

Episcopal Church GenCon 2009
or
How I Spent My Summer Vacation
by Deputy David Beaulac

I. Preparation

The Deputation to the House of Deputies from the Diocese of Albany took awhile to finalize itself, as a number of the deputies elected originally were unable to attend and alternates were brought in to take their places. In the end, the clergy deputation consisted of Fr. John Scott, Fr. Scott Garno, Mthr. Ellen Neufeld (all of whom had previously attended at least one convention) and Fr. Robert Haskell (a first-timer). The lay deputation consisted of all first-timers: Sue Ellen Ruetsch, Beth Strickland, Debbie Fish and me. We also had the benefit at the convention of support from Fr. Chip Strickland (who served as our Chaplain), Sarah Garno (Scott's wife) and, of course, Bishop Bill Love.

Prior to the convention, our deputation (in various forms) met six times: once with Bonnie Anderson, President of the House of Deputies in a visit she made to Albany; once to view an orientation DVD on the convention; once at the Province II Synod in Albany; once at a joint meeting with the diocesan Standing Committee and Rev. Philip Ashey of the American Anglican Council to hear about any issues we need to be aware of; and twice in the months before the convention to try to orient ourselves to the upcoming tasks.

In reality, I doubt that any level of preparation would have been sufficient to ready me for the experience of GenCon. The physical layout and size of the House (over 800 deputies), the highly legalistic structure used to conduct business and the overwhelming number of resolutions to read, organize, debate and consider (419 proposed, 316 acted upon) all contributed to some initial difficulty in establishing what possible impact I might have and how I might contribute anything to this effort! While I had come to the conclusion that our role there was to bear witness to God's Word and to our call to follow Jesus (as opposed to modifying our understanding of Scripture to conform to the ways of the world!), I found myself wondering how I might do so.

II. Day by Day

Tuesday, 7/7 -The first major function for us at convention was a joint presentation by the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies to both houses of the convention. It was an opportunity for us to see and hear the Presiding Bishop in person. She certainly made an impression on me, particularly her statement that "...the Great Western Heresy... [is] that we can be saved as individuals; that any of us alone can be in right relationship with God." I couldn't believe what I'd heard. Didn't Jesus Himself tell us that He is the way, the truth and the life? Did I miss something? I left

that session with a strong feeling that Katharine Jefferts Schori is an eloquent and obviously well-educated person whose theology is significantly anti-Christian. My fear is for the souls who will be lost under her leadership, deceived by her “teaching,” and led away from salvation through the Word.

The next session was the first of the “mission conversations through public narrative.” At our Province II meeting, we had done this before. The concept is to have each person around the table give a personal testimony, providing for interaction and communication from the group. Because of the size of our deputation, I had been assigned to a table nearby with a different group of people. The table coordinator (trained to facilitate the process) observed that I was from Albany and made it clear that I must be at the wrong table, since diocesan representatives were to sit together. I explained the situation to her, but was somewhat unimpressed with her level of openness and inclusiveness. I decided to opt out of any further sessions. In all honesty, my prior experience at the Province II meeting had given me the impression that, while people were cordial, they tended to use the opportunity to push their personal agendas rather than opening and being open to greater dialog. I view it as a way to attempt to appear open and listening, when that is really not the case (unless you share their views).

Deputy orientation basically laid out the operations of the house and the use of the voting devices. However, it also included a speech by Michael Battle, author of Ubuntu - I in You and You in Me. Ubuntu was the official theme of the convention. Mr. Battle stated that “we are not made in the image of God individually; we are made in the image of God in community.” According to his speech, all western philosophy is wrong and only Ubuntu is correct. In *my* opinion, all of this was just *his* opinion and his humanist theology fails to meet any God-centered litmus test. Between his comments and the Presiding Bishop’s comments, I began to get a feeling that the Episcopal Church is being moved strongly away from Christianity and toward humanism.

