

— TWENTY MINUTES WITH JOHN TARRANT —

Hope on the Ground

Buffalo in the Badlands

Matthew Townsend photo

Since 2009, the Rt. Rev. John Tarrant has served as Bishop of South Dakota — a corner of the Episcopal Church that defies expectations and preconceptions. Tarrant's ministry is a challenging one, and not simply due to South Dakota's relatively large size and sparse population (it ranks 46th for population density in America). South Dakota is a state of deep contrasts: between east and west, rural and urban, those descended from settlers and those descended from indigenous peoples, people who have hope and people who have lost it.

In October, Tarrant announced that he will retire in 2019. Two months later, he sat with TLC's Matthew Townsend at Stone's Truck Stop in Watertown to talk about the church in the Mount Rushmore State. In terms of indigenous ministry, Tarrant's experience offers a view into the collaboration between the Episcopal Church and its dioceses — collaboration that includes financial support from General Convention, which brought Tarrant and a number of South Dakotan deputies to Program, Budget, and Finance meetings in Austin.

Tarrant began the conversation with a significant detail: South Dakota has the largest number of Native American-majority congregations of any diocese of the Episcopal Church: more than Alaska, Minnesota, Navajoland, and North Dakota.

What is the Episcopal Church like in South Dakota?

Over 50 percent of our members are Native American in the Diocese of South Dakota. A large percentage of our members are poor, below the poverty line. We don't often think of the

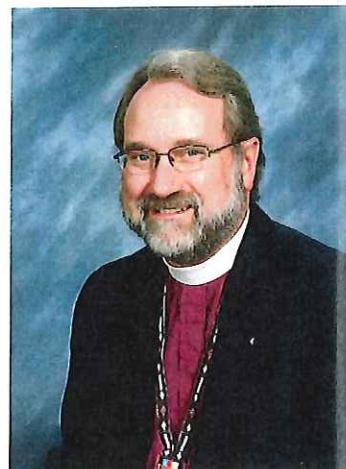
Episcopal Church in those terms. I don't mean our congregations serve the poor; I mean many of our congregations are the poor.

At least 20 of our buildings do not have indoor plumbing or water. Most of them have pretty good outhouses. When people hear that, at first, they say, *Oh my gosh, all the wealth in the Episcopal Church, we should get 'em bathrooms!* Only if you're going to pay the propane bills all winter long so the pipes don't freeze. Sometimes, that's the complexity of poverty that people do not understand. And that's not just South Dakota. There is a complexity to poverty that I would say a lot of America does not understand.

One of the things in South Dakota that in other areas of poverty you don't necessarily experience is the isolation. If you're poor in the city or serving the poor in the city, not too much of a drive and you can get out of it. But if you're serving the poor in South Dakota, you've got a whale of a drive.

Many churches, both inside and outside the Episcopal Church, hope to grow. What is the conversation about growth like in South Dakota?

I spent time in the [wider] Episcopal Church. I went to church



growth conferences and learned all that stuff. Then you come out here. You want a sign up so people can find church for the funeral. But for growth, signs won't make a difference — the demographics work against you.

Part of what the white churches face is depopulation of the rural area. If you look at the last census, South Dakota grew in the Rapid City area — the Black Hills — and in the greater Sioux Falls area. The group that grew was young children in the Native American population. But in Webster and Miller and Gettysburg, those populations are continuing to shrink. Gettysburg chose to close. These are rural America's issues, but maybe more extreme due to the distances.

On the reservations, the divisions between families seem to be stronger.

I've heard that familial division within and between reservation churches has increased in recent years. How is the church addressing rural depopulation and increased tension?

My question is: how does our faith in Christ Jesus, how does the power of God in Jesus, make a difference in our individual lives in our faith communities? If anything haunts me, it's how we present the gospel in such a way that people realize it's supposed to make a difference in our lives. It's not just about getting into heaven. I'm not perfect, but I'm a whole lot better because of my relationship with Jesus, because it does make a difference.

