

“Listening to the Church”: Preparing for General Convention
Remarks from the Rev. Dr. Gregory S. Straub
at the 141st Convention of the Diocese of Easton

For those of you who do not know me, I am Gregory Straub, a priest of this diocese since 1975 and canonically resident in the Diocese of Easton since 1976. It is a particular pleasure to be asked to address this body, whose secretary I was for many years.

I bring you greetings from the Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev'd Katharine Jefferts Schori, who remembers with pleasure her visitation with you a year and a half ago, from Bonnie Anderson, President of the House of Deputies, from the Executive Council and from your partners in ministry at the Episcopal Church Center in New York City and in regional offices throughout the church.

As I travel the church as Executive Officer & Secretary of the General Convention, I always announce that I am canonically resident in the Diocese of Easton. I can assure you our diocese is well-regarded by the church-at-large and has a reputation as a healthy diocese united in mission. Our bishop is held in high esteem by his peers in the House of Bishops. And I've never once been asked, "Is that in Pennsylvania?" Thank you for keeping the name "Diocese of Easton."

I have a particular fondness for the Hyatt Regency here in Cambridge, not only because it was the site of our bishop's consecration—I served as Chair of the Search Committee that developed the slate that led to the bishop's election—but also because then-Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold interviewed me for my present position during his visit to our diocesan convention here, and his Canon Carl Gerdaud dropped broad hints to me at that time that I would receive the joint appointment of the Presiding Bishop and President of the House of Deputies.

The General Convention is our church's governing body, comprised of two houses: Deputies and Bishops. Every bishop in good standing, active and retired, is a member of the House of Bishops, and each diocese in our church (111 of them) is entitled to send four ordained and four lay deputies to the House of Deputies. I had the privilege of being elected by the Annual Convention of the Diocese of Easton four times to serve as clerical deputy, and I served at an additional convention as seated alternate.

For legislation to be approved by the convention, it requires concurrent action by both houses in identical language. In the course of a General Convention, 15,000 bishops, deputies, delegates to the ECW Triennial, exhibitors, friends, relations and camp followers converge for ten days of very exhausting work, out of which come the

plan and budget for the next three year's of the church's mission on the churchwide level.

Our bishop has asked me to devote the major part of this address to issues upcoming at this convention that will be of interest to you and to your fellow parishioners back home.

You may be aware that at the 75th General Convention, three years ago in Columbus, Ohio, the General Convention passed a resolution that is numbered B-033. This was a compromise resolution, crafted in response to a request by then-Presiding Bishop Griswold and endorsed by Presiding Bishop-elect Jefferts Schori. It pledged the church to a season of restraint in consideration of the belief of a considerable portion of the Anglican Communion that the 74th General Convention, meeting in Minneapolis in 2003, had strained the bonds of affection within the Anglican Communion by consenting to the consecration of our church's first openly gay bishop, whose sexual orientation was a matter of public knowledge at the time of election and who was living in a same sex partnership. The season of restraint was to caution the church against consenting to the election of another openly gay bishop and from authorizing rites for the celebration of same sex unions.

It is a certainty that this resolution will come before the next General Convention for review. Several dioceses have submitted resolutions to convention that urge the church to end the season of restraint and to free standing committees and bishops with jurisdiction to consider consenting to the consecration of openly gay bishops. (Only those bishop elected between 120 and 30 days of General Convention like Gene Robinson are considered by the House of Deputies and Bishops with jurisdiction. Otherwise, standing committees in the several dioceses act for the House of Deputies.)

I have received other resolutions from dioceses calling for the convention to authorize the Standing Commission on Liturgy & Music to develop rites for the celebration and blessing of same sex unions (or the blessing of civil marriages in those political jurisdictions that permit them). Were such a resolution to be adopted at this convention and these rites to be developed in the span of one triennium, they would come before the 77th General Convention, which will meet in Indianapolis in 2012. There is also a resolution from a diocese that asks that parish clergy record the blessing of civil unions in their parish registers, just as they record services of Holy Matrimony.

