

## 2017 Diocesan Convention Address – The Right Reverend Thomas C. Ely

The theme of my Convention Address this year is “Every small act can make a huge difference!”

I take as my Biblical inspiration the parable of the Mustard Seed and Jesus’ acclamation in the Matthew Gospel that “With God, all things are possible” – even getting that camel through the eye of the needle! I think as well of Paul’s declaration in Philippians, “I can do all things through him (through Christ) who strengthens me.”

I also take to heart the words of Donna Hicks, as she holds the theme of Dignity before us at this Convention: “We might not be able to change the world, but we can create a more respectful way of being in it together.” Every Small Act of Dignity can make a huge difference!

Most especially, I take inspiration from the story of Jadev Payeng. Perhaps some of you know this story? He’s been planting trees on Majuli Island in India for nearly 40 years. Jadev was 16 years old in 1979 when he began planting trees to save Majuli Island, the largest River Island on earth.

The Island was in danger of disappearing within 20 years because of severe flooding, erosion and the deforestation of the land. Javad Payeng decided not to accept that fate and took it upon himself to save the island and its treasured culture. Please watch this brief inspirational video clip about his mission.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYnicEc3VZE>

“Every small act can make a huge difference!”

In this Address I want to explore this theme through the prism of our life as members of the human family and as the Episcopal Church in Vermont. Our Convention theme: “Declare Dignity,” has become a key in my life and formation ever since John Mitchell introduced me to Donna Hicks and her book *Dignity* several years ago. Since then, Donna has become a friend and mentor as I have determined to live into her call to be a Dignity Agent, following the example of THE Dignity Agent, Jesus.

I delight that so many of you have found her teaching to be inspirational for you, as well. I believe there is no more important lesson for us to learn than the practice of dignity in all our private and public relationships, indeed in our relationship with all creation. As Donna has expressed so well, “The world is suffering from a pandemic of indignity. It shows up every day in big and small ways – in the wars taking place all over the world, as well as the unnamed wars inside our workplaces, schools, churches, in our families and within ourselves. These wars share the same root cause: *We have lost sight of a fundamental truth about the human condition; that we are all born worthy of being treated as something of value.*”

I hoped that by engaging with Donna and all the Expo and Workshop leaders our baptismal promise to “respect the dignity of every human being” might take on fresh and deeper urgency in our lives. As Dignity Agents we can live and model the transformational possibility of God’s unconditional love. This can happen as we participate in the “loving, liberating, and life-giving mission of God,” to which our

Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, has bid us come with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, as members of the Jesus Movement. This work of transformation starts with each of us, no matter where we are by treating those around us with dignity.

“Every small act of dignity can make a huge difference!”

Right here in our life as the Episcopal Church in Vermont, I see daily evidence that “every small act can make a huge difference.” At the local level, I celebrate your efforts to articulate and implement Local Mission Approaches in creative ways as you look for the evidence of God at work in your neighborhoods and communities, and then connect your human and financial resources to help make a difference.

I’ve seen this in your commitments to feed people, house people, tutor children, volunteer for community boards and agencies, participate in restorative justice circles, after school programs, school lunch program, summer programs, community pantries, community breakfasts, lunches and dinners. It is evidenced in your work for racial healing, environmental justice, work with immigrant and migrant members of your community, care for the elderly, for veterans, and for those in any need or trouble, remembering Jesus saying, “Whatsoever you do to the least of these my brothers and sisters, that you do to me.”

I’ve seen you stand in solidarity with those on the margins, and I’ve seen you join hands and hearts with others like Camp Agape, Vermont Refugee Resettlement, Kids4Peace, Jerusalem Peacebuilders, Cristosal, Vermont Interfaith Action, Vermont Interfaith Power and Light, Pure Water for the World. I’ve seen it in your commitment to Dismas House, Black Lives Matter, Integrity, Northeast Kingdom Community Action, Migrant Justice, Franklin Area Rural Minuties, Vermont Adaptive, The Haven, the Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity, and so many others who also embrace the belief that “every small act can make a huge difference!”

