

## Diocesan Convention Address 2009 – The Right Reverend Thomas C. Ely

On Monday night of Holy Week this past spring, I arrived home to an intriguing message left on our answering machine. It went like this: “Hi there, my name is Barry Adams from Corporate Acquisitions. I’m calling you because we represent buyers in searches for businesses all over the country, and we feel we have a buyer interested in your type of business there in Vermont. And, I wanted to give you a quick call to find out if you are interested in selling at this point. Give me a call back (phone information left). I would love to chat with you if you are interested in selling your business. If you’re not interested in selling right now, no need to call me back.”

Ann and I shared a good laugh and a few interesting ideas in response to the call. I didn’t delete Barry’s message right away, and actually used it as part of my Easter sermon. I thought about it again as I was preparing this Convention Address.

At one level, of course, it was just a pre-recorded cold call from an enterprising guy trying to make a living, with no idea of whose phone number his computer had just dialed. On the other hand, the prospect that I had a business to sell and that someone might be interested in buying it gave me pause. I thought about calling Barry back and exploring his offer; but then I began to think about how I would describe “my business,” and what might actually be for sale to “someone interested in my type of business there in Vermont.” What would you have said to Barry?

Here’s what I imagine my call to Barry would be like if I were to call him today:

Hello Barry. My name is Thomas Ely and I’m returning your call from last spring about your interest in buying my business here in Vermont. (Pause) I know it’s been a while, but at least I haven’t forgotten you! Is this a good time to talk? (Pause) Great.

Well, I think the first thing you should know is that it’s not really *my* business, but rather something more like a co-op that I’m involved in here in Vermont. Also, you should know that our business is not for sale, but we’d love for you to share in it if you are interested. You see, I’m the Episcopal Bishop of Vermont and the “business” I’m involved in is God’s mission here in Vermont.

(Pause) That’s right, Barry, I’m talking about God, Yahweh, the Lord Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth. (Aside) I want to make it clear that it’s big business that we’re involved in.

(Pause) No, Barry, we’re not the only ones involved in that business here in Vermont. However there are about 8,000 of us Episcopalians who are. I have to be honest with you, Barry, only about 3,000 of us show up each Sunday for team meetings at our 48 locations, but those who do are really motivated. If you’ve got some time now, I’d like to tell you a bit more about us and what we’re up to. (Pause) Excellent!

I guess you could sum up our business approach in one phrase – “to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.”

(Pause) Sure, we have a mission statement: “To Pray the Prayer of Christ, Learn the Mind of Christ and Do the Deeds of Christ.” I actually like that mission statement a lot; but the loving God and neighbor focus of our business really sums it up best. I’m not trying to boast here too much or anything, Barry; but I have to say, we are actually pretty good at it most of the time!

(Pause) I've been the CEO here in Vermont for over eight years now; my territory is the whole state of Vermont; and we have 48 home base locations that I visit on a regular basis. I have to tell you, Barry, that for a small business it is quite remarkable to see how much these folks care about what they are doing, how much they care about one another, and how much they care about others in their communities and beyond. Many of them are even engaged in work in Central America, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa! Folk here visit those places and many have given money (sometimes quite a lot) to different projects in those places.

(Pause) You're absolutely right, Barry, their generosity is quite remarkable.

(Pause) Business plan?

(Pause) Do we have one? Oh yes, we have a plan! We call it "A Strategic Plan for Growth and Ministry." It's actually quite a good one – very comprehensive, although as we've discovered over the past few years it doesn't cover everything. Lots of folks had a hand in creating it, and more importantly lots of folks have made sure we stick to it. We are now in the process of evaluating and updating it. The plan has five key themes: Formation, Liberation, Communication, Connection and Celebration.

These themes are woven through the seven areas we call our action plan: Christian Education and Youth Ministry, Parish Life and Spiritual Growth, Outreach and Social Justice, Communications, Organizational, Structural and Financial, Parish to Parish and Parish to Diocese Ministry, and Rock Point (our 130 acre property in Burlington).

Perhaps it would help you better understand our mission (I mean business) if I shared a few things about what we are up to in these seven areas. Is that okay with you?

(Pause) Great. Thanks. I'll be direct as I can be.

