

2011 Annual Synod

I have to begin by telling you how completely thrilled I am to be standing before you at this moment doing what I'm doing. A year ago, I got to speak to you briefly as your Bishop-elect. There was an air of cautious optimism in the room, and I was very excited about what lay ahead. But we didn't know each other well then, so there was a certain reserve in our embrace of one another. Now I have some nine months on the ground in the diocese. I've logged about 20,000 miles on the vehicle you all own, and I've visited all but a handful of our churches. So I'm overjoyed to be able to tell you: I still go to bed every night and say a prayer of thanksgiving that I have the best job in the entire world, so I thank you and I thank the Holy Spirit for the trust that has been placed in me!

There is a great deal that I could talk about. But my remarks this afternoon are an exercise in triage—omitting much that is good and worthy of being said in order to focus on the one thing needful. So I would like to tell you a story. I believe it's a true story, though I can't be certain because it takes place in the future. And I'm not really going to tell you the whole story, I guess, but pretty much just the ending, because it's important that we all know that the story does have a happy ending, since the chapters leading up to the last one ... well, they are a little scary! Oh ... and I should probably mention that we are all characters in this story. Only the names have been changed to protect the unsuspecting.

Lisa and Jeff live outside of Sharpstown in Jones County—check me out, there are no such place names in Illinois; I told you the names had been changed—about 14 miles from the county seat city of Pinehurst. Jeff works in his father's retail farm implement business, and will one day own it; Lisa works in a local beauty parlor. They have two kids in high school, which can get a little expensive, so a couple of years ago they found themselves in nearly \$50,000 of revolving credit card debt. It seemed that they just weren't very good at managing their finances. Through one of Lisa's clients, they heard about a series of seminars being held down at the VFW Hall. They were feeling just vulnerable enough that they were willing to accept help from just about any direction, so they attended the meetings.

Doing so not only turned their financial life around—now their debt is less than \$20,000, they're living within their means, and they're looking forward to actually opening a savings account—not only is their financial life turned around, but they made some new friends who were also part of the group. Lisa and a couple of the other women are talking about starting a support group for mothers of teenagers. What she and Jeff learned about halfway through the financial management series was that it was sponsored by St Gabriel's Episcopal Church in Pinehurst. Lisa's client, in fact, the one who told her about the seminar, is a member of St Gabriel's.

Now, Lisa's parents were Methodists when they were kids, and Jeff's were Catholics. But neither Lisa nor Jeff ever had any experience with any church, except for the occasional wedding or funeral, where the religious talk never made any sense to them. But a couple of their new friends invited them to come to a group meeting in their home, right there in Sharpstown. There was some good food, good fellowship, some conversation about the big issues of life, and always a short prayer at the end, led by the host couple, Julie and Mark. Jeff and Lisa were a little skeptical at first, but they really liked the people, and found that they enjoyed exploring the spiritual dimension of their lives, which they had never done before.

After about three months of coming to these week night home group meetings, there was a special visitor. Julie introduced him as Father Cliff, the priest from St Gabriel's. Over dinner, Lisa and Jeff learned that Fr Cliff actually had a day job as an administrator at Pinehurst High School, and took care of St Gabriel's in his "spare time." At the discussion time, Fr Cliff informed the group that he had rented the VFW Hall on every other Sunday night beginning the following month, and wanted to know whether anyone in the group would be interested in joining him for a simple service of worship and instruction—a little music, some prayers, and a time of teaching about the basics of Christian faith, and, of course, some food. For those who continued to be interested, this could lead to baptism. On their way home that night, Jeff and Lisa agree that they would begin to attend those services.

So they do. And they find that they actually enjoy the experience. Much to their surprise, they begin to pray, on their own, at home. Not too much, but some. They also find that their relationship with their kids begins to be a little less stormy, and is sometimes even a little sweet. Nobody knows quite why, but both parents and kids are happy about it. The kids begin to join their parents at the VFW Hall on Saturday nights.

This goes on for a couple of years. The VFW Hall meetings are now held every week. The oldest child is now away at one of the state universities. It's fall, and Fr Cliff begins to gently raise the question: Who feels ready for baptism? By this time, there are over 20 adults in the group, none of whom had any previous ties to a church. To Fr Cliff's delight, the response is, "We thought you'd never ask!" So the instruction becomes a little more intense. They begin to read more scripture in their worship. By this time, both Jeff and Lisa have each gotten hold of a Bible for their own personal use, so they notice that the passages of scripture that are read are not chosen randomly, but follow a pattern. Some people from St Gabriel's quietly begin to show up and assist Fr Cliff with the teaching by leading small group discussions. New songs are introduced in their worship—songs with unfamiliar language and vocabulary that the catechists need to explain the meaning of—and the group is taught to give responses to various things the leader might say.

