

Thoughts for Clergy Day and beyond, July 2006

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1. The reaction to General Convention 2006 is a bit different from that of 2003. Then, there was outright explosive anger. Certainly there is some of that, but now there seems to be much smoldering going on as we move into these days of unknown duration and destination. I do not believe that it is an overstatement to say that there is a growing struggle to possess the Episcopal Church or be the expression of “Anglicanism” in America. Also, for some, the waiting appears to be over. What does all of this mean? Where are we headed? Now what? One of the historic roles of Bishop is teacher, so let me offer these reflections in that spirit.

2. I am deeply concerned about the whole agenda and drift of the national church. I am especially frustrated at having had about a year and a half to come up with a theologically mature response to the Windsor Report and instead have a last minute, rushed resolution adopted in the final hours of General Convention that pleased almost no one.

3. From where I sit we seem hell-bent, as a national church, on self-inflicted wounds and apparently are not all that concerned with the consequences to many of our own members, let alone Anglicans around the world. We need serious theological reflection about our common church life as American Episcopalians, about the moral theology that guides this church, about the authority and interpretation of scripture, and about how we govern ourselves and conduct theological business at General Convention. At General Convention, we saw all too clearly the spirit of American arrogance that drives our current engine. Sad to say, but many of those at General Convention seem to suffer from a defective ecclesiology, i.e., they either don't understand or are not willing to recognize what is meant by being part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Archbishop Rowan Williams clearly states this fact in his June 27 Statement to the Communion: “...whatever the presenting issue, no member Church can make significant decisions unilaterally and still expect this to make no difference to how it is regarded in the fellowship...The Church worldwide is not simply the sum total of local communities. It has a cross-cultural dimension that is vital to its health and it is naïve to think that this can survive without some structures to make it possible. An isolated local Church is less than a complete Church.”

4. The Rev. Greg Jones, of St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, has some reflections in this area that I believe are worth mentioning. We claim to be catholic (having a ministry that can be universally recognized), to be a faith that is not simply locally determined but connected through time and space with the communion of saints and fellowship of believers. Part of what it means to be the church catholic, the church universal, is that when we Anglicans break bread together at the Eucharist,

we realize the reality of a community that is more than the people present at any one moment with any one set of concerns. In addition, he notes that Anglicanism as we know it has never been simply a group of people who describe themselves as Anglican but who also enjoy unconfined local liberties.

5. This begs the question regarding what is meant by unity. Here, Jones notes that is why a concern for unity “as a means to living in the truth is not about placing the survival of an institution above the demands of conscience. God forbid. It is a question of how we work out, faithfully, attentively, obediently what we need to do and say in order to remain within sight and sound of each other in the fellowship to which Christ has called us. It has never been easy and it isn’t easy now.” Adding to this difficult work are strident voices on each end of our divisions who don’t seem to want to invest the energy and hard work required to develop a shared Anglican ecclesiological vision that is different from their current vision. They seem to desire only that which they already have, and if nobody comes along to their vision, they seem content to “part company.” Jones then offers some interesting observations, noting what he calls “Evangelical Free Anglicans” who will be “structurally fluid” to meet the needs of rapidly changing contexts, but “theologically frozen.” He calls the other end of the spectrum the “Progressive Free Anglicans” who will be “structurally frozen” yet “theologically fluid.”

6. I am convinced that we need massive institutional reform if we are going to cross the wilderness in our own day. It is important to remember that Jesus prayed for his disciples’ victory, not their escape – so I am going to work to change what I see as a diseased system. I am not resigned to accepting things as the way they must be.

7. There is much talk around the Communion about realignment, perhaps even that we may be headed for another reformation of sorts. Certainly the Archbishop of Canterbury indicated something like these thoughts in his June 27 statement wherein he stated the Anglican Communion “is not going to look exactly like anything we have known so far.”

8. As I contemplate this, I have been wondering about what kind of reformation or realignment I might tolerate? If change is heading our way, and this certainly appears to be the case, to what might our “times” compare? I’ve been reading a document entitled Make Us One, the study guide for interim Eucharistic sharing with the Methodist Church. It includes a brief overview of the establishment of both the Episcopal Church and the Methodist Church in this country in the late 1700s. I believe some parallels can be drawn to our current situation from our historical context.

9. A brief history lesson. The Episcopal Church went through a process of adaptation to the American colonies. We are descendants of the Church of England and shaped by the events in America in the 1780s. We emerged after the Revolution in a quest for

independence. As such, we found ourselves seeking new terms of coherence and a time of deep self-examination. Sound familiar? A bit later, we would form more formal relationships leading to an understanding of Anglicanism as a member of a global communion.

10. As we know, during the 19th century the Episcopal Church developed along several broad fronts. One was a revival of the catholic understanding of Anglicanism, and new forms of spirituality became popular. In addition, a broader understanding of Anglicanism developed and by the second decade of the century, three distinct parties had developed: a high church party emphasizing catholic heritage; a low church party emphasizing evangelical heritage; and a broad church party emphasizing the church's openness to modern social and intellectual trends. As these three parties lived together under the Episcopal umbrella, the Episcopal Church came to see itself in inclusive terms. The liturgy, rather than uniformity, became the defining expression of this church, and it was the liturgy that held it together. This principle is often summarized in the expression *lex orandi, lex credendi* or "the rule of prayer is the rule of belief." A shorter form is simply, "prayer shapes belief."

