

Opening Address
Diocese of Hawai'i Sesquicentennial
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Honolulu

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Greetings from the whole of the Episcopal Church, and congratulations on your sesquicentennial – the whole of this church rejoices with you in marking this notable anniversary!

Your bishop has asked me to reflect on where we're going as a church and what your particular vocation might be here in Hawai'i. In order to do that, I want to reflect a bit on the context here. One of the most distinctive things about our Anglican heritage is that we think context is of major importance. We can't reflect the image of God or be truly human representatives of Jesus Christ unless we claim the unique gifts of our creation. Much of the English Reformation furor was about worshipping God in a "language understood of the people." It's not just the language we speak but how we live and dress and meet our neighbors. It's got a lot to do with how we govern ourselves, what sort of churches we build, the music we sing, the way we move and dance and proclaim the gospel. This Hawai'ian context has everything in the world to do with what your next 150 years are going to look like.

So, where has this church and diocese come from?

These islands were first populated by Polynesian adventurers and navigators, who probably came here 1500 years ago, plus or minus a century or two. They seem to have slowed or stopped their journeying around 800 years ago. Those sailors ventured across much of the Pacific, to Rapa Nui and Aotearoa, with foodstuffs, animals, plants, people, skills, culture and language. There are profound connections between the cultures in every place they settled, but there has been unique development in each context.

There are some interesting parallels with the development of Anglican Christianity. Some of those ancestors made very similar journeys – and we could start with the divine voyage into human flesh, and Paul's repeated travels around the Mediterranean. There is some evidence of Christianity in the British Isles in the 1st century, just a few years after Jesus walked the earth, and there's a lot more evidence of Christian presence within a few decades after that. Roman soldiers came to those islands and brought a new faith and worship tradition with them. They left it there when they were recalled to the central parts of the Roman Empire, and Christianity began to take root among the tribes of the British Isles. It was spread by other sailors and those who went down to the sea to "mess about in boats." Brendan the Navigator (484-577), Columba (521-597 and Abbot of Iona), and bands of Irish monks set out in little boats to carry their faith across the sea, from Ireland to Scotland, to the many islands of the eastern Atlantic, and maybe a lot farther west across that ocean. Some other seafarers came raiding from the north, and some of those Vikings eventually became Christians (and settled or left descendants in the British

Isles). Some of them also went exploring west and south and east, across the known and unknown reaches of the Atlantic and Mediterranean. Voyaging is part of the Celtic Christian heritage.

The history of these islands was interrupted by some of those voyagers from the east, perhaps beginning with a forgotten Italian navigator, Juan Gaetano, in 1555. The first known visitor was an Anglican, James Cook, who arrived in 1778 and 1779. He was soon followed by others, including one who spent parts of several years here, George Vancouver – better known for his voyages along the Pacific coast of North America.¹

During his time here in the early 1790s, George Vancouver came to know King Kamehameha I, who had unified these islands not long before. Vancouver commended two Englishmen to him as counselors in matters religious and political, Isaac Davis and John Young – and much later, one of Davis' granddaughters became Queen Emma. The influence of Anglican Christianity seems to have run deep with the king, and before Vancouver departed in 1795, Kamehameha extracted a promise to send teachers of the faith to these islands. It was a promise that would be remembered for decades before it was satisfied. Yet the seeds planted in the 18th century took root and began to grow. They influenced later kings who respected the way of life even if they didn't themselves become Christians. Those seeds slowly changed attitudes and eventually ended the *kapu* system in 1819.

The Christian missionaries who were admitted here in 1820 weren't Anglican, and proved fairly rigid when it came to the local context. That's actually been a frequent failing of Christians in new contexts – we think we know what is essential to Christianity even when it turns out to be more shaped by our own prejudice than the heart of the gospel. Mu'umu'us are a good example – what started out as something like Protestant burqas have morphed into new cultural expressions of the local context. Aloha shirts probably have a connection with those puritanical holokus, though the world is not likely to see their roots in missionary modesty concerns!

Context shapes us as people of faith, and in turn we shape our context. The story that is more frequently told about the coming of Anglican missionaries to these islands grounds it in Kamehameha IV's childhood experience of the Church of England. He wanted his people to have a faith that felt consonant with the best of Hawai'ian culture, and encouraged the English to send missionaries.