These diocesan resolutions will be referred by the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies to legislative committees that have the authority to hold hearings on the matters. Any bishop, deputy, registered alternate or registered guest

may sign up to testify at a hearing. Legislative committees may then combine resolutions, amend them, substitute for them and recommend their adoption or non-adoption by the first house of convention to consider them. If a resolution passes the first house, either as presented by the committee or as amended by that house, it then goes to the second house for consideration.

It is already known that the Archbishop of Canterbury will attend the General Convention, as will a large number of primates who attended the Lambeth Conference last summer. I have just returned from Costa Rica and the Mutual Responsibility in Mission Conference at which the Primates of Canada, Mexico, Central America and Brazil individually told me they would attend the General Convention. It is safe to say, the eyes of the Anglican Communion will be fixed on the 76th General Convention.

The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada have ended their voluntary withdrawal from voting at the Anglican Consultative Council, or ACC, one of our church's instruments of communion. (The others are the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference and the Council of Primates.) The next meeting of the ACC will take place this May in Kingston, Jamaica, just before the convening of our General Convention.

At its next meeting, ACC will be asked to consider its response to the St. Andrew's draft of a proposed Anglican Covenant. (The St. Andrew's draft was issued in response to comments received from bishops at last summer's Lambeth Conference.) Our Executive Council, the body that carries on and has oversight of the work of the General Convention between conventions, and of which I am Secretary, drafted our church's response to the St. Andrew's draft. Our response, together with responses from other provinces, will be considered by the ACC, which will, we can presume, issue a new draft covenant for the consideration of the provinces. The Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies have stated for the record that they believe there is too little time between the ACC meeting and the meeting of General Convention for the Episcopal Church to develop a thoughtful response. There is no question in my mind that there will be a resolution put forward that the General Convention adopt or reject whatever draft is forwarded by the ACC.

The other major issue that I foresee that is churchwide in its impact is the church's implication in the transatlantic slave trade and the issue of reconciliation with the descendants of former slaves. The last General Convention passed two resolutions: one, calling for a national service of repentance for the church's participation in and profit from slavery, and the other, calling on dioceses to research their own implication in the institution of chattel slavery.

On 4 October last year, at the historic African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in Philadelphia, the church founded by Absalom Jones, our church's first African American priest, the Presiding Bishop led a service of repentance on behalf of the church. I was present for that service, which was profoundly moving. It was not, however, universally praised by our church's African American membership. First, the General Convention resolution called for a service at the National Cathedral. Secondly, the liturgy included a litany that, in effect, had African Americans apologizing for their own ancestors' enslavement. There will be additional resolutions that will come before this convention to address what was deemed, by some, to be an inadequate response to the last convention's resolution. On a more positive and constructive note, several dioceses have done outstanding work in researching their participation in and profit from slavery. (Our neighboring diocese of Maryland is one such diocese, but other outstanding examples include Ohio and, perhaps surprisingly, Mississippi.) All of the dioceses that have done this work have been asked to participate in an evening workshop at General Convention to demonstrate how they went about their work, in the hope of inspiring other dioceses to do likewise. As the land in which two of the great 19th century abolitionists were held as slaves, Frederick Douglass and Harriett Tubman, I would hope the Diocese of Easton would undertake this project in a timely manner.

The Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music has proposed an entire rewrite of *Lesser Feasts & Fasts*. Their proposed draft document is called *Holy Women, Holy Men*, and it will be printed as a supplement to the Blue Book, the Reports of the church's committees, commissions, agencies and boards to the General Convention that is being produced by my office, published by Church Publishing and mailed to every bishop, deputy, registered alternate and registered visitor requesting convention materials. At the same time it is mailed, it will be posted on line and available to every interested person with access to the internet. Believe me, every group in the church will be poring over this document to see if their heroes are adequately represented among the holy lives of the past.

(I am often asked what color the Blue Book will be this year. My answer is I have little power, but one I do have and exercise is to choose the color of the Blue Book. Last convention's Blue Book was green, a color taken from that convention's theme, "Come and Grow." This convention's Blue Book will be red, a color taken from this convention's logo, illustrating the theme, ubuntu, an African term that translates as, "I am, because you are." While the color may change, the book is always called the Blue Book.)

