

## General Convention - As Experienced by a First Time Lay Deputy

General Convention was an experience I shall not soon forget nor easily describe. Let me start by saying that serving as a deputy to the General Convention (GC) of the Episcopal Church (TEC) is both privilege and burden. By that I mean, to represent the Diocese of Albany is an honor – to have been elected by the Diocesan Convention and to be the face of our diocese in a large and diverse gathering is not a casual matter. The burden involves balancing love for God and my brothers and sisters in a setting in which deliberating over weighty and complex matters requires an astute mind and a discerning spirit.

As the Rev. Canon Charles King taught me, and House of Deputies President Bonnie Anderson has stated, “Deputies are not the same as delegates.” In the words of President Anderson, “Each deputy is elected to General Convention by his or her own diocese. As deputies, we know our diocese and the people of the diocese know us. We are not elected simply to represent the views of our diocese or any particular constituency. Deputies are extraordinary representatives who, ‘Ideally...should reflect the will of the whole Church, act for the whole Church, and speak to the whole Church.’ ...We are trusted to cast our votes, informed by prayer, factual information and the workings of the Holy Spirit. We have a responsibility to report back to our diocese after General Convention and, to the best of our abilities, convey how we voted in light of what we experienced and what we learned. “ With that preface, I will endeavor to give my report.

Despite the warnings from past deputies, it is hard to imagine the sheer volume of reading material that inundates those elected to this office. I suspect the advent of electronic correspondence has served to multiply the proliferation of pre-GC readings. In addition to letters, bulletins and the curiously named “Blue Book” (805 pages), there were DVDs and ancillary reading materials. There were also on-line discussions of various GC-related topics which flooded my inbox daily with the musings of various other deputies. There was a pre-GC two day provincial meeting at the Crowne Plaza in Albany, which I was unable to attend. I trust my fellow deputies will address any salient issues from that gathering.

So, feeling pretty anxious and not sufficiently prepared for what lay ahead, I joined my fellow pilgrims at the Albany International Airport on July 6<sup>th</sup> to begin our journey to the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention of the Episcopal Church in beautiful Anaheim, California. We tried to adjust to the three hour time difference and to be ready for the convention to begin.

We started each day with Morning Prayer at 6:30 a.m. in the hotel lobby. After breakfast, we trekked down the palm tree lined street to the Anaheim Convention Center. On Tuesday, July 7, it was a bit disconcerting to find that for some unknown reason, the New Deputy Orientation session scheduled from 8:00 a.m. to noon was cancelled. Armed with our ID badges and massive three ring binders, we suddenly had an open schedule until 2:00 pm. This was a rare instance of free time to do whatever we wished – like take a nap!

Finally, on July 7 at 2:00 p.m., the Convention was opened with remarks from the Presiding Bishop (PB) and the President of the House of Deputies (HOD).] It was in this venue that PB Katharine Jefferts Schori gave her opening address and the startling assertion that reverberated in many ears: “The overarching

connection in all of these crises has to do with the great Western heresy – that we can be saved as individuals, that any one of us alone can be in right relationship with God. It’s caricatured in some quarters by insisting that salvation depends on reciting a specific verbal formula about Jesus. That individualist focus is a form of idolatry...” At my table, we looked at each other and asked, “Did she just say what I thought she said?” I’m afraid that whatever she said after that was lost in the shock of the moment. [A personal reflection: Are we to regard the tenth chapter of Romans as heresy, especially verse 9: *If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved...?*]

Next, the HOD joined with our brothers and sisters of the House of Bishops (HOB) for the introduction to “Mission Conversation through Public Narrative.” To put it in more understandable terms, this is a process of “telling our stories,” or in evangelical terms, giving our testimonies. Six hours divided into four sessions over seven days were dedicated to this process. Some of us respectfully participated in three of the four sessions, but even our facilitator/coach from another diocese opted to skip the last session, scheduled from 8:00 to 10:00 p.m. on a Monday night. I did enjoy hearing of the faith journeys of my bishop and fellow deputies.

More orientation, a supper break, and an evening session of legislative committee meetings rounded out Day 1. Incidentally, only Mother Neufeld and Fr. Scott had actual committee assignments, but anyone could attend meetings and I believe all of us exercised that option.

We then fell into the daily routine of Morning Prayer, breakfast, committee meetings, legislative sessions, lunch, Eucharist, legislative sessions, dinner, committee meetings or hearings and a few scattered social events.

There were daily celebrations of the Eucharist at the Convention Center, which omitted the Gloria, the Creed and confession. I opted to attend Eucharist in another hotel with a smaller group of orthodox sisters and brothers. These were times of spiritual refreshment and encouragement.

