

## **Bishop's Address 2019— The Harvest is Plentiful; The Time is Now!**

She was completely trapped, locked in a life of immorality and shame with no apparent way out. No way forward. No way back. Living an almost invisible existence until he, under God's providence, crossed several boundaries—both geographical and cultural; established a personal contact with her in spite of her desire to be invisible; courted her curiosity; touched her deepest pain and need and brought her into the grace of his reckless and redeeming love. And she, amazingly, all so amazingly, then became the first evangelist to the Samaritan people. It is all told in a riveting manner in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of St. John. You probably know the story as the Samaritan Woman at the Well. I want to draw your attention this morning to a section of the narrative less frequently examined. She, having gone into the town of Sychar, shares her testimony in the town square: *"Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"* Soon, the villagers went out of the town, white robed, and winding their way to the well.

Jesus meanwhile was talking with the disciples who were freshly back from their grocery run to the town, when he posed before them a question. "Do you not say 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest?'" Let's pause here over this Jewish proverb that our Lord recites to the disciples. "Four-months-till-harvest." The Johannine scholar, F. D. Bruner notes that this proverb is equivalent to our saying, "Rome wasn't built in a day." It essentially means, "Be patient; don't expect miracles; it takes time for things to happen." But our Lord isn't buying it. In Christian mission that doesn't have to be the case. He immediately grabs their attention and ours with three straight visual commands—(for after all seeing-is-believing). **"Look...! Lift up your eyes...! See...! The fields are white with Harvest."** In other words, the preaching is now, the sowing is now, and the harvest is now! For the villagers from Sychar (dressed in white) and stirred by this woman's witness to the one who has given her new life are coming out in great droves. They, swept up by the Wind of the Spirit that blows where it wills, are even now coming out to see the one who has spoken such life giving and restoring words to this previously hopeless creature. Jesus wants his disciples (and us) to look at the world and see that people are more ready for the gospel than they (and we) may think.

You may recall that Jesus gave a similar message before he sent the Twelve disciples out with his "Sermon on the Mission" in Matthew's Gospel. *"And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'" (Matthew 9:35-38)* He saw the crowds filled with people unseen and uncared for by the religious leaders of the day and he had compassion on them (*that is he was stirred deep down inside*). He saw them as "tormented, exhausted and led astray." (Michael Green).

Then there is the parallel message he gave as he appointed and sent out the Seventy-Two on mission in 10<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Luke. *“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.... Go your way; behold I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.”* Some of these disciples will be received in peace others with derision, or worse, neglect. As Bruner observes, *“The world, in Jesus’ conviction seems to be filled with both wolves and sheep, with both the vicious and their victims.”* We should expect to meet both as we go out, our feet shod with the gospel of peace and the Word of Life on our lips. But make no mistake about it the harvest today, as it was then, is plentiful and the time is now!

### **Unseen Neighbors and Unseen Neighborhoods**

It is true for many of us here in South Carolina that we live increasingly in a world of unseen neighbors and unseen neighborhoods. In fact so much so that many of us may not realize just how plentiful the harvest is. Therefore, we have hosted at this convention several presentations on *The Art of Neighboring* by David Runyan. He has challenged us as Christians to begin fulfilling the Great Commandment by *“loving our neighbors (our literal neighbors) as ourselves.”* He, and his book *The Art of Neighboring*, is at the forefront of a national Christian movement to renew local communities through rank and file Christians pursuing meaningful relationships with those who live around them. There is much wisdom in this for us here in the Diocese of South Carolina.

It is worth noting that this fits into an even broader national movement that columnists like Gabriela Bhaskar and David Brooks are writing about. Take these opening paragraphs from a recent New York Times piece entitled *A Nation of Weavers*.

