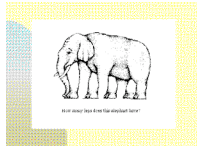


Bishop's Annual Address
The 175th Annual Convention
Episcopal Diocese of Michigan
The Rt. Rev'd Wendell N. Gibbs, Jr., 10th Bishop of Michigan
October 24, 2009

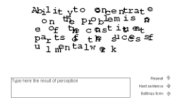
Sisters and brothers in Christ:

I want to begin my comments this year with a slight twist! The images you are about to see are not new, creative or necessarily provocative. I simply want to make a point. Please pay attention to the projection screens.

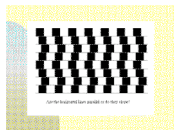
In the first image we see a simple drawing of an elephant. The caption asks, "How many legs does this elephant have?" As you look closely at this image, the lines of the drawing and your eyes interact in such a way that your perception of this elephant could lead you to believe there are more than four legs. Of course this does not correlate to what you know of elephants and thus your eyes and your previous knowledge continue to try to formulate an acceptable picture of the elephant.



The second image is one I am sure most of you have seen at one time or another. What do you see; a cup or two people facing each other? With enough time to contemplate this image, one can actually change perceptions to eventually see both! Again, your eyes are being informed by previous knowledge and experience.



The third image is a bit tricky. Here we have what initially appears to be just a jumble of letters. However, as we allow our minds to fill-in where the gaps occur (and with sufficient time to really complete the task) one can actually read what this message says: "Ability to concentrate on the problem is one of the constituent parts of the successful mental work." This is a lot like a complete the drawing exercise that you may or may not be successful with depending on past experiences and what you know of this type of exercise.



The fourth image I actually find difficult to look at because of the contrast of black and white boxes that are off line with one another. Combine that with my mind trying to answer the question asked in the caption, and I think this makes focusing difficult if not impossible. The caption says, "Are the horizontal lines parallel or do they slope?" Again, we are faced with a perception puzzle that might take some time to ponder to obtain the correct answer.



Finally, our last image is an old stand-by which prompts the question: "is the glass half full or half empty?" The answer to this question is clearly a matter of perception! And, depending on the answer, one is generally labeled an optimist or a pessimist. Yet, there is one other possible perception which I have discovered recently: "the glass is larger than it needs to be!" If that is your perception, then

you're probably an engineer. Which ever is your response, your perception is based on information you have gathered over time.

These images are great fun, but they also serve to illustrate a more important point. What we perceive in everyday life including the judgments we make about people are often wrong because we see what we are conditioned to see; not what is really there.

The word 'perception' comes from the Latin words *perceptio*, *percipio* meaning receiving, collecting, or harvesting with our mind or senses. When we are involved in the act of perception we do so through gathering a crop of information that is undergirded by our environment or culture and our past experiences. Thus, it is neither right nor wrong to see the glass as either half full or half empty. Rather, it is a difference of perception, and the perception might change given changing circumstances. Problems arise when we hold to our perception as the only correct one. Such a stance dishonors and disrespects the other and disturbs harmony in the community.

One perception that seems to disrupt community, particularly the Christian community, is our perception of change. Some of the most deadly words in the Church are: "but this is the way we've always done it". A greater barrier to mission and ministry has yet to be revealed. But, please, check your perception of what I am saying! I am not a proponent of change simply for the sake of change. Rather, I advocate that change is a reality of life. Not long ago, a scientist reminded me that all living organisms must change; if they do not, they die!

I believe that the Church is a living organism, instituted by God and infused with the life giving Spirit of God. If the Church is to remain vibrant, relevant and responsive to God's call, then she must always be prepared to change. As the Body of Christ, the living breathing organisms who are the Church are thus accountable to keep the body fed by word and sacrament, clothed with a spirit of honesty and truth, and open to embrace God's continuing revelation of the mission we are called serve.

To be faithful to this God centered life we must constantly moderate our perceptions so that they do not become inflated to the level of gospel truth. We must continue to remind ourselves to focus on God's mission rather than our own agenda of self-promotion, self-assurance or self-sufficiency. When we falter – not if we falter – but, when we falter then we are to repent of our selfish behavior and seek a renewed (or changed) relationship with God. Only then are we available to be servants and instruments of revitalization – new life!

