

The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas

Bishop's Charge – Council, 2005

Introduction

We are privileged to gather in this 101st meeting of the Annual Council of the Diocese of West Texas hosted by the people who are St. Alban's Church, Harlingen, ably assisted by the people who are St. Andrew's Church, Port Isabel.

We are indebted to Judy and Greg Quisenberry, general Co-Chairs of Council, to the Rev. David Reed, rector of St. Alban's Church, and to the dozens and dozens of parish volunteers who, with the Rev. Phil Taylor and the volunteers from St. Andrew's Church, have labored long and hard to make provision for our every need.

We are so grateful.

I would ask that those of you present, who are St. Alban's Church and St. Andrew's Church, please stand that we might recognize you.

Task Force on Mission and Ministry

You have already heard and acted on several reports on various facets of the mission and ministry of the church in the Diocese of West Texas, and you will hear even more tomorrow.

None of those reports are more important than the report you received yesterday from the Task Force on Mission and Ministry chaired by Mr. Richard Mosty and Mr. Ted Burkhart.

This task force was charged by Council two years ago to "examine all program areas of diocesan-wide ministry and to seek to determine their effectiveness in supporting the mission and ministry of local congregations and . . . to search for ways and means by which we can use the financial resources of the diocese more effectively in the building up of the church."

The hard and diligent work of this task force has gained for us insight and wisdom which will be of great and ongoing value to this diocese for years to come, and I am so very grateful to Richard Mosty, Ted Burkhart, and the Task Force for their diligent and faithful work.

The Windsor Report

I need not tell you that the past several years have been difficult ones in the life of the Episcopal Church.

The divisions occasioned by the election and confirmation of the bishop of New Hampshire have tested us severely.

But I do believe that the beginnings of our present indisposition were evident even back in 1996 when we gathered in Council, long before Bishop Robinson.

I observed in that meeting of Council that “Those things which divide us are (now) permitted by some to be exalted over the Lord who unites us.”

And, that while “our divisions are indeed serious . . . they pose a danger to us far out of proportion to their importance.”

We resolved in that meeting of Council that we would “. . . not permit this present controversy to sap our energy or divert us from our purpose.”

We further resolved to be determined “. . . together, right now, in our hearts, minds, and spirits, that we (would) not permit this (present) divisiveness . . . to hamper in any way the pursuit of the (missionary) vision that is before us.”

Further, we resolved in our meeting of Council just this past year that we would under no circumstances cut our relationship with the Episcopal Church (Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society) or the Anglican Communion.

We would not align ourselves with any consortium of Dioceses or any religious political action groups who seek a status separate from the Episcopal Church in the United States of America or from the Anglican Communion.

I declared to you that we would make determined effort to remember that the primary purpose of the Church is to make the Christ known to those who know Him not.

Only in so doing can the world truly be transformed, which is our purpose.

To accomplish this purpose is the mission of the church.

To make the Christ known to those who know Him not is the mark of our mission integrity.

And in the doing of that mission, we must always take care to maintain that integrity.

I also said to you that in order to maintain that integrity, we would even be prepared, if necessary, to go it alone for a while, yet always willing to cooperate with anyone in the serious mission and ministry of this church.

I can report to you that we have, in good measure, been faithful to and determined in the keeping of those resolves.

Our commitment to, and involvement in, world mission, as you heard from Betty Chumney yesterday, is profound and extensive.

Our congregations, with few exceptions, are healthy, strong, and focused.

And our parish clergy are to be highly commended, for they have borne the burden in the heat of the day, and they have borne it well and with consummate grace.

During these past two years, they have evidenced true God-given leadership by responding rather than reacting.

They have been a corporate, non-anxious presence, bearing witness in the midst of what for many of them have been times of great unrest and turmoil.

Many of them have had to endure the slings and arrows of huge amounts of misdirected anger, and they have done so with great forbearance and patience.

I am immensely proud of them and grateful for them.

The Windsor Report has now been delivered to the church and has been received by the Archbishops and Primates of the Anglican Communion.

The Report's criticism of the Episcopal Church in the United States is clear and pointed.

It makes a cogent case that the Episcopal Church in this country did not make a serious attempt to consult meaningfully with the Communion as a whole about the significant development of theology which alone could justify the election and consecration of a priest in a same-gender relationship.

