

July 20, 2009

TO: The Diocese of West Texas  
FROM: Bishops Lillibridge and Reed  
RE: Reflections on General Convention, 2009

It is Monday morning, July 20, and now that we have had a couple of days rest we want to offer you some of our reflections on General Convention, which met in Anaheim from July 8-17. We are grateful to all of you who have held us, the diocesan deputation, and the entire General Convention in your prayers. We have heard from many in our diocese - thanks for our actions, disappointment in our actions, curiosity about where we go from here, and more. We cannot answer each message individually, but sincerely appreciate the care and the hope that you all have expressed for our Church and our diocesan life.

It is impossible to share with you the totality of the General Convention experience and actions in a brief article such as this. However, we want to take a moment to discuss the issues that are making headlines and were at the forefront of this Convention, and we will have other opportunities to deal with the Convention in a broader context in the weeks and months ahead.

As expected, the Convention revolved around issues of human sexuality. The primary questions before the Convention were whether or not to overturn resolution BO33 from General Convention 2006, and whether or not the moratoria requested by the Instruments of Communion of the worldwide Anglican Communion would continue to be observed by The Episcopal Church. These moratoria include, in the words of BO33, "exercising restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church" (widely understood to mean partnered gay bishops). A different, but related, question was whether or not we would authorize the development of liturgies for same gender blessings. Two resolutions were passed dealing with these questions.

The issue surrounding the ordination to the episcopate of a partnered gay cleric was handled in resolution DO25. We encourage you to read the entire resolution (available on our diocesan website or will be soon), but let us note a section here. While not specifically repealing BO33, it states that the General Convention recognizes *"that gay and lesbian persons who are part of such relationships have responded to God's call and have exercised various ministries in and on behalf of God's One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church and are currently doing so in our midst"* and *"that God has called and may call such individuals to any ordained ministry in The Episcopal Church."* The office of bishop is included in the words "any ordained ministry". Technically speaking, the moratoria will stand until a partnered gay bishop is elected and ordained, but the spirit of the resolution clearly moves The Episcopal Church into new territory. The Instruments of Communion will have an interpretation on whether this is a rejection of one of the moratoria requested of The Episcopal Church.

Resolution CO56 calls for *“an open process for the consideration of theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same gender relationships”* and *“That the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, in consultation with the House of Bishops, collect and develop theological and liturgical resources, and report to the 77<sup>th</sup> General Convention”* (to be held in 2012). In addition, the resolution acknowledges *“That bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same-gender marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church;”* and *“That this Convention honor the theological diversity of this Church in regard to matters of human sexuality...”* . Put plainly, bishops may authorize blessings for same-sex unions but are not required to do so. This resolution moves The Episcopal Church away from clear acceptance of the Communion-wide moratoria in this area.

Both of us voted against these two resolutions. We did not vote this way because we believe that gay and lesbian persons have no place in the Church. There are many factors at work in our Church and in the Communion at present.

First, we believe that the moratoria asked of us (The Episcopal Church) should continue as the Anglican Covenant process continues to move forward. It should be completed by the end of this year and sent to the Provinces for consideration. The Covenant idea was first proposed in the Windsor Report (2004), to which this diocese has repeatedly committed itself over the past several years.

Second, the Archbishop of Canterbury attended the opening of General Convention and specifically asked this Convention not to take actions that would further divide the Communion.

Third, the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops has begun a comprehensive study of the issues of homosexuality, entitled *“A Theological Study of Same Sex Relationships.”* The committee is a diverse group of lay and ordained persons; bishops, priests, and consulting theologians; straight and gay persons; conservatives, liberals, and moderates; who will develop a study *“that will present the full range of views prevalent in the church today on the theological and ethical teaching about same sex relationships...and provide a study document explaining each position in the clearest possible way, presenting current scriptural studies and theological and ethical perspectives within the cultural contexts of The Episcopal Church...The Study will include relevant scientific and medical/psychological data.”* They anticipate a final draft no later than March 2012, perhaps sooner.

For the above reasons and more, the two of us believed that not moving forward on the issues raised in resolutions DO25 and CO56 would have provided the church with additional space in which to abide with one another as we wrestle with the whole range of views and practices in these matters. We believe that this theological homework needs to be done at this critical time in the life of the Anglican Communion and The Episcopal Church.

Declining to move forward in these matters would have also sent a strong message to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the wider Communion that we know this is a long, difficult road and that we respect our relationships with them enough to continue to offer restraint in these areas. At the same time, we acknowledge the reality that many in this church believe we have already waited long enough and the time to move forward is now. This was reflected in the debate and conversations that the most important thing at this moment was to “state clearly and honestly” where the majority of the Convention believes this church to be.

In all of this, we are hopeful that the work of the Theology Committee, given a fair hearing, will be an important contribution to our walk together, and especially as the Diocese of West Texas continues have these conversations. As you may remember, we have a Reconciliation Commission developing a framework for discussions in these and other areas.

Clearly, we are living in a time of great change in society and in the Church. Clearly, we have gays and lesbians in the Diocese of West Texas who are hurting because of their experience in the Church, and because we have voted the way we have on these matters. Clearly, we have conservatives in West Texas who continue to be frustrated by the actions of the General Convention. Clearly, your bishops have the pastoral responsibility for all of the members of our diocese as well as a responsibility to and with the wider Church. Clearly, balancing all of this is a challenge for even the most gifted of leaders. We want to assure you all that we are committed to your service in the Name of Christ, our own clay feet notwithstanding.

The larger issue in all of this is, of course, what it means to be a Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In many parts of the globe, Christianity is in decline and that fact must be acknowledged and addressed if the Christian faith is to be the “salt and light” that we are called to be to a world that is hurting in so many ways.

As a diocesan family, we are a diverse and complicated lot. We hold a range of views and have varying degrees of patience for the long engagement that has been with us and will continue to be with us for the foreseeable future. We hope that each member of this diocesan family is committed to walking together in mutual forbearance and love, which strengthens our witness both here and beyond our diocesan borders. This will require godly patience, Christ-like humility, and a holy willingness to “*Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ*” (Gal 6.2). In all that we do, let us remember “*For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake*” (2 Cor. 4.5).

More to come!

Gary Lillibridge, Bishop of West Texas  
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