First, we are totally moving forward in the whole area of formation and education. Our Annual Convention (that's our church equivalent of the shareholders meeting) will consider a resolution on life-long Christian Formation. This is actually a big thing, Barry; because so many folks think that Christian Formation is just for children. Still, many of us have caught on to the fact that it is really a life-long process. This is now a centerpiece of our operation, and we have a great Committee on Christian Formation leading the way.

Second, our commitment to outreach and social justice continues strong. I know, Barry, that in many circles this is not a popular thing; but our folks here really do get it. They understand that caring for others and actually trying to transform the world is at the core of our mission (I mean business) as Christians. They take to heart what our founding partner, Jesus (I'm sure you've heard of him before), had to say about "Good News" to the poor and those in need and about social justice and social transformation.

One of the key ideas that seems to have taken hold among those involved in our work here in Vermont, Barry, is an idea expressed by one of our earliest writers (Paul) who said, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.*"

That's quite a provocative thought, don't you think, Barry? People here seem to think it is and; like others who have gone before them, they are actually trying to make a difference in the

world. You see, Barry, there is still a whole lot of prejudice and discrimination against people of color, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons in our schools, communities and even in congregations of all faiths. Good folk are working hard to try and address those realities, and many see that as an important part of our mission (I mean business).

(Pause) What's that Barry?

(Pause) Oh, you get it that our business *is* mission. Super, thanks for picking up on that. Should I keep going?

(Pause) Thanks.

One of the other substantial areas where many are trying to make a difference is in response to the global climate crisis. I don't know if you agree or not, Barry; but I think caring for the earth as God's creation is the biggest moral challenge facing our world today. We must act for the sake of the planet. So, here in Vermont we are working hard at energy conservation, reducing our carbon footprint, exploring the use of renewable energy sources, supporting local and sustainable agriculture and striving to change people's hearts and habits.

We need to stem the tide of our careless and destructive ways. It's not easy, and many are in denial; but still we press on because the future of our planet is quite literally at stake.

(Pause) I'm glad to hear you agree.

A third promising area of our Strategic Plan is Spiritual Life and Parish Growth. Here our formation theme has really taken hold as well, Barry. For example, many of our members are involved in Bible study and adult programs like Education for Ministry. Likewise, many people throughout Vermont participate in the practice of Christian meditation, thanks to the leadership and witness of the Dean of our Cathedral. These are very encouraging signs. While we may not be seeing huge increases in the number of people attending our Sunday team meetings week after week, I do notice a deepening in the quality of life in our local base communities. Sometimes Barry, you have to look at growth not in raw numbers but in the transformed lives of those who are part of your organization.

(Pause) Not a problem Barry. I understand that you are a numbers guy. I'm just suggesting that there is more to our mission than numbers. May I keep going?

(Pause) Thanks.

A fourth area of focus in our Strategic Plan is building stronger and better relationships among ourselves, our 48 base communities and our "headquarters" - what we call "the diocese." Actually, Barry, all of us together are "the diocese," but sometimes folks forget that. Connecting with one another throughout the state and cooperating in the many interests and activities we have in common is essential. We continue to look for new ways to strengthen those connections, including holding meetings and events in different parts of the state and increasing our use of telephone and video conferences.

(Pause) No, Heavens no, Barry, I'm not the only one doing all this work. I absolutely love my job, but obviously I can't (and shouldn't) do it alone. In addition to the many, many volunteers

who work at the local and communal levels, I also work with a paid team who support, encourage and equip our local base communities in their efforts.

I have a really great team, Barry. Some work in the Burlington Office at Rock Point while others work from field locations throughout the state. Each and every one of them contributes to our ministry. Let me give you just one example, Barry. One of the new areas where we have provided significant support to our local base communities during the past couple of years is the area of financial stewardship. The accent has been on money as a spiritual component of our lives.

One of the exciting programs, which ten of our local base communities (also known as congregations) are participating in, is a year-long training program called *New Dollars/New Partners for Your Sacred Place*. It's a program designed to provide practical help on property care and stewardship to congregations with older religious properties. And it is aimed at helping them connect in new ways to their communities. It is off to a very good start.

(Pause) Thanks Barry. I'm glad you are finding this helpful in understanding us and our mission. I'd like to share more, if you have the time?

