

Episcopal Convention Update from Father Tom – First Update

This is my first update on General Convention. It will be lengthy. If you're not interested in this kind of thing, you can skip it! I offer it for those who are curious or confused, and simply as a way to explain what's going on. This will be a more practical update and explanation, and less of a reflective exercise. Those of you who know me know I will shift into reflective mode at some point, so I can promise you there will be some of that in the days to come. Writing is how I process, these days, so if you prefer that style, fear not; it comes later. For now, let me start with some of the things in motion as we begin the General Convention in earnest. Read on (or skip down) to hear an update on the music team too. For that matter, I've put headings below for each part of the update. Feel free to skip to whatever catches your attention. (And one more thing; I found time to write this, but I am writing it quickly. You are getting what comes out of my head and fingers without ample time for proofreading. Please forgive typos and grammatical errors. And length for that matter. I don't have the time to write you a shorter update, nor do I have the time to edit it the way I might otherwise try to do. I hope you'll find it useful in its rough-around-the-edges form.)

Although Convention officially opened yesterday, it feels as though we've been here a long time already. Such is the result of a packed calendar of hearings, meetings, legislative sessions, and all the rest. Indeed, many deputies and bishops were in Austin two days before Convention opened because there are matters to attend to before the Convention is officially in session. Sometime yesterday, however, the General Convention process slid into high gear and took off. It will not disengage for another week.

For those of you who may not know or remember what the General Convention is or does, let me give a VERY brief explanation. The Episcopal Church, which was formed out of the democratic fervor of the Revolution, and in many ways by the same men who founded this nation, represents a democratic style of polity that at the time was quite unique, certainly within Anglicanism. The official actions of the Church are governed by the Convention, which meets every three years. It has two houses, just like our Federal government. In our case we have the House of Deputies (think House of Representatives), with eight deputies from every

diocese: four lay and four ordained. The House of Bishops (think Senate) is made up of all the bishops in the Church. The Church makes decisions by each house taking up matters and approving, changing, legislation that the other house must agree with. If either rejects a piece of legislation, it does not pass.

There are about 900 Deputies (rounding up) in the House of Deputies, and about 300 bishops in their house. Each diocese also sends at least one alternate per order, which takes the number of Deputies to 1000 or so.

The Question of Prayer Book Revision

At this General Convention there are important things on the docket, and yet not nearly the large, complex issues that have come with many previous recent Conventions. It seems the biggest issue facing this Convention (so far) is what to do about the Book of Common Prayer. It's not that Prayer Book revision is a small and simple matter, however, I think the inside baseball on revision was that it wouldn't be as serious a conversation as it has quickly become.

Going into Convention, there were resolutions calling for Prayer Book revision of one sort or another, yet many felt there wasn't the stomach for or will to pursue a full and comprehensive revision process. There is enough energy behind revision, however, that the legislative committee that handles such resolutions around Liturgy and Worship has put forward a resolution to pursue a full revision, choosing that option from among several others that suggested other ways to address the good reasons to produce options or changes to existing liturgies.

The two main issues driving the discussion of Prayer Book revision center around the use and availability of marriage rites, and also the question of inclusive language and how we acknowledge the changing landscape of pronouns and theological assumptions about we speak of God. With regard to the former issue, it is a matter of justice for some that the Prayer Book be revised so that all those being married in an Episcopal Church are married using a rite that is IN the Book of Common Prayer, not *just* an addendum or trial liturgy. Addendums, while not the official term, are authorized rites for use in the Episcopal Church alongside the BCP. Some

of you may remember and know about the Enriching our Worship series of liturgies and updates. Another example would be the Book of Occasional Services, which is where we find things like house blessings and prayers for blessing various church items.

The Church of England has used authorized rites for some time. To this day the "official" BCP in England is the 1662 edition of the book, although, to my knowledge, there aren't many places that use it. Instead England has authorized a series of liturgies and rites in a book entitled Common Worship, which is what many congregations now use. We use it quite a bit at Christ Church at X Church (with our bishop's permission, since it is not authorized as an official liturgical source in the US!). There are arguments made on both sides of this debate that are valid and useful for consideration. There has been passionate testimony in hearings, and the Convention is clearly listening and discerning.