Some of the most helpful reflections in the Windsor Report have to do with the nature of communion, and in particular, what autonomy means in the setting of the Anglican Communion.

The Report distinguishes between autonomy and sovereignty, and stresses that autonomy has to do with freedom in relation to others, and not with the sovereign right to make one's own decisions regardless of others.

The Report recommends development of an Anglican Covenant to be adopted by all Communion churches and even suggests a model for such a covenant.

The Report strongly implies that Bishop Gene Robinson of New Hampshire will not be invited to the next Lambeth Conference.

“The Archbishop (of Canterbury) has the right to call or not to call to (the Lambeth Conference and Primates Meeting) whomsoever he believes is appropriate, in order to safe-guard and take counsel for the well-being of the Anglican Communion. . . .”

(He may) “invite participants to the Lambeth Conference on restricted terms at his sole discretion.”

The Report also urges the Archbishop, in relation to Bishop Robinson, “to exercise considerable caution in inviting or admitting him to the councils of the Communion.”

The Report recommends that the Episcopal Church be invited to express its regret that “the proper constraints of the bonds of affection were breached” in the consecration of Robinson and for the consequences which followed.

The Report says that such an expression of regret would represent the desire of ECUSA to remain in the Communion.

The Report also invites ECUSA to affect a moratorium on consecrating any candidate to the episcopate “who is living in a same-gender union until some new consensus in the Anglican Communion emerges.”

The Report asks those bishops who have intervened without invitation to minister to dissenting congregations in dioceses not their own to express regret for doing so, to affirm their desire to remain in communion, and to effect a moratorium on any further interventions.

Whether we Americans, who are so accustomed to going our own way politically, as well as in our ecclesiastical policies, can live with these recommendations remains to be seen.

I think the Windsor report provides us a wonderful basis and opportunity for the re-establishment of a necessary and broad-based middle ground within the church, a middle ground that was effectively wiped out by the election in New Hampshire and the confirmation of that election by General Convention.

Bishop Lillibridge and I are encouraged and look forward to next month’s meeting of the American House of Bishops and the corporate response we will make to that Report.

In all candor I must share with you that those in the House of Bishops who represent positions to the very far left and to the very far right in our present indisposition seem to have their feet so firmly set in concrete as to be immovable.

For them we will pray, but we will not permit them to control what we do.

Rather than be co-opted by either political extreme, we will continue to be prepared, if necessary, to go it alone for a while in the mission and ministry of the church.

In 1996 I called upon us to remember that “. . . our ancient enemy, the devil, is not nearly so much concerned with the outcome of any specific issue, but rather that over an issue we should begin to hate and fear one another, that over an issue we should cease to be part of the church catholic and become (instead) a conventicler of the self-identified and self-identifying righteous.”

No doubt, we are in a time of turmoil and change.

Turmoil and change are not new experiences for the church.

During demanding times in ages past, the Church has persevered by keeping faith with the one and only Son of God, and in doing so, has always emerged as a stronger and more faithful body.

I would encourage you to expect no less in our present time.

The Godly Admonitions

At Council last year, and in order to focus us ever more clearly on our central purpose as the church, I admonished each of our ninety-two congregations once again to share their mission and ministry plans with the diocese at large.

These plans were submitted to the Bishop’s office by Ash Wednesday a year ago.

An interim report on the progress of those plans was to be submitted by Thanksgiving.

Copies of both have been distributed to you today, and I commend them to your careful reading.

The purpose of this exercise is two fold: first, to encourage us to be diligent and determined in our mission and ministry planning; and second, to give us yet one more opportunity to learn from one another.

Please do read these reports carefully; taking note of those congregations who are doing the particular kinds of mission and ministry work that you would like to be doing in your own congregation.

Then, get in touch with those folks, and learn from them.

There is abundant wisdom and experience in this diocese.

We have so much that we can learn from one another, and this is another excellent way to do it.

I would again admonish each congregation to report to the Bishop and the Executive Board by Thanksgiving of this year your updated plans for mission and ministry as well as a reflection on the progress you have made in living into those plans.

Diocesan Development Program

Tomorrow you will receive from Alice Sallee a full report on the progress of the Diocesan Development Program, that marvelous and effective means by which we are able continually, now, to hold before the diocese the capital needs of the church.

