

A Pastoral Letter to the Faithful Family of Christ the King Episcopal Church

June 29, 2006 (The Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul)

My dear brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus:

I am writing to you as a reflection on the recent actions of the General Convention of our Episcopal Church and the many reactions and responses to that meeting which you may have read or heard.

The Convention was, as most such gatherings are, a mixed bag. Some truly grace-filled actions were taken, such as the embracing of a set of principles, called the Millenium Development Goals, which are designed to call our attention to the possibility of ending extreme poverty throughout the world within the next decade. Also, the Convention approved Interim Eucharistic Sharing with the United Methodist Church, once again taking a step (as with the Lutherans several years ago) toward our Lord's desire "that they may all be one" (John 17). Finally, a budget of \$152 million was adopted for the next three years, most of which will be used to fund outreach and mission in a world that is sorely in need of the saving Good News of Jesus Christ.

In other words, if I may be so bold as to say so, the General Convention took some actions which are in harmony with the recent work of our own parish leaders and members: increased focus on outreach, especially in reaching out to the homeless, hungry, and needy; increased focus on developing relationships with our neighboring congregations for common ministries of service and worship; and increased focus and funding for our work in sharing the Good News through outreach, Christian formation, ministry with youth, and other avenues of mission.

Unfortunately, these laudable actions are in danger of being overshadowed by two other matters taken up by the Convention: the election of a new Presiding Bishop for the Episcopal Church, and the Convention's responses to the 2004 Windsor Report (which was itself a response to actions taken by the 2003 General Convention). Although I was not personally present at the Convention, I have endeavored to listen to as many different voices as I can before giving you the following thoughts.

About the Presiding Bishop-elect, The Right Rev'd Katharine Jefforts Schori: Our own Bp. Howe has spoken of the soon-to-be Presiding Bishop as "an extremely gracious person with a truly brilliant mind." While some have lamented her lack of experience as a bishop, others have pointed to the fact that she demonstrated excellent leadership skills in the closing hours of General Convention in helping to achieve passage of a significant response to the Windsor Report (more on that below). Although I would disagree with some of her past decisions as a bishop and some of her public statements, I don't think it is our place to assume that, based on past attitudes or actions, she cannot serve our Lord faithfully as our Presiding Bishop. (Many said the same thing about the current Archbishop of Canterbury after his appointment, but have since acknowledged that he has been precisely the leader the Communion needs at this point in its history and development.) Let us pray that Bishop Jefforts Schori, who takes office in November, will listen carefully to discern and follow the Spirit's leading for the good of our whole Church and the larger Anglican Communion.

About the General Convention's response to the Windsor Report: As with most legislative solutions to complex issues, the language of the various resolutions addressing the Windsor Report was fully pleasing to no one: too strong for some, not strong enough for others. But the resolutions were intended to show that the Episcopal Church values our continued membership in the Anglican Communion. Here is what the Convention did:

- refused even to consider any movement toward developing a worship service to bless same-sex unions;
- expressed regret, and asked forgiveness, for straining the bonds of affection in the Anglican Communion by its action of consenting to the election of a practicing homosexual as a bishop in 2003;
- asked bishops and standing committees to “exercise restraint by not consenting to the election of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion” (responding to a request for a moratorium “until some new consensus in the Anglican Communion emerges”); and
- endorsed the Report’s proposal to develop an “Anglican Covenant” defining how decisions should be made in one part of the Communion that would affect the other parts.

Since the Convention ended, some significant events have taken place. Earlier this week, the Archbishop of Canterbury put forth a document entitled *The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today: A Reflection for the Bishops, Clergy, and Faithful of the Anglican Communion*. Copies of this article will be available at church, or if you are an Internet user you can find it here (carefully type the entire address into your Web browser): <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/releases/060627%20Archbishop%20-%20challenge%20and%20hope.htm>

It is an excellent piece of writing! The Archbishop places the current state of the Communion in a broader perspective rather than simply focusing on the “hot-button” issues, and proposes a process to move forward toward a new understanding of what it means to be an Anglican Christian.

The process he envisions, as with anything worthwhile, will take time: time for praying, listening, sharing, and journeying together. I find it unfortunate and disappointing that some have, as someone recently put it, “jumped ship before it reaches the harbor” – including some in our own diocesan leadership. The great majority of Episcopalians, including most of those who believe that the Church erred in 2003, are willing for the covenanting process to continue – for us to seek, as Anglicans always have, the *via media* (“middle way”) between an authority somewhere else telling us what to do on one hand, and the temptation to act without due regard for the views of the larger Body on the other.

As your Rector, I see no reason for us as a congregation to take any immediate action which would alienate faithful members of our parish family. I believe that we are called to stay the course: to be faithful to our Lord, unafraid (if not proud) of our denomination’s willingness to struggle with difficult issues of faith while still remaining one body in Christ, eager to continue our focus on outreach, partnership with our neighbors, and “proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ” (Baptismal Covenant, BCP 305). Christ the King is a place where God is worshiped, the Gospel rightly preached, the Sacraments duly administered, and where very different (dare I say diverse?) kinds of people love and care for each other because we know that God loves and cares for us all despite our sinfulness and despite our differences. My prayer is that we will not allow anyone to change this blessed face of Christ the King by seeking to divide us into “camps” or “parties” or “factions,” no matter how well-intentioned they may be. Paul is very clear in Galatians 5:19-21 that such things have no place in the Body of Christ.

In closing: I want all of you to know that I stand ready to discuss any or all of these issues with you. Beginning on Sunday, July 2nd and continuing until Sunday, July 16th, there will be sign-up sheets in the back of the church and on the bulletin board in the parish hall for anyone who would like to spend some time speaking with me to do so. When I return from the Youth Mission Trip to New York, I will contact those who have signed up and invite them to share time in a small-group setting, which I believe will be the most conducive to sharing and listening.

May the Lord bless us as we remain faithful members of the One Church and willing servants of the Most High.

Your priest, pastor, and friend,

(The Rev’d Dr.) Steve Clifton, Rector