

Convention Address
The Rt. Rev. Greg Rickel
Diocese of Olympia
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Tacoma, Washington

Some of you know that on the day of my ordination as your bishop, I decided to walk the one block from the hotel to convention center. Since it was so close I decided simply to put on my white alb and walk with my family down the street.

As I walked into the center I was welcomed by a very kind gentleman who told me that the acolytes and servers were meeting just upstairs, and he kindly directed me to that room. I assured him I would report right away.

I long for those days!!

Well here we are! I cannot tell you how much I thank you for your confidence and trust in bringing me to serve in your midst, but also for your welcome into that reality. I have been asked by my wife Marti and son Austin to tell you the same. We have experienced that welcome and care since the very first contact with your search committee and it has continued with all who participated in that process, and even to this day. We love being with you and I pledge to give all I can in service to you, this diocese, and to our Lord.

A few years ago on a Good Friday, I arrived at church just before the noon service to find that a roofer had come to repair the church roof, on that day of all days. There he was, perched up on our huge slanted roof, hammering away, just minutes from the start of the Good Friday liturgy. Of course, I was indignant; I ran to the church, looked up the ladder at this man and asked what he thought he was doing.

He told me he was fixing the roof.

I told him he would need to stop, a service was starting and we just could not have him up there hammering during our service.

Frustrated, he began to gather his things. I walked in the church and looked at some of the faces, and I thought about all we were about to say and remember, and I realized that this hammering might just be a good thing. Actually, I thought it might be brilliant.

I ran out the door, looked up the ladder, at the perplexed man now just beginning to descend, and I asked him—begged him really—to go back up the ladder, keep working and, even more, could he keep the hammering going another 30-45 minutes.

By now he was sure I was totally nuts, but he returned to his work.

I ran back in, vested to begin the service and the hammering began. At the back door of the nave I was greeted by a man complaining about the noise. He said it was an

annoyance. In my most pastoral tone I assured him Jesus was probably annoyed as well, among many other things, and he might just go with it and see if he couldn't find how it was connected to the day. We continued, with half the congregation looking totally annoyed and half being moved to tears at the confluence of sound and words and time.

This story has become a metaphor for me: our churches becoming a place where we retreat to tell our story, most of the time unaware of how it connects with what is going on just outside our walls. And this man, doing his job and so much more, hammering on our roof.

His work, his hammering, the noise he made for us would not let us slip off into an easy acceptance of things as they are. I could have put an end to it; I had my chance.

We might do well to pay attention to the noise around us, those hammering on our roof. There may be a message there, something to learn.

We hear a lot about no one going to church in our part of the world. They are not sure what we are about anymore and wonder about our intersection with the world. We, if we are not careful, can resign ourselves to the fate prescribed and told to us by the media and all the studies. If we listen long enough we can succumb to the prophecy of our age, that we are irrelevant and, even worse, dead, waiting around for our funeral.

Someone is hammering on our roof, and we will do well not to deny it but also not to resign ourselves to being unable to work with it.

I stand before you today with a conviction and a strong hope. The conviction is this: if we do succumb it will be no one's fault but our own, and the belief is we can and should be doing something about it.

It will not be easy. It will mean, without a doubt, we will have to imagine new things and relearn some old ones that we have lost. We will need to be able to accept the hammering on our roof, not as a nuisance and intrusion on our cozy and warm existence but rather a beckoning, even a symbiotic connection in which we can learn and grow.

Fred Friendly, Edward R. Murrow's partner in "See it Now," used to always open his seminars by saying their purpose was "to make the agony of decision making so intense that you can escape it only by thinking." We are at that point. The agony of decision making has become quite intense. The hammering is not going to stop just because we don't like it.

I don't believe we can only think our way out of it, but that would be a good start. If we think long enough, we might see we have all we need already. Our tradition is ripe with what we need, but we may in fact have to learn it again and learn it as it fits with the hammering on our roof.

