

On Friday, November 10<sup>th</sup> and Saturday, November 11<sup>th</sup>, I was privileged to serve as our congregation's Lay Delegate to the 151<sup>st</sup> Diocesan Convention for the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island. This was a unique opportunity to see what our Diocese is really doing for parishes like ours, and for outreach into communities near and far. When Father Gary asked me to write this article, it seemed overwhelming at first because the two days were packed with information. I certainly do not want to leave anything out, but to get to everything is impossible! So I will recount here the things that affected me, and I hope that these are the things that my fellow St. Stephen parishioners will find compelling as well.

First, we had a pre-convention meeting with Canon Claire Woodley to discuss the transition period and the rector search. This was a "feel good" session about adopting the appropriate attitude to welcome change. She encouraged congregations to use the interim time period wisely: carrying on regular church business while introducing variants in tradition; learning different ways to reach out and bring people into our community in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context; making any necessary "tough calls" as a parish family *before* welcoming a new rector; and encouraging each other and being as open as possible to God's call. Again and again she repeated that the one and only vital question any congregation in transition needs to ask itself is: "What does God want to have happen here?" Everything else should be rendered irrelevant. My favorite quote of hers from this session was this: "On the other side of sacrifice is delight." While there would be few among us who would gleefully assent when asked to sacrifice something, Canon Woodley reminded us that usually after we sacrifice something we experience positive feelings. While it sounds rather dogmatic, I personally plan to keep this in mind during our search process, because it will ground me in the fact that my own personal agenda may have to "give" if we as a congregation are going to "get!"

During the Convention itself, the Bishop gave an address that was, in essence, a "State of the Union." From his long speech, I found the following to be the most interesting:

- The Bishop stated that, with varying success, parishes across the Diocese have been making attempts to satisfy the Racial Justice and Reconciliation Initiative. He repeated three times: "We need to further expand our ministry to further address the needs of God's people."
- Our Diocese showed support for those affected by the DACA repeal
- There was a great deal of discussion about protecting illegal immigrants and offering sanctuary. Debate occurred about what exactly providing sanctuary entails and whether our official language should use words such as "xenophobia" or if that was too incendiary (it was decided by a powerful vote showing that it is important to use specific language when talking about the mistreatment of minorities).
- The Diocese is growing in ministry. There is an exhaustive list of congregations currently engaged in Redevelopment and work is starting on

- imagining the replanting of NEW congregations in areas that are currently not being served
- This Ministry Plan (budget) is the largest in the history of the Diocese. That may sound alarming, but the good news is that well over half the budget has been delegated toward actual ministry (serving our parishes, and our inreach and outreach programs).

While the Diocese is certainly a bureaucracy, and much of the days were spent debating the semantics of legal jargon, the Diocese is also a body of faithful and compassionate people of God. Worshipping with them was a pleasure, and I myself am pleased to share with St. Stephen's the final Benediction that was read. I believe it is a poignant prayer that reflects our values perfectly:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.