

Unified in Worship

At the Convention there were daily Community Eucharist services that were magnificent in their music and sermons. Imagine 4,000 voices, led by a choir of 200, accompanied by brass and organ, thundering out, “Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the Head and Cornerstone...binding all the Church in one;...,” All eight verses, concluding “...great Jehovah, great Jehovah, form our hearts and make them thine.” This was the opening hymn at the Sunday Eucharist, July 8. It was overwhelming in its glory and majesty. I have been similarly inspired, chilled (warmed), moved, at my church, St. John the Divine, on Easters and Christmas Eves, even Fourth of Julys. These daily, moving, Indianapolis experiences the first and second weeks of July 2012, in worship and in legislative action, this was God’s Church, His Holy Spirit. This was why I had come to be a witness in this Holy Place.

Three sermons in particular stood out and are recommended: those of House of Deputies President, Bonnie Anderson (“Courage. C.S. Lewis reminds us that ‘Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at its point of testing’”); The Right Reverend Michael B. Curry of North Carolina (“We need some Christians who are as crazy as the Lord. Crazy enough to love like Jesus, to give like Jesus, to forgive like Jesus, to do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God—like Jesus. Crazy enough to dare to change the world...into something close to the dream that God dreams for it.”); and that of the Presiding Bishop, The Right Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori (“Did you hear Ezekiel? Mortals! Stand up and listen! God is sending you to a rebellious house, full of impudent and stubborn folks. Your job is to go tell them, ‘listen up – here’s the deal, from the Big Man himself.’ And if they don’t listen, at least they will have met a prophet.”), on July 6, 7 and 8. Inspiring preludes to General Convention’s challenging agenda.

Resolution A-049

I attended General Convention especially to follow the progress of Resolution A-049 of Committee Number 13, Prayer Book, Liturgy, and Music. That is the resolution dealing with the blessing of same gender unions. I volunteered to work in House Services which allowed me to be on the floor of both the House of Bishops and House of Deputies during the convention. In the Houses of Bishops and Deputies I served as page, podium monitor, door-keeper, and was blessed to be in position to observe much spiritual and legislative action.

On Saturday, July 7, I learned that there would be a committee meeting that night to discuss the resolution. Members of the public, in addition to delegates, alternates and bishops would be allowed to testify. I prepared and delivered the following personal story:

"I am Jim Greenwood, member of St. John the Divine in Houston since 1944.
Love is beautiful to experience, to share and to support.
My wife and I have been married 54 years as of June.

“49 years ago we were blessed with the birth of twin daughters, our third and fourth children. They and their siblings were raised in the church, were active, and in High School were president and secretary of EYC (Episcopal Young Churchmen).

After college they realized their "lesbian" sexual identity which they did not deny or conceal. They have had successful careers in law and banking--one just finished her second year in seminary and is a candidate for holy orders.

"Both are active Episcopalians. Both are in committed lifelong relationships.

"My wife and I were honored and proud to take part in services of blessing and commitment that each of these beloved daughters has had with their life partner.

They wrote their own vows.

Both ceremonies were glorious in mutual pledges to love, honor and care for their same gender life mates. Members of the congregations pledged to support them in their commitments to one another and to God. They blessed us with their blessings.

"The only thing missing was a liturgy of the church that has been their home from infancy.

"Committed gay and lesbian couples who have had the self-awareness, honesty and courage to live their lives openly, and reverently before God, and the families that love them and support them, would be blessed if this general convention would move forward with Episcopal liturgies that would ask for God's blessing on committed same gender relationships like theirs (our daughters and their partners), that would honor God and be a blessing to us all. Thank you."

Although the large committee listened impassively to all the speakers, when the meeting ended a number of people came up to me and expressed their appreciation for my testimony. These included several from Texas, one of whom knew one of my daughters; another was a longtime friend from Houston with a strong interest in the issue; a third served as a Lay alternate to General Convention from the Diocese of Texas, who had worked with our Bishop on his "Unity in Mission" anticipatory response to the Church's action on A049. My remarks also struck a responsive chord with a priest from Denver, a husband and wife from Virginia, and several others who simply thanked me for sharing our family story with them.

The **House of Bishops** took up Resolution A-049, as amended, on Monday afternoon, July 9 and had a discussion/debate of about 90 minutes. It was most civil and both the bishops for and against the resolution treated one another with great deference, and respect. The language of the Resolution was modified in a few particulars that stated respect and honor for "the theological diversity of this church in regard to matters of human sexuality," and the resolution declares that "no bishop, priest, deacon or lay person should be coerced or penalized in any manner, nor suffer any canonical disabilities, as a result of his or her conscientious objection to or support" for the convention's actions on this resolution. (The final text of the resolution may be found at the convention web-site (www.generalconvention.org) under the heading of resolution status, at the Committee 13 link, adjacent to the number of the resolution.)

The resolution "authorizes for provisional use 'The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant' ...beginning the First Sunday of Advent, 2012." It approves use of these liturgies in concert with the "I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing" resource document (Found in Convention Bluebook, beginning around page 185). Its use will be "under the direction and subject to the permission of the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority."