Why don't people have that knowledge?

I think we quit talking about it a long time ago. We were interested in getting people to come to church — the baby boomers, after World War II. We were interested in building up our congregations more than building up the kingdom.

If we believe that God does really work through us, that God does provide answers, and that God does transform, then that is scary, because there is nowhere to hide, nobody to blame. And, some church leaders have fallen into the savior complex and enabled that attitude instead of saying, *God does give me the strength and the encouragement and the wisdom to be fully human, to be fully who I was created to be. But I've got to do the work.*

When congregations are faced with that, it's really scary.

What can the Episcopal Church learn about itself through its South Dakotan lens?

One of the things it can learn about itself is that it's a very diverse church, with diversity that has nothing to do with sexuality; that there's an economic diversity in the church that's absolutely ignored.

And it's the two or three gathered together that count. How, then, can we support these cells, these faith communities? What does it take? How can we empower people to offer the worship that's within them, and the structure to support that and not dictate it?

Some of our missions do better. We disempowered people because we told them, with the 1979 prayer book — and I'm going to show my bias — that Eucharist was the center. And the Eucharist became the center of worship.

This diocese used to have tremendous lay readers. [Mis-



A lake in the Black Hills

Matthew Townsend photo

sioner for property] Pat LeBeau's dad was a lay reader on the Cheyenne River mission, and he would go and do several services on Sunday morning. It was Morning Prayer.

What we did, we said that worship needed to be clergy-focused. And I think when we did that, we really lost that lay leadership that was pretty normative in much of the church. You can be the body of Christ in the Episcopal Church without indoor plumbing. You can be the body of Christ within the Episcopal Church having one priest serve seven or eight congregations. You can be the body of Christ within the Episcopal Church and not actually be able to afford insurance on your building, knowing if it burns down it's gone. You can be the body of Christ if you choose to be the body of Christ.

There is no gimmick. There is no fix. We're being called into faithfulness. And what that faithfulness looks like depends upon the community that you are.

It breaks my heart when I see congregations that are struggling over whether they should have blue or purple during Advent. It breaks my heart when a congregation says, *well, we can't come up with anybody who wants to be senior warden or junior warden.* That's the English model of the church that's never worked that well in small churches in America.

What I've done is I've said to congregations, *Look, be the body of Christ. What needs to be done?*

"Well, the walk needs to be shoveled."

Well, who's going to say, this winter, "I'll make sure the walks get shoveled?"

In fact, at Aberdeen, we did that for a while. They couldn't get anybody to serve on the vestry. I said, *okay, don't have a vestry. Get the folks together and figure out how we're going to do the jobs that need to be done. Let's not get caught up in this, and let's not feel inferior because we don't fit this particular model.*

That's the church in many places. It doesn't mean the classic model doesn't fit some places. But don't make your self-worth be grounded in a structure. Your self-worth is always and only grounded in the living God in Christ Jesus. Only, and always. Everything else is about how we're going to live it.

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What should the next bishop know?

This is a relational ministry, absolutely relational. You've got to be willing to be with people; there is absolutely no substitute. Sometimes you can't fully be there, so you've got to either send a representative or you've got to pick up the phone. But you've got to be willing to be with people. You've got to be willing to sit behind the windshield and do a lot of driving.

Jesus comes into the world, really, as the hope-bearer. The power of God through Christ Jesus can transform the world, and that's what gives us hope. Otherwise, we have no hope. The

bishop also needs to be the hope-bearer. It doesn't mean we don't ignore things when they're problems. But at the end of the day, you've got to have hope, and we need to express it with some sense of joy.

Also, there are no easy answers. If there were, somebody else would have come up with them a long time ago. Over 2,000 years

ago, God came to the world in the person of Jesus, and the world's still broken. The next bishop should not think they're going to come into South Dakota and fix. Hopefully the next bishop will come to South Dakota and be present, because that's what God did 2,000 years ago — came into the world and was present and is still present. And we're still seeing the ripple effects, but the world's still broken. We live in that kind of tension.

