
2003 General Convention and the Episcopal Church

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

As many of you know, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church has just finished its 74th meeting. Since 1785 (usually every three years), we have been meeting to celebrate God's redeeming work in this body, and to forge legislation that properly describes and guides the life of this church. It is always hard work, but I believe God honors that work.

Every generation of the Church meets certain challenges. Generations before us argued about liturgical ceremonial (and sometimes refused to give consent to bishops because of their beliefs on that issue), argued about slavery (and sometimes split for a season), argued about the role of women in the church, argued about civil rights.

Our challenge, for the past twenty years, has certainly been homosexuality. We are in disagreement about it. Yet, we are still worshipping together, serving together, studying together, and praying together. That prayer and service will benefit us, no matter what our position is on homosexuality in the Church.

"Comfort, comfort ye my people," said Isaiah. Let me try to provide some words of assurance and comfort following developments at this year's General Convention, and on this matter that particularly challenges our generation.

My first word is this: neither of the controversial resolutions passed at this year's General Convention changes the parish life of most congregations in the United States.

First, we gave consent for a particular gay man to be consecrated bishop in New Hampshire. That was New Hampshire's choice, and they have known that priest for twenty-eight years. He has been in a partnered relationship for thirteen years, and the diocese has elected him to be a wholesome example for that flock. That vote does not change the way each of us lives the gospel, or engages our parishes, or serves the world. God continues to call us to that steady mission.

The second major vote at General Convention was a vote not to authorize the development of liturgies that would bless same-sex unions. I know that you heard a different headline on most of the media outlets. You heard something like "General Convention recognizes same sex unions." Both statements are true. For years, many folks have been urging General Convention to vote favorably on authorizing such liturgies. This is the vote that continues to be denied. This year, that key provision was voted down.

However, General Convention has also been steadily acknowledging that many same-sex unions do exist in the Church. This is simply a statement of fact. For years now, some dioceses have been allowing the blessing of same sex unions. Other dioceses have been opposed to those blessings, and still others are decidedly ambiguous. So, this year's General Convention re-stated that truth this way: "We recognize that local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions."

Many of the news reporters, unfamiliar with similar past General Convention actions, seem to have assumed that the word "recognize" now bears authorization weight (as in "to give permission"). I admit that the word "recognize" can be read that way. But I also like the ambiguity of the word "recognize," because that ambiguity fairly describes the present ambiguity of the Church on this issue. Some of us are for it, and some of us are against it; that's where we've been for twenty years.

This resolution is more a descriptive than a prescriptive one. Like all effective resolutions, it states a fact rather than forces

folks to do something we do not want to do. The fact is that the national body of the Episcopal Church has not voted to authorize liturgies, but the body is willing to let certain blessings continue, in some kind of way, among its members. This is simply where we are.

This resolution, then, does not change, or force anything different, among local parishes of the Episcopal Church. The same dynamics and boundaries about same-sex blessings that were in place in particular parishes before General Convention are in place after General Convention.

Emotionally, I do appreciate that what I have just said does not seem true for some folks. They feel separated because of these national acknowledgments. "How can I be a part of a Church which has members operating in a way that I am not prepared to operate in?"

I appreciate this feeling, because it is wholesome. It means that I feel part of something bigger than just my own opinion, or my own family, or my own parish. I really am affected by something my brother or sister does across the country. I am part of the whole. When one member suffers, we all suffer. When one member rejoices, we all rejoice. At this moment, gays and lesbians are suffering; and folks opposed to their unions are also suffering.

I say, "Do not fear" being a part of this whole. The Episcopal Church has many members, and we are divided on the issue of same-sex unions. Some might even say that we are "broken" by that issue. But we are not in schism from one another; and disagreement -even on this powerful issue-- is not at all a threat to leave the body. There will be no mass exodus from the Episcopal Church.

Do not fear, then, these feelings of separation or ambiguity. And do not let the anxieties of the present moment deter you from daily Christian routines of prayer and service. In fact, if this present moment in the Episcopal Church drives us all toward renewed prayer and service, the result can only be tremendous!

I am glad to be an Episcopalian today. I have felt shaken and disappointed, anxious and uncertain, glad and elated, in the last week. We have been trying to work our way through a complex challenge. But we will make it. Jesus said, "Do not be anxious.... Seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6.25-33). We are seeking that kingdom. Pray for the Episcopal Church; even in our disagreement, God is doing a great thing here.

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