*“I start with the pain. A couple times a week I give a speech somewhere in the country about social isolation and social fragmentation. Very often a parent comes up to me afterward and says, ‘My daughter took her life when she was 14.’ Or, ‘My son died of an overdose when he was 20.’ Their eyes flood with tears. I don’t know what to say. I squeeze a shoulder just to try to be present with them, but the crying doesn’t stop. As it turns to weeping they rush out of the auditorium and I am left with my own futility. What can I say to the parents still around who don’t yet know they may soon become those parents? This kind of pain is an epidemic in our society.”*

The article goes on to talk about people referred to as *“Weavers”* who are seeking to build community, weaving their lives into the social fabric of their communities in a multitude of ways—from coaching boxing, to looking out for local kids in the neighborhood, to visiting sick folks in the hospital. Then there’s these words from a recent NYT article by David Brooks,

*“What big idea counteracts division, fragmentation, alienation? It is found in Leviticus and Matthew: Love your neighbor.”*

Indeed, when the world begins to sing out of our hymnal pleading for a hospitality, which both the Old and New Testaments are filled with, it may be time to hear what the Spirit is saying to us in the Church about God’s mission in and to the world. David Runyan and other

pastors in this movement of Christians and churches bridging denominational lines to help restore hope to neighbors and neighborhoods may be something many of us need to adopt—not just as a workshop but for a lifestyle.

Nevertheless, under the rubric that one size doesn't fit all, we hosted other missional focused workshops as well, each seeking to engage with an essential aspect of the Church's mission and ministry in the world.

- Culture & Contextualization for Mission & Church Planting with the Rev. Dr. Dan Alger
- Representational Confession: A Tool for Healing Wounded Communities with the Rev. Dr. Russ Parker
- Neighboring—second mini workshop with Dave Runyon
- INSITE: Part II—Won't you be My Neighbor? with the Revs. Gary Beson & Tyler Prescott
- Leading Missionally—With Heart and Hands with the Rev. Canon Phil Ashey

This is a truly remarkable offering of workshops and teachings on mission. It is part of a determined strategy to change the conversation within the diocese toward becoming a more missional people. I hope it has not gone unnoticed that we have been challenging “status quo thinking” for the last several years by intentionally focusing on missional themes. Perhaps, however, a few of you noticed another shift. We are no longer referring to these workshops on Friday morning and afternoon as the “Pre-Convention Workshops”. These Friday workshops are as much the business of the Diocesan Convention, as today's parliamentary “business” meeting. It took no resolution or canonical change to make this happen. As Bolsinger suggests in *Canoeing the Mountains* you don't always have to exhaust yourselves discussing and talking about changes sometimes you just need to make them. It will take, however, every priest's, deacon's and delegate's buy-in for it to take deep roots in the life of our congregations and diocese.

This missional shift in ministry, which seeks to recognize and be more attuned to cultural changes (one of which is the unseen and unknown neighbor) has become something quite real in many parts of the diocese. As I've already observed it is a broad social phenomenon in our nation. But in other parts of the diocese we have another development. What I'm referring to in this address as the unseen neighborhoods that are springing up all around the Low Country. The other day my wife, Allison, came home from grocery shopping. She seemed rather stunned. She had been to a new grocery store on the corner of Lockwood and the crosstown. I said, “Is there a grocery store there?” “Yes, underneath that new huge apartment complex. It felt like something in New York City.” “How'd you know about it?” I asked. She said “We got a coupon in mail.” I said, “Gosh, that's what one of the things I'm talking about in the Bishop's Address—Unseen Neighborhoods!”

The other day a fellow Anglican, Mr. Ross Lindsay, dropped by the diocesan office for a brief visit. He had written a book several years ago on church planting as the best way to reach the unchurched. In his book, he referenced how the Southern Baptist Convention in

1998 had been given a large gift specifically for the planting of new churches. To make the most strategic use of these funds they solicited a Washington D.C. think-tank to do a demographic study projecting national growth trends. According to Ross the study projected that by 2030 that 60% of the population of the U.S. will live east of I-95 and 36% of that population will live east of I-95 between Fayetteville, N.C. and Savannah, GA! Let that sink in for a moment. He also noted that in 2000 the Wall Street Journal reported on a new phenomenon in retirement patterns. The article referred to these new retirees as “half-backers.” This term referred to those retirees in the Northeast and Mid-west who instead of moving all the way to Florida were moving “half-way back.” Rather than retiring all the way south to Florida, people from the NE and Midwest were moving “half-way back” which of course places them in South Carolina—smack dab between Miami and New York!