Where do you see hope and joy?

Oh, God, all over the place. I see joy all the time, every Sunday I do a visitation. Even a little church in Madison, South Dakota, being served by a supply priest.

Or at St. Thomas, On the Tree, out middle prairie. Go out there. Folks will come, hardly anybody lives around there. They come to that church, it's the family church. They do have a pretty good outhouse. They do have electricity. The propane heat for their stove is just a little canister like we have for our grill. We come and gather and after the service in the church they go in the little parish hall, and they bring in food. They have roast beef, or they have ham, and it's hot. And they have soup, and it's hot. And they serve it. And they sit around. And we eat. And we break bread and we pass the cup. And that's joy. In a sense, I think hospitality is a witness of hope.

A family member dies. You see this over and over again: The family comes together. They make food. They cook for the wake. They cook for the funeral. They serve everybody. At the giveaway, they'll give away all sorts of stuff. The world says, "Well, these people are too poor to give away so much stuff,

they ought to be spending it on the rent!" But God says, "They understand generosity." Because generosity is when you give away what you don't have. Bill Gates can give away tons. But when you give away because you can't do anything else, because generosity is what you know and is part of your soul and you're not counting the cost, you just do it — that's hope. When I see that, I say, "Wow, if these Jesus followers can be like that, then maybe I can be like that." And I think it's made me more generous. I've seen generosity out here like I've seen nowhere else in the church. That's hope.

How can people get involved?

One of the things I think the larger church has lost is that the Diocese of South Dakota is actually in partnership with the larger Episcopal Church to do Native ministry. We get a block grant from the General Convention budget. What some in the church have gotten confused over is they have seen this as our ministry that they're supporting. In truth, it's the Episcopal Church's ministry that the Diocese of South Dakota is partnering with.

Nothing for my office comes out of that, my pay isn't based on that. It only goes into mission work. None of the Anglo churches benefit from that. In fact, we kick in anywhere from \$150,000 to \$200,000 a year from the diocese to help native ministry in the Diocese of South Dakota. It is a true partnership. Part of what the larger church can learn is we are partners.

The fruit of that is people with real lives, real joys, and real sorrows are ministered to through the Episcopal Church in areas that normally would be forgotten. And we have been, for 150 years and God willing we will be for another 150 years. There's no other denomination in the Dakotas that can really make that claim, except maybe the Roman Catholics.

We have been and we are present among some of the most powerless people in this nation. That should be a point of encouragement for the larger church. And it's not done with great fanfare, it's just done day in and day out. People like Fr. Charley Chan pour their lives out, in the name of Christ, through the Episcopal Church, for the people of God. People like Fr. Chan, and Lauren Stanley, and Margaret Watson, and Kim Fonder, and Ed Hunt, and Pat White Horse-Carda that do this day in and day out, and in the name of Christ for the Episcopal Church. That's pretty powerful. Our diocese could not do that ourselves. It's only in partnership with the larger body that we can do that.

How can people help without being patronizing or misunderstanding the need here?

I'll tell you a story. I'm at the House of Bishops, maybe a couple years in. Someone had sent into the office some altar linens from the church. On the outside of the box, it's written, "Not to be used." They have holes in them; there's one that was dirty. So, I stand up at the House of Bishops and show them the yellow linens. And I say, "Please, I appreciate the support we get, but please don't send us your garbage."



Matthew Townsend photo

St. John's Church, Browns Valley, Lake Traverse Reservation

Afterwards, a bishop stands up and says, "You know, we can get new altar linens for Indian churches in South Dakota and I'll to pledge to buy a set."

Some of the altar linens I've seen here are clearly hand-embroidered.