By now, most of you know me pretty well; and you know that I do not like surprises! The year that has past since our last Annual Convention has been full of surprise. If you had told me just one year ago how much our world, our nation and our local situation would change, I would not have believed you. Further, I would not have been prepared to believe how radically different people's perceptions of change would affect our common life. Yet, we all know now that change happened and continues to happen. While perceptions of change are as varied as the stars in the sky, it is the willingness to be open to reality (repentance), which leads to transformation (renewal), and opens the way to new life (revitalization).

Since our last gathering, the global economy has continued to bounce around like an overly zealous rubber ball. Meanwhile, the difference in perception between the “haves” and the “have-nots” continues to widen. Wars in many areas of the world continue to threaten the very existence of our planet. Meanwhile, world leaders continue to overlook the welfare of peoples already crushed by poverty, disease and lack of food resources. The United States continues to be embroiled in heated debates about inaccessible or non-existent health care. Meanwhile our children, our elders and our dwindling middle class are denied needed medical care because they are underweight, overweight, have a disease or don’t have a job. Here in Michigan, our legislators continue to debate their differing perceptions of how to pay for needed social services. Meanwhile school systems scramble to figure out how to pay their teachers; Mary and Joe citizen worry that there will be insufficient police and fire personnel to protect them and their children; and business owners wonder if there will be anyone left in the state to purchase their products or utilize their services. And all of this is underscored by the very real presence of a man of African descent living in the White House, serving as the 44th President of the United States, and, unfortunately being hailed as the sign that racism is no longer a problem in this country. I suggest we have a plethora of perception problems! I further suggest that some focus on repentance – being truly aware of reality – would be a very good thing right about now.

The secular world certainly has no monopoly on perception challenges. Let’s look at how our own beloved Episcopal Church is facing into the issues of the day. We certainly do not have the time here for me to address all of the interesting headlines and stories from the past year but let me hit a couple of main topics:

Since we last gathered in Annual Convention, members of several Dioceses have voted to leave The Episcopal Church and align with the Church in the Southern Cone. As you might imagine this reality has drawn a good deal of media attention, countless church resources that could have been used for mission; and enormous energy needed to debate who’s right, who’s to blame and who’s property is it anyway?! Added to this reality, a group of now former Episcopalians has started a new province called the Anglican Church of North America. I cannot speak to the success of any mission focus they might have adopted, but I do know that they too are expending financial and people resources for things other than mission. Meanwhile, the numbers of un-churched individuals increases, the pews in too many churches gather dust on Sunday morning rather than people, and the Evil One is turning cartwheels of excitement because Christians are too busy in-fighting to preach, teach and witness to the Gospel of God’s love. One perception of those not in the churches on Sunday morning: “who needs to go to church to have arguments; we can stay home and do that.” We could probably translate that into a new song refrain: “they don’t know we are Christians, there’s no love, there’s no love; they don’t know we are Christians, there’s no love.” We need a change of perception that helps us all remember that it’s not about us!

Although there were other important resolutions, debates and votes about mission, the environment and ecumenical relationships at last summer’s General Convention, the headline that dominated was, “Episcopalians debate human sexuality, again.” As you might expect our debates and our actions have of course thrown fuel on a fire that burns mightily within our church and across the Anglican Communion. The Pope has now gotten triangulated into our family squabble, dangling the carrot of a new brand of Catholicism with Anglican overtones.

Meanwhile children are still dying from malaria and other preventable diseases; Church membership continues to decline (in all churches; don't let Rome fool you); and the members of generation x, y and next are debating the relevancy of church regardless of the brand name. It seems to me that whether you consider yourself liberal or conservative, evangelical or catholic, traditionalist or emergent now is the time to get our minds out of each other's bedrooms and firmly fix our hearts on the Gospel mandate to "love one another".

