

# Bishop Shannon Rogers Duckworth

187th Convention Address  
Episcopal School of Baton Rouge  
October 26, 2024

Grace and peace to you! It is so good to be here with you at Episcopal of Baton Rouge on this beautiful fall morning. Dr. Steakley, and your team; you are amazing partners in the work of the diocese.

Regularly, people ask me how things are going. They look at me closely as they ask this question, making sure that they are getting the real answer. And, as I look to begin my 3<sup>rd</sup> year as your bishop, what I say to them is the absolute truth. I love what I do, and I love doing this ministry with you. As I travel to our 48 churches, worship with you, visit our 13 schools and senior living facilities, attend board meetings and football games, sit on the floors of preschools, eat delicious meals in the parish halls of your churches, gather at our conference center, and travel in the wider episcopal church... what I experience over and over again is hope. Hope for the future. Hope in your communities. Hope as we instill the love of Jesus in the hearts of our children. Hope for the future of the episcopal church, grounded in the life-giving, liberating love of Jesus Christ.

What is also true is that this hope is balanced by the real challenges that we face in south Louisiana. Massive late-season storms threaten our coastlines. We watch with empathy and a deep sense of grief as our friends in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee reel in the aftermath of two successive storms. We experience our property and health insurance rates increase at alarming rates, both at church and at home. Our coastlines are receding, and we struggle to find ways to be relevant and welcome new people into our pews. We are faced with aging congregations and aging infrastructure. It is a special thing to be called to ministry in this time and place. What we also know is the love, resiliency, compassion, and hope that we share in this corner of the vineyard.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr once said, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose sight of infinite hope.”

As your bishop, I will speak to both truths today: The challenges that we face as well as the incredible victories that propel us into a season of hope. For yes, as our theme states, Hope is Here.

About a month ago, members of our Diocesan Vitality Initiative Team traveled to Florida to gather with our 3 partner dioceses and the Episcopal Church Foundation to further define the work we have been engaged in over the last year. I described this as a master's level class of church growth and development. You will see a video about DVI later this morning. Everyone there...from Utah to Ohio, Southwest Florida, and Louisiana, demonstrated a commitment to the long-term mission and vision of their dioceses. There were so many ideas exchanged, and there was also an extraordinary level of creativity in the room. There were so many stories, but one struck a note with me.

A historic church in a small town in Ohio was wrestling with a decline in church membership. They wondered how they could be relevant in their community and attract new people to their pews. It's a familiar story, right? Anyway, they looked at their building and realized a need that they had never considered previously. The church had an old kitchen on the back of the building. They wondered: What if the old kitchen was knocked off the back, and was replaced by a state-of-the-art, modern kitchen that could be used by the community? They imagined young mothers coming in to learn how to feed their children healthy meals. Or maybe a local medical clinic could teach patients who have diabetes how to adjust to their new lifestyle.

Well, the idea grew wings and last week, they laid the cornerstone on a \$1M kitchen addition to their church. And guess where most of the money came from? It came from the community. It came from exactly the people that they felt the need to serve. They looked beyond what was expected and dreamed of something larger. For them, hope was a call to action. Faith and hope walked side by side.

Emily Dickinson said, "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches on the soul and sings the tunes without the words and never stops at all."

So, I begin with some very good news: 18 people are in various stages of the ordination process in the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana. 18. This is twice the number of people in the process even 2 years ago. To me, the ordination of new clergy might be one of the most important indicators of hope and vibrancy. And, we have 4 individuals engaged in our newly minted lay preacher licensing program. So, when I look out at all of you, when I gather with these dedicated and hopeful individuals who are so excited about ministry in Louisiana, when I see the work that you do in your communities, when I spend a day with the deacons, when I experience the leadership and vision of our rectors and clergy, when I engage children

about their faith, when I confirm and receive and baptize, and when I see the work of my staff and lay leaders, this hope takes wing and soars.

Last year at convention, our work around the historic \$1.25M grant from the Lilly Foundation to develop a program around Christian parenting was in its infancy. Now, out of this grant, the Little Box of Good News is only months away from being unveiled. And, oh my goodness, how wonderful it is! This bilingual resource for both families and congregations is filled with prayerful activities centered around bringing meaningful and high-quality formation right to your doorstep. Each time that Grace Rose brings out a new feature of the box, I am blown away. We cannot wait to share it with you. And, even now, the plans for the next two boxes are well underway.

Over the last few months, the dream of the Frances Joseph Gaudet Umbrella ministry has begun to take shape. It comprises six interconnected ministries and initiatives addressing injustice, environmental concerns, racial healing and reconciliation, educational access, inclusivity, cultural competency and humility, and relational youth development. The Umbrella has begun to work collaboratively and is a community of compassionate leaders committed to making a difference and positively impacting the world through the lens of faith and empathy. When I began

as bishop, I hoped to establish a position on my staff for this work and Tamika Gerhardt has stepped fully into this role. She will share with you our plans for the upcoming year. You will also hear reports from all six of these vital ministries throughout this convention.

