



THE REFORMED EPISCOPAL CHURCH

OFFICE FOR THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

A Founding Member of the Province of the

ANGLICAN CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

Epiphany 2017

Dear Reformed Episcopal Church:

Greetings in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ who has appeared to the world for the salvation of humanity! This appearing we call Epiphany. Because He has come among us, died and been raised from the dead to ascend on high, the Good News is that He is present again. The Lord Jesus who dwelt on earth by His Incarnation now indwells His Church by the Spirit of the Living God. He is with us. His Epiphany continues in Word, Sacrament and the Holy Spirit!

The great season of Epiphany presents us with the convergence of two powerful themes, the leading of God and His presence and Grace that keep us where His will takes us. The collect for the Octave of Epiphany provides us with a prayer, which begins, “O God who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles. . . .” This is a season of journeys connected with the appearing of Christ: the Magi to the manger, Nazareth to the Temple, the life of a carpenter to Holy Baptism, and from Holy Baptism to three years of traversing with disciples in training them for the growth of the Kingdom of God. All along the way of each leg of this sequence of journeys, Jesus’ Epiphany reveals that He is with us wherever God’s will leads. The merging of these themes is perhaps most aptly summed up with a favorite quote from an unknown author, “The will of God will never lead you where the Grace of God cannot keep you.”

As we begin this New Year, I want to remind us of the two great Epiphany themes of God’s leading and His presence in the journey He assigns for our lives. This journey for the Reformed Episcopal Church has taken an unexpected turn since Thanksgiving Day when my dear friend, the Most Rev. Royal Grote, peacefully made that final journey home to be with the Lord. We were extraordinarily blessed by his life and thank our Lord for all that He accomplished through him. God also greatly blessed us with a glorious funeral for our dear brother. Among the full to overflow congregation on December 13 at Church of the Holy Communion, over ninety clergy were present, thirty who are bishops of the REC, the Anglican Church in North America, and some of our Continuing Anglican Church friends. Archbishop Foley Beach of ACNA brought his greetings as well as from others. At the Archbishop’s request, I presided at Holy Communion and preached the homily. God was so very good to us in our effort to bring Him glory and to comfort the dear Grote family. The entire service was recorded and is online at Church of the Holy Communion’s website (www.holycommuniondallas.org). May our blessed Bishop Royal Grote rest in peace!

Yet for those of us who remain in the journey of our life in the Reformed Episcopal Church, there are a number of questions that we face at this time. I’d like to answer some of them, and hopefully provide some comfort, assurance and direction.

The first question may concern the office of the Presiding Bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church. According to the Constitution and Canons of the REC, the Vice-President automatically succeeds in the event that the Presiding Bishop passes away while in office. As the Vice-President to Bishop Grote who was our Presiding Bishop, I am now serving canonically as your Presiding Bishop until our next General Council, June 14-16, 2017, in Dallas, Texas. For your information, shortly after Bishop Grote’s death, I convened a

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conference call for our Council of Bishops to seek their confirmation and support based on the REC Constitution and Canons. I'm so very grateful for their encouragement and endorsement in these challenging times.

Furthermore, in God's good providence, Bishop Grote had planned an end of the year conference call for the General Committee to approve the plans for General Council next summer and to discuss other matters. In view of Bishop Grote's unexpected passing, I was required to chair that General Committee meeting, and I am grateful for receiving their complete support as well. You will be encouraged to know that the General Committee approved the hotel, agenda and other details for the next General Council in Dallas. Thankfully, Bishop Grote had included our staff at Church of the Holy Communion in the selection of the hotel and other plans. I was fully aware of what he wanted and received approval from the General Committee. We will be sending out a subsequent communication sometime early this winter with all the details for reserving rooms at the hotel and securing travel arrangements.

The Council of Bishops and the General Committee also helped me to address the matter of filling the Vice President position left vacant by my now having to serve as the Presiding Bishop. The Constitution and Canons also speak to this matter, calling for approval from the General Committee. In order to give me time to pray and discern this decision, our Bishops and General Committee decided by unanimous vote to approve whomever my choice would be from among our active Bishops. I believe this important decision should be made, since our ecclesial system always provides layers of backup should, as we know all too well from recent events, the Lord's plan differ from ours. Therefore, after much prayer, thought and reflection, I have asked The Rt. Rev. Dr. David Hicks to serve as Vice President of the REC through our next General Council in June, at which time the Presiding Bishop and Vice President will be elected for the following three years. Bishop Hicks has accepted this call. I thank him for his willingness to help with the many responsibilities before us.

For your further information, the Council of Bishops, General Council Committees and the General Committee will be having their regularly scheduled spring meetings in Summerville, South Carolina, April 26-29. The hotel and rooms have been secured. The details of these meetings will be sent out in the next few weeks. Therefore, the meetings with our Council of Bishops and the General Committee shortly after Bishop Grote's death and before the end of the year, served as an important seam from one Presiding Bishop to the next at a time of major transition.

