



## Bishop's Address, the 118th Annual Council

At this Annual Council and for the next year, I am inviting us to focus on the word “witness,” in Spanish, “el testigo!” As you have heard in the sermon this morning, it’s the word Jesus uses at the commissioning of the disciples to describe our purpose and intended impact. And I hope it will be a framing of our work that will help us stay focused in our shared ministry to Middle and North Georgia despite the sometimes disorienting vicissitudes of life. Centering this word from the lips of Jesus at this time, I believe, is one of the best ways we can grow in three specific areas individually and collectively:

- Increased fidelity to God
- Deepening care for neighbor
- And, communicating and commending an alternative way to live

In español:

- Mayor fidelidad a Dios
- Profundizar la atención a la vecino
- Y comunicar y elogiar una forma alternativa de vivir.

The best part of being bishop is definitely not the hat. It’s being with you on Sunday! You consistently inspire me. *Me inspiras constantemente!* Recently, I was at one of our congregations-what some might call a small church, sixty people all in. What bowled me over in my time with them, and has stuck with me since, is their vibrant commitment to Christian witness. By that I mean, specifically, how they care for each other and for their neighbors. Like many congregations, they face real challenges: securing and affording clergy leadership, an aging congregation, appealing to different kinds of neighbors, the ever present tight budget, and the ongoing maintenance of a building. Still, given all of those legitimate concerns, what dominated our conversation, stated many ways by different people, was the same question: **how can we share what we have with our neighbors?** What I heard that day wasn’t simply attitudinal. What I heard was a sincere preoccupation with opportunities over challenges. Christian conviction over cynicism and an evolving desire to make a measurable impact in the lives of others beyond the worshipping community. I confess to you that after our time of sharing, I wasn’t sure there was actually a need for a sermon.

We are members of a global communion of 98 million members. And as one branch of that Church, recent reports put the membership of The Episcopal Church at 1.2 million members. On any given Sunday, across every diocese, that looks like 350,000 or so people in church. Here at home in middle and north Georgia, that amounts to something like 9,000 folks in church on the average Sunday distributed over 120 congregations. Nine thousand, in a state of just over 11 million people.

Like the congregation I referenced, by lots of measurements we are a remnant church - small in quantity. **But this is what I want you to hear, and this is what I saw on my visit... While remnant refers to quantity, it doesn't refer to quality!** According to the Bible, remnant refers to the quality of the faith of those who remain. The question always before the faithful Christian and congregation is first and foremost, *what is the quality of my and our witness?* Cual es la calidad de mi testimonio? This kind of question leads us to what we might call, an integrity audit! In other words, are we, on Monday, who we say we are on Sunday? Said another way, how straight is the line between Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and our real lives? Here's the good news, while life is replete with things that are beyond our control, **we have complete control over the quality of our witness to Christ.**

So what is the nature and quality of our witness to Jesus Christ as The Episcopal Church in Middle and North Georgia? The first piece of good news is that it would be impossible for me to list the ways 56,000 Episcopalians have found Jesus amazing in their lives and have responded to His *amazingness* in ways that positively benefit their neighbors. So then, here are just a few examples of our shared witness for your consideration.

In a world where misogyny is still a palpable force, our church defiantly celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Ordination of women this year. But not only that, specific to our diocese, the number of congregations, schools and ministries led by women has increased.

And, in a state that seems to value the labor of Hispanic people more than their dignity, we welcome and affirm the dignity of their humanity and labor and intend this year to reorder our work among Hispanic people to make it more effective and sustainable. And we look forward to opening a new mission to Hispanic people in Dalton next year.

When it comes to communication, our witness work is about informing and nurturing the faith of those who are already members of the church, while simultaneously curating Christian content for those who might never attend one of our churches.

Jesus never said the good news was for the church exclusively, and so we must continue to find ways to lavish the gospel on two distinct audiences at the same time. Witness is about giving the Holy Spirit something to work with.

Finally, in a nation that seems to prefer denial about past and present sin and evil and as the corporate world walks away from the words and work of Equity and Justice, we will continue and gladly accept the challenge of enlarging our work of Moral Leadership at the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing.

Our witness there, through trainings, curriculum, and brave conversations is that we are not afraid of the truth. Interrogation of our past as a nation and a church is not the same thing as condemnation. Our witness is that only truth told in love can lead to authentic healing, reconciliation and redress.

Of course this is not an exhaustive list of our witness bearing together. I could go on like this for an hour, but I think you get the point. And still, there is more work to do and more witness to bear. **More witness to bear.**

The largest growth opportunity for most Episcopal churches going forward won't come through the baptisms of children, as is our history, but through Confirmation and Reception and even adult baptism.

This is true already for a number of our congregations, but more intention must be given to specific invitation, welcome, pastoral care, and formation of this segment of the neighborhood who are either completely unchurched, nominally churched, or the church-hurt. Our witness can move from just welcoming to searching out.

Likewise, many of our congregations exist in close proximity to either an elder care or a correctional facility or both.

If a feature of our witness is to respect the dignity of every human being, certainly that includes these two increasingly forgotten portions of our family.

Let me list just two more of these witness opportunities before I wrap up.

Emmaus House was born as our witness, in 1967, to the poor in Peoplestown. Its founding was bold and it put us beside the urban poor in a way we hadn't been previously. At present, Emmaus House stands at an important intersection in its missional life.

And my great hope is that her latter days will be greater than her former, and that she will embark on a bold new chapter of her advocacy work, but this time perhaps include a response to the desperate need for affordable housing in our city and country.

Finally, while we must sustain our witness in opposition to the powers and principalities of this world and strengthen our witness on behalf of the stranger, the captive, the elderly and the infirm, to be a witness means we also affirm the beauty of the earth and accept our role as its caretakers.

My intention at the beginning of the new year, inspired by the work of Andy Barnett and All Saints Atlanta, is to stand up a task force to study and recommend ways we can utilize solar power technology across the diocese - caring for the planet while saving dollars that can be used for mission.

These are but a few directions that we can and are channeling our witness to Christ in the world. Friends, not even Jesus, in the several commissioning addresses to his disciples, said that political unity was the goal of the church. Neither did he say our work was to eradicate sin or evil.

What he said was we were to love as he loved. We were to use power different from the way the world uses power and that we were not to be afraid. So here's what we know. Witness has to do with offering oneself. Witness moves us beyond comfort and convenience. Witness grows souls. Witness grows churches. Witnesses acknowledges and closes gaps. Witness has to do with movement toward neighbor. And witness, as someone has said, directs us not to tell God about our problems, but to tell our problems about our God!

At the conclusion of this, my 13th address to Annual Council, I want you to know the following: first, I am as proud of you as any bishop could be of a diocese - our lay folk, priests and deacons. Second, I continue to believe that we have the finest bishop's staff of any diocese in the entire church. And thirdly, while our challenges are real and not to be underestimated, so is our God who can do infinitely, abundantly, exceedingly more than we can ask or imagine according to the faith at work in us.

Thanks be to God and thank you.

**Bishop Rob Wright**

