

God's Church for God's World

This year's Diocesan Convention—God's Church for God's World—echoes that of the 15th Lambeth Conference. That's because the Design Team intended for the work of the Lambeth Conference to continue in our local dioceses.

To do that, we need to consider the following questions:

- What is the Lambeth Conference?
- What does the theme “God’s Church for God’s World” mean?
- How might this theme inform our ministry here?
- How have we anticipated the Lambeth theme in Western Louisiana?

So, let's turn now to our first question:

What is the Lambeth Conference?

The Lambeth Conference plays an essential role in the governance of the Worldwide Anglican Communion. To explain, let's be clear about what the Anglican Communion is.

The Anglican Communion exists in more than 165 countries. It includes 41 Provinces (like The Episcopal Church and The Church of England) and five extra-Provincial areas. There are over 80 million people in the Communion speaking more than 2000 languages. Provinces are at once autonomous—we govern ourselves—and interdependent (united by worship, theological tradition, and bonds of affection).

The Lambeth Conference is more than just a meeting. It is one of the four Instruments of Communion (or Unity). Those Instruments are:

The Archbishop of Canterbury

The Lambeth Conference

The Anglican Consultative Counsel

The Primates' Meeting

Given our time constraints, I'm not going to explain each of these. The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion websites offer more detailed information. My point is to indicate that the Lambeth Conference serves to weave the Communion together and to set its general direction until the next Lambeth Conference. And that brings us to our next question:

What does the theme “God’s Church for God’s World” mean?

God has a mission: the healing, redemption, and reconciliation of the world. And God has a church to carry out that mission. If you're ever wondering what your congregation is all about, just remember this theme: God's Church for God's World. You exist to carry out God's mission in your local community. Naturally, that will take many forms in accordance with the needs and challenges of your specific context.

Our work in England was organized around a number of Calls. To be honest, I had no idea what a Call was before beginning the process. Think about them this way. A Call is a report from the Lambeth Conference on the conversations the bishops have had on what we take to be the central challenges facing the Church in today's world. The places where God is calling us to act together to accomplish God's mission.

During our time together we considered and reported on our insights on the following matters:

- Mission and Evangelism
- Reconciliation
- Safe Church
- Environment and Sustainable Development
- Christian Unity
- Interfaith Relations
- Anglican Identity
- Human Dignity
- Discipleship

You can find information about the Lambeth Calls at the Lambeth Conference Website. In this context, I'm going to focus on just one of the calls: Discipleship. I'll use this single call to suggest how the Lambeth theme God's Church for God's World can inform our ministry in Western Louisiana. And that brings us to our third question:

How might the theme inform our ministry here?

In a keynote address Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell asked us, "What is the church all about?" "McDonalds make(s) hamburgers. Cadburys make(s) chocolate. Starbucks make(s) coffee... [The] Church of Jesus Christ makes disciples." Let me put that in local terms. The Church in Western Louisiana makes disciples.

We don't make disciples like Cadburys makes chocolate. That's a mechanical process. Making disciples is organic and relational. Chocolate bars don't make chocolate bars. But only a disciple can make disciples.

So, to make disciples, we must be disciples first. The Baptismal Covenant in the Book of Common Prayer tells us in outline what a disciple is.

In this context we don't have time review it all. Instead, let's look at the starting point for following Jesus. Let's look at conversion.

We are Anglicans. Our Tradition is rich and beautiful. St. Benedict's view of the spiritual life lies at the heart of that Tradition. The monks make three basic vows. The first is obedience. The second is stability or sticking with a specific community of people in all their beauty and cussedness.

But the vow that concerns us in this context is *conversatio morum*. You'll often see that phrase translated as "fidelity." What it means is a promise to pursue a daily pattern of living that leads us closer and closer to God. The third vow is a commitment to lifelong conversion.

Discipleship is rooted in conversion. And yet I hesitate to say that it *begins* with conversion. My hesitation comes from how I suspect some will hear the word "begin." It may sound to you like a before-and-after point in time. A sort of starting line or that moment when a switch has been switched once and for all.

Instead, I urge you to consider conversion as the daily starting point to which we return and from which we emerge. You might say that the Christian way is always one day at a time. That's not to say that we make no progress in the spiritual life.

On the contrary, many talk about the Christian path as resembling a spiral staircase. We return again and again to the same place except from a new standpoint. When things are going well, that new place is a higher plane. Sometimes we've taken some steps back.