The second line of questions may concern the position of the Ordinary of the Diocese of Mid America. Again, the wisdom of those who have gone before as reflected in the Constitution and Canons, and the foresight of our beloved Bishop Royal have prepared us for a time such as this. According to the REC Constitution and Canons a Coadjutor Bishop automatically succeeds to become the Ordinary, in the event the preceding Bishop retires or passes away in office.

If you recall, Bishop Grote was always concerned that he prepare for succession of leadership in the event that the Lord called him home in office. He thought it could be through an accident since he traveled so much. It was out of this possible eventuality that I was nominated and elected to be Bishop Coadjutor in 2008, granting automatic succession once Bishop Grote left his office as Ordinary. Unfortunately, Bishop Royal was taken from us too soon another way. Nevertheless, his prescient planning has allowed me to serve in an assisting capacity preparing under Bishop Grote's excellent leadership to take over for him at some point.

Bishop Grote, as of our last synod in February 2016, had reached the decision that it was time to begin handing the diocese over to me in mid-2017. He announced this at synod. This has required much preparation, since the Bishop's plan was to devote himself entirely to being the Presiding Bishop by January 1, 2018. Due to his desire, he had instructed me to begin making transitional plans at Church of the Holy Communion. This meant that beginning in spring of 2016 the CHC Vestry appointed a transition team headed up by our excellent Sr. Warden, David Norton. Since our Ordinaries are not typically rectors of parishes, this process has involved a search committee to determine my successor as rector. This had been accomplished and will soon be announced. Therefore, due to Bishop Grote's wise leading we were partially prepared for me to begin to serve as the Ordinary. Basically, we have only had to move up the succession plan in the diocese by six months.

I am also beginning to work on our next synod in the Diocese of Mid America, which is moved from February to the day before the Council in a General Council year. In this case, our Synod will be June 13 in Dallas. As the details are finalized, we will be sending them to you. At least for now, please plan on being in Dallas for a

morning meeting, which will probably require you to come in the day or evening before. Bishop Grote had planned on a very short synod. We simply don't have much more time this year. As far as I can tell we shouldn't have much business given General Council.

Third, some have asked if I am moving to Houston. No, I will remain resident in Dallas at the Pro Cathedral of Church of the Holy Communion, but I will keep two offices, one at each cathedral church. I will establish an office at the Cathedral See, St. Matthias in Katy, Texas. My goal is to be in Houston for three to five days a month, conducting a clericus (clergy gathering) for the Houston churches, and meeting with the great clergy and laity in this important part of our diocese as needed. My main office, however, will be at CHC and I will continue to work out of Dallas.

Keeping my residence in Dallas was actually part of the plan that Bishop Grote and I had worked out. We had both come to the conclusion that a Dallas location for my permanent residence was best for the future of the Diocese of Mid America. The facilities and fulsome staff of Church of the Holy Communion, the developing Dallas campus of Cranmer Theological House, and Dallas being more geographically central all pointed to the logic of my staying in Dallas. On a personal note, my dear wife Susan of now over forty-five years (just celebrated our forty-fifth wedding anniversary as of December 19, Praise the Lord!) and I, have a full home in Dallas. Susan's sweet mother, Evelyn (ninety-one years young), and our youngest son, Austin, working his way through college, also live with us. Oh yes, we also have Jay, a male retriever Boykin Spaniel (state dog of South Carolina), and Lola, a beautiful young female, black and tan longhaired dachshund; they are the real king and queen of the Sutton household!

Fourth, I know many of you, especially in the Diocese of Mid America, are wondering what my Episcopal schedule will be in 2017. For your information please know that I will be formulating a new schedule as soon as possible that has two parts to it overlapping at the same time.

The first part concerns *immediate* transition at the parish and diocesan levels. This involves, effective February 1, 2017, that I will relinquish my position as Rector of the Church of the Holy Communion, become the Bishop in residence of the Pro Cathedral Church, and begin fulfilling exclusively my Episcopal responsibilities. I will no longer be in charge of daily operations at Church of the Holy Communion. It will have taken two months to expedite this transition at the parish level, but then CHC has around four hundred active communicants, a parish school, and multiple staff. This is an important congregation to the REC and the Diocese. It has been critical to move through this transition smoothly; yet, given the need for me to be released for wider service, as soon as is practical.

As part of the January phase of this first part of the transition at the local level, I will be resetting an Episcopal visitation schedule for winter, spring and early summer, through General Council. Top priority in the diocese will be those visits that Bishop Grote was not able to make at the end of last year. For example, one of these visits involved the cancellation of an ordination of a deacon to the presbyterate/priesthood. In addition, I will be prioritizing those visits to parishes where there needs to be ordinations and confirmations. In parishes where there are no confirmations, sometimes I might have to utilize our Archdeacon James Payne and regional deans and canons: The Very Rev. Walter Banek (Good Shepherd, Tyler, Texas), The Very Rev. Jason Grote (St. Matthias, Katy, Texas), The Very Rev. Jerry Kistler (Montrose, Colorado), The Very Rev. Frank Levi (Chicago, Illinois), The Very Rev. Canon Charles Camlin (Dallas), and The Rev. Canon Missioner Wayland Coe (Houston). I will be meeting via conference call with these men on a monthly basis to coordinate our efforts to serve the diocese.