You well know that in the first phase of this program, which was completed in 2003, we set out to raise 11.7 million dollars, and ended up raising 12.1 million.

An expanded Development Committee has been hard at work this past year discerning the case for the next phase of this program, and it is exciting.

I don't want to steal any of Alice Sallee's thunder, but I do want to offer an explanation for a portion of that report which at first you may find puzzling.

And that is the part that has to do with Camp Capers.

For some time, now, it has become apparent to many of us that Camp Capers is steadily being compromised by the increasing real estate development around it.

One mile up the road is the first phase of a multi-phased new housing development. Realtors in the Boerne area have shared with us word of even more housing developments planned on the road between Comfort and Waring.

Quite frankly, I am concerned that we may not want or be able to stay long term in our present location.

Subdivisions and youth camps are, for the most part, mutually exclusive. Therefore, I have recommended to the Development Committee that we put a temporary hold on any further major improvements to Camp Capers until the Department of Camps and Conferences accomplishes a thorough study of this matter.

And I would ask this Council to direct the Department to embark upon such a study and report back to us next year.

We can then direct the Diocesan Development Committee to begin addressing the clearly defined needs of Camp Capers.

Conclusion

I would conclude my remarks to you this year with word of my intention to retire as Bishop of West Texas effective January 31, 2006.

To have had the great privilege and high honor to be bishop of this diocese is an extraordinary personal blessing to me, and one for which I will be forever grateful.

I am well aware that over these past years I have not always loved you wisely or loved you well, but God knows, I do love you.

Together, by His good grace, we have in these past years borne witness to the Risen Christ and have moved this diocese well along in her mission and ministry.

But it is also obvious that there is so much left to do.

At Council last year we laid hands on Gary Lillibridge and, with God's blessing, declared him to be our Bishop Coadjutor, the one who is to follow after me, even as I followed after John MacNaughton,

and he followed after Scott Field Bailey,

and he followed after Harold Gosnell,

and he followed after Everett Jones,

and he followed after William Theodatus Capers,

and he followed after James Steptoe Johnston,

and he followed after Robert Elliott ---

all of us in the lineage of the blessed Apostles, and all blessed beyond measure to be called to mission and ministry in this diocese.

Bishop Lillibridge is now the latest, and we are blessed.

During the course of this year he will continue his preparation for the assumption of this office.

To that end, I have asked him to take a mini-sabbatical of one month in late spring or early summer, and spend that time in serious meditation and reflection on the critically important ministry which will all to soon become his responsibility.

This will not be a vacation month.

I expect he will spend a good part of this month on his knees, consciously in the presence of his Lord.

It is his intention and mine that this transition be seamless.

In September I will yield to him most of the primary administrative responsibilities of the Bishop's Office.

And, in order to assure that he will have sufficient support in this office, I would announce to you the call for a special session of this Council to convene on Saturday, October 15, 2005, for the purpose of electing and calling forth a Suffragan Bishop for this diocese.

I would ask this Council by resolution to direct the Standing Committee to oversee this election process in the manner normally used by the Diocese of West Texas.

You who are delegates to this Council will be the delegates for this Special Council.

Consecration of the suffragan bishop-elect would then, God willing, be on or about January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany

And finally, the blessing which you have afforded me of being your bishop is a blessing I have been able to appropriate only because forty years ago I married up, a fact for which I am, and remain, profoundly aware and grateful.

Whatever blessing I may have been to you these past years is due hugely to the love, support, encouragement, patience, and endurance --- mile after endless mile --- of Sandy Folts.

She is my best friend, the love of my life.

I owe her a lot, and so do you.

It is true; this is not a tranquil time in the church, and I can personally attest to that.

But it is a time that offers us marvelous new opportunities, marvelous new mission opportunities.

I am confident that we can and will emerge as a more faithful and committed body.

My prayer is that we will stay the course, that together we will be a corporate, non-anxious presence, and in so doing, permit the Lord to continue His abundant blessing upon His church.

Let us go forward, now, into this new year, a year filled with prospects for exciting change and new possibilities, sure in the knowledge that we continue to walk in the very presence of our Lord, Himself, the One whom we know to be the ultimate and primary source of all of our blessings.

AMEN