I can report to you today that within our church there are folks who have taken notice of our need for renewal. Just last March in the House of Bishop's pastoral letter to the Church there is at least some recognition that there needs to be a change in our perception of how we are to be the church and our need to repent of our past mistakes and oversights:

"God calls us to repentance. We have too often been preoccupied as a Church with internal affairs and a narrow focus that has absorbed both our energy and interest and that of our Communion – to the exclusion of concern for the crisis of suffering both at home and abroad. We have often failed to speak a compelling word of commitment to economic justice. We have often failed to speak truth to power, to name the greed and consumerism that has pervaded our culture, and we have too often allowed the culture to define us instead of being formed by Gospel values.

While our commitment to the eradication of extreme poverty through the eight Millennium Development Goals moves us toward the standard of Christ's teaching, we have nevertheless often fallen short of the transformation to which Christ calls us in our own lives in order to live more fully into the Gospel paradigm of God's abundance for all."

Our own Bonnie Anderson, serving a second term as President of the House of Deputies, offered her insights for a change in perception of our call to be the church in her sermon at General Convention:

"One of the toughest things about these tough times is that we can't hide from them. Our technology enables us to see and to know not only how we are affected, but how the global economic crisis is disproportionately affecting the poorest people in the world. It is within our reach to do something about it and that is the toughest thing about our times."

"The church does not have a mission; God's mission has a Church." Mission is the reason we exist at all – to be out in the world serving as the face, hands, heart and feet of Jesus Christ, bringing healing and reconciliation and renewal to our broken world. We are called by God to be this kind of people. And we so badly want to do it. Since 1991, General Convention has concurred 58 resolutions about mission: calling us out into the world to join God in the ministry of peace and justice. We are so clearly called to do this.

We say we want to do it. And some of us are doing it. But despite all this there still exists a huge gap between the needs of the world and the response of our church to those needs. Together, there is so much more we can do.

Looking closer to home over the past year, each one of us has been touched by the fall-out from the economic downturn. Michigan is clearly at the epicenter of this current recession and will most likely lag far behind any recovery experienced by the rest of the country. Your diocesan leadership, especially the dedicated members of Diocesan Council, has acted boldly on your behalf attempting always to balance financial constraints with mission realities. This task has been made very difficult for two main reasons:

First, while most everyone has agreed that a reduction in force in the diocesan offices was absolutely necessary to reach immediate and lasting budgetary savings; some in this diocese have proffered their opposing perception of what needed to be done and sown seeds of suspicion and mistrust. My first reaction to such misperception is defensiveness. However, the harvesting of new understandings about how people form perceptions helps me to realize that too many members of our diocese are reacting based on prior conditioning rather than on reality.

More than once it has been suggested to me: “bishop, the process is way more important than the end result.” That may very well be true if we are engaged in baking a cake. If the baker does not put together the correct ingredients and bake at the correct temperature, the end product will in fact be worthless (or at least tasteless). However, if we are engaged in God’s mission and our response to that mission then the end product has to be seen as at least as important as the process. After all, the end product is a reconciled creation! From that perception, we work with the assumption that all the children of God are blessed with God-given gifts. It is also a working assumption that all the children of God are disposed to use those gifts for the good of the whole. Does it really matter then which children of God are the ingredients for a given process?

It has troubled me for a while now that some folks are more concerned about inserting their ideas, agendas and concerns into whatever process, project or plan we are engaged in than they are about reaching a place of consensus around which we can all find a place to stand. Meanwhile, far too much time and energy has been expended being critical rather than finding ways to assist; far too much time and energy has been expended on addressing personal agendas rather than exercising our prophetic voice to further God’s mission in southeast Michigan. I suggest we have some work to do on the information available at harvest time when we form our perceptions.

Secondly; I have been quite alarmed at a creeping congregationalism that appears to be another manifestation of idolizing the process rather than effecting the end result. I see such behavior as a misguided understanding of the ministry of all the baptized in which the dominant thought is that one charism for ministry is better or more important than another. A review of the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer corrects such thinking. There it is taught that, “the Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.” Furthermore, we are taught that those members (ministers) of the Church are known as “lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.” To me the most revealing part of the discussion of ministers and ministry is that the answer to the question of what the ministry of each order is, begins with the same phrase: “to represent Christ and his Church.” The full answer goes on to express in what way each order carries out this ministry and in no way are these qualities expressed as being better or more

important than the others. Rather, each ministry is simply different and equally necessary for the church to fulfill its mission; God's mission.

