

On the Bishop's Mind

September/October 2009

Church News

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Romans 8.18)

As you are reading this, another summer has come and gone. I hope that you were able to find some rest and relaxation along the way. We now move back into the busy rhythm of September to May, and I hope that a significant part of this rhythm for you is your active participation in the worship and ministry of your congregation.

As you know, I attended General Convention in Anaheim in July, along with Bishop Reed and your diocesan deputation. This edition of The Church News contains much information on the actions of General Convention, and I encourage you to read it thoroughly. Bishop Reed and I also sent some early reflections about General Convention (on July 20) and if you have not seen it, it can be found on our website (www.dwtx.org under the Current News section). I want to use this space to offer some context of where we are. There will be much more to say in the coming weeks and months as well.

We continue to be in a time of crisis with the Anglican Communion and The Episcopal Church. No one is beyond the reach of the pain that is being experienced, regardless of where you find yourself on the issues before us. I have pledged to respect the dignity of every human being following the example of Jesus. A part of this Christ-like example is to realize that both majorities and minorities need care and respect. Another important aspect is for a majority to seriously consider how it treats a minority. We are talking about issues, yes; but most importantly there are people behind every issue, and Jesus cares about all people.

Depending on the circumstances, we've all found ourselves in the majority on occasion and in the minority on other occasions. I was in the minority for several of the votes at General Convention. Being in the majority or in the minority is often a fleeting thing. A good spiritual exercise for each of us to consider is how we would like to be treated when we are the minority.

The fact is that faithful Christians can and do differ about human sexuality. This means that we have important and difficult work ahead as we seek the mind of Christ in how we shall live together. In light of the decisions of the General Convention, I want to offer a few words of assessment of the landscape here and elsewhere. Even though this article is longer than my usual column, I am not able to discuss each of the following in the detail they deserve. I do, however, offer them to you as a sort of "baseline" for consideration in our larger discussions in the months ahead.

1. The global reality

The Anglican Communion is one of the three largest Christian bodies in the world. While certainly having a strong history of diversity as the Anglican Communion, the current "diversity" we have faced for several years now threatens our Communion in ways previously unknown. This has kept us mired in confusion and division about the Anglican Church's witness both within the Communion and with our ecumenical partners. The actions of the recent General Convention have furthered this confusion and division and, in very real ways, threaten the place of The Episcopal Church within the Anglican Communion.

2. The provincial reality

The Episcopal Church is one of the "provinces" of the Anglican Communion, and we are a province in crisis. Over the past several years, some bishops and large parts of their dioceses have withdrawn from The Episcopal Church. Beyond that, some congregations have split or left the church. In addition, virtually every statistical marker in the most recent "State of the Church" report shows decline, and much of that is double-digit decline. While our disagreements regarding sexuality are serious contributors to this decline (35 percent of congregations responding to a church-wide

survey indicated a source of major conflict was over the decisions of the General Convention of 2003), this simply continues and makes worse an ongoing pattern over many years.

My own opinion about the ongoing reasons for this decline on the provincial level include, but are not limited to, a lack of genuine interest in and commitment to evangelism (sharing the good news of Jesus) and no clear vision as a provincial church of dioceses working together in mission. This is acknowledged in the State of the Church report which states that, “under 20 percent of our congregations report active evangelism programs and less than 5 percent report that evangelization is a congregational specialty”; and “lack of understanding of identity by many in our church (laity, bishops, and clergy) also adds to a sense of confusion...” Ask most Episcopalians about the articulated vision of the “national church” and you get a blank stare – not because they don’t know the answer, but rather because there is no articulated vision on the national level which can be seen as our corporate mission and identity.

3. The diocesan reality

As I have previously stated, the Diocese of West Texas is a diverse and complicated lot. Before and since General Convention, I have heard from people across the theological spectrum regarding human sexuality. We have members sitting in our pews who have vastly different thoughts about how Jesus views the issue of homosexuality. Certainly the actions of this past General Convention move The Episcopal Church beyond the moratoria (on ordaining partnered homosexuals as bishops and blessing same-sex unions) which had been requested and, for the most part, had been in place over the past several years. Some in West Texas see this movement as welcome news, others as a clear departure not only from the moratoria, but from the biblical teaching about homosexuality. Still others say that the Church has redefined its teaching and understanding on other matters (the ordination of women and remarriage of divorced persons, for example); and that the Church’s understanding and teaching regarding homosexuality deserves the same reconsideration.