The other main reason we hear calls for revision center on an original concept of the Reformation Church. As our language changes, so too, some would say, should the prayers of the Church. If the members of the church speak a certain way or language, that language should be captured in the formation of liturgies, or so the argument goes. The translation of liturgies from Latin into the native tongues of their various members in the 16th Century is a hallmark of the Reformation mindset. This is the same argument that led to the creation of Rite II, as the Church realized that the language of the 1928 BCP had almost become a foreign language in the sense that it uses words, idioms, and turns of phrase that are unknown to many who did not grow up with the liturgy. Among the things that have changed over the decades since the 1979 BCP was approved, are the words we use to describe God. We know enough about biblical scholarship by now to admit that only using male pronouns to refer to God is limiting and inaccurate. Gender inclusive language has become more and more important as women have gained greater equality with men and also as there has been more and more female-friendly scholarship in the realm of scripture and liturgy. In many churches we are hearing gender neutral language already, and so it seems a change could be in order.

Full Prayer Book revision, although the option that first made it out of committee, was not the only option on the table. Resolutions from various

corners of the Church (they can come from Bishops, Deputies, or Provinces) called for alternatives including targeted and limited revision of portions of the BCP, the continuation of Trial Liturgies (which allows the use without the status as official), and the creation of an updated and approved volume for use alongside the BCP. The House of Deputies will be taking this matter of full revision up first, and if they pass it, the Bishops will have to agree to it, which, as of now, seems unlikely. One of the assumptions that the legislative process tests is whether the whole of the body supports something, or whether it is the will of a minority that is well-placed. This is not a new tension at General Conventions, to be sure, but there has been much speculation, to date about what will happen.

#MeToo

The rise of the #MeToo movement over the last year has touched the Church as well. Some suggest that the Church should be embarrassed to be responding to the Culture on this issue and not leading the way, for like most institutions, the Church has not always responded in a timely or appropriate manner to the mistreatment, abuse, and exploitation of women. Whether it's sexual abuse issues with clergy, or institutional sexism and objectification of women, the Church has a checkered history in this regard. That's not to say that all women have experienced trauma or felt marginalized, yet there have been many, and now is the time for it to stop.

It is for this reason that the House of Bishops hosted a Listen Session on Wednesday evening, the night before the Convention officially began. The session was crafted around liturgy that acknowledged the Church's failure, and allowed those gathered, to confess our failures and lament our shortcomings. It was a powerful way to start, and one of the best forms of penitential liturgy I've participated in. After the initial liturgy and prayer had concluded, female bishops, often flanked by their male peers, took turns reading testimonies of women who had submitted their stories in advance of the Convention. I only stayed through the first three testimonies, which I should explain. I was with my 12-year old daughter. While the event gave me the opportunity to talk with her about why we were praying the things we were praying, and why it mattered, we reached a point at which the subject matter was not appropriate for

her. It was not graphic in any way, and those who edited the statements (with permission of the women who submitted them) did so in careful and respectful ways, it was just a bit too much for a middle schooler.

We were there for enough of the service, however, to appreciate its gravitas in this moment of the Church and the culture. As one of our Deputies was quoted as saying, "it was a start." There is a lot of work to be done in the Church to make sure we are hearing the voices of those who have been wounded, respond with open ears and open arms, and change the Church in whatever ways we can to prevent more people from being wounded in the future. As the father of daughters, and one who was raised to respect women, I wholeheartedly agree that we need to and can do better, and that the Church should be leading this effort. The other slogan of the movement, "time's up", is spot on.

The Way of Love

If you have heard our Presiding Bishop preach, you have heard him preach Love. Whether it was at our Diocesan Revival or at the Royal Wedding, you got to hear one of his recurring themes. It's an important theme, and despite its simplicity, it's one we need to hear again and again. At the opening Eucharist Bishop Curry preached about the Way of Love and unveiled an effort of the Episcopal Church to lead with this message in a way that can transform lives and the world. He shared, with handouts to boot, about how we live out the "Loving, Liberating, Life-Giving Jesus Movement."

