

Reflections on the 77th General Convention of The Episcopal Church from the Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane, Bishop of Maine

Many articles have been written about our recent General Convention, but I thought it might be helpful to some in the Diocese of Maine if I added my own reflections.

I've attended every General Convention since the Convention in Detroit in 1985. This Convention was the most irenic one I can remember. That's not to say that people agreed on every issue. Folks often disagreed with great passion, but they did so civilly and with mutual respect. In part this was due to the hard work and good modeling of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music which made a sustained effort to reach out to people on all sides of the same sex blessing issue. The Presiding Officers and the Chairs of many of the legislative committees also made concerted efforts to preside calmly and even-handedly. As a result, folks on the losing side of voting decisions often expressed gratitude for being listened to and respected and for being fully included in the decision-making process. I think, perhaps, that The Episcopal Church has matured to the point that we recognize we have no expendable members.

This Convention also seemed to recognize when we weren't ready to make a decision. On the matter of same sex blessings, the Convention felt ready and moved ahead. But in several other areas, like revising Title IV or reducing the financial asking of dioceses below 19%, the Convention decided we needed more experience and study. The primary example of this restraint was the Convention's decision not to vote on the Anglican Covenant. Despite widespread belief before Convention that The Episcopal Church would vote the Covenant down, wholly or in part, we discovered that there was no significant consensus about what to do. Deputies weren't sure what any vote would mean in light of the Church of England's decision not to affirm the Covenant. So we decided not to decide and to continue in conversation and discernment with the other Provinces of the Anglican Communion. In the weeks since the Convention, I've come to regard this decision as a wise one.

Mission is a buzzword in The Episcopal Church. We all speak of becoming more missionally oriented. But it's clear we understand the word in the fullness described in our catechism - participation in God's mission of reconciliation. And that moves us well beyond simplistic notions of outreach or social justice. Much of the conversation at Convention revolved around the need for lifelong Christian formation and the need for congregations to help members live faithfully and missionally. People can advocate for justice only if they're spiritually prepared to do so. Considerable support was given at this Convention for lifelong learning, for the education of clergy, particularly clergy representing indigenous people and other minority groups, and for education with youth and young adults.

The General Convention authorized a service of same sex blessing, as expected. It made clear in doing so that the service is not a marriage service in disguise and may not be used for purposes other than the blessing of same sex couples. The service

must be authorized by the diocesan bishop, and its use will be reported to the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music. No church or clergy person can be required to hold at such a service, and no penalty may be imposed for declining to do so. The Convention made a number of changes to the text of the blessing rite, so a final text will not be available for several months. I will meet with the clergy of this diocese this fall to discuss the rite and its implications for our ministry in Maine. (The Convention also called for a study of marriage both as a civil act and a rite of the church. Our own study of marriage, which will be sent by the diocesan Task Force to churches and available online in the coming days, should fit well with that study.)

Probably the most significant conversation at the General Convention revolved around the need for The Episcopal Church to be a new church for a new day. Nearly everyone agreed that some sort of major reform is needed, but there was little agreement about what that reform might be. Much of the discussion was reminiscent of the conversations we've been having in Maine for the past several years, so we Mainers felt well-equipped to participate - and perhaps a little ahead of the curve! After hearings and intense discussion, the Convention determined to appoint a special task force, including people outside the normal leadership of the church, to consider the matter broadly and to make recommendations to the next General Convention. The Episcopal Church has used this method twice before in its history in addressing major matters, and I believe most deputies and bishops think this is the most responsible and practical way to address reform.

My work with Program, Budget and Finance was closely connected with the conversation on reform. Should we hold the line the on budget while the church considers change or should we make changes through the budget? In the end, PB&F did a little of both. We reorganized the budget according the Five Marks of Mission, using the template created by the Presiding Bishop's Office, but we drew numbers for the budget from all the proposals we had received. We restored funding for lifelong formation and youth and young adults, for the MDGs, for the College for Bishops, and for the General Board of Examining Chaplains. We expanded funding for mission partners and poor dioceses. We held the line on the asking from the dioceses, but asked the leadership of the church to plan for both a reduced asking in the 2016-18 triennium. I believe we listened well to the church and balanced competing concerns as gracefully as possible.

There's much more that should be said about the Convention. Some wonderful sermons were preached at our daily eucharists. Of particular note were sermons by Bishop Michael Curry and the Rev. Stephanie Spellers, and by the Presiding Bishop. The schedule was impossibly tight, but we still found time for fellowship and fun together. Many in our deputation managed to squeeze in a meal together late each day. Despite fears that there wouldn't be enough time, I think we actually found time to do what we needed to do.

Your deputation was very present and worked incredibly hard both in committees and on the floor of the House of Deputies. They were well-respected for their contributions

and are very knowledgeable about what happened at Convention. I hope you will call on them for conversation and education in your congregation. I'm incredibly proud to be part of the deputation from Maine.

It's our belief, some might say, our conceit, that when The Episcopal Church gathers in Convention we gather in the presence of the Holy Spirit, and that our decisions are guided by the Spirit through prayer, worship, discussion and debate. I felt this to be more true at this Convention than I've ever experienced before. Amidst all the passion and disagreement there was a palpable sense that we were all trying to discern the truth as the Spirit gave us the light. And because we disagree, and any of us might well be mistaken, we're learning to hold our "truth" with a bit of humility. We need all the voices among us to approximate God's truth. I believe we the decisions of General Convention reflect the Spirit's presence, and I'm grateful to have been there.

+Stephen T. Lane
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