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### Reflections on the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention

First, let me express what an incredible honor and privilege it was for me to represent the Diocese of Albany at the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention. The trust and confidence you bestowed upon me when I was elected a Provisional Deputy, and subsequently called upon to serve as a Deputy, was not something I took lightly. I pray I was able to serve this Diocese, the orthodox viewpoint, and most importantly our Lord Jesus Christ with honor and dignity. I also, would like to thank the rest of our deputation for their hard work and service to our diocese and the Lord. Fr. John Scott, as deputation chair, led us with wisdom and grace. Mtr. Ellen Neufeld, with her fiery personality, gave us the courage and spark to stand up and speak without fear or reservation. Fr. Bob Haskell was a steadying influence who was always ready with the research we needed to be well informed on all the pertinent issues. I was particularly impressed with our Lay representatives. Dave Beaulac, Sue Ellen Ruetsch, Debbie Fish, and Beth Strickland – all of whom were first time deputies – showed a wisdom, skill, passion, and courage that is rarely seen in a first time deputy. To a person, they all spoke out in the House of Deputies (this is a very daunting prospect given the fact that you are speaking to almost a thousand unfamiliar people through a somewhat delayed sound system while your face is projected for the whole hall to see). And not only did they speak, but they were clear and articulate, with a passion for Jesus Christ and his kingdom. It was an honor to inhabit the trenches with such able, loving, and committed people as were on our deputation.

When I returned home the first question most everyone asked was, “How was California/Anaheim.” My response was always, “Anaheim was beautiful, I particularly enjoyed our night of relaxation at Disneyland.” However, I know they and you, while perhaps interested in the accommodations of a tourist town, are really asking for my reactions to the General Convention, which after all is the reason we were there. I think we might all say that our gut reaction to that question is “frustrating.” It was frustrating being the voice of orthodoxy in the midst of so many who hold contrasting views. It was frustrating that while many people told us how much they appreciated and respected our voice and viewpoint, there were an equal or greater number who seemed to “tune out” any time someone from our deputation went to the microphone. It was frustrating to hear so much of our Church leadership speak out of both sides of their mouth. On the one hand we (General Convention) insist that we value and respect our brothers and sisters in the rest of the Communion. On the other hand we make decisions and take actions that not only defy the will of the vast majority of the rest of the Communion, but in a real sense make life for them much more difficult. Our arrogance is at its best (or worst) when we are blatantly trying to remain in Communion as long as we can do it on our terms. It was

frustrating to see a church which can trace its roots back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers take a stance on issues that looks more like 21<sup>st</sup> Century American culture, and less like Biblical Christian morality. It was frustrating to once again see how far we have allowed our church to stray from God and from Holy Scripture and yet try to defend it as “inspired.”

Obviously the two issues that drew the most attention and most debate were resolutions D025 (dealing with a more-or-less repeal of 2006-B033 which called for a moratorium on electing and consecrating bishops in same-sex relationships) and C056 (which calls for the “collection and development of theological and liturgical resources,” for blessing same-sex unions). The first three resolves of D025 say things which I believe all Episcopalians can agree to. They reaffirm our constituent membership in the Anglican Communion, encourage continued relationships with others in the Communion, and reaffirm our financial commitment to the Communion. These ideas were not debated. However, this resolution puts these positive attributes of our relationship over and against ideas such as in the 6<sup>th</sup> resolve which says, “God has called and *may call* such individuals [baptized members living in committed same-sex relationships], to any ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church...” This seems to be in clear contradiction to B033, which while imperfect, had given us the ability to remain within the ranks of the Anglican Communion in a full way. Many within the leadership ranks of the Convention tried to argue that D025 was “descriptive” not “prescriptive”. In other words this told the world where we stand as a church, it wasn’t actually repealing B033. The irony is that the ink had barely dried on this resolution when two dioceses nominated same-sex coupled clergy for election as bishops. It seems to me that this can only be taken as the first step toward electing another bishop in the mold of Gene Robinson of New Hampshire – description quickly becomes prescription.

Resolution C056 also breaks with the wishes of the Anglican Communion. This resolution calls for the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to “collect and develop theological and liturgical resources,” for the blessing of same-sex unions, and allows bishops, especially those where same-sex unions are legal, to offer “generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church.” Again the spin coming from the leadership claims that this resolution only calls for the development of liturgies, it doesn’t specifically authorize them. However, any one with an understanding of General Convention procedures would realize that General Convention 2012 will undoubtedly receive these liturgies and subsequently approve them. The only delay is in the process and if there is anything General Convention holds dear it is “the process”.

These two resolutions, I believe, will further tear the fabric of the Anglican Communion. Since General Convention 2003 consented to the election as bishop of Gene Robinson the majority of the rest of the Communion has been asking the Episcopal Church not to proceed in theological innovations which the rest of the Communion cannot follow. Time and time again

this church has decided that we are the only true enlightened Christians and that even if the rest of the Communion cannot support what we are doing we are going to do it anyway. And this is not to mention that a clear reading of Holy Scripture shows that while God loves and accepts us as we are, that does not mean that he condones every decision we make. We are all sinners and “fall short of the glory of God,” but we cannot continue to call good what God so clearly says is contrary to His will for His creation.