I told you on the walkabout and since that I want to spend my energy in three areas:

First of all, everyone under age 35: youth and young adults. I have said I believe we must do this, find the connection again, and if we cannot we are dead. I can't state it enough. And I believe we can. This convention is sponsored by the youth and young adults of this diocese at my invitation. They have done an incredible job and they have done it with a commitment and an energy that is inspiring. On top of the work they have put into all the planning for this convention, tonight they will provide the fun we shall share together, two from their midst will preach for us at the Eucharist tomorrow and they will be living witnesses to the future and the present of our life in these days. We may well thank them again as we go through this convention but I would like for us to do that now—thank them for their commitment, their witness and their inspiration.

The first focus naturally leads to the second: congregational development. For me this is the deep and long study of the organization we call church and the honest reflection among those in our communities, which leads us to be healthier, sustainable and transforming to those within and equally outside our walls. It begins with some parameter of how we will live and converse with each other. The 10 Rules of Respect are a foundation for how we will begin in healthy communication. There may well be better ones, but we have to start somewhere.

In preparation for this work and this convention sponsored by our youth and young adults, and thanks to Karen Ward and others who have directed me, I have been reading what the younger faithful are saying. Right now I am finishing a book entitled *Intuitive Leadership: Embracing a paradigm of narrative, metaphor, and chaos* by Tim Keel, a young emerging minister. I found several parts of his book especially interesting.

He talks about technique reproduction and the weariness the church now labors under due to it. He writes:

“We have a mounting leadership crisis in the church. We are facing a crisis of imagination, an ill-fed spiritual attention span nourished by novelty. I believe this dynamic has debilitated local churches ... We are missing leaders like the patriarch Jacob, who are willing to wrestle with God as Jacob wrestled the angel on the bank of the river, refusing to release God until he blesses us—even if it means hobbling the rest of our days.

“We are missing the prophetic leaders who are able to read the sign of the times, who listen carefully, thoughtfully and theologically, who respond in faithful and creative ways based on an imagination baptized and engaged in a missional reading of Scripture, the environment, the people God has provided in their midst—not to mention the resources at hand that God has supplied. At its worst, this reduced picture of reality has drained the landscape of color and creativity under God, and imagination has been lost in favor of a very small and uniform version of life. Our churches are the religious equivalent of strip malls with the same massive retailers located in Anytown, USA (what some have referred to as “flatland”). I am truly afraid that in our desire to attain success, defined as it has been and accessed through supposedly reproducible programs, models and technique

duplication, we have instead become technicians. We have given away the harder and truer path that would produce the more enduring fruit of character, discernment and creative contextual responsiveness. Like Esau, we have traded our birthright for the proverbial bowl of stew.”

This is hammering indeed. And it might seem very harsh, but it is time for us to start listening to such and to be in conversation with the notions shared here. To deny that such sentiments are growing while we shrink is the ultimate blindness to the iceberg ahead.

I have a great hope and an expectation that we can begin to revision our future and what we are about in our local contexts. In this next year it is my hope to begin congregational development training for clergy and laity, and preferably teams of both from all congregations. And believe me, there are no congregations in this diocese, no matter what their size, no matter where they are, who cannot benefit from this training. It is training not rooted in techniques or cookie-cutter programs but rather a way of learning and thinking in spiritual community, and the making of a mission specific to the context in which you find yourself.

It is clear we will need resources to do some of this—not all, but definitely some. I want to speak to that on two levels.

There will come before this body a resolution to raise the assessment 2 percent in order to provide more money for church planting, redevelopment and putting ourselves strategically into areas in which we need to be making an impact. While I had nothing to do with this resolution, and while I might say this particular approach is not what I would hope for right at this time, I do want to say, as that old song goes, “I second the emotion!” It is time for us to get out of the pathology of staying mired in our discontent and to begin to put our energy and money into development and redevelopment, to invest in the congregations who are willing to work and take up the challenge of evangelizing their context—the congregations who are unwilling to succumb to the “sky is falling” view but are also willing to heed the hammering on our roof, are willing to enter into the “agony of decision making so intense that they can escape it only by thinking.”