Other times of refreshment included dinner/receptions sponsored by Trinity and Nashotah House and a lifelong dream – going to Disneyland! In the Exhibit Hall, I purchased a pocket-sized prayer book and some lotion for my aching feet. I was able to get a chair massage for my neck and shoulders at the Health exhibit. We saw our dear brother Tom Gizara at the Faith Alive booth and had a pleasant conversation with sisters at the Daughters of the King booth. Back at the convention hall, we enjoyed getting acquainted with our fellow deputies from the Dioceses of Dallas and Alabama.

Now - the more difficult task of describing the business of GC. This process is not for the faint of heart. It requires a nimble and strategic mind. I believe God assembled (and Albany elected) a marvelous blend of gifts in our deputation. Mother Neufeld, Fr. Scott and Fr. Garno had previous GC experience. The rest of us were greenhorns. Debbie Fish emerged as the one with an exceptional aptitude for parliamentary procedure and the dispatch of business. She helped us and our neighboring deputations when we got lost in the whirlwind of the legislative process. We had to use strategy to get to the microphones to express our views before the obviously planted “terminators” would call the question and end debate.

Through the committee meetings, we were able to observe how resolutions were polished and packaged before being brought forward for a vote. Many resolutions were redundant and melded together. Sadly, we observed committees trying to find ways to manipulate deputies whom they viewed as somehow obstructionist to the agenda. Occasionally, wisdom would trump manipulation.

There were a few resolutions that I supported, including Rachel's Tears, Hannah's Hopes – a liturgy for the loss of children. There were common sense resolutions that served to clarify and streamline various processes and practices. There were some that I considered silly – like the resolution to ban plastic water bottles. And there were those that I voted against with the orthodox minority, including:

- D025 – endorsing the ordination gay and lesbian persons “living in lifelong committed relationships characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God. “
- C056 – encouraging the collection and development of theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of marriages, civil unions or domestic partnerships for gay and lesbian persons.

[Note: Many times, we heard it said that orthodox opposition to these resolutions is based in fear and hatred. I vigorously object to that assessment. As a sinner saved by the grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, I do not fear or hate people based on their sexual orientation. I do fear the judgment of a holy and righteous God toward those who knowingly transgress His clear commandments and encourage others to do so – see Romans 1:26 - 27, 32.]

There were resolutions which disturbed me, including:

- D035, Reconciliation: Repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. The intent of this resolution was for the GC to “repudiate and renounce the Doctrine of Discovery as fundamentally opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and our understanding of the inherent rights that individuals and peoples have received from God...This doctrine, which originated with Henry VII in 1496, held that Christian sovereigns and their representative explorers could assert dominion and title over non-Christian lands with the full blessing and sanction of the Church...” The resolution proposes that both the HOB and the HOD inform “relevant governmental bodies in the United States of its action....to write Queen Elizabeth II... requesting that her Majesty disavow, and repudiate publicly, the claimed validity of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery...” The resolution further calls for the GC to direct the Office of Governmental Relations to advocate for the U.S. Government's endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

[Note: While I understand that wrongs were committed in the conquest of “the New World”, I see this resolution as trampling on the lives and work of missionaries and evangelists who were being obedient to the Great Commission given by our Lord and recorded in Matthew chapter 28. When I rose to voice this objection, I was cut off and called out of order. With the encouragement of my

fellow deputies, I approached the microphone once more and said the proper words to gain the right to speak my mind. Soon after, a deputy of the progressive persuasion came to me and expressed his admiration for my persistence. He added that in his opinion, the President of the HOD had been rude to me.]

- A099 – proposing a change in references to the Blessed Virgin Mary in *Holy Women, Holy Men*, a.k.a. *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. The impetus to refer to her simply as “Mary of Nazareth” had been reversed in the HOB, but for some reason reappeared in the version put before the HOD. The Chair of the Prayer Book, Liturgy and Church Music Committee made a lame attempt at addressing a “typo” that could be corrected at a later time. It was late afternoon on the last day of GC and obviously people wanted to be done with it. The HOD voted down an amendment to restore “the Blessed Virgin” and passed the faulty version of the resolution, prompting the righteously indignant reaction of Mother Neufeld. This invalid vote was reported to the HOB by Mother Neufeld and a correction was promised by the PB.

It has been almost a month since our return from Anaheim, and it has taken all this time for me to sit down and commit my thoughts and reflections to the written word. I believe that I performed my role of deputy to the best of my mortal ability and within the scope of my defined duties. I was privileged to serve with an incredible group of clergy and lay folk, who became a solid and supportive community in a setting where we were obviously in the minority camp. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Bp. Love in contending for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Sue Ellen Ruetsch

August 15, 2009