Wednesday, 7/8 - Legislative sessions were held from 8 to 10 am and 4:30 to 6 pm. We were seated next to the deputation from Dallas who generally shares our orthodox views. This was a blessing because, as extremely liberal comments or waste-of-time resolutions would come up, my grumbling would fall on somewhat sympathetic ears. Not much of significance legislatively was done. A number of procedural motions were passed, that would provide for the handling of what were viewed to be major issues later in the convention. Voting was held to approve new Bishops-elect for Long Island and South Dakota. The approval of the Bishop-elect for Ecuador Central was held up by an impassioned statement from a clergyperson from that area indicating that the election was unfair and not representative of the desires or needs of that diocese. The matter was tabled for a later session.

All deputies then had to pair up with someone they didn’t know to have a “mission conversation” about Resolution B033. This was the resolution passed at the previous general convention that indicated that the Episcopal Church would exercise some restraint and attempt to answer the Windsor recommendations. I paired off with one of the deputies from Dallas. I guess I needed to “blow off some steam,” because I let loose

that I thought that B033 was a slap in the face to the Anglican Communion, that the Episcopal Church is intent on doing whatever it wants to do without regard to the needs of or effect on the Communion, and that its litigation-happy attitude was an indication of just how far it's moving from being a Christian church. He just sat there and smirked at me, and I didn't know if he was going to agree, argue or just write me off as a "flamer." In any case, when I was done, I asked him what his views were on the matter. He then proceeded to tell me how much he felt the same way, elaborating on the issues. I think God knew I needed to vent, and gave me a supportive and sympathetic ear when I needed one.

In the middle of the day, the Opening Eucharist was held, with the Archbishop of Canterbury preaching. The ceremony attempted to be very splendid, but seemed to lack something. Archbishop Williams gave a somewhat uninspiring sermon. I left there feeling that he is probably a brilliant academic, but that he either lacks the conviction or the cojones to stand up and take necessary action to save the Communion in the name of the true Faith. One other thing worth noting: the Archbishop held a number of meetings during his stay here, including meetings with leaders of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered (GLBT) groups – but none with any orthodox groups.

We also had our first legislative update by the American Anglican Council (AAC) right after the Opening Eucharist. (Each day from here on, we would go over to a meeting room at a nearby hotel and have a noon Eucharist, lunch and a brief legislative update.) This day, we were advised of about upwards of 75 resolutions proposed that may impact the direction of the church and that we should watch. We also learned about the roles and responsibilities of the legislative monitors. I served as a legislative monitor for the Prayer Book, Liturgies and Music Committee. I attended these committee meetings, kept notes of topics and tone of discussions and any actions by the committee, and reported these back to the AAC for their inclusion in the daily updates. This turned out to be exhausting, but also very enlightening as to the workings of the convention and the thought processes and methods by which attempts would be made to pass specific legislation.

Thursday, 7/9 - This was a light day legislatively – we voted on a number of procedural motions and minor resolutions. In one of the sessions, we met as a "Committee of the Whole" to discuss B033. Some expressed concern about the negative effect repeal of B033 would have on the relationship with the Anglican Communion, but a larger number expressed that B033 doesn't reflect where the Episcopal Church is now or is going and should be repealed. There was no action to be taken here – just discussion. Two committee meeting sessions were held, but not a lot of significant action as of this time.

Friday, 7/10 - Two legislative sessions and two committee meeting sessions were held today. The only major issue to come up in legislative session was C064, Endorsement of the UN Earth Charter. Since no copies of the Earth Charter were provided (and therefore we didn't support it), this was referred to committee. At the AAC Update, we learned how to call for a Vote by Orders. The importance of this is that

our votes (as well as everyone else's) would be counted individually. Many of the votes were held by voice vote – leaving it up to the discretion and hearing of the President of the House to determine whether it passed. On significant issues, we wanted to be sure that our voice was accurately counted. The orthodox deputations we could use to call for a Vote by Orders were Albany, Dallas, Central Florida, South Carolina, Springfield and Fon du Lac.

This evening, with no committee meetings scheduled, our deputation decided to “escape the bubble” and attempt to see the Yankees play the Anaheim Angels. Unfortunately, no tickets were available, so we went to a sports pub and watched the game while having dinner. It felt very good to get away.

