

*The Bishop's Report to the Diocese  
Concerning the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention  
August 2009*

Dear Friends throughout our Diocese of East Carolina,

Thank you for your prayers and support during the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention, both for me as your bishop and for all members of our diocesan Deputation and Episcopal Churchwomen Triennial delegation. We had a wonderful deputation consisting of: (Lay Deputies) David Abbott, Tom Holt, Tess Judge, Larry Overton, (Alternates) Anne Bustard, Joan Geiszler-Ludlum, Susan Holmes, Casey Ludlum; (Clerical Deputies) Sonny Browne – Deputation Chair, John Pollock, Peter Stube, David Umphlett, (Alternates) Carrie Craig; (Episcopal Church Women Triennial Delegates) Jo Anne Kilday – Diocesan ECW President, Pat Davis, Annie Jacobs. who represented our diocese prayerfully and well. I remain proud of them all and thankful for their generous stewardship of time, effort and wisdom.

I was much encouraged to see the very visible presence of many youth and young adults at General Convention, which gave me confidence in God's vision for The Episcopal Church. I think of Casey Ludlum (Church of the Servant, Wilmington), a recent college graduate; Claris Hill, a college student and member of St. Thomas, Oriental; Jake Melnyk, who attends UNC-Wilmington and is an active member of our diocesan Campus Ministry; of Matt Scully, our campus minister at East Carolina University in Greenville; of the Rev'd Sonny Browne and the Rev'd David Umphlett, young priests of our diocese who served as Deputies. I think of Michael Sehdev, a 17 year old from the Diocese of Southeast Florida and a youth representative of our own Province 4. This young man was invited to address the House of Bishops and began his remarks by noting that "...Jesus called his followers to be fishers of people. Too often, I fear, we settle for being keepers of the aquarium." Such a strong heartbeat for mission showed itself throughout the Convention, and I am encouraged both to see such strong young leaders in our midst and I have hope for our Church's future.

The Convention was also graced by the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury as well as almost half of the Primates of the member churches of the Anglican Communion and many other Bishops from around the Communion. Their presence was a way of introducing them to the General Convention, which is a unique form of church governance within the Anglican Communion and the cause of confusion in many places throughout our family of Anglican Churches. Inviting these honored guests was also one way of demonstrating our Church's commitment to our relationships and responsibilities within the Communion. As President of the group, it was my honor to host Archbishop Williams at a small luncheon for the Presiding Bishop's Council of Advice immediately prior to his departure. We had a most enjoyable lunch and an enlightening and helpful conversation together in which each of the nine members described the context of their diocesan ministry and the missional challenges faced. We assured him as well of our commitment to our continuing life in the Anglican Communion.

The work of the Convention was carried out mainly in the legislative process that is at the heart of General Convention. The two Houses of Convention (the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops) considered, discussed, debated and voted on hundreds of resolutions ranging from the courteous to the controversial. Since it is only the General Convention that can speak authoritatively for The Episcopal Church, the passage of a

resolution that expresses the mind of the Convention must be agreed to in the same form and in the same words by the concurrence of both Houses. The decision-making process of General Convention is both conservative and cumbersome. This laborious legislative process prevents the General Convention from acting rashly as well as requiring a vast agreement on any matter before a decision is made. It also sometimes takes years to achieve the necessary consensus – for example, the question of whether or not bishops should retain their vote in the House of Bishops after their retirement has been considered by at least five Conventions, and still no agreement has been achieved between the two Houses of the General Convention.

The resolutions passed by this the 76th General Convention include, among many others, the passage of a health insurance plan for the lay and clerical workers of The Episcopal Church; a mandatory pension plan for full-time lay employees; firm support for expanding ministry and evangelism among the growing Hispanic population of our country; a charter for and commitment to Christian Formation as a lifelong process of learning and growth; a revision of the disciplinary canons for ordained persons; continuing financial support for the Millennium Development Goals and many more. (For a full list of the resolutions passed by the Convention, go to the following web site: <http://gc2009.org/viewlegislation/>)

