

A letter to the St Paul's Fairfield family about the 2006 General Convention of the Episcopal Church (USA)

After debating and adopting scores of resolutions and becoming the first major denomination in the United States to elect a woman to lead it, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church ended with an almost unparalleled joint session of the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies (Clergy and Laity). The purpose of the extraordinary session was to do everything possible to adopt a last-minute resolution that would respond to conservative bishops around the world, and their U. S. allies, who objected to the 2003 consecration of a partnered gay man as bishop of New Hampshire. Earlier versions a similar response had failed to receive the majority vote in both Houses required for adoption.

The last-minute resolution apologized for the strain that our 2003 action caused within some of the branches of the Anglican Communion—some 77 million members located around the world in nations that were once part of the British Empire, of which the Episcopal Church has some 2.3 million. The resolution also called upon the dioceses of our branch of the Church, the Episcopal Church (USA), “to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion.” The resolution was a compromise in the spirit of classical Anglicanism.

But it pleased no one—not even many who voted for it. Conservatives at home and abroad wanted an apology for the New Hampshire consecration and a pledge not to consecrate any more bishops living in same-gender partnered relationships. Progressives wanted an affirmation of the New Hampshire decision and authorization for blessing same-gender unions and developing official liturgies for such ceremonies.

The result, speaking historically, is a watershed moment for the Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church within it. Speaking personally, for gay and lesbian priests who are doing their utmost to live holy lives in partnered relationships, it is something altogether more intense: a crisis that threatens the heart of their faith and personhood, the conviction that God made them the person they are and called them to be a priest.

In the abstract, the crisis has to do with the interpretation of the Bible, with Church tradition, with conservative versus progressive politics, and with negotiating stances within the international councils of the Church. But for faithful lesbian and gay people, the crisis is intensely personal, amounting to a repudiation of their faith, their devotion to the Gospel, and their vocation of life-surrendering service to the Church. For all of us, the issue has faces, faces of people we know and respect and love: priests who serve with us, committed same-gender couples who worship with us, gay and lesbian adults and teens who are valued members of our community of faith.

So how does this current moment in the 450 year old life of the Anglican Communion affect us at St. Paul's? It is first of all, like any crisis, an opportunity: an opportunity to reaffirm everything we stand for as a community that, as our motto puts it, is “open, vital,

committed.” We affirm our gay and lesbian members; we walk together in the Way of the Cross. We declare what we have witnessed, that a partnered lesbian priest leads not only a holy but indeed an inspiring life. We declare our continuing commitment to justice in law and equal standing in church for all faithful people.

We reaffirm our ties to the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut and the Episcopal Church in the United States and the polity that has served us well since we declared independence from Great Britain. We celebrate what we have accomplished as a Church, including prophetic leadership on other matters of justice—including civil rights for people of color and rights for women. We celebrate all the good work this General Convention managed to complete and put in motion.

We reaffirm our ties to the Anglican Communion, and offer prayers for the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Primates of the thirty-eight provinces around the world as we together with them continue a process of conversation that will unfold over the next five or more years. No one can predict what the Anglican Communion will look like or stand for then, or exactly how the Episcopal Church will fit within it.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has perhaps the most challenging of tasks. The lengthy theological reflection that he published after our General Convention ended suggests to me an image of a man trying to fashion a harness that will hold two very powerful and contrary-minded horses together: one horse bound and determined to run back to the nineteenth century and join the Roman Catholic Church in setting the authority of the Church over against the perceived threats of science and biblical scholarship to its authority; and the other horse bound and determined to run ahead into the twenty-first century, preaching and being committed to a timeless message of the Gospel.

Accordingly, we reaffirm the historic and now never more timely association of the Episcopal Church and Anglican theology with the intellectual acuity and flexibility that makes of scientific discovery and biblical scholarship not enemies but allies, and we look not backward to the nineteenth century but ahead to the twenty-first.

We embrace our wounded sisters and brothers and pledge to continue to struggle with them for equality in the law and in the church. And we go on as God’s people. There are babies to be baptized, children and youth to teach, adults to inspire and encourage, couples to bless; worship to delight in, and the Gospel to preach; the hungry to feed, the homeless to house, and the destitute to clothe. We have a world to reconcile to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We will focus our attention on being a parish church in a needy world, and remain in this unfolding conversation too, committed to working for truth and peace and justice both locally and globally.

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Rector
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