Saturday, 7/11 - Legislatively this day was very non-controversial. At the morning session, Jenny TePaa spoke to the Convention, proceeding to bash Western Culture and theology. After listening to her rail on about how we all bear responsibility for injustices to indigenous peoples, I was less than impressed. There seems to be a tendency by the convention planners to invite anyone with an axe to grind to “address” us. Unfortunately, I was less convicted by her accusations than I was upset that such people were wasting so much of our time!

This evening, we went to the Seminary dinner for Trinity and the reception for Nashotah House. Each was special in its own way, but both reminded us of just how few places there are to train clergy with any orthodox leaning! They both deserve and need our support.

Sunday, 7/12 - Today the major action of the House was to take up D025, Commitment and Witness to the Anglican Communion. This resolution effectively would repeal B033, stating that while the Episcopal Church remains committed to the Anglican Communion, it is its view that gays and lesbians living in committed relationships may be called to all ministries and recognized in the Episcopal Church. A 30 minute discussion was held, during which time 17 people spoke. In an effort to provide fairness, the President did alternate between “pro” speakers and “con” speakers. Because of this, the few of us (I believe three of us from Albany) in the “con” column were allowed to speak in lieu of the majority of “pro” speakers. In the end, the Vote by Orders was taken and the resolution passed to go to the House of Bishops for consideration.

This evening, there was a Prayer Book, Liturgy and Music Committee hearing on the series of resolutions concerning gay and lesbian union blessing liturgies. At this well-attended hearing, 30 people spoke (10 spoke in favor, 20 – including me – testified in opposition). However, in monitoring the meetings of this committee it became clear that it was predisposed to support these issues without regard to the hearings.

Monday, 7/13 - We received word that the House of Bishops had also passed D025. The House of Deputies took up the issue of the Bishop of Ecuador Central. While somewhat confusing, it appears that what happened was what needed to happen and

was done properly. Apparently the concerns were from people who just didn't like it. Anyway, the HOD approved him as well.

Tuesday, 7/14 - Today the HOD took up the Title IV revisions, setting new precedents and methodologies for clergy trial and discipline. Mthr. Ellen Neufeld was on the committee responsible for handling this resolution, and kept us up-to-date with the revisions. In the end, the final resolution was much less onerous than the original proposals, but still can represent some problems should TEC become even more discipline oriented. It passed relatively easily. We also took up "Holy Women, Holy Men," a set of alternative feasts and fasts for trial use. Among the problems with this were that it added so many names it was virtually impossible to review properly and it included people with marginal or questionable connections to Christianity or Anglicanism. Of course, this passed too.

An Abrahamic Blessing was sung today by representatives from local Jewish, Islamic and Christian organizations. It was nothing if not interesting, but I couldn't help but feel somewhat unsure of what they were praying for – Unity? Peace? One World Religion?

With committee meetings winding down, the deputation took a field trip to Disneyland this evening. Again, it was good to get out of the bubble. We got no pictures of Bishop Bill on Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, but we also couldn't account for his whereabouts all the time!

Wednesday, 7/15 - Today was Budget Day! A presentation on the budget indicated that the proposed budget reflects a 30% reduction (that's \$23 Million, folks!) from the current budget. We vote on it tomorrow. Lean times for the Episcopal Church – but still no disclosure of litigation expenses!

The HOD approved the Lay Pension Plan requirement for church employees working more than 20 hours a week. It also approved a resolution calling for *study* of Ridley-Cambridge Draft of the Anglican Covenant, but no provisional endorsement of it.

Thursday, 7/16 - The proposed budget is discussed and passed. A resolution, C023, which would have called upon the Church to call for the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act and fight against any similar state legislation, was referred back to committee in concurrence with the House of Bishops. However, it should be noted that there was strong sentiment in the House of Deputies to pass the resolution, reflecting again a high level of opposition to traditional marriage.