Since January, our work with the Latino-Hispanic community has continued to expand. We hosted a New Camino workshop in February 2024.

Following this presentation, the Cathedral Vestry initiated weekly English as a Second Language classes in partnership with The New Neighbor Project.

Through this, we will establish a model that can be used throughout the diocese. In addition, we are currently piloting the customized Latino

Hispanic Ministry Discernment Guide, co-authored by Karla, Tamika, and

Canon MacIntire. We plan to offer this exciting resource to the wider

church. St. Luke's, New Orleans began their discernment this fall, and we

will pilot this guide at another congregation in early 2025. We will also

explore Latino Hispanic Ministry opportunities with a current bilingual

congregation and increase our social media presence. We will also deepen

resources and connection with our other Gaudet Umbrella ministries,

namely youth and young adult ministry. I am grateful for the generosity of

Don and Kathy White, as they continue to support the financial and

visionary health of this ministry.

We have also managed the Episcopal Relief and Development Long-Term Recovery grant, which provided \$150,000 of direct economic support to 41 marginalized families in 2023. In 2024, we received \$175,000 and served 60 families. Partnerships with Latino Community-Based Organizations and NOLA Ready have allowed the Diocese of Louisiana to build resilient and sustainable families. Over 350 individuals are better prepared for, during, and after a disaster.

A few weeks ago, I had the honor of spending the day with current deacons, those in the process, and those considering this order.

Archdeacon Charlie DeGravelles has infused organizational structure and energy into this important order of ministry. He currently serves as deacon in charge at Nativity in Rosedale, and has traveled around to various deaneries to share stories of how congregations can be engaged in strategic and adaptive outreach leadership, no matter how large or small they are.

At this convention, two important resolutions will be brought before you for a vote. The first is to provide a base-level entry for deacons into the Church Pension Fund. The minimum contribution level of \$25 a month provides

deacons access to the benefits and resources of CPG. This reflects the desire of the General Convention of the Church to make this benefit possible for otherwise non-stipendiary clergy.

Also, after many years, I feel as though it is imperative to provide the same access to diocesan Constitutional voting rights for deacons as is provided for priests. The days of us and them are over. And, if we are to step fully into the future of hope, the voices of both ministry orders must be at the table.

During his address this past summer at General Convention, Bishop-elect Sean Rowe quoted Dorothy Day when he said, “Everyone wants a revolution, but nobody wants to do the dishes.” This quote resonated deeply with me. The day of his election was a truly extraordinary moment. Before walking across town to vote, members of our deputation gathered around me and prayed over me. It was one of the most profound moments of my ordained life. To be with my fellow bishops, to center in prayer, and to elect the next Presiding Bishop in such a clear way felt like holy ground. In about a week and a half I will fly to Atlanta to be a part of a small group of bishops he has asked to collaborate and dream with him about the future of



the church. I was honored to be asked to be a part of this time and look forward to supporting Bishop Rowe in the work that he has in front of him.

In the midst of the incredible things that I have outlined for you, what is also true is that I feel that a significant part of my work as your bishop is doing the dishes. And I want to be clear, I find great hopefulness in this work, too. I feel as though one of my most important jobs is to be a good steward of the resources to which we have been entrusted and to give vision to the structural and financial ministry of the diocese. This structure, at its best, is bent towards assisting and equipping you. My hope and prayer is that when the time comes for me to hand off the crozier to the 13<sup>th</sup> bishop of Louisiana, we will be stronger than we were when I began.

Standing in the midst of this “dishes” ministry is our work through the Diocesan Vitality Initiative, which I referenced previously. As we engage in important conversations and decisions around property and liability insurance, as we look at our budget in strategic ways, and as we find and broaden ways to communicate with you, we know that this work will bring both great excitement as well as loss. This diocese will not look the way that it does today. We will journey through that grief and also know that hopefulness stands at the other end. Mission and ministry continue, even if

the context changes. In the words of our beloved prayer book, “life has changed, not ended.”

A great example of this is the Grace Church Fund. Five churches have benefited from this endowment, created after the sale of Grace Church, to assist parishes that are on the verge of calling full-time clergy. Though this fund and in the ministry it continues to make possible in our diocese, the legacy of Grace Church lives on. If you are a member of a congregation who has received these funds, please stand.

St. Michael’s, Mandeville

St. John’s, Thibodaux

St. Luke’s, New Orleans

St. Francis, Denham Springs

Christ Church, Slidell

As we move into adaptive ways of being a resource to the wider diocese, I fully anticipate that this fund will continue to provide that extra bit of support for our congregations who find themselves at that critical juncture of ministry. Hopefulness comes when we are reminded that in God, all things have become new.