Two of the more controversial resolutions passed by General Convention were designated as “D025” and “C056,” respectively. Resolution D025 begins by “...reaffirming the continued participation of The Episcopal Church as a constituent member of the Anglican Communion...” and goes on to deal with the discernment and call of suitable persons to the ordained ministry of this Church. The resolution notes that gay and lesbian persons in committed 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 be it further Resolved That the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention affirm that God has called and may call such individuals, to any ordained ministry in The Episcopal Church.” This resolution (for which both our Deputation and I voted “aye”) affirms the long-standing canons of this Church which insure that the discernment process which may lead to ordination is open to all baptized members of this Church, though no one can claim any right to ordination. The ministry of ordained gay and lesbian people in our Diocese has been exemplary and continues to be a blessing. The discernment process is the shared responsibility of a parish Vestry, Rector, Lay Discernment Committee, Bishop, Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee. In this Diocese the discernment process begins in the local parish and remains fully open to the participation of all as described by the Canons of this Church.

Resolution C056 directs the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to “...collect and develop theological and liturgical resources...” around the blessing of same-gender unions and to report their findings to the 77<sup>th</sup> General Convention in 2012. This resolution does not authorize the creation of public liturgical rites for the blessing of such unions and goes on to state that this Church’s definition of marriage (as printed on page 422 of *The Book of Common Prayer*) remains unchanged. The resolution goes on to say that “...bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same-gender marriage, civil union, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of the Church.” Both our diocesan Deputation and I voted in the affirmative for this resolution.

Since 1996 my stated position in regard to the blessing of same-gender unions within our diocese has been that no priest of this diocese has my permission to bless a same-gender union until such time as the General Convention speaks clearly on the matter. As I said earlier, the decision-making process of General Convention is an extended process which determines whether or not a broad agreement among the elected leaders of this

Church, both lay and ordained, can be achieved over a sometimes very long period of time. While this General Convention did not authorize liturgies for the blessing of same-gender unions, I do believe that this is the direction we are moving in as a Church; and the General Convention in Resolution C056 has given latitude for bishops to "...provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of the Church." I tell you that I am considering prayerfully what such a generous pastoral response may mean within my responsibilities both as a bishop of the larger Church and this diocese. I invite your prayers in the days ahead.

In closing, I wish to hold up and celebrate two things about this General Convention. First, I note that It has not been so very many years ago when it would have been impossible for a woman to be ordained deacon, priest or bishop, or elected by a diocese to serve as Deputy to General Convention, and unthinkable that a woman would serve as either Presiding Bishop or President of the House of Deputies. Indeed, it was not so many years ago that the leadership of The Episcopal Church gathered in General Convention would have been overwhelmingly Caucasian, male and old. I looked around this General Convention and saw the beautiful diversity of gender and race representing the breadth of the membership of this Church, and there only after prayer, struggle, conversation and conversion. I heard "liberal" and "conservative" arguments offered on the contentious matters and almost every matter considered by this convention. The conversation was sometimes intense and sometimes messy. But in the faces of the people of the Convention and in their expression of thought and theology, I believe we have grown, sometimes reluctantly and often not without conflict and struggle, more closely as a Church into what is God's vision for the Body of Christ. And I rejoice in and give thanks especially for the leadership of our Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev'd Katharine Jefferts Schori and the President of the House of Deputies, Bonnie Anderson.

The second thing I give thanks for around this General Convention is not even necessarily what we did, but rather the way in which we did what we did. I saw and heard (for the most part) differences being embraced and treated with the respect and dignity befitting our baptismal vows. Ideas were respectfully voiced and courteously heard. Both "liberal" and "conservative" exercised the moderation of respect and restraint and articulated their various positions with clarity. In concluding a television interview with two bishops holding opposing views on the blessing of same-gender unions, the CNN reporter ended the segment with his own reflection that we might be a better country and world if all could live with their differences as these two bishops do. Now that's witness to the presence of the Spirit and the reconciling power of the Gospel, brothers and sisters. You and I are called to display the same witness that the two bishops held forth in the television interview. As one bishop said in an address at Convention: "You don't need to have all the answers, you just need a mission. GO!"

Amen. ***GO!***