
Do Not Fear!

**An article from the Cathedral Times
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler**

Yes, I am beginning to receive correspondence about the upcoming General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Thus, this week is a good time to reflect on what will be occurring there. Every three years, the Episcopal Church gathers in convention to enjoy the breadth of our ministry together, to take counsel together, to pray together, and to discuss resolutions about the future of our church. Though the ten days seems excessive to me, the mood is often encouraging and even thrilling.

The atmosphere can be fun, but most of what one hears about is the legislation. In our bicameral legislative structure, the House of Bishops consists of every bishop in our 108 dioceses, and the House of Deputies consists of 4 clergy and 4 laypersons from each of those dioceses. In order for any resolution to pass, that resolution must be approved by a majority in the House of Bishops, and a majority in the House of Deputies. Resolutions often have the effect of simply being a "mind of the church," since they normally do not carry constitutional or canonical authority -unless they are meant to be constitutional or canonical changes. (A resolution, for instance, stating that the "tithes" (10%) is the standard of financial giving in the Episcopal Church is not at all adhered to by the majority of Episcopalians; a canonical change allowing women access to ordination is meant to be applicable to the whole church.)

When any issue is pitted against another, legislatively, the atmosphere can become awkward and threatening. The Episcopal Church is no stranger to that atmosphere. We have pitted important issues against one another for some time. Consider the arguments for revising the Prayer Book. Consider our discussions on abortion. Consider, especially, our discussions when we finally voted to allow women access to every order of ministry (including as bishops and priests, as well as deacons and laypersons). Before those discussions, we argued about ritual and ceremonial, high church and low church, biblical scholarship, north and south.

The issues that will draw the most attention at General Convention this year will certainly be related to homosexuality. You know that, and I know that; though I wish it were not the case. Ours is not the only denomination struggling with those issues. We are in a culture right now that speaks especially openly and directly about sexual issues, issues that fifty years ago were taboo. I look forward to a time when sexuality will not dominate our church business (or, at least, the attention given to church business), but that time is not here. It may be our responsibility, at this cultural moment, to address the cultural reality from our community of gospel and grace.

As most of you know, I am one of the four clergy deputies from the Diocese of Atlanta. Thus, I will be called to vote on these sexuality issues that some believe have divided the church. There will certainly be a vote on whether to give consent to Gene Robinson, an openly gay man elected as Bishop of New Hampshire (he cannot be ordained bishop until a majority of the House of Deputies gives consent). There may, or may not, be a vote on whether to develop liturgies for the blessing of relationships outside marriage that mediate grace; a similar resolution appears every three years. This year's resolution is not meant to be a canonical change (which would be in the prayer book), and it specifically refers to relationships that are not marriages.

I have made no secret of my position on these sexuality issues that presently pervade the legislative agendas of the Episcopal Church. Indeed, I have spent the twenty years of my ordained life discussing and praying about these issues. They have not been easy issues, but they are not new issues for me. In short, I am open to the full participation of gays and

lesbians in the life of the Episcopal Church. I do not believe that homosexuality, in and of itself, is a sin. I fully realize that there are many faithful Episcopalians who do not agree with where I am, individually, on matters of homosexuality. Therefore, I know that my own opinion, or vote, just like their opinion or vote, does not represent a final consensus of the Church. No one person or position yet represents the Church's consensus. I am forced to live with that reality, just as my dear friends and colleagues "on the other side of the legislative aisle" must live with that reality.

However, there is a larger reality that I do represent. In fact, there is a reality that I have given my life and ministry at the Cathedral of St. Philip to represent. Do not fear! We can be part of a community of faith that finds our unity beyond our different opinions on homosexuality. These sexuality issues, though powerful and deep, do not have the power to divide us, or to divide the Church. To grant them power to divide is to lose our faith. This community of faith, the Cathedral of St. Philip, is, in Jesus Christ, much stronger than that. We include straight and gay persons, and we include almost every opinion you might imagine in these sexuality issues. (Personally, I have had my disagreements with almost all those opinions, on either side of the aisle.)

But I do want to represent this Christian community of faith who knows how to love each other, and how to cling together, even when we disagree on important matters. The Cathedral of St. Philip actually does a great job of this! Sometimes we do it without even realizing it. We can, and do, live together. I see a future where the matters which (some say) threaten to divide us seem as distant as our former arguments about high church and low church, or whether it is okay to eat certain foods.

Do not fear! These words may be the most frequent admonitions in scripture. These words come from angels and prophets. They come from the mouth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Do not fear. Jesus Christ will hold us together. Jesus Christ will hold us together even when we disagree, just like our families hold together in the midst of disagreement. We can live with that. We have lived with it before, and we shall do so again. Pray for us!

The Very Reverend Sam Candler

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