Plus the fact that this wasn't about altar linens. It was about *don't be patronizing and send us your garbage. Don't fantasize in your head that if you send these worn altar linens, that the little Indian ladies will be down by the river, cleaning them up and putting them in the sun.*

I didn't bring them there because we needed altar linens. They need propane, they don't need vestments. I've made the mistake. We all have those moments. When there were floods in Grand Forks a few years ago, I was at St. Paul's Church in Stockbridge. I heard St. Paul's Church there was flooded. So, I said, "Gee, I know what we'll do, we'll collect coats. I'm sure they'll need that." So, we boxed up all this stuff and we send it to them. What they didn't need was a bunch of boxes and clothes and stuff that they have no place to put. But that was making that assumption that this is what they need. I hadn't been there.

To make it worse, I was surprised when they didn't send a *thank you*. I think the *aha!* came when I moved out here, and I began to become aware of how we project what we think folks need without relationship.

Contact the bishop to build relationship. Contact me. This is a very incarnational diocese.

How can people pray for the church's ministry here?

Pray that the Spirit will move local folks to be raised up as leaders. Most of our mission churches need leadership, faithful and faith-filled leaders.

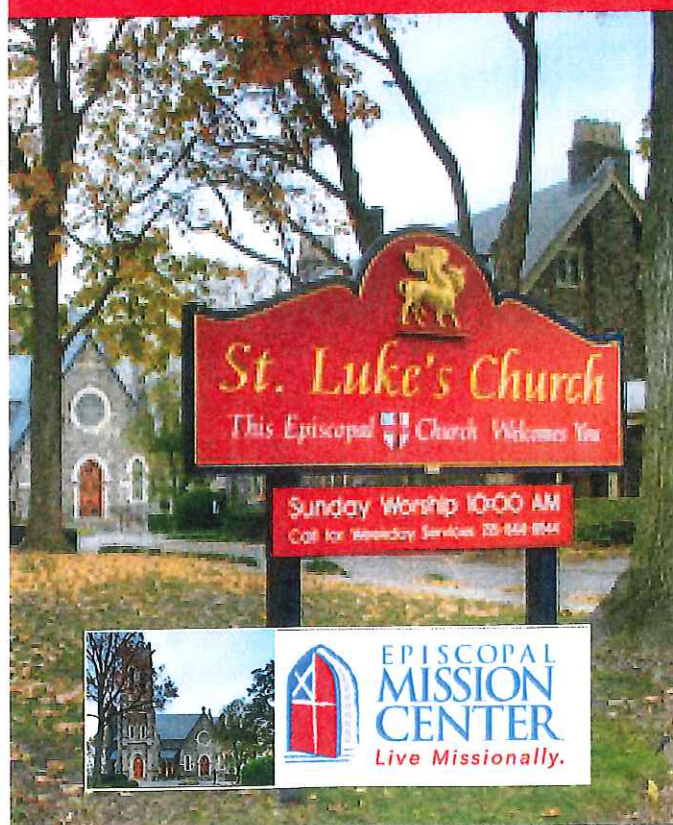
Pray for our work, and pray for our mission clergy, who really do pour out a lot of their lives for the sake of this ministry. And they don't do it in high-compensation ways. This is sacrificial ministry. Pray for their health, spiritual and physical. Pray for their stamina; and also to give thanks for their willingness to serve our Lord in this very difficult ministry. Not just to pray for the needs, but to give thanks that there are Jesus followers who are willing to sacrifice a part of their lives for the sake of the gospel in the Dakotas.

And pray for the people. It's a hard life. This is true in other parts of the country, but it's a hard life. It's easy for despair to creep in, and that's part of what suicide is about. Pray that the hope of the gospel can take hold. I pray that for our country.

Fr. Chan has probably done more suicide funerals in two months than I've done in my entire ministry as a priest. When two-thirds of your funerals are for people under 50, there's a toll for that. So we pray for encouragement.

It's sad. But the Episcopal Church is there. And that's pretty powerful. We look at the Episcopal Church and grouse about this and that. But the Episcopal Church is in Sisseton and Pine Ridge and Rosebud and Cheyenne River and Standing Rock. It is present among the people — those who are the pastors and the people themselves. That's powerful, I think. Until I came out here, I wasn't even aware of it, and I was a lifelong Episcopalian. □

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