

Bishop's Address for Convention, 2020

"40 years of pilgrimage"

Who knew? Last year, when you and I met for the first time at convention, who knew of the year that was to come?

Last year, I stood before you, pretending not to be nervous, as we discussed "A Call to Pilgrimage." We did a lectio and had some round table discussions about the theme. I outlined a prescriptive way of approaching our journey as pilgrims:

- Travel Light
- Stay in Balance
- Have the Courage to be Lost

My hope at the time was that it would be a language that we would embrace, with an ideal that would shape our work together.

But, who knew? Who knew that in fact, in such a short time, this ideal, this language would become a practical reality of our walk together?

2020 has certainly, thus far at least, been a year of the unexpected—COVID, fires, Martian air—with the expected impact of economic downturn, increased need, protests against racism, displaced peoples, and an election. Our very vocabulary has been altered as we faced the importance of COVID protocols, white supremacy, essential workers, social distancing, and so on.

Early on in COVID, when it became clear that our pilgrimage plan was needed, we quickly adapted worship, study and business to our computer screens. We traveled light. Along with that, we worked to stay in balance, keeping our tradition in conversation with innovation and creativity. We began to ask important questions about our sacraments, our buildings, evangelism, outreach.

Most of all, each one of us has sat in the place of being lost over these past nine months, convincing ourselves that we have the courage to be in that place. It's been very uncomfortable many times, yet, I've watched us meet it with curiosity. What is coming, what is emerging, what opportunity is there for us in El Camino Real?

In our twice monthly clergy meetings, something that has surfaced frequently is the importance of holding the question. The gift that we have been given is the opportunity to ask the curious question, and not move too quickly to the answer—to ask questions that begin with “What if?” or “I wonder if?” and to approach our discomfort from the place of creativity.

This is in keeping with the general character of our diocese. As I looked back through the [Brown Book](#) that documents the story of how we became a diocese 40 years ago, it is clear that the discussion wasn't merely about function or convenience. There is much in there, if you haven't read it yet, about being curious and imagining the pilgrimage that would unfold in the Episcopal Diocese of El Camino Real.

The questions came before the establishment of the diocese. They were summarized in a statement of priorities yet read as hopes and yearnings. This is what you said then about your hopes for El Camino Real:

“A body that is small enough to allow us to discuss, decide about, and initiate ministry for and among the people of God... a bishop viable and present to us in a unique way... care, involvement, and mutual support between congregations in a smaller diocesan unit... a family with close acquaintance...local effort to be regarded as the program of the whole diocese... conventions, meetings, and events not identified with a single church or headquarters, but mobile, bringing visibility and responsibility to all parts of the diocese... emerging church forms can be contained only in new and flexible wine skins... forms that flex with the flow and express a pilgrim people not poured into concrete cathedrals... a people on the way, the King's Highway.” [Brown Book](#), page 6.

These hopes, this curiosity that was expressed 40 years ago is indeed who we are now: local, mobile, emerging, flexible, a body small enough, yet large enough.

It doesn't matter much whether it is time of COVID or ordinary time, this is our identity as a diocese. Of course, the phrase, “A bishop viable and present to us in a unique way,” in my book, didn't mean on-screen. But who knew? And, after all, I did buy a purple camp chair that I carry in my car, just in case I get to see you.

On another page of the *Brown Book*, I found an organizational chart for the diocese. This intrigued me, because, if you look at it, it has the simplest structure

needed for a diocese: The Standing Committee, the Commission on Ministry, the Bishop, Parishes and Clergy. The only other box was one labeled “Ad-hoc task forces.”

The reason this is interesting is that ad hoc task forces exist when circumstances are shifting, and we have to adapt to meet the needs of our time. This happened to us this year, and you’ll hear more from a couple of groups during this convention.

Early on this year, I met with a small group to discuss putting together our very own School for Ministry—a local, bilingual formation program for lay and ordained leadership development. Another group that emerged was a Phase II team of seven people, originally designed to help us to deal with the ever-changing protocols around COVID (at one point hourly changes as you may remember). Emerging Communities became a team—a world-wide team—that meets monthly to envision creative ways of meeting the spiritual needs of those we do not yet know and to prepare for being New Church.

The Liturgy Commission was quickly expanded to be multi-cultural and varied in its membership. I formed a Think Tank to discuss sacramental and theological questions that are emerging due to being online. There is a group that meets weekly to create a unique approach for our diocese with questions around race, and you’ll hear from them later today.

None of these Ad Hoc Tasks Forces have acronyms, they all meet on Zoom, yet they have purpose and meet—some weekly, some monthly, some as needed. Their work is adaptable and nimble.

There have been other additions and changes this year—all of them necessary and most of them expected. Kelsey Davis left to go back east and be closer to Heather’s family; Mary Beth Powell retired, and Kirstin Nielsen arrived to take her place among us; Lisa Bennett who worked with Fund Development is leaving to move to the San Juan Islands; Canon Jesus Reyes began working part-time for the Diocese this fall.

I know this has not been an easy year for any of us. I am a person who loves to be among you, to learn and teach, to engage and to love. I love being mobile.

Instead, I have, too often, found myself staring at a screen giving guidelines about a virus I don't understand to a people I do not yet know very well.

I say this because I need to be honest about the fact that you and I are getting to know each other through the lens of COVID, in a time of distress, and with much uncertainty. I am meeting you on screen, during COVID, when our country is divided and there is much civil unrest. This time will shape us, but I believe in ways that will emerge as good and hopeful in our shared episcopate.

God called us together right now, because we are both desirous of the same thing: walking a pilgrimage toward being a New Church—a church that is adaptable, mobile and emerging.

As pilgrims, sometimes our path is along a way of stones made smooth by the many who have walked before us. At other times, we are in bad weather, scrambling up a steep hill while our feet slide on loose shale.

Still, at times, we pause and look up, marveling at where we are, at who we are, at whose we are. To my way of thinking, this is when we identify with the passage from the Book of Esther: “who knows, but perhaps you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this.”

It is likely true that we were meant to lead together for this present time—a time of COVID, and fires, Martian Air, unrest, economic downturn, great division, election and unprecedented need. It's challenging but we have what we need, for our baptismal covenant tells us how to walk our pilgrimage better than any program or any carefully crafted curriculum.

As the songs says, we don't know where the road leads. We follow it. We don't know its end. But we know how to walk it, we know how to live it. For the task before us is to minister in the rich mission field God has entrusted to us.

My prayer is that we will continue to encourage each other when we stumble, celebrate with each other those moments of life's simple joys, and remain open and attentive to what is emerging.

The way of pilgrimage in El Camino Real is the way that it was outlined 40 years ago and the way that it will continue to be: We travel light, stay in balance, and have the courage to be lost. May it be so.