These predictions are now 20 years old and, frankly, I have no idea how accurate these have been so far. But in case you haven’t noticed the growth in the eastern portion of South Carolina is already a stunning reality and more is coming. The fields are ripe with harvest. It is not Four-More-Months-to-Harvest. The Harvest is now! Kingdom questions need to be flooding our minds and tugging at our hearts! How many of these recent arrivals will our present congregations in the Low Country be able to reach? How many of those moving here will be inclined to attend established, even historic, congregations? Perhaps those who are already Christians or have been active in churches before? Those with a heart for history and rich traditions? Perhaps. Nevertheless, how many will be more effectively reached through a newly planted church right there in their new community? How many live in new neighborhoods we have hardly even seen or know are there? And how many of our congregations are vigorously trying to learn where these neighborhoods are and how to reach them? Some of these may not even look like the neighborhoods we’ve been used to in the past. We may find our heads swimming like my wife’s after her recent shopping trip to a new grocery store underneath a huge new residential complex. But, surely, there are parishioners in our congregations involved in real estate and business development. Can they be resources for our dreaming and planning? Can we have congregational intercessory prayer groups devoting intensive time praying for new missional opportunities in these places? What are we waiting for I ask myself? Surely not for the litigation to be over or property questions resolved? The fields are ripe with harvest today! Unseen neighbors in unseen neighborhoods. Frankly, I feel like I’m back to the future. The Rt. Reverend Victor Rivera, the bishop who ordained me almost 39 years ago and then a year later when I was 31 appointed me as Chairman of the Diocesan Church Growth Committee (what on earth was he thinking??), used to speak of having “church growth eyes”. Eyes like Jesus for the lost; for the sheep without shepherds—lambs without pastures, wandering far from the flock. I pray that God will give many of us Church Growth Eyes! For Jesus said, **“Look...! Lift up your eyes...! See...! The fields are white with Harvest.”**

**And Yet Even More Invisible People**

Not long ago, I met with David Marten, the youth minister at Holy Comforter, Sumter. We talked of the need for church planting in the diocese and for the many cultural changes in the world around us. He had been listening recently to a podcast of renown missiologist who was predicting that the next wave of church planting would be in rural areas. That was so surprising to him that he got on a demographic website for South Carolina, which showed the percentage number of Nones county by county. Nones is a term to describe those people in a community who identify themselves as having no religious affiliation. To his surprise and mine, it perfectly illustrated what the missiologist was forecasting.

### **South Carolina by Counties and our Churches: [SHOW MAP OF COUNTIES]**

Take a moment to locate your county and church on the map. The crosses mark places where we have congregations. You will notice a percentage figure on your county. That identifies the percentage of non-religious affiliated persons in your county.

As is to be expected with such a large influx of people moving into Berkeley and Dorchester Counties, as well as Horry County in the north (with Myrtle Beach and the Grand Strand) and in Jasper County and Beaufort in the south we see in these counties a high percentage of nones. Fortunately, the Church of the Cross, Bluffton launched a multi-campus approach and is looking to plant again in newly projected communities and so also is St. Helena's, Beaufort. Earlier this morning we welcomed St. Timothy's Cane Bay as a new parish. They are seeking to reach the unchurched in Berkeley County. And as the exits on I-26 demonstrate people are moving in by the droves. Those congregations in Charleston County and on the peninsula of Charleston don't get too comfortable with the 39% Nones. This Pew Research study is a few years back and doesn't account of the growth in Charleston County and in the Holy City in just the last few years!

In last year's Bishop's Address I remarked how Johns Island had doubled in population in the last ten years. Glory be to God, Fr. Greg Snyder and the vestry and lay leaders of St. John's were not without an answer to this huge gospel opportunity. Just earlier this spring, in a great step of faith they called Mr. Will Klauber, now a newly approved candidate for holy orders, to lead this a church plant. Then, this last Wednesday, St. Aidan's of the Sea Islands opened a checking account for this new church plant!

Up the coast to the north, Christ the King-Grace, Waccamaw on Pawleys Island under the rectorship of Tim Surratt has taken yet another step in building a facility to enable greater growth and ministry. Even farther to the north, Grace Anglican, North Myrtle Beach, with Cindy Larson as the new Priest-in-Charge, has found a new location for their congregation in Little River. I was just there last Sunday to confirm and receive new members into their fold. Yet still, the influx of growth is so dramatic we are lagging far behind seizing the many opportunities that are before us.