Call me a fool, but my hope and dream is that we might sustain or even lower our assessments while actually finding the resources because of the huge investment and the growth we experience while doing even more with what we have.

To do that we will have to face some hard realities. Currently, the loans outstanding from the building funds at the diocese are 63 percent nonperforming, meaning they simply sit there with no payments being made on them. When that happens, what was set up as a revolving fund to continue helping congregations no longer revolves!! That is a problem; it is stagnation and it will get us nowhere.

I know this is hammering on the roof, but we have to begin to tackle such things.

This is one reason I would suggest before we raise assessments that we look to our systems and policies so that we might use the added infusion in the best possible manner, and in a way that positions us best for the future. I vow to be about that process in the months and years to come. If clergy days were any indication, the will and commitment for mission is clearly there.

I hope we can also begin to focus on radical hospitality, which sounds simple, but just visit a few different churches and see what you experience—and I mean for you to actually do it: visit and see. I do not excuse myself or the D-House for that matter; we all have some to learn about this.

Several years ago one morning I received this letter. And this is in a church that pays very close attention to this and is known for hospitality, and yet this letter came one morning to me:

Good morning--

I attended your church for the last two Sundays. I really enjoyed the service and the people. I have been praying for my husband to want to come to church, and on Father's Day, he woke up and decided he would like to attend. I was delighted. When we got to your church (a couple of minutes after the service had started--mainly because we did not know where to park), we went to the nursery to drop off our son. He will be 3 on Sunday. Much to my shock and heartbreak, they turned us away, saying that they were full. Then, when we took our 5 year old to find her classroom, the woman who intercepted us on the way said, with some exasperation, "Well, was she here last week?" When we said no, she said, "We'll try to find room for her."

Please understand that this is not a tattle-tale email. This is an email to express to you how broken hearted I was that this happened. I was so thrilled to finally have my husband at church, and he ended up in the playground with my son. In all my years at all different types of churches, I have never seen this happen. If your church wants to have a growing congregation, this should not happen. When we were driving home, my husband said, "That just confirmed to me why I do not go to church."

Thanks for the wonderful homilies I heard. Godspeed to you all.

This can be so easily missed, but we just have to try. We can tend to think that evangelism is really complicated, but some of this is not difficult at all; it is instead a commitment to an intentional focus on the stranger in our midst. It is an attention to welcome. And as Nedi reminded the diocese in one of her columns not too many months ago, you have only about 45 seconds before the mind and heart of a newcomer decides whether it is a welcoming place or not.

Smiles are a good place to start—to look like we actually enjoy what is going on in the place. I sometimes find it difficult to find a smile in some churches. We would do well to remember also that welcoming is not the job of the assigned greeters or the ushers; we are

all the welcoming committee, we all speak something to those who come into our communities. Radical hospitality is focused on the stranger, but much of what they ultimately witness and carry away is how they see us treat one another. We have to do both for the spirit to be felt when those we wish to welcome enter the room. It will take going out of our way to make this work, but it is the first step in developing ourselves so that we might welcome others.

To accomplish this, we will need to focus on the third of the focus areas, stewardship of all of our resources, and when I say this I mean our money, our environment and our relationships. You will know, many of you, of my willingness to speak of money and my strong belief that our relationship with money is a spiritual issue. I will not shy away from talking about it, giving it or asking for it, and yet it is truly just a small part of our call as stewards.

Additionally, our environment and our Earth cry out to us for help. As I view our Earth as a gift from God, we, being stewards, are called to care for it, too. This coming April, this diocese will be blessed to hold a national meeting entitled “Healing Our Planet Earth: Singing a New Song of Hope.” It will be held in Seattle April 10-12, 2008. Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, Bishop Steven Charleston, Bonnie Anderson (Chair of the House of Deputies) and many others will be present at this event along with people all over this country and Canada.

The presiding bishop will be meeting with the clergy during her visit as well as speaking in other venues that will be announced in the months to come. As stewards of our Earth, the church must become a leader in this new challenge for our life and for our world.

