

The Rt. Rev. Herman Hollerith, IV
Pastoral Letter for the
Diocese of Southern Virginia
February 14, 2010

I want to tell you how privileged I feel to be serving as your bishop. This past year has been a life giving one for me. Despite all the challenges before the office of the bishop, before all of us, I am proud to be working with you. I am proud of your dedication, determination and obvious commitment to ministry. We are here for a reason, my friends, a powerful reason – to do the work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Together, let us think for a moment about what that work is. Right now in many parts of our diocese members of our churches are facing the loss of their jobs, loss of their retirement income and an uncertain economic future for themselves and their families. A number of our parishes have responded with care and compassion, and we are trying new models of ministry, but there is more that we can do.

Our brothers and sisters in Haiti to the south of us have faced a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. I am extremely proud that as a diocesan community we have already raised well over \$30,000 in relief funds, but there is still more that we can do.

Many of you are working hard to find ways to care for *this fragile Earth, our island home*, but as a diocese there is so much more that we can do.

Ministries, such as the Mission of the Holy Spirit and the homeless ministry of St. Paul's Church in Newport News, reach out to people at risk, but there is still more that we can do.

When so many of our sisters and brothers still face issues of prejudice and injustice, and even though we have come a long way, there is still so much more that we can do.

Friends, a new world is enfolding before us. Carried as the currents of the Holy Spirit, it is time to embark on a new course in Southern Virginia. But to do this we must first make changes.

I want to state a basic principle that under girds my thinking. It's a maritime or sea-going principle: *the helm cannot turn the ship to a new course until the engine room has been first sorted out*. Without the engine room powered up and running, a ship is doomed to float aimlessly - regardless of any desired compass heading by the captain or the crew. While I know many of you are anxious about getting on with the missionary work of the diocese, I want to impress upon you

the necessity of first getting our engine room in order. We have suffered years of engine room neglect. So, “be not anxious”, we will again discover our course, but we will do it correctly, thoughtfully, deliberately and under power.

Part of my responsibility to you is to offer a retrospective on my first year as your bishop. The moment I took office I was faced with four primary tasks.

The first task was simply one of getting to know you. Even though I had been in the diocese for 9 years and understood Southern Virginia culture, I was only familiar with a handful of parishes. My major task this past year has been to build relationships with you, to spend time listening to you and getting to know you. This past year, I have officially visited 35 parishes for confirmation. I have also visited many other parishes for meetings, official gatherings, installations and ordinations. I have put approximately 35,000 miles on the diocesan car. And yet, when you add it all up, I have still only visited *less than half* of our congregations. Vision grows out of relationship. What I have discovered this year is that finding a total strategic vision for a system of this size simply cannot be done all at once or over a few months. Patience is required as I continue to get to know you.

The second task I faced when I became your bishop was one of strengthening the internal structure of the diocese, beginning with the support and administrative staffs of Talbot Hall. In light of the budget shortfall I inherited shortly after my consecration, this task was particularly challenging.

Within the executive staff (the three canons, the treasurer, and the communications officer) there has been great stability. I am fortunate to have a superb executive staff. Overall, I am excited by the way the executive staff is developing into an effective working team. One of my highest priorities is to see that the office of the bishop does business in a manner that models excellence for the rest of the diocese.

Early in my Episcopate my eyes were opened to an unexpected reality - a large number of diocesan program committees, the ones associated with the work of the Executive Board in particular, were either inactive or all but nonexistent. Some simply lacked leadership. Other committees were struggling with their sense of missionary direction. While the Executive Board was restructured during the interim period, the committee system was left largely untouched. The challenge of sorting this out has been significant – especially the challenge of raising up new leadership.

The good news is that we have a grand opportunity to construct a program ministry that is relevant not to a diocese of 30 years ago, but to a diocese in the 21st Century. As we heard in the Transfiguration story which is our Gospel lesson this morning, Peter wanted to reconstruct the past while Jesus beckoned him to move into the present moment to prepare for the future. In Jesus’

message we can see that something new is breaking forth. The time is right to capitalize on the opportunities in front of us.

This year has seen the resurrection of the Stewardship Committee, the creation of a new Mission/ Outreach committee, and the strengthening of the regional ministry of the deans, especially in their working relationship with me. Some of our committees are still in transition, such as Anti-racism, and Aging. Overall, much work remains. But, if we work together creatively, and devote ourselves to raising up new leadership we will accomplish this work, I can assure you.

The third task I faced as a new bishop was the physical deterioration of Talbot Hall. Basically, what I found was that the Diocese of Southern Virginia is “land rich and penny poor.” We have significant property in Norfolk at Talbot Hall, but lack the financial resources to be an adequate steward of that property. As I began to consider the repair and maintenance of our property I began to wonder how Talbot Hall fits into a 21st Century model of diocesan ministry.