Now, turn your eyes to the harvest in our more rural counties. If you live in Marlborough County and attend St. Paul's, Bennettsville, for every three people you see throughout your day whether at work, shopping or attending community events two of them do not have

any committed religious affiliation. For members of St. David's Cheraw in Chesterfield County, statistically, every other person you meet throughout your day has no a religious affiliation. So too with those who attend St. Matthew's, Darlington or St. Bart's, Hartsville.... We could adjourn the convention right now and have every priest and delegate ponder these percentages, and our time would not wasted!

What will it take to reach these unchurched neighbors in our more rural small towns or even mid-size communities? Can our present congregations change enough to accommodate their needs? Do they need to? Does it mean having multiple services even in the small town congregation that will appeal to people with different needs and from different backgrounds? If so, how does an already stressed congregation and rector carryout or launch such a venture? Will we lose what we have? And will the priest and vestry that steps out in faith be accused of neglecting or not caring for the long time members? Change can be difficult when it appears to challenge the habits of a lifetime. One definition of leadership I have heard is that "Leadership is disappointing your own people at a rate they can absorb." But even this disappointment is only possible from a foundation of deep trust between a congregation and their pastor and that trust takes time to establish. We have much to prayer over as we seek God's equipping for our clergy and laity for these challenges and rich opportunities before us.

### **Jars without Lids and Life beyond the Invisible Fence**

Years ago as a young priest and Chairman of the Church Growth Committee in the Diocese of San Joaquin I attended a Church Growth Conference in Pasadena. One of the speakers used an illustration that has stuck with me all these years and I have on occasion shared it with clergy and vestries. If you put fleas in Mason jar they will hop right out. But if you put the lid on the jar the fleas will jump and jump hitting their heads against the lid. Even a little flea brains, however, can soon realize that repeatedly hitting their heads against a jar lid is not a preferable existence and will soon jump just low enough not to hit their heads on the lid. After a time you may then take the jar lid off and for that matter even remove the fleas from the jar and they will still only jump right below the jar lid line. Now here's an even more fascinating fact. The fleas of the next generation will jump no higher than those that sired them. Well the illustration wasn't lost on me. I could look around the diocese where I was serving and see priests who had made their peace with jumping just so high and no higher. Being at the time a vicar of a small rural congregation I determined that I would not let the small jar I was in and the lid I was hitting my head against to determine what I believed was possible in God's kingdom. **Note:** I am not suggesting that the success of one's ministry is determined by the size of the jar or the height of the jar lid, but rather by the quality of the ministry one is exercising in the Kingdom of God! A further challenge a priest may have is how to help the congregation that has just-gotten-by-in-survival-mode for a decade or three to believe that there can be more than what they've experienced and to look for the kingdom possibilities that are there for them. To see their community with Church Growth eyes and a Kingdom heart.

Just this January I read a book by Michael Hyatt entitled, *Your Best Year Ever*. Parts of it reminded me of this illustration. In chapter two, Hyatt shares a story about how several years ago he and his wife, Gail, had an English setter dog named Nelson. Nelson was a perfect pet for the family. Warm, gentle, lovable, and great with their grandchildren. He had only one fault. When they would open the front door he would dart out like an escapee from a high-security prison. Dashing out the front door he'd cross the street barely dodging oncoming traffic and out into the neighborhood. It would sometimes take them 20 minutes to chase him down. They didn't know what to do until they discovered Invisible Fence. Hyatt said it was the breakthrough they needed.

Invisible Fence works by pairing an underground perimeter wire to an electronic dog collar. Whenever Nelson would approach the boundary established by the underground wire it would send a warning vibration through the collar. With some additional training Nelson quickly learned where the boundary line was and avoided it. No more bolting out the door. They could actually leave him in the front yard with no fear that he would run away. But they soon made an interesting observation. After a while they realized the collar was no longer necessary. If they stood on the other side of the barrier and called, Nelson wouldn't come. If the grandkids tried to entice him with a treat, he wouldn't budge. The barrier had moved from the external world of an electronic device to the internal world of Nelson's brain. As Hyatt summarizes "Our beliefs play a massive part in how we approach life." We all too often experience what we expect and what we expect often determines what we experience.

