Bishop Steve's July 8th Newsletter Article

Dear Friends in Christ,

Desmond Tutu, onetime Archbishop of South Africa, was once asked what was unique about Anglicanism. His response was, "We meet." That is, as a church our decisions are made in council. We get together to talk and pray about the decisions we need to make, and we work them out together.

This is especially true of The Episcopal Church. Although we have bishops, we are not hierarchical. Each bishop is equal to every other bishop. Each diocese is equal to every other. The Presiding Bishop is elected and is not an Archbishop. And every decision is made in concert, either at a House of Bishops meeting or, more likely, at a meeting of the Executive Council, an elected body that serves as the General Convention between Conventions. The General Convention is held every three years, and it is composed of every bishop and eight representatives of each diocese, four clergy and four laity. It is the highest institutional authority of our church. If everyone is present, there are 800+ people involved.

This parallel structure is repeated at every level of the Church. We have Priests in Charge and Vestries. We have Bishops and Annual Conventions. Annual conventions are made up of all the clergy and representatives of every worshiping community. In between diocesan conventions the bishop shares responsibility with the Standing Committee, the Diocesan Council and the Trustees. When decisions are to be made, we have to meet.

The Episcopal Church is sometimes called a connectional church, rather than a doctrinal church. We recite the Creed every Sunday, but we do not have a denominational confession, as other churches do. Instead, we meet at the table. Our unity is a spiritual unity grounded in prayer, scripture and eucharist. The bishop is the symbol of that unity, and the bishop's visit reminds each community that it is part of the Body of Christ, connected to the diocese (all the churches), to the wider church, and to every Christian everywhere.

That same spiritual connection is expressed in our meetings. They usually begin with prayer, often with scripture. We invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit so that our decision-making is not simply political or practical, but grounded in the presence and spirit of God. Our decision-making is based on our discernment of what God wants here and now.

This week you will receive the Call to Convention for the Diocese of Western New York. It will be sent out widely to all those on our mailing list so that everyone knows the diocese is gathering to make decisions together. We're going to meet! We're going to address diocesan and parish business. And we're going to prepare for the election of our next bishop.

It’s important that everyone be there. It’s important because without you, our decision-making is impaired. Without you, we won’t be fully represented, and we won’t hear the fullness of perspectives and experiences our diocese represents. Without you, the prayers we offer won’t contain your needs and concerns.

People often complain that the Anglican approach to decision-making is messy and slow. Sometimes it takes years to reach a final conclusion. A benign dictatorship might be more efficient and timely. Yet, we believe that only by meeting and praying together as a Body can we, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, make decisions that express our care and respect for every member of the Body and our discernment of the will of God for us.

I look forward to seeing every parish, mission, priest, and deacon at our Convention.

Peace,
Bishop Steve