters very much.

In every place I visit, folks have asked, "What's your vision for the diocese?" And here is precisely how I want to begin my answer: My vision for the Diocese of Massachusetts is that it is a large and diverse body of Christians who are nonetheless *committed to listening deeply* to one another, and discerning *together* what God wants most from us at this time. MY vision, and YOUR vision, are to become, by the work of the Holy Spirit, OUR vision, for OUR diocese.

I hope that this process will be not a maze, but a labyrinth. No maze-like tricks or dead-ends, no anxiety about solving a puzzle or guessing at a solution. No, I trust it will be, instead, an exercise in walking a path together, listening and learning, certain the whole while that this path, however circuitous, will take us to the heart of Christ, and back into the world.

One Surprise After Another

Finally, aside from the question about vision, the question I have most been asked in my visitations is, "What has surprised you in your first year?" There have been a host of little surprises, actually, so let me close with a short litany of a few of them.

I was surprised at last year's convention when aliens beamed their radio station into the middle of my annual address; and I am surprised this year that they haven't!

I was surprised when the stuffed donkey Esmerelda showed up at my visitation to St Stephen's, Lynn, looking not a day older than she did when I was there as seminarian 30 years ago!

I was surprised in Ashmont when they had me lay on incense and bless it five times within a single Evensong!

I was surprised to be warned that there would be a chicken at the communion rail in Groveland!

I was surprised the first time a little girl actually curtsied when introduced to the Bishop in Chatham!

I was surprised to discover a karaoke version of the Hallelujah Chorus in Lawrence!

I was surprised at how often I've been called upon to bless new bathrooms and boilers, all over the diocese.

And I was surprised to discover my photograph displayed in Technicolor frosting on a sheet cake in Reading (raising truly disturbing and probably heretical questions of eucharistic theology)!

I was very surprised when I received the following letter last spring, addressed to my predecessor, from something called the Chicago Private Equity Group.

To: M Shaw, Diocese of Massachusetts

Dear M,

Knowing a great deal about your industry and having secured Dunn & Bradstreet information on the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, I thought you might be interested in buying one of your competitors. We have built a database of every company in your industry. We will approach all possible sellers and will provide you the capital to make those acquisitions.

*(Perhaps we should factor *this* into the Mission Strategy Process!)*

And here's the last one. The last surprise to relate. It happened in Chelmsford. At the new Rector's installation, I met a shy boy of 6 or 7. Upon introduction, he said something which I didn't catch. "I'm sorry," I said, "I didn't quite hear you." I lowered my head. He stretched up, leaned toward me, and said: "I like your hair-do." "Thanks," I replied, "I was worried maybe the miter was giving me hat hair!"

Dear friends – lean in and listen to me: I like your style.

I love this diocese. I love your energy, and your cantankerous engagement. I love your overriding good will, and yes – your diversity. I love your incense and your karaoke. Most of all, I love that you love Jesus – and your determination that together we find ever more faithful ways to serve one another, and our world, in the Name of Jesus. And so we shall, by the grace of God.

*The Right Reverend Alan M. Gates
November 14, 2015*