You all just received a communication from our Diocesan Vitality Initiative. Be sure to read it and pass it along in your congregations. We have good work ahead of us, including embarking upon an initial feasibility study of a campaign that will be mutually beneficial in the operations of the diocesan ministry as well as in the local congregations. We have made significant strides in balancing the budget, despite large increases in both property and health insurance. The days of siloed leadership have to be put aside. We are all in this together.

The next area of focus for me over the last 2 years has been the long-term sustainability and vitality of the Solomon Center. This began by spending about a year revitalizing the board, establishing an executive committee to directly support the executive director, and spending the last 6 months reconciling the finances so that we have a clear picture of our financial situation. Although the SECC was organized at its founding to be self-sustaining, for almost 4 years, the diocese has primarily funded the executive director's compensation and assisted with other extraneous and unanticipated budgetary items. As you see in your report, this deficit runs close to \$150,000/year. Dan Krutz has stepped in as interim executive director and is working closely with the executive committee and board to

streamline processes, digitize finances that were previously done on paper, and engage in the local community to develop marketing strategies. We will also strategize with ministry partners in other dioceses who have faced similar struggles with their camp and conference centers. In addition, Christwood, under the leadership of Steve Holzhalb, has graciously stepped in to provide at-cost audio-visual components to modernize Room D so that it can be used for virtual and in-person meetings. We simply cannot offer the SECC to the wider community without these resources. They have also been extremely generous in offering the services of their marketing and finance departments. We have work ahead of us. No doubt. Yet, Dan, and the board, and I remain hopeful. However, we need you to join with us so that this can be a resource that is enjoyed for many years to come. ,

I cannot do this work alone. I want to begin by thanking my family. Jimmy is a constant companion on this journey, traveling with me across the diocese. We always smile when we see Cindy Obier's red Miata already in the parking lot! Our two boys are doing great things and I am deeply grateful for the love and support that I receive from them on a daily basis. I also want to thank my amazing staff. Each of you show up each day with the fullness of your gifts and a healthy dose of humor. We have so much

fun and we also work extraordinarily hard. Whether it's revitalizing the Diocesan Youth Leadership Committee, having fun producing "Gen Z writes the script", connecting with a parish who is having financial issues and keeping our diocesan finances straight, walking alongside a congregation in a search, being a trusted ear, developing a new outreach ministry, assisting me with the complexity of my work, assisting you with your own administrative needs, implementing a huge grant to serve families at home, managing communications, leading Latino Hispanic Ministry ministry, inspiring the deacons, or traveling with me to our parishes...my team is there. In addition, I have an extraordinary group of chancellors, diocesan committees, clergy, and lay volunteers who share this journey with me. I am humbled by your commitment to this work and your readiness to step in and lend your expertise to a myriad of circumstances. I don't take a minute of it for granted.

If you are a member of my diocesan staff or serve the diocese in some capacity on a committee or ministry, please stand. If you are a member of a Vestry, Daughters of the King, Episcopal Church Women, Altar guild, lay reader, or acolyte, please stand. If you have volunteered two days of your time to be with us as we do the work of the church, please stand.

I will end with an image that I want to share with you. This photograph was taken the morning of the consecration of Bishop Dorothy Sanders-Wells of Mississippi. Just moments before her consecration, the ordaining bishops gathered in this space for conversation, before moving into the worship service. This space is the chapel at St. Andrew's Episcopal School in Ridgeland, a chapel named in honor of bishop Duncan Gray, Jr. As many of you know, Bishop Gray was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement and at great personal expense, cast a message of hope into a time of incredible darkness. During this meeting, the senior bishop in the group looked at all of us and looked at Dorothy Wells and said, "Remember this moment. Look around this room. These are your people." I said this to the clergy this summer at our annual summer gathering and I say it to each of you.

In a few weeks we will elect the next president of the United States. It is a time of division and contention that rivals other extraordinarily difficult moments in the life of our nation. So, I show you these chairs to say that what makes this chapel a chapel is not the bricks, or the chairs, or the walls, or even the altar. What makes all of it sacred, what makes it work is the power of the Holy Spirit, our collective prayers, and your collective ministry. Take a look at this picture. Imagine sitting in one of these chairs.

Imagine who is sitting at your left and at your right. Who is missing that needs to be here? We are each other's people. And I remind and challenge each of us, that no matter who we vote for or even who wins, that as Episcopalians in the diocese of Louisiana we stand as harbingers of peace, reconciliation, and hope. For hope, is in fact, right here.

May God bless each of you, the work that you have in front of you, and the hope you give to others. And may Jesus inspire and strengthen us to do the work we have been given to do.