Friday, 7/17 - The major legislative item today was C056, a resolution that would authorize development of and discretionary use of rites for same-gender blessings. 35 minutes of discussion was allowed, with 17 in favor and 13 in opposition (including many of us). In the end, it passed by nearly a 3 to 1 margin in each of the orders.

III. General Observations

In general, GenCon 2009 was an exhausting experience. Physically, we were fairly close to the action, although there was a lot of walking each day between venues. Mentally, it proved to be challenging. As a novice, it took awhile to get acclimated to the procedures. Some of the senior deputies and committee chairs seemed to be quite willing to manipulate the schedules and the procedures to their advantage, leaving us (initially) scratching our heads. We did catch on, and were able to represent our diocese and our opinions more effectively.

It was also emotionally exhausting. We had been forewarned that there might be some hostility aimed at us due to our orthodox beliefs. Surprisingly, this was not the case. Instead, we were usually treated more with indifference to our presence than with hostility. Instead of an attitude where we were viewed as adversaries, we were treated more as the vanquished. There was nothing to be adversarial about since they were in total control and their agenda was going through. Any opinions we might express were inconsequential.

The atmosphere of the House of Deputies was that of a baby boomer reunion. In the House of Deputies, music was always playing as we entered and exited – just not Christian music. Cat Stevens’ “Moonshadow” strikes me as a somewhat peculiar choice, given the wide variety of Christian music available. Pre-session ‘meditations’ by the chaplain were just that – not prayers, but reflections.

The exhibit hall was quite a disappointment, but was reflective of the direction of TEC. One day I decided to go there to buy a Christian shirt (I was running out of laundry!). To my dismay, the only shirts I could find were by activist groups slamming American Imperialism, shirts with the Episcopal Church logo, or vestments (not for me!). The other thing I noticed about the exhibit hall was a pro-Palestinian and anti-Judaic tone. This was consistent with some of the resolutions proposed that could be called anti-Zionist and pro-Palestine.

IV. Personal Observations

All in all, I feel that I witnessed the exposition of a new international church - not a Christian Church, but a church worshipping itself and the world. It wasn't just born – it has apparently been in existence in many areas around the U.S. It is not the church I know or accept. In the Diocese of Albany, we uphold a traditional belief in Scripture, doctrine and ultimate faith in the power and authority of God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It appears that some of the current leadership in TEC have replaced that with faith in humanity and its ability to find salvation through works and belief in one another.

Prior to the convention, my feelings went from excitement to worry to conviction to resignation to slight hope (early on) to despair (toward the end). I also carried some worry about leaving my business for two weeks – my absence from my two-person hearing aid dispensary meant that there would be no income production

for those two weeks. However, God does provide. On the first Tuesday we were in Anaheim, I called my office and was advised that there were already five appointments for new consultations scheduling for when I return. (He did indeed provide, although it was very challenging trying to catch up!)

In the first few days of the convention, I personally felt as though there was something akin to a fog that had descended upon me – I began to question my cognitive ability to handle the things surrounding me. That fog lifted after a few days, but it was very disconcerting. I still don't know what hit me, but I'm thankful for God's deliverance and restoration.

At the convention, I was extremely proud to be a member of our deputation. We were given an opportunity to stand up and profess our beliefs, and we all did so as we saw opportunities. Our support for one another was an onsite exposition of God's love for us and our efforts.

The AAC Eucharists/Lunches/Updates were vital to my ability to get through the experience. As spiritually dry and demoralizing as many of the experiences each day were, the AAC was an oasis that gave me spiritual and moral refreshment.

Upon my return from the convention, I found that I carried some of the burden of the convention back with me. It took two weeks before I started to regain some of my perspective and could feel my personality getting back to normal (my wife noticed it, too.).

I guess the die is cast. It's interesting – for some time I've hoped that clarity would be given to the muddy issue of where we, the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion were going. Now that clarity has been provided from the TEC side with reference to scripture and the Anglican Communion, it's all thrown back on us. I believe that we must evaluate our positions within it as a diocese, as parishes and as Christians. There are many difficult issues to consider as we proceed.