

Episcopal Convention Update from Father Tom – Third Update

Today the Episcopal Church grew by another diocese as it welcomed home the deputation from Cuba. One of the results of the Communist overthrow of Cuba was the separation of Cuba from the Episcopal Church. As a result of recent political changes in that country, it has become possible for them to once again come back into the Episcopal Church fold, which was accomplished by nearly unanimous votes in both houses. The Bishop of Cuba was admitted to that house right away, and there was a seating of the Deputation in the House of Deputies, followed by a spontaneous a Capella singing of the Doxology. It's always nice to have such good news to celebrate, to be sure.

The hot items at convention are still around revision of the Book of Common Prayer and Marriage Rites and their use in the Church. After the House of Deputies (HoD) passed a resolution for full revision of the BCP, a process that would take many years and many millions of dollars, the House of Bishops (HoB) amended the resolution that came to them from the HoD to the point that it is almost a substitute resolution. The HoB resolution passed overwhelmingly after the Bishop of Texas worked, or at least consulted with at least 50 other bishops. Their version of the amendment calls for memorializing the 1979 BCP, retaining Rite I, the Psalter, and some other bits. It also clearly opens the door for liturgical renewal in the form of new rites that could be crafted and approved for use alongside the 1979 BCP. It is unclear what the HoD will do when they receive this resolution back from the Bishops, so we'll have to wait and see. One humorous note that applies to Christ Church: a Deputy noted that if we approved full revision of the BCP, parishes that still cherish the 1928 book will have the '28, the new prayer book, and the new, new prayer book. It just sounds like fun, doesn't it?

The resolution dealing with continued use, and expansion of marriage rites made it through the HoD largely intact, although it was amended. The language around support for priests and parishes in dioceses where the Bishop does not currently allow same sex marriage was softened, but still should offer that support, nonetheless.

Other business before the Convention includes things like whether the Church will engage in active investing to influence the shareholder meetings of some companies, such as a gun manufacturer. There have been resolutions addressing ongoing conflict in the Holy Land. There has also been an effort, which is being widely endorsed, to be more attentive to the pastoral needs of transgendered persons, and working to include them in the life of the Church. There are also resolutions that clean up canonical issues, some of which were begun and passed three years ago. To make the change official, it must be approved a second time by the General Convention. One such vote today was a first; it passed a vote by orders without a single no vote or split vote. It's great that the process can work well from time to time.

Another matter that came up this time around that hasn't necessarily been important to the average parishioner (yet), but is very important to parish and diocesan leaders, is the call for parity between clergy and lay pensions. Clergy are part of a defined benefit plan, while laity are part of a defined contribution plan. The Church Pension Fund, which answers to the General Convention, administers both, and has tried to express the difficulty in making the two the same. For example, laity don't often serve the church for as long as the clergy do, and having a portable retirement plan is essential. Also, all lay employees are guaranteed to have half of their social security assessment paid by their employer, whereas the clergy are responsible for the full 15.3% self-employment Social Security tax on salary AND housing. Some parishes help offset this tax burden, while others do not. Incidentally, public debates about clergy housing tax exemptions rarely note that clergy are responsible for the full Social Security cost of housing. The exemption is a federal income tax exemption only. One other thing the Church keeps in mind is that the Clergy Pension Fund assessment covers more than retirement. It also includes some other benefits specific to clergy that wouldn't normally be expected to extend to laity. At any rate, the resolutions that came to convention were not able to truly address the complexity of comparing the two types of job descriptions and pensions, and so the language was watered down to a suggestion (instead of a mandate) that parishes and dioceses do their best to balance these realities. My read is that over time we will see shifts in the actual assessments for both clergy and laity, but it will take a lot more time to sort it out than could be dealt with in the time we had to work with at this convention.

Fun Fact: The Convention now provides rented iPads to all Deputies, Alternates, and Bishops instead of doing the work of the Convention on paper. The first year the Convention used this method was in 2015. There was some initial concern about this method, not for the technical challenge it might provide to some members of the Convention, but because it seems expensive to think about renting all those iPads! In truth, however, the Church has realized a tremendous amount of savings by moving to virtual paperwork. In 2012 the Convention produced 1.2 million sheets of paper, about two reams per Deputy and Bishop. The virtual binder eliminates all the paper cost and the production costs of making copies. In years past the Convention set up a full industrial sized print shop, with a backup, so that it could provide the hundreds of copies required to keep resolutions, amendments, calendars, and all the rest up to date. All of it was stored in enormous binders which were either thrown away at the end of the Convention or shipped home because it was too large to fit in suitcases! This trend toward technology has saved natural resources, money, and also made the Convention materials available to everyone, even those keeping track from home via the Virtual Binder link I provided a couple of days ago.

On a personal note, yesterday was a fun day for me, as Eva sang her first solo at the Convention. She led the music team on a fun song about the story of Jonah. If you are on Facebook, you can visit the Diocese of Georgia page to see a video of it. It was certainly a proud papa moment. The music team continues to work hard to provide the vast amount of music our worship requires, which continues to span many genres and languages. Yesterday we had musicians with us that included a Native American flute player, a Creole band, and an Asian choir.

The Convention is really speeding up now, in terms of how both Houses address legislation. Our Canon to the Ordinary and Deputation Chair, Frank Logue, described this process as a tetherball. It's going around and around, and as it continues to go around it goes faster and faster. Once the committees and Houses are moving for days, the legislative work increases. The other factor is that the looming end to the Convention causes the Houses to move faster too. The time for the General Convention to meet is finite. If it doesn't address important matters, they simply won't get addressed this time. There will be changes to the

legislative calendars to make sure that the most pressing matters are addressed, and sometimes the less important matters simply don't make the cut. That process can happen in different ways, but it's not a bad thing if every matter doesn't come before the Convention. There really are more important and less important issues to be dealt with.

In Peace,
Tom+