On occasion, when I am personally challenged by someone's perception of what I should or should not do I would love to invite that someone to live in my shoes for a day. With such an idea in mind, let me share a story with you from Aesop's Fables.

There was an old man, a boy and a donkey. They were going to town and it was decided that the boy should ride. As they went along they passed some people who thought that it was a shame for the boy to ride and the old man to walk. The old man and boy decided that maybe the critics were right so they changed positions. Later, they passed some more people who thought that it was a real shame for that man to make such a small boy walk. The two decided that maybe they should both walk. Soon they passed some people who thought that it was stupid to walk when they had a donkey to ride. The man and the boy decided maybe the best thing would be for them both to ride the donkey. Soon, they passed a group who thought that it was a shame to put such a load on a poor helpless animal. The old man and the boy decided that maybe the critics were right so they decided to carry the donkey. As they crossed a bridge, they lost their grip on the animal and he fell into the river and drowned.

(I won't give you the actual moral of that story because I can't say that word in public!). You see sisters and brothers, we perceive what we are conditioned to see, perhaps even what we want to see; not what is real. I believe we have some serious work to do to re-inform the suppositions we use when we offer a perception and that will require some community discernment.

Very recently we embarked on a new era of discernment. This particular time of discernment has been given the name Revitalization and Strategic Visioning Project (RSVP). This project has come out of our ongoing debates about how to appropriately utilize certain financial resources for ministry. RSVP is using a process to get at the information we need to renew our common mission. I urge that we not fall into our usual mode of operation seeing the process as the project rather than the final product. We need a new mission direction for our diocese to help us focus outside of ourselves and remember that it's not about us but about God. I commend RSVP to you and give thanks for the leadership of Reb Scarborough, the design team, and all those who have and will participate in this effort.

If we are to fully discern a mission direction the time is now to repent of patterns of mistrust and suspicion; the time is now to repent of fostering personal agendas that discount God's mission; the time is now to repent of the attitude that 'my charism is better than yours' or that 'my ideas are far more important and more informed than yours'. We are at a critical moment to seek renewal – "change". Change that builds up, right-directs and honors the giftedness of every member of the community today as we also seek to honor the gifts of those who have gone before us.

I believe this is a good time for us to engage in a mission building exercise. We have a great opportunity to rise above and not give in to the uncertainty and fear that characterizes such an

anxious time. This is a holy moment for us to learn to live in the abundance of what we have rather than huddle in fear, longing for that which we have lost. This is a wonderful chance to re-inform the basis of our perception so that we can faithfully see what is real.

Let me back-up for a moment and highlight that it is only some people who have engaged in unhelpful and unhealthy perceptions; not all. Only some of our congregations and leaders – not all – have been resistant to the kind of change and renewal that will bring new life to the church in Southeast Michigan. It has been said, *"If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less."* All around our diocese members of the Body of Christ have chosen revitalization (new life) over irrelevance.

Some of the signs of renewal and revitalization already underway in our midst include:

- The Wednesday night sit-down supper at St. Gabriel's, Eastpointe: this ministry is welcoming unemployed folks and seniors in the neighborhood for food and fellowship. And, now, grateful hearts are starting to bring vegetables from their own gardens and making monetary donations to help cover costs.
- The ongoing conversations across diocesan lines here in lower Michigan that continue to foster ideas for greater cooperation toward each diocese being better able to free up more resources for mission and ministry. One very exciting result of these discussions is the prospect of a joint mission project with the Dominican Republic. One of our hopes for this joint project involves receiving help from our sisters and brothers in the DR to jump start needed ministry to Spanish speakers here in lower Michigan.
- A monthly memorial service at a funeral home near Wayne State begun by St. Christopher & St. Paul, Detroit, is providing pastoral care for those unclaimed deceased persons or for those families unable to afford a funeral for their loved ones. The lives of nearly three dozen people are honored each month.
- By a quirk of fate, Trinity, Belleville found itself somewhat at the epicenter of the auto industry related job losses when a dozen church families lost employment. As a result of their compassionate response, the congregation has become an anchor in the community for helping folks grapple with job loss.
- Spirit of Hope, Detroit, has launched an urban farm project. The project goals, in the words of Matthew Bode, pastor of this Episcopal/Lutheran congregation, are: "To be an evangelical and visual presence on a desolate corner of the city; to help supply the church's food pantry and once-a-week soup kitchen with healthy food; and to teach people how to grow their own food." And as if that isn't enough, there are plans to acquire and retrofit a vehicle that can be used to drive around the neighborhood making the vegetables available to more people (and of course the vehicle will use bio-fuel technology!)
- While I am on the topic of joint Episcopal/Lutheran ministries, another sign of renewed and revitalizing ministry is the growing partnership we participate in with our ELCA sisters and brothers. Bishop Marsh and I are engaged monthly in conversation and visioning as we discern how our respective Churches can be a relevant and life giving presence in our region.