Stewardship of our relationships is by far the most important part of this third focus. It is crucial that we remember it is not our differences that the world watches and assesses us by as much as how we treat one another through our differences. When the world looks in on us and sees no difference in how we navigate our difficulties, we are not witnesses to Jesus Christ and we are not offering transformation to the world.

There is no avoiding the fact that our Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion find ourselves living in a deep tension. There is a lot of hammering going on. We are, however, a people especially built for this challenge.

In my first House of Bishops meeting, I kept being reminded of something Peter Gomes said to a group of clergy and seminarians several months ago. He said, “You Anglicans have a most amazing gift you have given to Christianity. You have been a gift to us because the rest of us have been able to peer over the fence at you as you deal with very difficult issues, often before any of the rest of us do, and we watch you live in that tension and yet still be able to eat together. This is your gift to us; you are about to lose it. Please don’t.”

These are difficult times with difficult decisions to make. I will not always make the right ones—let’s be clear about that right now—we will all make them, good and bad.

Whatever decisions we make must take into consideration not only our generation but those who have gone before us and, perhaps most importantly, those who will come after us. The protection for that has been instilled in our polity for centuries.

In attending the pre-convention meeting in Olympia, and from hearing about others, it became clear to me that many of you are just becoming aware of breakaway congregations in Poulsbo and Oak Harbor who once called themselves Episcopalians and part of this diocese, but have chosen to associate themselves with other entities and Bishops across the globe. Equally, just in the past few weeks, a small group has decided to depart St. Paul's, Bellingham and start another church outside the Episcopal Church. I can assure you these have my attention, and the attention of the diocesan resources. I can assure you that I have spent time almost every day of my short episcopate on property issues and preservation. We are in discussions with the presiding bishop and her staff, and the Standing Committee is being regularly apprised. I am spending lots of energy and time on this.

I will continue to, and I want you to hear from me today, what I have said before; and it is not new but bears repeating. Anyone, any person or groups of persons can leave the Episcopal Church. This is anyone's right to do and if they can no longer worship or find a spiritual home, I hope we will honor that with all the grace we can possibly witness. However, our polity is clear: the property does not follow. The property is always an area which will need resolution in these circumstances.

And I should further say this is not about demonizing anyone, nor is it about theology. The point is true no matter what the theology or beliefs of anyone or any group that would attempt to take property out of the church. To do so is neither who we are nor what any of us signed up for when we became Episcopalians, even if we were not properly taught that when we became Episcopalians.

As in all things, and as it is with our amazing God, there is a wonderful silver lining in all of this. I want to honor a special group of people who have attempted to coexist and have refused to let the Episcopal presence in Oak Harbor die. I am referring to the Episcopalians of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Oak Harbor, a parish that, because of special circumstances, has been brought into a very special relationship with me as bishop, the Diocesan Council and the Standing Committee.

My first visitation was to this wonderful band of Christians. My family and I spent a day being uplifted by them, their perseverance and their great energy and commitment. Ironically, we were most inspired by the gift they have been given by their exile. For to hear them tell the story of their journey over these past years is to hear people tell a story of truly understanding what it is to be the church, without a physical home, existing in a chapel next door to where they once worshiped, where they grew in their faith, where they were married, buried and baptized. To not be able to enter in, to be so close and yet to be seen as aliens in their own land.

I can't take the time to tell you all how much of an inspiration they are, but I do want to honor them now, and I hope you will join me in thanking them and showing them our appreciation.

Before I end, I want to hold up to you several of our relationships—relationships we have had and those we hope to develop in the days and years ahead. First, as the dean (Robert Taylor, St. Mark's Cathedral, Seattle) said, the Episcopal Church Center in New York is decentralizing and has designated Seattle as one of the four sites in which to place offices. The other offices will be placed in Los Angeles, Atlanta and a Midwest location yet to be determined. There will be essentially two and a half offices here, and St. Mark's Cathedral and the Diocesan House are working to find the space to put these office.