I have already received many resolutions from diocesan conventions proposing additions to "Lesser Feasts," so, if any of the proposed resolutions passes the convention, the new edition will be obsolete before it goes to press.

Of resolutions that have churchwide, diocesan and parochial impact, I would mention three more.

The first is a complete rewrite of the disciplinary canons in Title IV of The Constitution & Canons of the Episcopal Church, another publication prepared by my office. The last rewrite of Title IV failed to pass the last General Convention, primarily because of a provision for the discipline of lay parish volunteers. The Title IV Task Force II that worked on the canons in this triennium deleted references to lay persons and greatly simplified the process for bringing a complaint against an ordained person. The present Title IV, not that old actually, is based on the Uniform Code of Military Justice and is adversarial in nature. The proposed Title IV takes a more pastoral approach to clerical discipline and shrinks the number of persons required to staff committees of inquiry and courts, which should make their implementation less expensive and more approachable for small dioceses like ours.

The second is a resolution proposed by the Church Pension Group, or CPG, in response to a resolution of the last General Convention, to make mandatory participation in CPG's Medical Trust, which provides health insurance for most of the church's clerical and lay employees. At present there is nothing that requires a diocese or parish to participate in the Medical Trust, and some dioceses and parishes believe they can find medical insurance at a cheaper rate or provide more coverage outside the Medical Trust. The proposed resolution would make canonical, and, therefore, mandatory, participation in the Medical Trust. Because the group covered would be larger, CPG estimate that the cost of providing coverage will decline for those parishes presently in the trust by a minimum of 10% per year. (The person who supervised the study has told me that is a most conservative estimate: most parishes would realize greater savings.)

The third is another resolution proposed by CPG that would make canonical a General Convention resolution of many years ago that called on the church to provide its lay employees who work 1500 or more hours a year—that's 20 hours or more per week—with health and pension benefits. The CPG engaged in a three year study of lay employees and found that male lay employees were more likely to receive full benefits than female lay employees, and that lay employees, as a group, felt insecure in their futures because of their lack of benefits. In the study it was revealed that lay employees have a high level of job satisfaction: they work for the church, because they find it fulfilling, but not receiving full benefits was a disadvantage of making a career as a lay church employee.

These, I think, are the major issues coming before General Convention, but, so far, I have seen only some of the resolutions proposed by interim bodies and dioceses and

provinces, and I've received practically none from deputies and bishops, two large sources of potential resolutions.

I know it is our custom here in the Diocese of Easton for the bishop and deputies to meet with the convocations to hear the concerns of parishioners before General Convention and for the bishop and deputies to report back to the convocations on the actions of General Convention. I would urge you to go back to your parishes and alert your congregations about the issues likely to come before General Convention and to invite your fellow parishioners to do two things. First, all legislation that will come before General Convention will be posted on line at the General Convention website, which is www.episcopalchurch.org/gco. As my office authenticates resolutions, and as the Presiding Bishop and President of the House of Deputies assign legislation to legislative committees, it posts resolutions. (There are not many on line yet, but come mid-April there will be a raft of them.) Ask your rector or parish secretary to publish the link for legislation. This same link will be live through General Convention, and people at home can follow resolutions as they move through the legislative process and read their final form, if they are adopted. My office's ability to provide this service is thanks to the work of David Michaud, a priest of this diocese.

Secondly, I would ask you to recruit members of your congregation to attend the diocese's pre-convention meetings of convocation: to hear about General Convention and to express their opinions about upcoming legislation.

Since I became Secretary of General Convention, I have worked to make the legislative process as transparent as I can and as available as possible to interested persons around the world via the internet.

I would also ask those of you whose parishes produce a weekly worship leaflet to download for free the Episcopal Church's bulletin inserts, throughout the year, if you wish, but certainly in the months leading up to General Convention. They provide a good introduction to the work of the General Convention and to ongoing work in the church in many other areas of the church's life.

In closing, let me say, that it is one of my life's greatest joys to be the Secretary of the General Convention, and I look forward to greeting our diocesan deputation in Anaheim and, I hope, many others of you, as well.

I'll now take questions.