(Pause) Terrific. I know I'm sharing a lot with you and I really appreciate your interest.

Another emerging resource, Barry, is our Companions program. This involves a small, but growing number of gifted folks from around the state who receive training and support in order to "companion" or "walk with" our congregations when we think the presence of another set of eyes and ears can be especially helpful. One of those key times is when a congregation goes through a time of clergy leadership transition. I know you experience this in the business community. Currently, seventeen of our congregations are in transition, and so the work of our Companions is expanding and becoming better known throughout our organization. (Pause) You're right Barry, that's a lot of openings!

Communications is a fifth key area of our Strategic Plan. We have an excellent company newspaper, an emerging E-Newsletter and a website full of information. The person responsible for communications in our organization will be on sabbatical part of next year; and that means some things will be different, like fewer editions of our newspaper. However, part of what she will do on sabbatical is work on a new design for our web site, and I'll work with a newly created Task Force to look at all aspects of our communication strategy in order to recommend changes and improvements for 2011 and beyond. Say Barry, would you like me to add you to our mailing and email lists?

(Pause) Splendid. Send me your contact information and I'll do that. Let me move on to another action area.

Because our enterprise connects and relates through structures and money, we've identified this as one of the action areas of our Strategic Plan. Each local congregation contributes to our common budget. That provides most of the resources needed to support and strengthen relationships and programs throughout the state, and even beyond through the work of our headquarters office in New York. One of the things I am quite proud of, Barry, is the way each local community takes to heart this financial commitment. We also connect through the many

talented people who serve on our committees, commissions and boards. This organization simply could not operate without that participation and commitment.

(Pause) Yes, it is a lot to keep track of; but it's the nature of organizations like ours to involve lots of people and to count on their support.

(Pause) You're right, Barry, I am very fortunate to have such a high degree of cooperation and support.

The seventh and final area of our Strategic Plan for Growth and Ministry is really about a place – a special and sacred place called Rock Point. Rock Point is a magnificent 130 acre property on Lake Champlain in Burlington. Rock Point is home to Rock Point School, our business office, our camp and conference center, and several residences, including the Bishops' House, where my wife Ann and I live.

Like each of our 48 local congregations, Rock Point is a center of much mission and ministry. It is an educational, spiritual and environmental laboratory for people of all ages, from all walks of life, and from all over the world. One of our hopes for Rock Point is that it can be a focal point for our work around renewable energy and sustainability. We've had some financial problems with our Camp and Conference Center over the past few years, Barry; but I think we've turned a corner there and hope to build on our success in this past year. There's a lot that needs doing at Rock Point and thankfully good people are involved in that effort.

So, Barry, that's a lot of good stuff about our business plan, don't you think?

(Pause) Right, our Mission Plan.

(Pause) Excuse me?

(Pause) Challenges? Oh yes Barry, of course we have challenges. I didn't mean to skip over those. It's just that I see so much that is positive that I tend to focus my attention there. I actually think I've pointed to some of the challenges we face in what I've already said to you. But I can be more specific if you have the time?

(Pause) Thanks, I really do appreciate your interest.

We do have challenges: challenges around money; challenges around having enough people to do the various things that need to be done; challenges connected to our facilities and a lot of deferred maintenance; and even challenges with other Episcopalians here in the United States and abroad. You see, Barry, our organization is actually part of a larger association known as the Anglican Communion of churches spread all over the world; but that's another long story for another day. Even some of our own folks are still working to understand the nature of our organizational relationships and connections around the world.

Here at home, one of the practical and immediate challenges we are facing, Barry, is the challenge of our budget. This past year has been particularly difficult on the financial front, as you well know. When I look ahead to next year, and the years after that, I realize that we need to make some adjustments in order to maintain a balanced budget. That means reductions in some of our program areas and reductions in our budget line items for salaries and benefits.

Quite frankly, Barry, I don't like this; but we've made some good progress in the last few years, and if we don't want to put that in jeopardy I'm going to have to make some difficult personnel decisions. The hardest part about this is that I deeply appreciate the gifts and skills of those with whom I work. I respect and value our relationships, and I know that much of what I have been able to accomplish in the work here in Vermont is due to the effort of these colleagues. I plan to announce some changes in the configuration of our team after the first of the year, after I've had an opportunity to inform them about the changes.

