80th General Convention

This past summer I was privileged to serve as a General Convention deputy of our diocese for the fourth time. Meeting in Baltimore, Maryland, this was a convention unlike any other, shortened due to COVID precautions with work beginning months in advance online at the committee level. As some time has allowed for reflection, I now believe that the pandemic required the Episcopal Church to make positive changes regarding governance.

As General Convention was to be only four days in-person, legislative committees were required to complete their work prior to our gathering in Baltimore. This meant that for many months committees did their work online via Zoom. Even though Zoom is impersonal at times, having the committees meet online allowed greater access for the wider church. If one wanted to attend hearings for resolutions, one could sign up to testify due to the wonders of modern technology. In the past, one needed enough financial resources to travel to General Convention, requiring taking time off from work. I noticed that because hearings were online, more young people seemed present for the business of the church. Testifying or attending a hearing was not mostly older retired folks who had the means and time to travel.

Having a four-day convention also meant that our business had to be streamlined. Having been to convention before, I admit that I appreciated the business procedures that were adopted, including the rules for the consent calendar. Unlike past conventions, less time was wasted on the floor by deputies who lacked wide traction among the entire house, grandstanding at the podiums. Legislation was passed efficiently, and for that I am grateful.

I know that many want to return to the conventions of the past. I also know that many describe General Convention as a homecoming for our church. Seminaries have banquets, caucuses meet daily, and deputies and bishops enjoy long-standing friendships with those from other dioceses. Many celebrate their friendships in the wider church informally at bars, coffee shops, and restaurants.

But I am also mindful that having a shorter convention during times when churches have fewer financial resources may very well be increasingly ethical. The pandemic brought about ways of functioning that certainly have increased the participation of younger adults. Our ways of doing business need to support this, and if this means a shorter convention allowing working people, as well as people with less financial resources, to participate, then so be it. As many aspects of the Episcopal Church must be shed due to the changing realities of our times, General Convention must also change. If it is truly

the central key of our governance, then it cannot remain an elite church crew who have the time to travel, pontificating on behalf of the average Episcopalian in our pews. I also want to caution the idea that General Convention is a homecoming for our church. This simply cannot be true, as most laity who do the heavy lifting in our congregations are not present. If it is a homecoming, it is only a homecoming for the power brokers of our church.

Still, one of the great gifts of the Episcopal Church is our form of governance, for at General Convention all the baptized have a voice. The pandemic showed us how to make it better, increasing participating regardless of age, status, and wealth. Let's continue to build on those strengths, moving forward into modern times with a church that reflects the best that modern times have brought, even if it was an unruly pandemic that forced us to embrace such change.

Blessings,
Father Paul Lillie +
Rector
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