

Impressions of
The General Convention of the Episcopal Church
July 8 - 17, 2009
by Fr. Dave Elsensohn

The 2009 General Convention is the fourth I have attended. My experience of this last gathering was that its tenor was much more collegial. We did deal with some very difficult questions, just as the 2000, 2003, and 2006 conventions did. But in the midst of what were sometimes tense discussions, people were able to treat each other with respect, civility, and together enjoy a little humor. This was a cause of celebration.

Everything in God's creation has at least two sides. The opposite side of the collegial nature of the 2009 G.C. was the voices that were not present. All of us are aware that four Dioceses have withdrawn from the Episcopal Church: they are the non-continuing Diocese of San Joaquin, Pittsburgh, Fort Worth, and Quincy. I could not help but wonder if the level of civil discourse was aided by the absence of the deputies from these Dioceses. At the same time, the strident voices at the other end of the spectrum also seemed to be absent. Those at one end of this curve seemed to have come to the conclusion that there was no longer room for them at the table in the Episcopal church. Those who balanced their voices at the other end may have been quieted by the lack of vociferous opposing voices to energize them. This development is a source of grief for me, and should be for the church. Any time the church shuts itself off from the ideas of another portion of the church we are guilty of a form of fundamentalism. Some could say that the Episcopal Church is at times guilty of liberal/progressive fundamentalism, an unwillingness to hear the conservative voices among us. We are all impoverished any time any of our brothers and sisters are made to feel unwelcome and withdraw from the ongoing dialogue in the church. The theology that emerges from counsels in which the entire church is not represented is fundamentally flawed.

My years of sitting on the floor of the House of Deputies has taught me something. This last convention has reinforced my impression that when difficult issues or ideas are under discussion, the participants frequently do not discuss what is before the group. They may be speaking in the terms of what is on the floor. But in fact they stand before the House publicly wrestling with their own preconceived notions, stereotypes of those in positions that differ from their own, and a fear of the agendas they suspect are behind what has been presented. There is value in this process if it helps those involved to come to a point where they are ultimately able to hear their opposite number (truly hearing is required - agreement is optional). This takes a great deal of time. Getting to this point requires deep commitment to our Lord, and to the Church. At its best, on occasion - when we find this place, this is where the General Convention shines.

Many years ago, at the 2003 General Convention, Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold called the Convention to the practice of Interpretive Generosity. This is the practice of ascribing the best possible interpretation to what you hear the other saying. In all likelihood that is closer to what the other intends than the opposite. This year's General

Convention has reminded me that interpretive generosity, loving our brothers and sisters as we love ourselves, is the only way forward for the Body of Christ. When we do this, all that I have described above becomes that much easier (but no less challenging).

Now to a few specifics of convention. You can visit http://ecusa.anglican.org/gc2009_8419_ENG_HTM.htm?menu=menu91928 to get a list of the legislation presented to General Convention. You can also find a report of the final status of each resolution. In a few days you will find a link there to the final form of each piece of legislation that was adopted.

D025 was the piece of legislation that made the biggest headlines. It was interpreted by the media as the Episcopal Church breaking ranks with the Anglican communion on several issues. It did not. Instead this brilliant document endeavored to present a snapshot of the facts of life on the ground in our church. The central issue behind this document is the unique nature of how we govern ourselves as a church. The rest of the Anglican communion does not enjoy the same level of democratic process that we enjoy. As a result our lived reality of a church that encompasses many different deeply-held convictions is foreign to them. In fact it looks rather messy from an international perspective. The author of this resolution offered it to be informative, not proscriptive or prescriptive.

Resolutions A138 established a church-wide mandatory health care plan for lay and clergy employees of the Church. Resolution A177 established a mandatory pension program for Lay employees. These programs will go into effect July, 2011. Resolution C070 challenged the church to reduce its carbon footprint 50% by 2019.

Resolution A074 is one of those resolutions that will call the church to theological reflection and study. It sets out a development of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral (1886, 1888). This document moves beyond ecumenical relations and furthers our statement of principals in regard to inter-religious relations. I look forward to a time when we form a discussion of this text at St. Peter's.

B007 has changed the canons in regard to a Diocesan Bishop's obligation to visit the congregations of his or her diocese once every three years. With the passage of this resolution, these visitations may now be made by either the Diocesan, Suffragan, Coadjutor, or Assisting Bishop of a Diocese. This change will be very important to the Diocese of Alaska. This will allow us to begin to rethink how we provide for Episcopal ministry in our far flung land.

In one of the closest calls, C023 The Defense of Marriage was defeated. This resolution would have called "ALL" Episcopalians to work for the repeal of all defense of marriage laws in our respective states. The measure passed the House of Deputies by 5%. The House of Bishops then did not concur and referred the measure to an interim legislative body. Calling "ALL" Episcopalians to a position like this could be seen as a violation of the comprehensive nature of the Anglican Church. This concern came to be echoed on

the floor of the House of Deputies once they had a moment to reflect on what their vote would mean to so many.

The Houses of Deputies and Bishops passed a resolution calling for a study of the theology of marriage. The resolution number is C014. As the centuries have passed, the church has found it necessary to re-articulate every one of its central doctrines and dogmas to each new age and culture. The call for this study is no different. It is obvious that we live in a time and culture that is challenging much of what the church believes and stands for. This reflection is intended to speak what we believe to this emerging culture in words this new society can hear. I am particularly excited about this study.

C056 might be seen as a companion resolution to C014 by many. This resolution calls for the gathering of liturgical resources that already exist in the church worldwide and are being used in the blessing of same sex unions. Like any study, those doing the work need to know what something "looks like" before being able to reflect on it. This does not call for the development of these liturgies, only the study of what already exists in many corners of the universal church. This committee is to report their findings in 2012.

I am as positive as I can be that the results of C014 and C056 will be brought into dialogue with each other at the 2012 General Convention. As in every transformative moment in church history, it will be critical to have prayerful, reflective people of faith involved in this study. The same will be true of those we elect as Deputies to the 2012 General Convention.

Thank you for supporting me as a Deputy to convention from our parish and Diocese. I consider it an honor to have represented this part of Christ's Body in the counsels of the Church. I will be happy to talk with any of you about convention. And I encourage each of you to read the legislation for yourself because I am certain that some of your friends and relatives will be asking you about what we did.

Faithfully,
Fr. Dave Elsensohn