As we reflect on relationships I would urge a recommitment to our sisters and brothers across the world in our companion Diocese of Jerusalem and all of the Christians—Anglicans, Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Presbyterians and a rich array of evangelicals—who wish us to know them as the living stones of the Church of Jesus Christ. To Him we offer our prayers for each other and our hope and efforts for a just peace in the Holy Land.

We are also in the initial phases of developing a relationship with our brothers and sisters in the Diocese of El Salvador and I hope you will say your prayers about this and enter in where you can.

Finally, I want to end today with a challenge outside ourselves. It is a big challenge, but one I know we are up to.

We have shown our metal by the great response we have had to St. Paul's in New Orleans—what a fabulous story. I have received greetings from Bishop Charles Jenkins of Louisiana. He has thanked us for the gift which Bishop Rivera and I were most happy to carry to New Orleans from your generosity: \$11,500 given directly to the two dioceses of Mississippi and Louisiana, part of a total of nearly \$1 million brought to these two dioceses from all over our church; and to also thank us for our pledge commitment of \$500,000 for the redevelopment of St. Paul's, New Orleans. This commitment is above and beyond the money I just mentioned; in fact, on that same trip Nedi and I delivered \$20,000 to the offering plate at St. Paul's. For those who have not had the fortune to go there, you should know that as long as you are from the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia, you have new cousins in New Orleans and they are waiting to welcome you!

And so I bring before you a new challenge. Part of the Millennium Development Goals is the attempt to wipe out extreme poverty. One crucial way to do this is to wipe out disease and improve health. The primary target today is malaria. You may have read lately that the Gates Foundation is working diligently on the eradication of malaria. Episcopal Relief and Development is joining in this fight with its initiative to combat malaria called NetsforLifesm. This initiative is placing over one million nets, with training on how to use them, in 16 countries of sub-Saharan Africa. This is not a disease we know well here but it is well known in many other parts of the world. Here are some facts about malaria:

- Each year, 300 million to 500 million people contract malaria.
- Each year, malaria kills one million people, most of them children.
- Each day, 3,000 African children die from malaria.
- Malaria strikes the people of poor countries because malaria no longer exists in the United States and Western Europe.

Sleeping under a malaria net protects people from being bitten at night by the mosquitoes which cause malaria. It also prevents malaria transmission by releasing a chemical which repels and kills mosquitoes. Each malaria net saves multiple lives for up to five years.

Bishop Rivera and I want us to take the lead in the Episcopal Church on this. We would like to challenge this diocese to give one net for every communicant we have, to vow to save the lives of the same number of people who call themselves Episcopalian in the Diocese of Olympia. Each net, with the training required to use them, costs only \$12. This challenge is part of our stewardship of relationships, as we are related to those who need us to give them this protection and this simple, inexpensive way to wipe out a killer which we have been rid of for years. For want of a better name, I am calling it the “One for One Malaria Net Challenge.” I hope you will join me in it.

The world is hammering on our roof, and sometimes the noise is so faint we can easily not listen or avoid it completely. I pray we will not.

Also, the ERD Seattle Women’s Development Council has produced a Christmas card which they are selling at this convention. It says, “The gift of a malaria net has been given in your name to ERD’s NetsforLifesm initiative. We can eradicate malaria globally, now.” The cards will be on sale at the ERD table during the duration of convention. I know this is another challenge we can meet as we build the city of God.

On that Good Friday, the roofer I told you about lived up to what I asked him. He kept hammering for that 30-45 minutes. Afterwards, a group in the church invited him in for some coffee and some conversation. He still thought we were a bit nuts but he also knew he was welcome.

The next year, when I walked in for the Good Friday service, the same man that had greeted me the year before indignant at the noise of the hammering met me at the back door and asked with the same urgency as the year before, “Where is the roofer? We need the hammering. We need him.”

Indeed we do. As we build the city of God, we need the hammering, and lots of it. Let’s welcome it, learn from it, do a bit of it ourselves, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Questions: What hammering are you hearing? How can you use it to build the city of God?