Sacramentally, the Christian life begins with Baptism. But think with me about the Baptismal Rite in our Book of Common Prayer. Whether they are infants or old enough to speak for themselves, baptismal candidates are presented by members of the community. This points to the crucial role of the community in conversion. We'll have to leave that discussion for another day.

What comes next—before moving to the Sacrament itself—is a recitation of the crucial moments in the conversion process. The candidates (or the godparents on behalf of infants) commit to do the following: to *Renounce*; to *Turn*; to *Trust*; to *Promise*. To be more precise, we Christians commit to repeat these spiritual movements one day at a time.

We *renounce* Satan and all the spiritual forces that rebel against God, the evil powers of this world, and our sinful desires. We turn away from them. Not just once. But day by day in mostly small but sometimes large ways.

Next, we *turn* to Jesus and accept him as our Savior. In our can-do, achievement-oriented world it's no small thing to admit that we need a Savior. That we cannot accomplish on our own the most important, defining thing of our entire existence. The goal of human existence is union with our Creator. And this union comes to us always only as a gift. Never as our own accomplishment.

Once we've admitted our need for a Savior, we learn to *trust*. To trust that Jesus' grace and his mercy and his love will accomplish for us what we cannot achieve by our moral rigor or our sincerest piety.

Finally, we *promise* to obey and follow Jesus as Lord. We admit that he knows what we do not know. He embodies the very wisdom of God. The insight and the understanding needed to

navigate the complexities of life. To love God and to love neighbor in all the particular, messy circumstances of real life.

Our discipleship is rooted in conversion. And conversion happens, with God's help, one day at a time. We each need a rule of life that includes corporate worship, personal prayer, study, works of mercy, and promotion of justice.

Now I'm pleased to say that the ministries of this Diocese have already anticipated the Lambeth Conference's theme in many ways. We already understand ourselves as instruments of God's mission. And I would like to highlight just a few of the ways that this has been happening from Lake Charles to Lake Providence, from New Iberia to Shreveport. And that brings us to our final question:

How have we anticipated the Lambeth theme in Western Louisiana?

The examples are too many provide a complete list. So I'm going to outline a representative few:

In response to natural disasters we have helped to repair or reroof 164 homes in at least 9 parishes throughout central and southwest Louisiana and in so doing touched the lives of over 400 people.

We have also built partnerships with a wide array of organizations. They include Catholic Charities, The Rapides Foundation, Office of Public Health, Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Chamber of Commerce, Lasalle Parish School Board, and Christus St. Francis Cabrini.

I want to thank the leaders of our Disaster Relief Team for all the work they have done and continue to do: Joy Owensby for Central Louisiana, Archdeacon Lois Maberry for Northern Louisiana, and Cindy Robertson for Southwest Louisiana.

And here are a few examples parish-based mission:

St. James in Alexandria hosts a monthly breakfast for their distressed surrounding neighborhood. In addition to providing a sit-down, warm, nutritious meal, the Breakfast Crew has partnered with the NSU School of Nursing. Fifteen to twenty nursing students not only help cook and serve food but offer health assessments. Montgomery Animal Hospital provides free pet health assessments, vaccinations, and nail clipping. Stanley's Men's Parlor gives free men's haircuts. And the Office of Public Health has given Covid-19 and flu vaccines.

Moving to the south, St. Andrew's, Moss Bluff, responded to hurricane devastation by sponsoring three annual Planting Hope Seedling Tree Giveaways. St. Michael and All Angels in Lake Charles has fully renovated its Recovery House, a resource for the whole area in response to the disease of addiction.

In the Monroe Convocation, St. Thomas has rebranded itself as St. Thomas by the Bayou, thus offering the natural beauty of its setting as a spiritual resource for the surrounding community.

Grace has transformed its educational mission in response to changing demographics. Narrowing their scope to nursery and pre-school, what was once a situation of declining enrollments now boasts a growing waiting list.

These ministries are all adapting to the real, changing circumstances around them under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I regret that I cannot mention everyone. But I know the Diocese joins me in applauding you all.

And while I'm highlighting our local mission, let me encourage everyone to take note of the funding available from the Diocese. Our Treasurer will be reminding us of the Grant and Interest Free Loan Program brought to us by the wisdom of the Diocesan Council. Please, please be creative and take advantage of this program.

In closing, I want to thank my staff. Kathy Richey, Holly Davis, Thomas Stodghill, John Bedingfield, and Joy Owensby. And I want to thank all of you for the privilege of serving as your bishop. It is both a joy and an honor to follow Jesus with you. I love you. You are all a cherished part of my life. May God bless us all as we do the good work of Jesus Christ in our corner of God's Creation.