

Bishop Johnson's Thoughts on General Convention Issues

July 11, 2003

Dear Clergy and Lay Diocesan Leaders,

With the 74th General Convention only weeks away, the volume (both in sound and quantity) of comments and correspondents has predictably increased. Almost without exception, these responses are related to what the Church has, should or ought to affirm about issues of human sexuality. In summary, there are basically two positions espoused: we're for it or we're against it. Confusion seems to deepen when, to paraphrase one public figure's comments from the not too distant past, we are asked to define what "it" is.

Many of our diocesan clergy have offered thoughtful reflections on these matters and have arrived at different conclusions often citing the same resources. I appreciate these contributions to our ongoing discussion. To date, I am thankful to report that very few observations have been mean-spirited and, in a word, un-Christian, and these comments have not come from our clergy or lay leaders. I know that one such statement is being circulated and that it is demeaning of the personhood of persons with a homosexual orientation. I condemn such mean-spiritedness on either side of the issue at a time when it is difficult enough to find a Godly way forward in this very divisive debate.

So that you will be clear, I ask you to recall the position I have publicly held prior to, during and since being called as your bishop just over two years ago. I am theologically conservative around issues of human sexuality and still affirm the traditional teachings of the Church in this regard. I have shared this point of view in settings ranging from meetings with my friends on the Integrity board, as well as with those who hold more traditional views around this constellation of issues.

Yet I take seriously my responsibility as chief pastor of the Diocese for all those among whom we serve side by side. Holding this commitment to bear witness to the faith of the Church that we claim together as Christians, while at the same time recognizing that there is no way that one can successfully stand in two places at the same time, is the reality that we face as we go to General Convention. This is not the first, nor will it be the last time that Christendom has been called to discern what it means to follow Christ as savior and sovereign. As the old saw has it, "Everybody wants a savior. Nobody wants a lord." It is into this relationship of letting Christ be Lord of our lives that we are again called to act in faith, trust and Christian love, even when we disagree on how to proceed.

Flannery O'Connor told a story about a little girl who loved to visit one of the sisters in a convent. But every time the nun gives her a hug, the crucifix on Sister's belt gets

mashed into the child's face. Reflecting on this image, Richard Lischer observed, "The gesture of love always leaves a mark." In baptism, each of us (even the ones with whom we disagree) is "marked as Christ's own forever." The gesture of love always leaves a mark. Let's not forget that this mark, made with the sign of the cross, is one we have received and are to bear witness to each day. I hope that you will read my article in the *Church News* and on the website in this spirit. – +Don

Church News Article Summer 2003

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As has long been taught in The Episcopal Church, we are convinced that "as we pray, so we believe." In Franklin Ferguson's introduction to the Episcopal Church, *A Pilgrimage in Faith*, he makes reference to "The Characteristic Act." He describes it as follows: "All institutions have some kind of corporate act which represents and sets forth as a drama that community's purpose or reason for being. In the Acts of the Apostles, it is said that the early Christians 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers' (Acts 2:42)."

Ferguson extrapolated from this passage the nature of the worshiping community we are called to be. I have often cited this passage as a one sentence definition of the work of the Church as we gather week by week in this our most characteristic act. Nearly every Sunday, as I go on my round of visitations, this verse is claimed again and again as part of our renewal in the Baptismal Covenant. I ask if those assembled will continue in "the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers." Their response each time is, "I will, with God's help."

Doesn't this sum up the work we are about as Christ's people in The Diocese of West Tennessee, in the Church nationally and in the context of our participation in the world-wide Anglican Communion of which we are a part? I believe it does. This "characteristic act" we are called accomplish "with God's help" constitutes us as the Church bearing witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord of life.

It is against this unchanging call and mission that we gather in counsel this summer at General Convention. Issues relating to human sexuality (specifically, the proposed blessing of same-sex unions, the ordination of practicing homosexual persons, and the consent process for the election of Canon Gene Robinson as the next bishop of New Hampshire) threaten to overshadow the other important work we are called to do as members of the community seeking God's guidance in matters of faith, order and compassion.

However, many important decisions will be made that do not focus on issues of human sexuality, and these will have significant implications for how we will live together as the Church. Poverty, abuse, neglect and selfishness will be on our agenda. Stewardship, evangelism and ministry development will also be presented for our considered action.

Our decision about these areas will affect the well being of many more in our communities than those affected by our decisions on issues of human sexuality. These should be at the forefront of our personal hopes and corporate confessions as the Church.

With God's help, we are being called to amend our lives and to awaken hope for those who have no one to plead their case. Race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, sex, marital status, sexual orientation, disabilities or age are among the areas we are called to prayerfully address. Episcopalians will disagree about how, when or whether we should address the various concerns raised by each of these expressions of our shared humanity. Yet we are called to prayerfully wrestle with the concerns and to consider God's will for us in these matters at this time.

For those persons supportive of the proposed changes to our community's traditional biblical and historic understanding about homosexuality, this convention presents a time of hope. Many members of our community have spoken of the time being right to decide on these issues, that the cause is just and that the personalities being considered for affirmation are fine examples of Christian life and witness. Others are just as convinced that the time is not right to make this decision. I tend to be of this persuasion.

As a bishop, I do not see these issues as being primarily "a matter of justice." Rather, I believe they are principally a matter of theological perspective. At least two such perspectives are being proposed for our consideration. While respecting those who differ with me, I do not believe that the Church is of a mind at this time, either locally, nationally or internationally, to affirm these changes in our traditional teachings around these issues. For these reasons, I will not be voting in support of making these changes at this Convention. However, I am committed to staying in touch with those who differ with me in this regard.

While we do not know what the final outcome of the voting will be, I am confident that we will find a way forward together as a diocese. With the tried and true Anglican genius for holding differing points of view in tension while at the same time continuing to be faithful in our mission as the Church, I trust that God will lead us to a new place of creative expression as we serve the community and world in which we have been planted as witnesses to the teachings of Christ.

As you are probably aware, each deputy to General Convention must vote his or her own conscience on the various issues brought before us. Therefore, deputies from their respective dioceses are not voting as instructed from "back home" or by their bishop. I trust God to guide us as our decisions are made prayerfully and faithfully.

"Clarifying what is our task determines what is to be the nature of our community." I recently rediscovered this quote in an old file of sermon illustrations. While it was not attributed to anyone in particular, I think it fair to attribute its conclusion to the discussion of the issues we are facing as The Episcopal Church at this time. What is our task as the Church? What is our task as Episcopal Christians? The answer will reveal the nature of

the community in which we are continually being called to live, move and have our being.

What is the task we have been given? The answer is found in our service of confirmation, a distillation of our baptismal covenant made as mature persons of Christian faith. We are to renounce evil and renew our commitment to Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. The community determined by this task is one in which our personal and corporate sins are named and where forgiveness is sought and claimed because God in Christ has made it so. This information is not new to our consideration. However, we must remember to not overlook the obvious while the press of the urgent seeks to draw our attention away from the basics of our common faith.

I ask your prayers for our diocesan deputation, for all the deputations and for the bishops of the Church who will be called to make the decisions that will be set before us. I ask your prayers for me as your bishop as I seek to hear Christ's call, and with God's help, respond to it in Christian faith, hope and charity. I trust God to lead us, and I am certain that, in the end, God will inspire us to new opportunities to be a people united in our common witness to Christ's love.

+Don

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