At the beginning of December (or, as the group is told, "Advent"), each of the candidates for baptism is paired with a sponsor from St Gabriel's, someone who listens to them and prays for

them and emails them and talks by phone at least weekly. About ten weeks later, at the beginning of Lent (which Jeff remembers his Catholic grandmother talking about, though he never knew what it was), the 20 candidates solemnly sign their names in a special book that has been prepared for that purpose, as their sponsors vouch for the fact that they have been faithful in attending worship and instruction, and have lived in the world in a manner worthy of a follower of Jesus. Fr Cliff and the other catechists begin to mention something called the Eucharist, though whatever they say about it is kind of vague, and they never teach about it directly. But Jeff and Lisa and their other friends get the distinct impression that it's pretty important, and that, after they are baptized, it will be a regular part of their experience.

Around the middle of Lent, everyone is given a special hand-calligraphied copy of the Apostles' Creed and the Our Father, and told to memorize them. Then, on the night before Easter, a bus appears in VFW Hall parking lot, which takes everyone to Pinehurst, and St Gabriel's Church. They're ushered into the back of the church and given a hand candle. It's very dark. A lot of scripture is read, and the passages are very long. But the catechumens have heard them all before. It is in these stories that the gospel has been explained to them: the Creation, the Flood, Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac, the Exodus, the Valley of the Dry Bones. Then their sponsors present them to Fr Cliff, who is dressed up in a way they've never seen him before! He asks them if they renounce the ways of this world, and if they promise to follow Jesus as Lord. Then the whole congregation says the Apostles' Creed with them and answers some more questions. Then, one by one, Fr Cliff baptizes them, and pours oil over them—generously—and tells them that they have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. Then, for the first time, they give and receive the Sign of Peace, and finally, are actively present as heaven and earth are joined and death and life become indistinguishable from one another, and they dine on the Body and Blood of him whose true members they have now become.

The next Sunday, they gather for the Eucharist once again, only this time back in the familiar VFW Hall in Sharpstown. The Bishop is there, somebody they've only heard rumors about until this point! He leads them in a discussion about becoming their own Eucharistic Community, and, together, they decide on a name: the Church of the Advent, Sharpstown. The Bishop goes on to tell them that they are now part of an entity known as Jones County Parish, which is now comprised of two Eucharistic Communities: St Gabriel's, Pinehurst and Advent, Sharpstown. Members from both Eucharistic Communities will be elected to serve on a single Mission Leadership Team, which is responsible for planning and advancing the mission of the Diocese of Springfield in Jones County.

Soon thereafter, Lisa and Jeff make plans to host a home group of their own. Their hope is to conceive and give birth to yet another Community-in-Formation in Jones County Parish, since there's a new bio-fuel plant set to open in the community of Larkspur, about 17 miles north of Sharpstown. And so it goes.

In the meantime, a hundred miles to the northwest, in Gibson County, a more urban area, two long-established Eucharistic Communities in the city of Parkerville, Incarnation and St Margaret's, have reconfigured themselves into Gibson County Parish, merging their vestries into a single Mission Leadership Team. This is not yoking, in the sense in which we have used that term. This is getting organized for effective coordinated and collaborative mission in Gibson County. Sunday services will continue at both Incarnation and St Margaret's, both in the distinctive styles to which they have become accustomed. But now they're working together to find ways of serving a growing immigrant population, many of whom seem to be sitting lightly to their traditional religious heritage. They're talking about establishing a literacy program for parents and advocating on their behalf with the local school system. Serving the marginalized openly in the name of Christ, announcing good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind—the people of St Margaret's and Incarnation, who only a little while ago thought of themselves as rivals, are energized by their participation in fundamental Christian mission.

Across the state laterally now, the people of Fawcett County Parish, meeting for worship in historic St David's Church in the county seat town of Reedsport, have done a sophisticated demographic survey of their parish, and discovered a significant population of unchurched, and economically marginal, households living in mobile home parks tucked away in various corners of the county. So they picked one, and got permission to hold a Vacation Bible School in the park's community building. Nearly 40 children showed up, which enabled them to establish relationships with their parents. One of these parents, a single mother, agreed to host a bible study in her trailer if somebody from St David's would come and lead it. There is hope that a Community-in-Formation might soon be established in that area.

And so the church's mission is pursued across the diocese. It's not done exactly the same way in any two places. There's a huge amount of trial and error ... especially error! More attempts and mission fail than succeed, but there's a sense that, at least we're "failing forward." More to the point, there's a sense that we're all doing this together. We're mutually accountable. The people at Reedsport in Fawcett County are vitally interested in what's happening down in Jones County, and both are keeping tabs on how the Eucharistic Communities in Parkerville are pursuing the whole church's mission in Gibson County. They are interested in one another's mission because they know themselves to all be members of one church—the Diocese of Springfield.