As your bishop I assume the responsibility of being chief steward of all diocesan assets. With that in mind I immediately appointed a property committee to begin the hard work of assessing the situation. In all honesty, I have no idea how we will address the Talbot Hall problem or what decisions we will make in the future regarding the property. But, I know that we cannot ignore the challenges that we face.

The fourth task of my Episcopacy was that of placing a full time youth missionary on the diocesan staff. This was a wish that came from you. In an effort to shore up our present youth ministry in the diocese and to move us along into the realization of a new ministry, I transitioned leadership from the interim Youth missionary to a newly established Youth Transition Team. That team has done its work very, very well. During the third week of January the committee presented me with three final candidates. To date, I have interviewed all three candidates and I am in the process of issuing a call. I will announce my decision as soon as all the details have been finalized.

One thing I am certain of, dear friends, is that we will not be able to attend to our tasks until we have addressed fiscal issues in our diocese. For years now we seem to spend a considerable amount of time struggling around money matters. Admittedly, we have been undergoing a painful transition in this diocese in the last several years. I also realize that under past administrations fiscal decisions have been made that have raised concerns – like the cost of severance responsibilities for the former bishop’s staff and, frankly, the cost of the election and consecration of your new bishop. What I want to assure you of is that my staff and I are reviewing fiscal priorities and policies to ensure that our resources are used to their maximum capacities to empower the mission of the diocese in the future.

Needless to say, the economy these last two years has put a serious strain on all of us. As you know, this fall, I called upon all parishes to embrace 10% as the standard of giving in our diocese. From the bottom of my heart, I want to thank the many parishes that have been working toward giving their fair share of 10%. Your leadership is deeply appreciated. If every parish will make a dedicated effort to be goal oriented in their giving to the diocese, we *will* have the resources to address the missionary opportunities of the 21st century. Along that same line of thinking and as an extension of our leadership, I believe it's high time we began to increase our giving to the programs of the greater Episcopal Church. To speak candidly for a moment, we spend far too much time arguing about money in Southern Virginia. It's time for us to count our blessings, get off the dime and move on. We have so much to do and so much opportunity.

“Opportunity” – that’s the key word for us in this diocese - God given opportunity! During this past year I have become certain of one thing in particular – and that is the great potential that we have in Southern Virginia to proclaim the Gospel in new and exciting ways in our respective communities. But, something else I am certain of is just how huge our challenges are in this day and age. A great number of our Southern Virginia churches – not all – but a great number are simply *not growing*. Some are actually shrinking in size and the rest are simply staying the same size their membership grows older and older, which in a sense means that they are shrinking too. There are a number of reasons why this is happening, but the bottom line is that fewer and fewer young people, young professionals, young families are joining our churches. This is being reflected in the leadership that is being raised to serve on vestries, parish committees, diocesan committees, and for the ordination process. Canon Lewis has been doing a small research project as of late. Here’s the results: out of all the lay leaders who attended the eight pre-council meetings across the diocese last month only 16 of them were born pre-1970, just 16 who were 40 or under. Now that should give us pause.

Folks, we have to come to terms with the fact that some of the methods we’ve been using in our diocese and parishes simply aren’t working anymore. So this is what we are going to do. First, my staff and I are going to be doing everything we can to equip congregations to meet the demands for the 21st century. This includes offering liturgical conferences for parishes, lay leadership training programs, new member incorporation programs and stewardship training – as well as our regular bishop’s days with vestries. Most of these programs have already been planned for the near future or are available to you now. Take advantage of them. We want you to be empowered to move forward.

Second, with Canon Jay Magness, I am establishing new committees to address issues in congregational development and church planting in Southern Virginia. We need to find present congregations that are committed to developing new creative ministries – congregations which have hearts for doing mission - and do everything we can to support them financially and

programmatically. Likewise, we need to locate appropriate sites for planting new congregations in Southern Virginia. And there's good news for both of these areas - we have the financial resources already set aside for planting, and we have the expertise and talent in people in our diocese to show us what we need to do programmatically to grow congregations.

And finally, Canon Win Lewis and I are working with the Commission on Ministry and other special commissions to make sure that we are raising up the very best clergy possible to lead our congregations. I believe we already have excellent clergy leadership in Southern Virginia. And already our programming is focusing on the spiritual, professional, theological and personal wellness of all our clergy. But as some of our present clergy retire or naturally move on to other calls throughout the greater church, we must be able to replace them with a new generation of strong leaders. In the future we will be employing the very best methods to identify the leadership skills necessary for excellence. And we will be asking you – the congregations – to send us the kind of people who can carry the church forward into this new millennium.

In closing, let me share with you something Bishop Bennett Sims once said – because it's something I really believe and that drives me. He said that the real legacy that any bishop leaves behind will not be the camp or conference center that bears the bishop's name. The real legacy of any bishop will always be the quality of the clergy leadership he or she leaves behind.

I hope you will let the Spirit stir you up! God is calling us to seize the "Episcopal moment" in Southern Virginia. And through our life together, we can make a powerful and faithful response. AMEN.