As part of a renewed emphasis on communications and evangelism, I encourage you to tell the Good News of your local mission connections. Share it with your local news outlets. Fill up your social media networks with stories, pictures, and videos. Don’t be shy. Don’t hide your light under a bushel (and no, we are not going to sing “This Little Light of Mine,” although I am tempted.) Let the Good News of God’s abundant, extravagant, unconditional love being lived in your neighborhoods and communities, ring throughout Vermont and beyond.

“Every small act can make a huge difference!” And does!

And then there is our *common life* as the Episcopal Church in Vermont, in which we are all working hard to maintain and strengthen our local communities of faith, as well as our shared identity as the wider Episcopal Church in Vermont. And, where indeed, “every small act can make a huge difference.”

Here the challenges at times are very practical, stretch us and test our human and financial capacity. We can easily become discouraged, or we can choose to pray, embrace, encourage, and support one another in our participation in the Jesus Movement here in

Vermont. I don't have a precise prescription for that participation, but I do think it means understanding the interconnectedness of our life as the Episcopal Church in Vermont. For me, that is a deeply spiritual matter of recognizing and celebrating the reality that in our common life we depend upon one another. I'm fond of saying, "Together, we are the Episcopal Church in Vermont." This is more than a slogan. It is the truth!

Perhaps there is nothing more symbolic of our common life as the Episcopal Church in Vermont than the trinity of: our common budget, our annual Convention and Rock Point - all components of our common life where "every small act can make a huge difference."

First, the Budget: As you well know, especially those of you who watched the pre-Convention video with Diocesan Treasurer, Dr. Gerry Davis, we are facing budget challenges as a diocese, just as many congregations are.

Last year, the Funding Our Mission Task Force put forward several important initiatives, including a new approach to calculate the assessment formula that determines each congregation's share of our common budget. We established a four-tier, real-time approach and agreed to "try it on." As it turned out, the calculations and estimates we used to establish our path to the needed support revenue from congregations to balance the budget, proved inaccurate. Hence, we anticipate a possible revenue shortfall and budget deficit for 2017, that could be as high as \$125,000.

Diocesan Council acted at its September meeting to address this through a combination of expense reductions, a one-time, as needed, withdraw from unrestricted diocesan funds in the diocesan Unit Fund and supplemental payments from congregations based on an equitable formula. We won't know the full extent of the gap until all congregations report their 2017 total operating revenue, but we are prepared to address its full reality if it comes to pass.

Let me be clear, the Diocesan Council is committed to the four-tier, real time formula. We are just trying to make sure it works properly to fund our needs as a diocese, while at the same time calculating local parish contributions based on real time revenue. To avoid a similar situation occurring in the 2018 budget, the Diocesan Council proposed an adjustment in the percentages of income used to calculate each congregation's assessment. You will have seen this in the budget resolution scheduled for our deliberation tomorrow. That budget reflects a \$40,000 reduction in expenses compared to 2017.

I want to emphasize here that Diocesan Council believes the budget presented represents the most conservative budget we can craft, without seriously reducing our capacity to offer the basic ministry of a bishop and diocesan office to the people and congregations of Vermont. Many dioceses our size function with a budget around 1.4 million dollars. In 2018, ours will be just \$1 million. The budget for the diocesan Ministry Support Team in 2018 will support five full time members, including the Bishop and three part-time members. I am grateful for the dedicated and hard-working members of this team.

"Every small act can make a huge difference."

Another initiative from the Funding Our Mission Task Force, was the reshaping of the way we handle diocesan grants and loans. Again, we said we would “try it on,” and so far, so good. While it may not have seemed a big initiative at the time, a robust Grants and Loans Committee is in place and they have crafted policies and practices that make the application process much easier and more impactful.

In the distribution of nearly \$200,000 annually, including some funds from the very successful *Alleluiafund*, they have tried to place an emphasis on mission over buildings, while at the same time recognizing that building needs often impact mission opportunities. Information about this committee and its work is on the diocesan website and I give thanks for their great work. Again, the evidence is clear, “every small act can make a huge difference.”