11. In this and over time, Episcopalians came to understand the importance of the global as well as the domestic mission field. Unfortunately, I am beginning to see a trend across many segments of our church that seems willing to disregard our history of missionary relationships if it comes to the point where we are forced to make a choice between the "new revelations of the American church" and our "historical bonds of affection" that have held the Anglican Communion together over the years.

12. It would be a mistake to underestimate the severity of the crisis that loomed for our church following the American Revolution. Questions of identity needed to be addressed: What did it mean to be an Anglican in a new and independent nation? The adaptation of the American Episcopal Church is an amazing story that is too long for these pages, but suffice it to say that these adaptations were astounding accomplishments. Anglicans had to forge their identity in a religious landscape dominated by Calvinist theology, namely Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and to some extent, Baptists. The players may have changed a bit, but don't we as Episcopalians and Anglicans now face questions of identity in a country where we are still a minority church?

13. It may be that we are facing much more than a crisis within the polity and organization of Anglicanism. Perhaps we are facing a reformation not dissimilar to the one faced when the Methodists emerged as a reform movement within Anglicanism. Perhaps in this 21st century we, as Episcopalians and Anglicans, need to rediscover some of those elements, including understanding ourselves as a religious movement (not simply a church) which is focused on the preaching of faith, repentance, and holiness. Perhaps looking at the "heart religion" of those early Methodists is worth re-

examining, i.e., that repentance implies the heart-felt acknowledgment of a person's dependency on God; that faith implies a heart-felt trust in Christ; and that holiness implies the personal, heart-felt transformation. Perhaps the Episcopal Church of the 21st century can involve the renewal of an understanding of discipleship as a covenantal accountability to each other. Accountability to one another in Christ can be a powerful means to both personal and social transformation.

14. At diocesan council this past February, I spoke of the need to re-examine all kinds of areas in our corporate life so as to define what it means to be a Christian in the 21st century and what it will mean to be an Episcopalian and Anglican. I believe that this crisis is an opportunity to redefine and clarify who we are as Christians and what our ministry and mission shall be as we move forward as God's Church. The need for this goes much deeper than our divisions since General Convention of 2003, because (individual congregational growth notwithstanding) our denomination - along with many others - has been in serious decline for several decades. We might as well face right into that fact, admit it, and then use this new opportunity to "renew our covenant" following the examples of this throughout the scripture. The people of God often call themselves back to their covenant with God so that they might move into their future with strength and confidence as a royal priesthood.

15. What, then, are our beginning foundational points and core values if a new reformation is really upon us? I gave you some of mine at diocesan council, and I repeat them here along with traditional Anglican principles which have guided us as a church. All of these are my passions and my life's work.

- I am scripturally centered and Gospel focused.
- I am sacramentally grounded.
- I am committed to the missionary call of Jesus Christ.
- I am positive and hopeful for a fresh emergence of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion.
- I am actively engaged in empowering creative and innovative leadership.
- I am committed to spiritual growth (formation) and numerical growth (evangelism).
- I fully believe the promise I made at my ordinations that "I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation."

16. In addition to the above, some of the foundational and historical beliefs and definitions of what it means to be an Episcopalian and an Anglican include:

- Proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Savior;
- Affirming the Old and New Testaments as containing all things necessary for salvation;
- Believing that Jesus is really the unique son of God, that he was crucified and that he rose from the dead.

- Affirming the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed as sufficient summaries of the Christian Faith;
- Immersing ourselves in the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist;
- Accepting the locally adapted historic episcopate;
- Believing in the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ at the Eucharist;
- Affirming worship as including both word and table;
- Affirming that baptism and the covenantal relationship established through it is the doorway to the life of holiness;
- Recognizing the gifts and ministries of all persons, laity and clergy, women and men;
- Teaching the need for prayer and holiness of heart and life as a means of growth in the Christian faith;
- Recognizing that Christian discipleship inherently includes the pursuit of justice and social action;
- Worshiping in ways that reflect our liturgical and sacramental roots;
- And there are many others as well.

17. However, there appear to be clouds on the horizon regarding these biblical and historic practices that have defined us, and many are approaching their limits as to what is acceptable. Many feel their limits have already been exceeded. All can certainly agree that we are nowhere near consensus on these limits, and some are questioning if there are any limits. I should note here that these current divisions are much deeper than simply human sexuality. Issues of authority of scripture, interpretation of scripture, discussions of matters of "justice" and "rights," how a community (Communion) comes to theological decision, what provincial "autonomy implies," and overall church order/polity are all before us in ways that are much more strident than in previous generations.