(Pause) Thanks for saying that Barry. I know things will work out.

We're also looking ahead to the possibility of a different kind of challenge; the possibility of a major fund raising effort. While nothing is fixed in stone yet, there is a dedicated group of folks trying to determine if and when we should move forward with such a venture.

I hope they do decide to go ahead so that we can raise a lot of money for the future of our diocese. The last time our organization did this a number of funds were created that have helped the local communities in many ways. Indeed, during the course of the past ten years we've provided over a half million dollars in grants and over a million and a half dollars in loans to our congregations. Hey, for a small organization, Barry, that's not bad, don't you think?

(Pause) Yeah, I agree. There's a really good story here that we need to tell! Thanks.

Apart from everything else we've been talking about, Barry, perhaps the biggest challenge facing us is the changing nature of the world and organizations like ours. I don't think our organization has spent enough time thinking about this. I know I haven't. Our world is rapidly changing, and people are not turning to churches in the way they used to. Part of that is the nature of the post-modern world of globalization, technology and social networking that is changing the way people come at their life and living. Part of that is our own individual and institutional resistance to change. We're good at making technical changes. It's the adaptive changes that challenge us. To be honest with you, Barry, I worry that if we don't change some of our ways and soon, our future could well be in jeopardy.

Some very smart and thoughtful people are writing, blogging and saying that we are already in the midst of a cataclysmic shift, not just in the church, but in the world. I'm trying to listen and learn from what they are saying and writing so that we can strengthen our mission here in Vermont. One key feature in all of this is the issue of authority in people's lives (what is it, where does it come from and how do they relate to it?). Another is the shifting social patterns which value a more participatory, relational way of living, working and worshipping. There's no doubt about it, Barry; the business I'm in is changing, and we have to pay attention to that.

(Pause) Yeah, I know you're right, Barry. We're not alone. Thanks for the reminder.

Listen Barry, it's been great talking to you. Thanks for listening to me go on and on about our work here in Vermont. And even though our business is not for sale, I would sure welcome you as a partner if any of what I've said connects with your passion.

(Pause) You're welcome, Barry.

I should really let you go now, but there's one more thing that I want to share with you. It's really a concept, an idea, a way at looking at things that I picked up from a motivational leadership video I saw earlier this year. I think it connects to everything I've been trying to say to you about our mission here in Vermont.

(Pause) Really, that's great. Thanks.

DeWitt Jones, the man who made the video, was a photographer with National Geographic for over 20 years. His video is intended to inspire and motivate individuals and organizations to a new way of thinking about vision in their work. The video begins with DeWitt Jones saying, "For twenty years I was a photographer for National Geographic, shooting pictures all over the world, creating extraordinary visions. I learned a great deal from these visions about society, about geography and about people. But the vision that most changed my life was not a photograph. It was an attitude, a perspective that exists at the core of the Geographic – a vision so simple yet so profound – *Celebrate What's Right with the World.*" That's the title of his video.

At the heart of his inspiring message is the invitation to reconfigure our usual approach to things from "I won't believe it until I see it," to "I won't see it until I believe it." He said, "I believed the vision of the Geographic and then I began to see it." His point is that to the degree that perception controls our reality; if we don't believe something it is not likely that we will ever see it become a reality.

As an antidote to the dominant cultural paradigm of scarcity and competition, Jones offers - through his stunning photography - this vision of transformational possibility - of seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary. By way of further illustration, he quotes Michelangelo's memorable line, "I saw the angel in the stone and carved to set it free."

Sometimes I wonder, Barry, if our capacity to embrace something new is limited not by our lack of faith that something is true or even possible, but by our nagging fear that indeed it might be possible. If it were true, what would that really mean for our lives? "*Celebrating What's Right with the World*" reminds me that incredible things happen when we're open to possibilities.

(Pause) I should have figured you've seen that video. Why didn't you stop me?

(Pause) Thanks. I'm glad to hear that it caught your imagination like it did mine.

Take care, Barry; don't forget to send me your contact information; I hope to hear from you again soon.

(Pause) You too, Barry; goodbye.

*I'd like to invite you now to take a few minutes and turn to another person and share something that caught your interest and attention in that imaginary phone call with Barry.*