Moving to another of the three iconic arenas of our common life, let me offer a word about the future of Diocesan Convention. For a while now, the Dispatch of Business Committee has been in conversation about the shape, cost and venue of Convention. Recognizing the value of the personal formation experience of Convention, like the day we have just spent together, and the necessary legislative component and the costs associated with a two-day Convention, Dispatch of Business has been considering other options.

In a moment of serendipity, or perhaps *kairos*, a small group of clergy leaders asked to meet with me to share some of their concerns and ideas about the ways and purposes of our gathering as a diocesan community, including Convention. Out of that conversation and the deliberations of the Dispatch of Business Committee, the idea emerged for the formation of a **Task Force for Reimagining Diocesan Convention** and other diocesan gatherings to benefit and build up our common life.

I will appoint that Task Force tomorrow. The work of this Task Force will include looking at the dates, possible venues, shape, cost and substance of Convention and other common gatherings. One idea, just to give you an example, is to move Convention to the late Spring after colleges are in summer mode and hold Convention on a college campus. I’m sure if I paused now and asked you to brainstorm ideas that we would be late to supper. Trust that there will be opportunity to offer your ideas, for indeed, I believe, “every small act, every idea, can make a huge difference.”

The third iconic area of our common life is Rock Point. How many of you have spent any time on Rock Point? If you haven’t, then please come and experience this amazing 130-acre sanctuary that you own. That’s right, you own it! The people of the Episcopal Church in Vermont are the owners, or the current stewards of Rock Point. Others before us, for over 165 years, have been the stewards of this outdoor cathedral on the shore of Lake Champlain, and now it is in our hands.

There may have been times over the course of those 165 years, when this property just seemed like one of many such properties on Lake Champlain in Burlington; but today it is one of the last remaining, privately owned, largely undeveloped open spaces on the Lake in Burlington, where public access is allowed. In fact, it is the largest such property.

Rock Point is home to the Rock Point School, the Bishop Booth Conference Center, the Offices of the Episcopal Church in Vermont and its Bishop, the Rock Point Camp, the

largest Solar Installation on any religious property in Vermont, Community Gardens, and many, many programs that find a special place of welcome there. Over 10,000 people visit the property, or participate in programs on Rock Point each year. In every sense of the word, it is truly a missional church opportunity for the Episcopal Church in Vermont.

When you (or your ancestors) elected me Bishop of this great diocese 17 years ago, you asked that I pay attention to Rock Point and help chart a course of action for its future. That journey has been an interesting part of these past 17 years. I won't rehearse the history of that journey with Rock Point, but suffice to say that it took many twists and turns as we headed toward the great and promising place we are today. Today, thanks to the hard work, vision and generosity of so many, Rock Point is well positioned for a positive and sustainable future. With a solid land use plan, a comprehensive forestry plan and a nearly completed business and site plan in place, we have a good idea of where we are heading and what we need to do to get there.

Key to that success has been the current Partnership Campaign for Rock Point, which set the ambitious goal of raising 1.7 million dollars as an investment in securing the future of Rock Point, along with a commitment to increase the Rock Point endowment by \$2 million dollars over the next several years. My hope had been to announce today that the \$1.7 million-dollar goal had been reached, but instead it is my joy to announce that we are almost there, and that I am confident we will reach and exceed that goal.

With over \$1.5 million dollars in gifts, pledges, grants and a portion of a previous bequest designated by Diocesan Council for this effort in place, and the very promising prospect of more to come, I am confident that this campaign will be a success. Most of that success is due to individuals from the Episcopal Church in Vermont and others who believe in the importance of conserving and sustaining this valuable ministry resource for future leaders to steward.

Right now, as most of you know, we are engaged in the Parish phase of the campaign that we are calling "Upon this Rock." To date 23 congregations have made their gifts or pledges to this effort for a total of \$140,000. If, or maybe I should say when, the other 22 congregations announce their participation, there is a good chance that number will double to \$250,000. That is on top of the individual gifts from Vermont Episcopalians totaling over \$750,000. There are also several larger gifts or pledges from individuals pending, that we are hoping to include. You can see why I am optimistic that we will reach our goal.<sup>1</sup>

I know some of you were skeptical about all this when we began, but we have been wonderfully guided in this effort by one of our own, Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, who has served as Legacy Minister for the Partnership Campaign. Ellen is a member of Christ Church, Montpelier and a former member of Saint Michael's, Brattleboro, during her tenure as President of Marlboro College. Early on, Ellen captured the vision for the future of Rock Point and has guided us magnificently toward our goals. At the same time, she has opened doors and windows through her extensive network in Vermont and beyond, that we would never had known about if we had pursued a more conventional Capital Campaign approach.