There are a host of resources on the internet that went live immediately after the sermon, which you can find at episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove. If you don't have time to go look it up, don't worry; we'll be sharing it at Christ Church one way or another! The invitation to practice the Way of Love comes with resources to engage in activities that foster this way of life, modeled on Jesus and his example. Those practices are Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest. It is a rule of life for followers of Jesus, and something that, if embraced, will certainly help the church fulfill Christ's mission in the world.

As you would expect, the sermon was inspiring and altogether appropriate to launch us into the work that lies before us at Convention.

Racial Reconciliation

Another one of our Presiding Bishop's priorities surround racial reconciliation. Events in recent years have highlighted for the whole world to see how race is still a painful and divisive issue in our nation. Today the two houses met for a joint session (Bishops join the House of Deputies) to hear testimony about racial reconciliation and discuss how it can inspire and shape the church's response to racial struggles. The speakers included a former Nazi skinhead, Arno Michaelis, who now works with young people to show them a different path forward. As he learned, no one would ever beat the Nazi out of him; it was only possible to love it out of him. We also heard from a local African American poet, Chucky Black, who reflected on the magic of his blackness, and the pride that comes from it.

Dr. Katherine Meeks, of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing asked us to be open to being changed, that we not leave this place as we arrived, but leave acting in new ways. Finally, The Rev. Nancy Frausto, a young Latina Dreamer shared her story of coming to this country illegally to be reunited with her father. She noted a plague of apathy in this country around matters of race, and suggested that there could be no reconciliation without justice, and no justice without speaking the truth. She called on all of us to start seeking and speaking the truth. The Church does have a role to play in helping the culture achieve racial harmony, and I hope we find that voice sooner than later.

X Choir

Let me say how much fun it is to be singing at this Convention. I've written before about the power of worship. I've always been in the congregation and swept away by it. Now I find myself on the platform getting swept away again. The energy and spirit of a few thousand worshipping together is palpable. Our first worship service yesterday for the opening eucharist was exciting and fun. We are staying on our toes musically, as we are learning pieces we did not rehearse or singing them in ways we didn't rehearse them, and we've included musicians with whom none of the group has worked with before. I love this kind of free-flowing music for the most part. I gained "woodshedding" chops as a teenage

barbershopper, and even the X Choir is known to pick things up and sing them with just a few run-throughs. This is proving invaluable here.

For now, the lead music team is made up of about half Christ Church singers and half from the Oklahoma parish (I can't recall which one) where Scott Chard leads music. Our styles seem to be fitting together really well and we are certainly having fun. We've had several rehearsals so far, with many more to come. The rehearsals for the tomorrow's revival, for example, will be about eight hours in total. This is a good thing, but it is hard work too. I'm in an interesting position as both a singer and an alternate deputy, which means I am on the move all day long trying to fulfill both roles. I'm not complaining; General Convention is always like that for Deputies, but the singing has added a new level of complexity. I hope you are proud of your Christ Church team. Kathleen Turner is doing a fantastic job (and has done in the lead up to Convention), and all our singers are giving it 100%. Over the next few days we will be joined by a few more Christ Church men, and by Monday we will be at full strength. Log in to the live stream to see and hear what's happening in worship. Those links were in a previous email we sent on Tuesday and also in News You Can Use.

Thank you again to all who supported our team to get them out here. You are helping us offer a ministry of music that is literally having an international impact. We're sharing some of our favorite and best stuff, and I have no doubt that some of it will turn up in parishes across the Church as a result.

In Closing

I will again ask for your prayers, for the entirety of the General Convention and the Episcopal Church. The Church doesn't have a mission, some say. Instead, God's mission has a Church. I hope and pray that our God's mission becomes the appropriate and lasting focus of our efforts, not only here, but in all our parishes. God is good, and I have to go to rehearsal. I kept this under 3000 words, which is saying something!

In Peace,
Tom+