



Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina

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July 15, 2012

7th Sunday After Pentecost

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Some of you have actively followed the decisions of the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Others have been blissfully unaware that our denomination even had a General Convention. We have. And the actions taken mark a significant and distressing departure from the doctrine, discipline and worship of Christ as this Church has received them.

In conversations with clergy, and from the emails I have received, I know there is much uneasiness about the future. Some of us are experiencing the well-known stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. And, of course, I must acknowledge there are those for whom the recent decisions are a cause for celebration. For me there are certainly things about which I was thankful at the convention in Indianapolis. I might even have taken encouragement from the resolutions that were passed regarding needed structural reform, and for the intentional work in the House of Bishops on matters of collegiality and honesty. Unfortunately, these strike me now as akin to a long overdue rearranging of the furniture when the house is on fire. Why do I say this?

There are four resolutions which were adopted that bring distressing changes to the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Episcopal Church that every ordained person in this church has vowed "to engage to conform," and which stand in direct conflict with the doctrine, discipline and worship of Christ as this church has received them.

First, let me mention resolution C029. While this was amended during the debates in a more temperate direction, it still moves the Church further down the road toward encouraging the communion of the unbaptized which departs from two thousand years of Christian practice. It also puts the undiscerning person in spiritual jeopardy. (I Corinthians 11:27--32)

Plainly, the resolution that has received the most publicity is A049 which authorizes rites for Same-Sex Blessings. This resolution goes into effect in Advent 2012, but only upon the authority of the bishop of each diocese. It hardly needs to be said, but for the record let me say clearly, I will not authorize the use of such rites in the Diocese of South Carolina. Such rites are not only contrary to the canons of this diocese and to the judgment of your bishop, but more importantly I believe they are contrary to the teaching of Holy Scripture; to two thousand years of Christian practice; as well as to our created nature. Many theologians down through the centuries speak of what we are as human beings by Creation; what we are by the Fall; what we are through Redemption (that is in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ); and what we shall be in our Glorification. Our marriage service in the Book of Common Prayer is rooted in this understanding. Because of this, it is biblical, it is Christian, and it is Anglican. I would also add, it is beautiful and it is true. Therefore the Episcopal Church has no authority to put asunder this sacramental understanding of marriage as established by God in creation and blessed through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. It has no authority to do this either by revising the marriage rite to include same sex partners or by devising some parallel quasi-marital sacramental service. I remind you of the elegant

words of our Prayer Book which echo the teaching of our Scriptures: “The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation, and our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. It signifies the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church, and Holy Scripture commends it to be honored among all people.” This speaks of a “given-ness” in this age that is good, and is emblematic of our Christian Hope. It prepares us for the age to come; when God the Father summons his Church to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

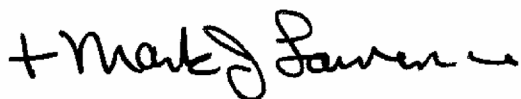
There is however an even more incoherent departure from the teaching of Holy Scripture and from our Episcopalian and Anglican Heritage to be found in the General Convention’s passage of resolutions D002 and D019. These changes to our Church’s canons mark an even further step into incoherency. They open the door to innumerable self-understandings of gender identity and gender expression within the Church; normalizing “transgender,” “bi-sexual,” “questioning,” and still yet to be named – self-understandings of individualized eros. I fail to see how a rector or parish leader who embraces such a canonical change has any authority to discipline a youth minister, Sunday school teacher, or chalice bearer who chooses to dress as a man one Sunday and as a woman another. And this is but one among many possibilities. Let me state my concern clearly. To embrace an understanding of our human condition in which gender may be entirely self-defined, self-chosen is to abandon all such norms, condemning ourselves, our children and grandchildren, as well as future generations to sheer sexual anarchy. So long as I am bishop of this diocese I will not abandon its people to such darkness.

Some have said to me, “But bishop the culture is accepting this. To continue to resist these innovations is to put ourselves on the wrong side of history.” I say to such thinking, you cannot be on the wrong side of History if you are on the right side of Reality. Archbishop William Temple was correct when he wrote over 70 years ago: the Church needs to be very clear in its public teaching so it can be very pastoral in its application.

This Monday afternoon I will be meeting with my Council of Advice. On Tuesday I will be meeting with our Diocesan Standing Committee. Then during the remainder of July I will be meeting with the deans and with clergy in various deaneries. Given these changes in the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Episcopal Church the question that is before us is: “What does being faithful to Jesus Christ look like for this diocese at this time? How are we called to live and be and act? In this present context, how do we make Biblical Anglicans for a Global Age?”

On the penultimate day of General Convention, in a Private Session in the House of Bishops, I asked for a point of personal privilege and expressed my heartfelt concerns about these changes. I listened to the words of others and then departed with prayer and charity. I left at that time because at least for me to pretend that nothing had changed was no longer an option. Now that I have returned to South Carolina it is still not an option. I ask that you keep me and the councils of our diocese in your prayers as you shall be in mine. We have many God-size challenges and, I trust, many God-given opportunities ahead.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Joseph Lawrence" with a stylized flourish at the end.

The Right Reverend Mark Joseph Lawrence