Well, I read that and was back to the flea in the jar. I immediately saw the application of Hyatt's illustration to three arenas of my life and ministry. First, of course was to my own life. What invisible fences had I made an unhealthy peace with and allowed to become part of the internal life of my mind determining therein what I believed was possible? The next place I began to apply it was to the diocese. How had this ongoing litigation placed us behind an invisible fence and how had we as a diocese allowed this long process of waiting to move from an external barrier of a slow grinding legal process to become a barrier within our minds, creating or at least contributing to a visionless, faithless method of operating? From there it was rather obvious to begin applying it to our congregations and clergy. Had the ongoing legal process, and the resulting litigation fatigue, as well as the uncertainty of who might eventually own the property just become a convenient excuse for doing nothing but the status quo and internally reciting the proverb Four-more-months-till-harvest. Had it become for some of us an invisible fence? Taking a wait and see approach?

Just maybe God has taken us into this uncharted territory to transform us? To unleash us from our false idols, comforts and securities. As Todd Bolsinger notes, "In a changing world, the leader must be continually committed to ongoing personal change, to develop new capacities, to be continually transformed in ways that will enable the organization's larger transformation." In a world of unseen neighbors and unseen neighborhoods do we have to wait to know who owns a church building to begin missional thrusts of loving others as our

neighbor or of even beginning to pray about how we minister to neighborhoods we've only just recognized are there? Can we not begin praying earnestly for the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into the harvest?

### **A Plea for Prayer—A Call for the Intercessors**

As Jesus said, *"The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into the harvest."* Many of our congregations have intercessory prayer groups. It is a ministry often made up of women. However, it need not be so. Some of the most important intercessors in my life over the years have been men. Whether intercessors are men or women, I want to celebrate them today. I've often used an analogy to describe the work of the intercessors. They are like the RAF pilots during WWII fighting off the German bombers over London. In that sense, they are protectors of the congregation from spiritual attacks. Yet another role of the air force (that is the intercessors) is to fly interference for the ground troops as they engage the battle and seek to hold or take new ground from the enemy. But if you look at the prayer lists of the typical parish intercessory group it is heavily weighted with prayers for the sick. Certainly, the sick are in need of our prayers. Let no one hear me as saying otherwise. As James 5:15 declares "And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up." However, if that is their chief ministry then they resemble the fighter pilots in a war with most of their flying time logged circling the MASH unit. If the prayers for the sick and dying are offered at the expense of praying vigorously for those at the forefront of the battle and granting a prayer cover for those leading the charge, then the soldiers fighting the good fight and taking the enemy's ground will soon be in beds of the Mash unit. Therefore, I am making a proposal moving forward. I will be asking the Deans of our deaneries to collate the names of clergy, their spouses and children (frankly, I already have them on my personal intercessory list). And I am asking all our active clergy to identify in one reasonably short sentence what they seek prayer for during the next three months (we'll circle back in three months for reports and updates). We will seek to marshal the intercessory prayer groups so that each priest and deacon in the diocese is prayed for each week by anointed intercessors so that our clergy and families may be renewed in gospel ministry and be equipped to lead their congregations in the harvest that God has so dramatically placed before us.

### **Giving the last word to a church planter in the field at harvest time**

*\*Bishop,*

*Please bring us home with a reminder that what we are called to do and be is nothing new and nothing to be scared of.*

*Jesus is already where He is calling us to go.*

*He is the seed that you mentioned in your previous address.*

*He has been scattered.*

*He sees the unseen, He cares for the hopeless, harassed and helpless..... all we have to do is what the Spirit of God enables us to do, point to Him!!!!*

*There He is.... in the supermarket parking lot changing a tire or jumping a car*

*There He is paying for the coffee shop latte for a stranger*

*There He is learning the names of the baristas and the checkout persons*

*There He is dropping off a meal at a neighbor in Nexton who doesn't attend a church*

*There He is asking to pray or drive someone to a Dr's appointment who doesn't attend a church*

*There He is throwing newspapers on neighbors' porches in pre-dawn walks with His dog*

*There He is rolling trashcans back up driveways of people He has never met*

*There He is praying from the safety of his living room chair for the neighbor kids playing or riding bikes*

*There He is*

*There He is*

*There He is,*

*In our neighborhoods, towns, and cities, and in their rural fields of South Carolina*

*He is in each of us that have repented and called on His name,*

*There He is...*

*Let's go join Him*

*\*Taken from an email from The Rev'd Gary Beson*