The General Convention did not stop there when it comes to actions which will disturb the rest of the Anglican Communion. The \$141 million budget which passed for the 2010-2012 triennium included more than \$8 million for litigation against departing dioceses and other legal expenses associated with those actions. Leadership argued that this was a stewardship issue in regards to property, but what about the Christian witness we are called to uphold? What about Christian virtues such as grace, understanding, love, etc.? What about the fact that every statement that has come from every instrument of Communion (the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Primates, the Lambeth Conference, and the Anglican Consultative Council) has implored us to halt all litigation against each other? Time and time again we were told how hard it was to do the budget with declining attendance and giving, and how much was not going to be able to be funded. If Convention had decided not to fund this spurious litigation we could have restored more than 40% of the budget that was deleted, including fully funding important ministries and not needing to lay off almost 40 people from the National Church Center.

While D025 and C056 were the hot-button items at the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention, there were other resolutions which warrant comment. For example, General Convention authorized the implementation of a Mandatory Denomination wide Health Plan, and a mandatory Lay Employee Pension Plan. Both of these pieces of legislation make it mandatory for churches and dioceses to offer Health insurance and Pensions to all employees who meet what I consider to be a very low threshold of hours worked per week (approx. 1000 hours/yr for health care and 1500 hours/yr for the pension plan). While I laud the idealism of being able to offer Health insurance and pensions to everybody, the practical reality is that many small churches which may be able to scrape together the funds to employ someone above half time now may not be able to continue to do so when it becomes mandatory for them to pay for health and pension benefits. In the Diocese of Albany this could become a dark reality, for, as Cn. Haskell pointed out in floor debate, upwards of 1/3 of the churches in the Diocese of Albany currently offer health insurance to clergy through other means than the national health plan (ie the local chamber of commerce) at a significant cost savings to the church. In the next 3 years when participation in the denominational health plan becomes mandatory the chamber of commerce option will no longer be available adding further financial burden to churches who may already be struggling financially.

On the very last day of Convention a vote occurred which highlighted for me and the rest of our deputation just how far our church has drifted from Scripture and tradition. We were considering a slew of resolutions reauthorizing liturgies from what used to be Lesser Feasts and Fasts, but what will now be called Holy Women, Holy Men. The legislation before us was the feast of St. Mary the Virgin, but was called Mary, the Godbearer, explicitly leaving out “Virgin.” This was also left out of the collects and other prayers associated with the liturgy. A member of another delegation proposed an amendment that would have restored “virgin” to Mary’s title and to the prayers offered for that day. After less than five minutes of debate the amendment was *soundly* defeated. Now as a side note, I must mention that Bishops had passed similar legislation the day before and had restored the word “virgin”, and even though that form didn’t pass in the House, it was decided that it was presented wrongly because of a clerical error and would be corrected in its final form. Officially Mary is still a virgin in the adopted liturgy. However, the actions of the House of Deputies highlight how far we have come from our roots. One might argue that homosexuality, or marriage for that matter, is not discussed in the Creeds. You might also argue, I believe wrongly, that the Scriptures are contradictory on homosexuality. But the virgin birth is explicitly spoken of in the Creeds, and very clearly attested to in the Scriptures. For General Convention to so easily vote out a core doctrine of the Christian faith would have been a true travesty.

With all the negativity surrounding General Convention one would think that nothing good came from our almost two weeks there. In fact, there were some good things – like an initiative that came out of the Ministry Committee, which I monitored, that commits the church to take an active role in trying to reduce the debt load that new clergy carry coming out of seminary. We also passed legislation, which was included in the budget, authorizing a strategic plan to plant new churches and evangelize and minister to the ever increasing Hispanic population in our country. Convention also voted to continue to fund and support ministries to Native Americans particularly in the areas of ministry and leadership development. And as a result of General Convention the few remaining orthodox dioceses are exploring the possibility of a way for us to meet together on a regular basis for prayer, encouragement, support, and training for ministry and mission. To me this sounds like an exciting possibility and something I will be very interested to hear from the Bishop and Standing Committee about in the near future.

In closing I want to echo what Bishop Love said in his reflections on the General Convention. While Convention could have possibly passed legislation that would have tried to force bishops and dioceses like ours to do things we find Biblically, morally, and ethically objectionable it did not. We are still free to live out Biblical Christianity in the way we feel the Spirit inspires. The Diocese of Albany before General Convention is still the same now that General Convention has ended. As Bishop Love said, “By the grace of God, the Diocese of Albany will: continue to uphold the traditional orthodox teachings of the Church”, and we will continue to “proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of the world – the Way, the Truth and the

Life, the only One through whom salvation is possible.” If we keep Jesus Christ as the center of our universe, and if we stick together as the Body of Christ we are called to be we will be victorious in the end – because Scripture shows us that even if we lose the battle, even if we lose our lives and everything else we have, we still have the victory in Jesus Christ who overcame death and the grave, rose victoriously and ascended to the right hand of the Father. To him be glory and power now and forever. AMEN