- Since 2006, St. James', Birmingham has been engaged with Greenfield Union Elementary School to help improve the reading skills of Detroit Public School students. Their efforts have already reaped benefits as test scores for those in the tutoring program are on the rise.
- And, just this week, Christ Church, Detroit, was awarded the Spirit of Detroit award by the city council for its continued support of the Giant Step Teen Conference, which draws 9th and 10th graders together to help point them in the right direction and bridge some differences in the greater Metro area students.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it should prime the pump as each congregation and our diocese as a whole seeks to discern its real response to God's mission. The projects and ministries I have highlighted certainly required some thought and planning; and, they require those involved to repent of what they have been conditioned to see and be open to the reality God places before them. (I think all of these congregations should be honored by this convention).

I have one additional sign of renewal and revitalization that I believe will help put our diocese in a better place to be a life giving resource to our community. But before I reveal that, I want to lift up the names and ministries of some of the leadership of this diocese who have assisted me and/or have given selflessly to our common response to God's mission particularly during this past year. I do not know if all of these folks are here today, but it is important that their names are inscribed in the records of this diocese for their faithful and tireless work of ministry and for their commitment to constantly moderate their perceptions to see the reality of God before them.

- The Rev. Richard Hamlin, Rector of St. Michael's Lansing, who has served our diocese this past year as President of the Standing Committee
- The Rev. Linda Northcraft, Rector of St. John's, Royal Oak, who has served our diocese this past year as President of Diocesan Council
- Dr. Donna Wessel-Walker who has served our diocese as chair of the Commission on Ministry for at least the last 2 years
- Andrea Morrow, a member of Diocesan Council and chair of the committee that made it possible for the ministry of Emrich Retreat Center to be given new life
- Joannee DeBruhl, Jenny Ritter, Shari Spencer – three women whose tireless efforts have created and maintained the G3 Garden (God, growing, giving) located on the Emrich Retreat Center property. Their efforts have helped provide fresh vegetables to folks in need in the Brighton area.
- Seth Lloyd, a member of Christ Church, Detroit who faithfully served as chancellor of the Diocese of Michigan since the Spring of 1996. Seth's legal counsel since my arrival in Michigan has been invaluable; his commitment to the welfare of this diocese is unmatched; his deep and abiding faith in God stands as a witness to us all.

- This, of course, brings me to Steve Ott, the new chancellor of the diocese! I give thanks for his willingness to accept the challenge and responsibilities now before him and recognize that he has some pretty big shoes to fill.

Please join me in demonstrating our thanks for all of these faithful servants of God.

Sisters and brothers, I began my reflections today with a series of pictures designed to exercise your talents for perception. I have attempted to clarify that without acknowledging that too often our personal perceptions are inaccurate or at least incomplete, and without some transformation of our perceptions we are out of step with God's mission and thus at risk of being declared irrelevant. In the midst of this reality, I have also acknowledged that we live in difficult and uncertain times. Yet, as God's children – as people of the resurrection – we cannot allow ourselves to be entombed by our anxieties. As we read from the prophet Jeremiah: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" [Jeremiah 29:11], and from the Letter to the Romans: "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us" [Romans 5:3-5a]. So we must embrace the hope God gifts to us. That embrace is made all the stronger when we repent of the times we have replaced God with our own agenda; when we commit to a renewal and transformation of our relationship with God and one another; and lay ourselves open to receive the new life God desires for us.

By our presence here today, let us recommit ourselves to the service of God's mission in and through each other.

May it be so!