In spite of our differences on this subject, we in the the Diocese of West Texas have done an outstanding job of holding our life together in mission and ministry. I compared West Texas to the other 100 domestic dioceses in the State of the Church report to see how we were measuring up in these challenging years. Numbers are not the most important thing in the Church, but they are important indicators which can inform us about ourselves as well as others. For like comparisons, I did not include those dioceses (12) which are part of our province but are in different countries.

For changes from 2003-2007 (most recent available), West Texas is ranked near the top in the four categories in the State of the Church report. Some of this information means we’re doing well; some of it simply means we’re not in as much decline as others. Nonetheless, we continue to show remarkable resiliency in our many ministries and in our life together as a diocesan family, and we can rejoice in that.

For percentage change from 2003-2007 our numbers are as follows: Communicants in Good Standing (-1.4 percent, ranked 12th out of 100); Average Sunday Attendance (-4.5 percent, ranked 7th nationally); Active Members (+1.5 percent, ranked 5th with only 6 domestic dioceses showing any growth); Plate and Pledge Income (+16.9 percent, ranked 10th out of 100).

Our overall diocesan size (out of this same 100 dioceses) when measuring Active Members is 26th (28,071); Communicants in Good Standing, 26th (21,844); Average Sunday Attendance, 24th (10,147); Operating Income, which is all congregations in a diocese added together, not diocesan budgets, 23rd (\$25,653,639).

4. The congregational reality

For most Christians, the local congregation is where the communal aspect of the Christian life is experienced most often. I have heard from many clergy following General Convention. Most are concerned about the road ahead, whether they are in agreement or in disagreement with the actions of General Convention. Some have devoted much time and energy over the past several years engaging these important issues.

The disagreements before the Communion have had an impact on parish life. At the same time, there is danger in letting these disagreements define a congregation or for individual persons to become totally focused on these to the

exclusion of all else. I want to exhort each of you to do all in your power to strengthen and equip your congregation to be a strong partner with Christ and to be actively involved with making a difference in your community. Whatever our current disagreements may be, there is a timeless and very important theological component to building up the body of Christ. We are called into Christian community so that the body may be built up by the gifts of the various members, and I want to encourage you to generously share the gifts that you possess.

5. The individual reality

In the final analysis, each individual Christian will need to decide how important these issues are to him or her in the overall understanding of his or her personal faith in Jesus. These decisions need to be shaped by Scripture, by prayer, and in sacred conversation with both those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree. On one level, it does appear that we have irreconcilable points of view on the issue of homosexuality. I suppose an important question for individual Christians is therefore, “The points of view may be irreconcilable, but does this mean that individual people – called together by Christ through baptism but who differ on matters of homosexuality – are likewise irreconcilable?” I hope not, but I cannot answer for you.

The real story of our diocese is told in people and in their transformation. Since returning from General Convention, I have attended and celebrated Eucharists, been present at a baptism, visited camp sessions at both Camp Capers and Mustang Island (twice each), been active in planning two upcoming mission trips (one in which I’ll participate in November), attended a “packed house” Happening Closing service in Corpus Christi, preached a couple of sermons, met with clergy and laity on a variety of topics, worked on our clergy conference, attended our Cursillo staff planning meeting (I’m the Spiritual Director on the October Cursillo), and a host of other things too numerous to mention. Our 26 Episcopal Schools are preparing for the school year, and our churches are gearing up for fall programs. In other words, life goes on! As I move about the diocese, even in the summer, I see and appreciate all that we have here; and I am committed to strengthening it every day. The sun still rises each morning and with it our call to Christ’s work in God’s world.

So, what does all of this mean? Where are we and where are we headed? I have called a special meeting of the elected leadership of the diocese (The Executive Board, The Standing Committee, The Trustees of the Church Corporation, and the Diocesan Deputation to General Convention) on September 9 to address the questions of the broader Communion as well as life in West Texas. You are blessed with gifted lay and clergy leadership which serve this diocese through these elected offices, and I am looking forward to being with them in September as we discuss our life together.

I will continue to communicate with you following the September 9 meeting and throughout the fall as we determine how we can continue to be witnesses for Christ in this part of the world.

In summary, yes there are (in the words of St. Paul to the Romans) “sufferings of this present time.” There are also glimpses of “the glory that is to be revealed to us” and I wish that you could see it from my perspective, for you would rejoice in the breadth and excitement that is present in our diocesan life together. This is not mere wishful thinking, but active ministry that continues to grow day by day. In this, to paraphrase 1 Peter 1.21, “I have confidence in God, who raised Jesus from the dead and gave him glory, so that my faith and hope is in God. “ And God is precisely the place where our faith and hope should rest.

Faithfully,
Rt. Rev. Gary Lillibridge