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<sup>1</sup> The Campaign totals change daily, so this represents activity as of November 1, 2107

Thanks, in large measure to her good work, the efforts of our Campaign Advisory Committee, the Rock Point Board, the Trustees of the Diocese, and the good leadership of the Reverend Craig Smith, Mr. David McKay and a host of others, there are good prospects for additional fundraising success beyond this present campaign in partnership with civic and community leaders in the greater Burlington area. You'll hear more about some of that from Craig Smith tomorrow.

Suffice for now to say thank you to all of you who have helped bring us to this point of celebration. My hope is that others will see this positive outcome as reason enough to join us and help take this campaign way over the top, so that we might fund those ministries and projects about which we have only been able to dream, including expanded youth and outdoor education ministries. "Every small act can make a huge difference!" And is!

There are other examples I could cite of ways in which small acts can make a huge difference, but I think you get the point. Everything you do matters. Every act of dignity matters. Every expression of compassion matters. Every action in the service of justice matters. Every offering of generosity matters. Every gesture of love matters. Every gift of time, talent and treasure matters. Every kind word matters. Every token of forgiveness, understanding and peace-making matters. Every prayer, every word, every thought, every action matters. It all matters.

I began with the inspirational story of Jadev Payeng. Let me end with one final story from my experience in Alaska this September when the House of Bishops gathered in Fairbanks for our fall meeting. Those of you from Saint Stephen's Middlebury have heard this story.

Fort Yukon is located on the north bank of the Yukon River at its junction with the Porcupine River, about 145 miles northeast of Fairbanks. It is located 8 miles north of the Arctic Circle, in the middle of the Yukon Flats. It has a total area of 7.4 square miles, of which, 7.0 square miles is land and 0.4 square miles is water.

Ann and I were part of a group of eight who visited this community and the congregation of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, while other bishops and spouses visited other similar, small communities where the Episcopal Church is present.

Our mode of transportation was a small plane, since the only other ways to reach Fort Yukon are boat or snowmobile! The estimated population of Fort Yukon is around 550 people, most of whom are Gwich'in Alaska Natives. The Gwich'in name for Fort Yukon is Gwich'yaa Zhee, which translates: "House on the Flats." Saint Stephen's is the oldest of the 24 Episcopal Churches in the Interior Region Deanery. There are 50 congregations all together in the Diocese of Alaska. During our visit with the people of Saint Stephen's, we learned many things, including the result of their local mission discernment process that resulted in the decision to build and support two buildings to meet the needs of their community.

The first building, which was just completed and which I had the honor of consecrating at the end of our visit, is a mortuary situated right next to the church building. That's right, a mortuary! I had never blessed a mortuary before and so, after hearing their stories throughout the day, this act of blessing took on special and sacred meaning for me and our group. Now, a mortuary may seem a strange mission focus to

you (as it first did to me), but in the native culture of the Gwich'in people, care for the body at the time of death is a very sacred matter and there was no such facility available to the community to serve this need. So, they built a mortuary with community support that is now fully available to the community. It is a modest building in which bodies can be prepared for burial by family and community members in the custom of the Gwich'in people.

Reflecting later on all of this, I realized that here was the perfect intersection of one particular faith community paying attention and responding to the unique context in which they were trying to deepen their passion for outreach and mission as the heart and hands of Christ. Their next project is a parish hall for community gatherings. Such outreach efforts don't always involve new buildings, but for them it did, and helped give shape to their meaningful future.

"Every small act can make a huge difference!" Go and learn and live what this means for you, for us, for the Episcopal Church in Vermont.

Oh, and one thing more! Wait for it! (video of Madelyn Parker Ely's first steps at age one)

"Every small act can make a huge difference!"