My brothers and sisters, about six weeks ago the members of our Department of General Mission Strategy met in working retreat over a Friday night and a Saturday up in Springfield. I met with them. Naturally, we talked about ... mission strategy! With the able assistance of Mr Mark Waight of St Michael's, O'Fallon, we emerged from that meeting with a draft Vision Statement for our diocese. I haven't read it to you yet. But you already know it, because I've just described it to you. But here it is anyway:

The Diocese of Springfield in one church, organized for mission into geographic parishes, manifested in Eucharistic Communities and communities-in-formation, with a goal of being concretely incarnate in all of the 60 counties of central and southern Illinois.

“*The Diocese of Springfield is one church...*” That’s not a novel concept. It’s what our basic Anglican theology tells us about any diocese, because the diocese is the fundamental unit of the church. Anything either smaller than that or larger than that is just a matter of expediency. Within our diocese, we have everything we need to effectively pursue our mission. Everything. That may not be the way we’re accustomed to thinking. But it’s time we claim who we know we are, and begin to live that way.

“*...organized for mission into geographic parishes.*” In the Episcopal Church, we use the word “parish” synonymously with “church” or “congregation.” But that’s not what the word means. Traditionally, it refers to a specific piece of geography; a parish has clear boundaries. This vision statement allows us to reclaim that heritage, and use it as a way of being accountable to one another for mission. Within a geographic area, who is responsible for organizing and pursuing the church’s mission in that area? The congregations in that area! This is just a “back to the future” thing.

“*...manifested in Eucharistic Communities...*” Notice that the ‘E’ and the ‘C’ at the beginning of ‘Eucharistic’ and ‘Community’ are capitalized. This suggests that we’re not just being descriptive here, but floating the idea that Eucharistic Community might be a more useful formal term by which to speak of the people who habitually worship together at the same altar week by week, the people who make up what we presently would call the “congregation” of a Parish or Mission. In the terms of this proposed Vision Statement, there will, at first, usually be a one-to-one correspondence between Parishes and Eucharistic Communities. But if this vision grows wings, we will many instances of two or more Eucharistic Communities in the same parish.

“*...and communities-in-formation...*” In my story, the group that eventually became the Eucharistic Community in Sharpstown, the Church of the Advent, was for a couple of years a Community-in-Formation. The Eucharistic Community of St Gabriel’s in Pinehurst, acting through their Mission Leadership Team (formerly known as the Vestry) of the mission of the diocese in Jones County Parish, conceived a new Community-in-Formation when they rented the VFW Hall for the personal finance seminar, and gestated that new community through the home group hosted by Julie and Mark, and gave birth to that Community-in-Formation when the Saturday night worship and teaching sessions began. Simply put, a Community-in-Formation is the child of a Eucharistic Community, and when that child grows up, it becomes a Eucharistic Community in its own right.

“concretely incarnate in all 60 counties” Did you know that 60 out of the 102 counties in Illinois are within the territory of the Diocese of Springfield? At present, we have 37 churches at which the Eucharist is regularly celebrated on Sunday. But four of those are in Madison County, three are in Sangamon County, and two each are in McLean, St Clair, and Marion counties. So do the math: This means that we have no mission work established in 31 of our 60 counties. I realize, of course, that some people cross county lines to go to church, but I think you see my point. One of the fruits of pursuing our mission more effectively will simply be that we are visible in more places.

I hope your head is spinning right now. I hope you're disturbed. I hope you're apprehensive about what I'm saying. Because if you're not all those things, then you're probably not grasping that the vision I'm laying out is a many times more serious challenge to the status quo of the way we “do church”—in this diocese or elsewhere—than anything we've ever encountered in our lives. We could spend the rest of today, and all of tomorrow, and not even begin to tease out all the implications. Unfortunately, we've got other stuff we need to do. But make no mistake: This is a game-changer.

And I'm more than aware that, at this point, everything I'm talking about is only a trial balloon. Before any of it can happen, there needs to be a very deliberate process of conversation and buy-in. If it's just my vision, or just the vision of the DGMS, it won't get to first base. There's enough here to make everyone in this room hugely uncomfortable, at the very least. But nothing less drastic than this is called for at this hour in our life together. I, for one, am scared to death. But I'm also excited beyond words. What an opportunity to be on the cutting edge of the Lord renewing his church, and through the church being renewed, having the world be renewed. As the Lord tells us, “Behold, I make all things new.”