Americans who lived here had been asking for an Episcopal cleric since 1840; a deacon spent 6 months here in 1852, and Bishop Kip of California worked hard to find a priest who would settle here for some time without success, until he finally approached the bishops of Oxford and London. They consecrated Thomas Staley in 1862, and King Kamehameha and Queen Emma were confirmed a few months after he arrived. They supported and encouraged his work, and the king worked to translate the Prayer Book and helped Staley learn the language and how to preach in Hawai'ian before he died in 1863. Queen Emma is best known for her work with the sick and founding the hospital that still bears her name. Archbishop Longley knew her well, and spoke of her "saintly piety."

¹ A very helpful survey of the early years of the church in Hawai'i: <http://anglicanhistory.org/hawaii/missions1927/>

Staley returned to London after 7 years, and the next prospect was Bishop Henry Whipple of Minnesota (who also helped start the church in Cuba), but after long deliberation he finally declined. The Church of England consecrated Alfred Willis, who arrived in 1872. For the next 30 years he built schools and churches, profoundly strengthened the church here, and after the American takeover of these islands, equipped the church here to become a missionary district of The Episcopal Church, which it did in 1902. Among the students educated at Iolani during Willis' time was Sun Yat Sen. The First Nations people of these islands helped to form another father of nations, a Christian, and a healer².

These islands are one of the most multicultural of all the United States and Episcopal dioceses, and have continued to welcome migrants from Europe, the Pacific, and Asia – especially Chinese in the early years, then Japanese, and later Filipinos, and other Pacific Islanders. The bishop of Hawai'i even had charge of a Russian Orthodox priest for a time in the early 1900s!

The many strands of the church here are not unlike the three tikanga of the church of Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Polynesia – and grow out of a similar ability to bless and celebrate the gifts of many cultures. God has created us in diversity, and the reign of God is certainly more evident when we can see the image of God in its variety.

Those many strands and seeds have taken root and flourished in these islands – sometimes quite literally, in the pigs, dogs, chickens, taro, sweet potatoes, coconut, banana, and sugarcane brought by early Polynesian sailors; in the oranges and grape vines, cattle, sheep, and goats Vancouver brought; and in the later arrival of rice, pineapples, coffee, macadamia nuts, and horses. Most of those imports have been creatively received, a few less so. Yet, like mu'umu'us, even originally problematic introductions are frequently redeemed in these fertile lands. The church and culture will continue to grow, develop, and evolve if we seek the welfare of all, if we live in expectation of resurrection when change confronts us.

What has Christianity, particularly the Anglican variety, wrought here? The Hawaiian royal family kept asking for fulfillment of Vancouver's promise, and perhaps finally as Kamehameha IV sought the gentle spirituality he'd seen in England as a child. The particular gifts of Anglicanism here in these islands have had to do with multicultural, multivalent blessing of God's diverse creation. For God's sake, even the Church of England and The Episcopal Church have managed to cooperate here!

Yet it seems that Jesus' own ministry is the best image for the ways in which this Church has been faithful. Above all, Jesus fed and taught people, healed and reconciled. He listened and learned, and asked what people wanted and needed – and then responded to the particular need or context, and challenged us to do the same for the least of these, with food, water, clothing or shelter, welcome to the stranger, and solidarity and companionship to the sick and imprisoned. He didn't bring water to the overfilled; he challenged the satisfied. He broke down barriers between people(s), confronted the systems that built those barriers, and teaches us to do the same.

² Sun Yat Sen learned about Christianity at Iolani, and was later baptized. He trained as a medical doctor.

The particular gifts of the Hawai’ian church’s response have been about feeding local hungers, healing the sick in body mind and spirit, and teaching minds open and eager to learn. All are concerned with bringing good news to the poor, liberation to captives, and healing, whether we think ourselves needy or well-(or over-)satisfied. Our task as the body of Christ is to proclaim that hope-filled news of the reign of God within us, around and among us, and abroad in this world of wounds and wonder.

The work of this church in the years ahead is about what I hope are becoming the familiar Five Anglican Marks of Mission, rooted in this context:

- proclaiming the good news of the kingdom – what you teach in diocesan schools and Sunday schools, and also the work of public advocacy toward a healed community for all
- teaching, baptizing, and nurturing new believers – we tend to think about this mostly inside churches, but what about the unchurched out there – or the myriads of young people asking big questions? How can we meet them at Starbucks, athletic clubs, bars and the beach? Jesus would certainly be hanging out with surfers and with the crews of fishing vessels...
- respond to human need through loving service – through hospitals and healing work, but also through Nets for Life, ERD; ministry with immigrants, migrant workers and refugees; through food banks and community gardens, and storm relief. Free and open meals in some places, like Leadville³ and St. Louis,⁴ shift the focus from charity for the poor to building community for all and healing social division
- transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence, and pursue peace and reconciliation⁵ – helping young people prepare for constructive participation in society; working against domestic violence and trafficking; helping to build cultures of safety in church and all communities; working for peace in the Middle East and on the Korean peninsula. It includes changing systems that exploit migrant labor, or incarcerated persons, or that encourage armed violence – in Sudan and Congo as well as the US
- care for the earth – education and advocacy about climate change, sea level rise, fuel use; understanding the interrelationships of our stewardship of food, fuel, and water, and the connections to migration of peoples fleeing conflict and climate disasters; the difficulty of crop production given desertification or war in Sudan; disappearing homelands in the Pacific. Bishop Michael Baroi said to the HOB several years ago after floods in Bangladesh: “save us from these curses.”

How will we serve in the years ahead? Consider where we might find partners for this kind of mission. God can use anybody who shares a vision for a healed world – they don’t all have to be Episcopalians or even Christians. Who knows something about the generational impacts of land loss or cultural repression? Certainly the Maori and the First Nations peoples of North America, but also the descendants of those pushed off the Scottish highlands in favor of sheep farming, and the indigenous peoples of the Andes now losing their land and way of life to mining – and also small farmers everywhere who can’t compete with industrialized agriculture. What does the good news of Jesus have to offer, and how can we navigate those divides in order to heal lost and lonely people?

³ St. George, Leadville, Colorado: <http://www.saintgeorgeleadville.com/>

⁴ <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2012/11/08/transforming-churches-st-johns-episcopal-church-in-st-louis/>

⁵ Attention to violence and peacemaking added at ACC15

What do Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims and Jews, Episcopalians and Roman Catholics have to teach and learn from one other about economic displacement, under- and un-employment, and the search for healed and holy communities?

This Episcopal Church has plenty to learn from its younger members and newer ones about what sorts of healing and hungers are deepest right now. Are we willing to listen and learn, like Jesus with the Syrophenician woman? Are we willing to ask, “what do you want God to do for you?” Are we willing to learn new ways of responding to those hungers? Nelle Morton calls this “hearing others into speech,” providing the kind of hospitality that encourages others to tell their deepest longing. It might also be called evangelism, and a kind that Episcopalians might even embrace. There’s another aspect that involves helping each one discover where gifts have already been given – blessing the good creation God has done in this one and that community, having appropriate pride in the way God has created each one of us.

We know that we’re going to need to continue to learn new ways of stewarding all the gifts of creation – perhaps we can learn to use them more wisely through listening more deeply to the voiceless around us, groaning in travail – both the human beings most affected by weather extremes, job loss, changing economies, and the non-human creation. Who is despairing, hopeless, wandering? May God send us out to meet them (and meet the hopelessness in ourselves) and help us discover the gifts and good creation already present. That amounts to blessing, that is hopeful work, but we have to get up and go, out of our safety zone – that, after all, is what mission means, whether it is discovering Jesus in the midst of a homeless church or in prison or the chilly neighbor next door whom we still don’t really know.

The challenges and opportunities in the years ahead are directly related to these kinds of mission – the work to and for which God sends us into the world – indeed, the kind of adventuring exploration that brought the ancestors to these islands. Where and how will we venture forth in search of the kingdom of God? This shrinking globe means that we are ever more conscious of our interconnections – as cultural strands in the same context, and as partners in the blessing or cursing of this planet on which we all dwell. Rising seas and changing climate will have the greatest impact on those who dwell closest to *moana*.⁶ We are *ohana*⁷ because we have our life from living water, we know the eternal oceanic reality of continuity and change, and of the gifts of crossing the great expanses of the sea, especially when some see that expanse as a barrier to keep strangers out. We know that God’s spirit hovers over the chaotic and creative sea, whether we speak of traveling human beings or migrating creatures and soil. We are connected in the living water of Christ’s life within us. The next years and centuries in this place can be a source of deep and abiding blessing if we are immersed in that living water.

I want to close with a prayer and a blessing. The prayer is that of a young Polynesian from Vanuatu:

⁶ the sea

⁷ family

O Jesus, be the canoe that holds me in the sea of life, be the steer that keeps me straight, be the outrigger that supports me in time of great temptation. Let your Spirit be my sail that carries me through each day, as I journey steadfastly on the long voyage of life. Amen.⁸

And a blessing from the other side of the world:

Deep peace of the running wave to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the Christ of peace to you.

⁸ Cited by Winston Halapua, *Waves of God's Embrace: Sacred Perspectives from the Ocean*. Canterbury Press: 2008.