
A Church on the Move

**A Response to the Bishop's Address
to the 105th Annual Council
of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta**

Rome, Georgia

Bishop Alexander, Bishop Whitmore, fellow members of Counsel and honored guests:

I have the privilege of giving the report of the Committee to Respond to the Bishop's Address. Before I begin, though, I want to thank the other members of that committee: Ann Canipe, Charles Fisher, John Herring, Liz Schellingerhoudt, and WC Wyatt. They share in my sentiments, and have been gracious enough to allow me to try to put those feelings into words.

In the movie "Annie Hall," Woody Allen makes an insightful comment about what makes healthy relationships. In assessing their relationship, one of his characters says to another: "A relationship, I think, is like a shark. You know? It has to constantly move forward or it dies. And I think what we got on our hands is a dead shark."

Bishop, it is clear from your address that the Diocese of Atlanta is anything but a dead shark.

We are, in fact, moving forward. You talk of the pace of our common life - how crowded your calendar is, how long your "to-do" list has grown, how many new projects parishes are bringing to you for support or consent. You talk about our next Bishop needing to have the skills to "hop a freight" because there is little evidence that this train is going to slow down, even to change conductors.

And, I note that the numbers bear this out.

- We actually grew in 2010, while much of the rest of the Episcopal Church in the United States declined.
- Parish support of the Diocese of Atlanta is actually up this year when compared to last.

More importantly, this forward movement is not new. During your tenure, we have started,

- 7 new parishes and worshipping communities, and
- 4 new Hispanic congregations.

Under your leadership, 2003 was, for us, the end of the beginning, not the beginning of the end.

We are a church on the move. And, it feels good.

As with any journey, there are challenges. Moving forward can sometimes feel more like an adventure in the jungle than a walk in the park. But, that's the nature of church.

The Dean tells a story about a man who was stranded for years on a desert island. One day a ship arrived to save him. When the captain of the ship stepped onto the beach, he noticed that there were three identical huts standing there, side by side. "What is that?" the captain asked, pointing to the first hut. "That's where I live," the man responded. "I see," said the captain. "What is that?" the captain asked, pointing now to the second hut. "That's where I go to church," the man replied. Impressed with the man's piety, the captain pointed to the third hut and asked, "then, what's that?" "Oh," the man said, "that's where I used to go to church."

We have challenges in our Diocesan budget. We will find answers.

Yesterday, we thought that we were going to have to close the Church of the Common Ground, but we found a way to finance her presence on the streets of Atlanta for another year. That should give us time to develop a strategic plan and begin to build operating and financing structures that can sustain that ministry. That was church.

We need to find a way to help fund a staff person for the new ministry being proposed in the Macon Convocation Initiative. Perhaps Thanksgiving will give us an opportunity to address that need.

We need to find a way to continue to fund our other successes: Emmaus House, Holy Comforter, Camp Mikell, Chattahoochee Valley Episcopal Ministries, and various campus ministries. And, we will.

We will do these things because they are important to who we are. We are a church on the move.

You couldn't have said it better when you said that "the best thing about the Diocese of Atlanta is the Diocese of Atlanta."

Now, I also heard you say that you think there will be a day when you will feel like a "lame duck," or a time when you think things might begin to slow down. I wonder. You are an energetic leader. I have never seen you sit still and, frankly, I'm having a hard time trying to imagine what that would even look like. You may be moving out of the Cathedral, but you are not moving out of the Church.

I have been called an optimist. But, I too am a prisoner of hope. And, my hope is that you will continue to guide, inspire, lead, cajole, encourage, and challenge us for years to come.

There is one problem with moving forward at this pace, though. Like a river overflowing its banks, sometimes the water cuts a new channel, and we are powerless to do much about it. We can't control it. We can only watch it with awe, knowing that this is what it looks like when God is doing a new thing.

Bishop, this may be one of those moments.

This was your eleventh and final address to the Annual Council of the Diocese of Atlanta. I know that you don't want to be saluted. I know that you don't want us to carry on about who you are, or take the time to go back and remember all of the many things that you have done for us. I know you that don't want us to start recounting all of the ways that you have been responsible for this movement that we all feel and hold so dear.

But, you know, you don't always get what you want.

People who have learned to move find it hard to just sit still in their seats when they want to stand up and shout. This may be one of those moments. I have been asked to create a space for us to show you how we feel, to give you a sense of what this movement that you have nurtured looks like and sounds like.

So, I end this response in gratitude - in gratitude for who you are, in gratitude for what you have done and in gratitude for who we have all become.

We are a church on the move. And, for that, Bishop, we thank you!

The Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell, Jr.

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