It resolves that the theological resource for the blessing of a life-long covenant be further developed over the next triennium "with specific attention to further engagement with scripture and the relevant categories and sources of systematic theology (e.g., creation, sin, grace,

salvation, redemption, human nature), and include work of diverse theological perspectives in the further development of the theological resources.”

Before the final vote a bishop from a diocese not expected to support the resolution or utilize the authorized services, stated his respect for those favoring its adoption, but encouraged them to accept their likely victory with humility—suggesting that too much celebratory jubilation would get publicity and make his job more difficult “back home.” The presiding bishop, who chaired the meeting with considerable grace, echoed his comments.

The House of Bishops passed the resolution by a vote of 111 to 41 (72%) with 3 abstentions. The Diocese of Texas bishops all voted “No.”

The resolution was taken up for consideration in the **House of Deputies** the following afternoon (Tuesday). Again, mutual respect and collegiality were in evidence. A divided vote was requested, meaning that the lay deputies would vote separately from the Clergy deputies and a majority of both Orders would be required for the House to “concur” with the House of Bishops. [Each diocese had four lay and four clergy deputies. The vote would be either “yes” (a majority for), “no” (a majority against) or “divided” (2 for and 2 against). Each diocese would have one result in each Order.] There were 111 eligible voting dioceses.

Before the vote was taken, there was a motion to refer the matter back to the committee (which would end for all practical purposes its consideration at this General Convention). This motion was defeated by a strong voice vote.

The final vote in the House of Deputies on the Resolution

	<u>Lay Order</u>	<u>Clergy Order</u>
Yes	86 (78%)	85 (77%)
No	19	22
Divided	5	4

I understand the Texas Lay deputies voted majority “no” and the Clergy deputies voted majority “yes.”

Theological Reflection

It will take time for all of this to be digested and discussed at the diocesan level around the Church. I wonder if this might be part of what Jesus foretold in John 16: 12-16? “I have much more to say to you, *more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.* He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.”

At least part of our Church, a significant majority, seem now to be able to bear what they perceive to be the truth, revealed to them by the Holy Spirit in many ways over the past 30 years in our Church, that gay and lesbian men and women may establish loving relationships that are

worthy of God's blessing, and our blessing, and that these relationships are entirely consistent with the gospel message of Jesus.

I went to Indianapolis to witness The Church in action on this and other issues. I believe the Holy Spirit led the bishops and deputies on Resolution A-049. The decisive majorities believed that, as well, but they acknowledged that there is more work to be done. They did not just say, "well, that's that." With humility they committed to continue to explore and dig deeper into scripture, to examine more closely the nature of marriage and relationships. To listen to "the other side." To further refine and proclaim their side.

I have no doubt that the 41 bishops, 19 Lay deputations and 22 Clergy deputations who voted against Resolution A-049 also believe they are led by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps they are right. Perhaps they are also open to the possibility that this could be "of God," even though they don't think so.

It is meaningful that this action took place in the week after July 4. The Holy Spirit first manifested its life-changing power and might almost two thousand years ago, in a tiny land in a world ruled by imperial Rome. It has demonstrated that it can flourish anywhere, in any setting.

Who can deny that it was at Independence Hall in 1776 when freedom first rang out in this "our" land? "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness...."

Who would deny that it was there trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath were stored as His truth marched on to free slaves (despite the efforts of many who quoted scripture in efforts to maintain that terrible institution) and preserve the Union in the 1860s?

Might it not also be present within our Episcopal Church (in this free land since 1785) as we search out truth (and blessings) for gay and lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender Christians? It is the freedom of this land that has allowed them freely, authentically, to be who they believe they were created to be and to pursue their own Happiness, individually and as couples. Whose request to their church in this resolution is for a liturgy that will allow them to ask God's blessing on their own blessed relationships and their commitments to each other and God, and the support of the community of believers. Who would also bless us by doing so.

Might this, at long last, be the time (in light of our tradition of liberty and freedom) when we *can bear* this manifestation of the Spirit of truth? Might the very fact of our nation's freedoms be why we are out of step with (ahead of) other provinces of the Anglican Communion that haven't experienced the richness of freedom of expression that has facilitated our own growing awareness of this "truth?"

Bishop Doyle has declared that within the Diocese of Texas he will authorize such services to be conducted in two parishes, to begin with, and then in whichever parishes seek permission to do so, assuming concurrence of rector and vestry and utilization of a process he

will prescribe. Churches also have the option of not making a statement, and just waiting to decide.

Those rectors and vestries choosing not to conduct such services may declare their intent not to do so. Although the language included in Bishop Doyle's "Unity in Mission" treatise for "traditional" parishes includes possible adoption of statements to the effect that they will "never" conduct such services, it does not compel such wording.

I hope St. John the Divine won't choose language with such a "closed door" tone. The Rector's June 1 letter has stated his and the vestry's opposition to such services and declared their intent that they will not be conducted at St. John the Divine. Never is a long time. The Holy Spirit might be on the other side of the door on this issue.

At the very least, let us pray and keep open minds on the subject as we continue to study scripture, reason, pray, and ask what He would have us do. And ask that He would form our hearts and make them His.

Jim Greenwood
Member, St. John the Divine since 1944
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