

18 July 2009

Dear Friends,

As you know, the 76th General Convention of The Episcopal Church drew to a close yesterday after ten days of prayer, fellowship, thoughtful conversation, and formal legislation. It has been a remarkable convention to my thinking, not just because of a number of significant decisions that have been made, but more so because of the manner in which those decisions have been made—deliberations characterized by honesty, humility, prayerfulness, and a great gentleness and generosity of spirit.

Certain issues (namely those pertaining to human sexuality) have made the headlines, but they are not by any stretch of the imagination the only significant steps taken by this General Convention.

I would note, for example, the budget that was adopted for The Episcopal Church for the next three years. Facing the same economic realities that we are all currently facing, our Church has chosen intentionally to increase its direct funding for both local and global mission initiatives while significantly reducing the infrastructure of our Church Center in New York and our General Convention. This single action makes a significant statement about who we understand ourselves to be—a body dedicated to the missional life of the Church, Christians who are committed to reaching out and standing with the poorest among us both domestically and internationally. Rather than retreating into ourselves, our Church has chosen, in effect, to embrace the current economic crisis as an opportunity to reposition ourselves for the future.

I would note, too, the decision made by this General Convention to adopt a church-wide health care plan. For years now, the cost of health care for clergy and lay employees has been a significant financial burden for all of our churches, large and small. Now, with the adoption of this plan over the next three years, the vast majority of our congregations (over 95%) will be able to realize a ten percent savings in health insurance costs. These represent precious resources that will in turn be freed up to invest more directly in our missional life.

There are, of course, two significant resolutions that were adopted regarding issues of human sexuality—Resolution D025 (“Commitment and Witness to the Anglican Communion”) and Resolution C056 (“Liturgies for Blessings”).

The first is a multilayered resolution that requires careful reading and thought. That resolution can be found at http://gc2009.org/ViewLegislation/view_leg_detail.aspx?id=986&type=Final , and I encourage you to read it in its entirety. I strongly encourage you also to read the letter sent by our Presiding Bishop and the President of our House of Deputies to the Archbishop of Canterbury regarding Resolution D025 which provides significant background information and context and indeed makes clear what this resolution does

and does not accomplish

(http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/D025_letter_to_Archbishop.pdf).

As that letter states, this resolution is “more descriptive than prescriptive in nature.” It is a statement that “reaffirms commitments already made by The Episcopal Church and that acknowledges certain realities of our common life.” Of particular note, the resolution does not go beyond the provisions of our Constitution and Canons, and is intended simply to offer a kind of honesty that I believe will indeed help us live into the communion we all desire.

The second resolution regarding human sexuality (C056 - http://gc2009.org/ViewLegislation/view_leg_detail.aspx?id=898&type=Current) calls upon our Church’s Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to “collect and develop theological and liturgical resources” pertaining to the blessing of same gender relationships and to report to the next General Convention in three years. I would observe that while it does not authorize public rites for the blessing of same gender relationships, it does acknowledge the need that some bishops may have to “provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church.” Collectively, D025 and C056 are intended to provide a framework within which more substantive and comprehensive discernment around these issues can take place in the days ahead—a conversation that I trust, too, will contribute to the listening process called for by successive Lambeth Conferences.

Both statements also contain the explicit reaffirmation of our Church's commitment to being a constituent member of the Anglican Communion, as does another resolution that the convention adopted, D020, which expresses The Episcopal Church's intention to review and comment on the current draft and any subsequent drafts of the Anglican Covenant.

Worth noting, too, all of our conversations during this General Convention took part in the presence of a large number of international guests—bishops and primates, clergy and lay leaders—including the Archbishop of Canterbury,. This fact that made it possible to engage in the same kind of thoughtful, faithful, and open conversation that so characterized the whole of our gathering in Anaheim.

I would be remiss if I did not express my sincere gratitude to the members of our deputation—a diverse group that itself represents the spectrum of theological and political perspectives found within our diocese. The way in which our deputation has honestly, prayerfully, and kindly engaged their work—including passionate, faithful, and heartfelt disagreement on any number of difficult issues—is truly remarkable and commendable. As one guest observed regarding the way in which our deputation worked so positively and constructively through difficult issues, “They should be the blueprint for our Church.” I trust and hope that the same can and will be said of our collective witness as a diocese.

Clearly, the actions taken by this General Convention will take some time to work through and to understand. None of these decisions, however, require immediate action.

Following some time for rest and renewal during August, I plan to be present at each of the Regional Convocations prior to our diocesan convention. I will be joined at those Convocations by members of our deputation, and we look forward together to sharing more information with you as well as hearing your thoughts.

As always, I am grateful to you for your great faithfulness and good work. Please know that I continue to hold you in my prayer. Wishing you a restful and renewing remainder of this summer, I remain,

Yours faithfully in Christ,

The Right Reverend Robert O'Neill
Bishop