Please know that the next six months in the Diocese of Mid America will be transitional as I try to catch the most urgent situations of which I'm aware. Once we're past the General Council this coming summer, I hope to return to our normal, annual cycle of visitations to the missions and parishes of the Diocese of Mid America. Thank you my beloved DMA brethren for your patience.

The second part of my Episcopal schedule now involves the work of Presiding Bishop. For your information, I will be meeting by conference call on a monthly basis with our Council of Bishops. With their help and counsel, I will seek to guide the REC to General Council, at which time our church will decide on the plans for the next three years. My main concern, however, is to continue to plan and work toward the orchestration

of our next General Council, as well as seek to lay a foundation at General Council with a vision for carrying on the work of the Gospel and the growth of our mission, domestic and foreign, in the REC. That, I know, was Bishop Grote's sense of direction for the future.

In the meantime, I need to fulfill the Presiding Bishop's commitment to mission at an international level. To this end, I am working under consultation with The Rev. Canon Bill Jerdan. He is making a special end of January/first of February trip to Dallas for a briefing, planning for the next Board of Foreign Mission conference call, and making preparations for a strong mission emphasis at our next General Council.

In addition, I have already communicated with most of our International REC Bishops. I have informed them that I will, with the Lord's help, be keeping Bishop Grote's plans to visit Germany, Croatia, and the Free Church of England's annual convocation in late spring and early summer. I am also concerned that sometime in the future the Presiding Bishop of the REC visit Cuba and make contact with our wonderful bishop there, who by the way will be at our General Council. I think in the wisdom of the Lord that the visit to Cuba by our Presiding Bishop will probably be in the next twelve to eighteen months. Hopefully by that time, the Cuban Government will have recognized officially the REC. This will greatly help any visitation by an American Bishop.

Well, I hope this overview gives you some sense of assurance and strengthened confidence that the Lord is with us in the REC. By God's Grace we are attempting to move forward serving our Lord Jesus Christ in the proclamation of His glorious Gospel. No doubt the will of God has led us to a place none of us expected. We have suffered a great loss in the passing of our wonderful leader, the Most Rev. Royal Grote. At the same time through his gifted leadership, thanks be to God, we were not left without good contingency possibilities. According to the wisdom of those who have gone before as expressed in our Constitution and Canons, we have begun to implement them. A succession has taken place that moves us forward in ways that I know Bishop Grote would have wanted.

As your Presiding Bishop and Ordinary of the Diocese of Mid America, although sad for the reason these transitions have had to take place at this time, I am honored and humbled to serve the Reformed Episcopal Church that Susan and I love so much. I have a deep conviction that we have a precious jurisdiction that has and can, I pray, long continue to play a significant role in the spread of the Gospel in the Anglican Way in North America. Please pray for me, and the REC, as we move toward our next General Council. Bishop Grote had allowed me to work with him in shaping some very exciting plans for the REC and its positive growth in the future. I will by God's Grace be presenting what the Lord had given him and now me, as we approach together the next chapter of the REC proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Should you have a need, please contact me at the Pro Cathedral of the Church of the Holy Communion. I have a full-time secretary and Pro Cathedral Coordinator. Her name is Mrs. Cathy Heissenhuber, whose husband Werner is a Deacon at CHC. Cathy has served Church of the Holy Communion and me for over twelve years. She keeps my schedule. If you'd like to meet in person or by way of conference call please contact her at cathy@holychurchdallas.org, or 972 248 6505, to set up an appointment. If you need to speak directly with me, just let her know.

My brothers and sisters in the REC, please know that I want to serve you with whatever God has given me through forty years of pastoral ministry. Nearly thirty of those years have been associated with the Reformed Episcopal Church in pastoral and academic capacities around our church in the northeast and southwest. My academic work even took me to England for stretches of residency in doctoral studies at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford University, where I became more directly familiar and in touch with our brothers and sisters in the Free Church of England. Then, seventeen and a half of these REC years have been as a Bishop in the Church of God, since I was first consecrated by the Most Rev. Leonard Riches and other Bishops, July 29, 1999. Whatever God has given to me, an unworthy sinner saved by God's Grace, I offer to you!

Therefore, be assured my fellow brothers and sisters in the REC, that the Epiphany journey of Jesus Christ continues among us. He has not left us alone. He is with us. We also have each other! The will of God has not led us where the Grace of God cannot keep us. Let us look to Jesus Christ in true faith, cry out for His All-Sufficient-Grace, pray fervently for the ongoing witness in the Anglican Way that God has so graciously restored among us, and with this wonderful old path for living the Christian life, strive for the fulfillment of the

Great Commission He gave us! The Lord bless each and every one of you in the REC in this new year of 2017. Be assured of my prayers for our dioceses, for our congregations, and for all of you. Now may the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all evermore. Amen!

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Ray R. Sutton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross symbol at the beginning.

The Most Rev. Ray R. Sutton, Ph.D.
Presiding Bishop
Bishop Ordinary of the Diocese of Mid America