18. When I was made a bishop, I made some commitments. I agreed that as a bishop I was called to be "one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ's resurrection and interpreting the Gospel, and to testify to Christ's sovereignty as Lord of lords and King of kings." I also promised to "boldly proclaim and interpret the Gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up the conscience" of God's people. Done properly, this is "cutting edge" stuff. And while bishops are certainly called to be on the "cutting edge," we also promise to keep the edge from cutting: "You are called to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church." Living in this tension, it seems to me, is what it means in part that my heritage is the faith of those in every generation who have looked to God in hope (Book of Common Prayer, pages 513, 517, 518).

19. We need to be in community together in West Texas. We are going to redouble our efforts to be the best, most faithful diocese in the church. This is going to take time and great effort, willingness, and sacrifice by us all. We'll see what the future of the

Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church will be as these issues play out on the world's stage.

20. I hope that you stand with your bishop and your fellow Episcopalians in West Texas. It is, of course, unrealistic to expect that everyone will have the patience or fortitude for this journey. I understand that the church is a volunteer association and people are free to come and go, and some may choose to go. This is heartbreaking, but people need to be part of a worshiping community that builds them up. If people must go, we bid them farewell with a heavy heart, and assure them of our prayers. But I am committed to getting everyone who wants to travel to that far shore there safely and in one piece/peace under Jesus Christ. John 17, Jesus' unity prayer, assures us that this is Christ's will, and though in 2000 years of history we have not accomplished this in many ways, it does not diminish the call to continue striving towards Jesus' prayer for us.

21. Where I stand and where you stand may not match ten for ten; in fact, they probably won't. But I bet we can get seven, eight, or maybe even nine out of ten – and that's good enough for me and I hope that it is good enough for you. I need your continued trust. We are in a dynamic and fluid situation, and we are at work. There is no need to think of leaving the diocese of West Texas, because we have not changed any of our core beliefs that have brought us into fellowship as Christians and as Anglicans. Yes we have some serious differences on the national level as a denomination. But in the words of Bishop-elect Reed, the fact is you don't hit your little brother when your big brother has made you mad. From where I sit, talk of separation and leaving the Church simply isn't necessary in West Texas, for we are a diocese tied closely with our Anglican heritage and in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury, and there are many conversations on a local, national, and global level that give me hope. I myself am part of many conversations with Windsor bishops about how we will move forward in and through our present difficulties. On this, you are going to have to trust me and give this process time; in other words, exercise some Godly and historic patience. But this is also not simply a time to “maintain” and “mill around in the light of Christ” while all of this plays out. Every single Christian person is needed to make his or her local congregation the absolute best that it can be, so that we are addressing these critical challenges from a position of holy strength and not divided weakness.

22. In my mind, it is beyond doubt that we, as the body of Christ and the Episcopal Church, need a renewal and a recommitment to be God's Church in the 21st century. This will require letting some things go and taking on some new directions, all prayerfully and carefully considered as we attempt to follow the Holy Spirit's lead. As your bishop, I am committed to be actively involved in shaping the future of the Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church in this country. Some will criticize this approach, saying we are continuing to “ride the fence.” But that is simply not the

case. This is being historically and spiritually patient enough for God to work in and through our brokenness, and it does not require us to give up on what we believe as Anglicans and as Episcopalians who have been nurtured and cared for by this expression of Christianity.

23. On the deepest and most profound level I am very committed to discovering with you what the Church of the 21st century will look like, and to work towards a clarity in what it means to be called a “Christian.” The word Christian is a beautiful word, because it describes a beautiful and sacred thing – the holy relationship between a human being and Jesus Christ. Perhaps in our modern culture the word “beautiful” is not the adjective that comes to mind when someone hears the word “Christian,” but it certainly should be.

24. Now for some specific good news about being a Christian. On Sunday morning, July 9, I had the privilege to being in St. Francis Chapel at Camp Capers with a summer session full of energetic staff and 11 and 12 year olds who were about to spend the week learning about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The theme for the week was “The Amazing Race” (Hebrews 12.1-2: *let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God*). The preacher, The Rev. Jonathan Wickham, spoke of the need to remember that when you run a race, you need endurance: *Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings great reward. For you need endurance so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised* (Hebrews 10.35-36). He then asked the campers to remember a hard thing that they had done. He got a variety of answers, such as “Make an ‘A’ in social studies”; “Learn to knit”; and “Talk to a girl.” I was touched when two of the campers said, “To let go of someone you love”; and “To tell the truth after you have lied about something.” I sat there thinking that there were some significant and emotional stories behind those comments. As I listened to those 11 and 12 year olds, I thought to myself, “In the midst of all the struggles on the national and international levels, here I am in a small chapel in the beautiful Texas Hill Country witnessing children work out their faith and enjoy the company of Jesus Christ in music and in prayer. It simply doesn’t get much better than this, and this is what we are about.”

25. After teaching the crowds on one occasion, Jesus told Simon to ‘*Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.*’ Simon answered, ‘*Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.*’ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break (Luke 5.4-6). You might recall that following this little fishing episode, they brought their boats to shore, left everything, and followed Jesus. A ministry is launched. The gospel speaks. It gets us. We are encouraged. Wow. Thanks be to God.