

DIOCESE OF WESTERN NEW YORK

Thanks, etc.

October 25, 1991

Thousands of words have been written and spoken since July 20th about the 70th General Convention of the Episcopal Church and indeed about the very future of our denomination itself.

Was it a good Convention or a bad one? Was the House of Deputies more prophetic than the House of Bishops? Will the Episcopal Church stay together or break apart? Who won and who lost? Were there hidden messages for "them" at the national Church Center from "us" in the pew?

After the 1967 General Convention, then-Presiding Bishop John Hines said that after each General Convention, the leadership of the two Houses got together to discuss which House -- Bishops or Deputies had been the most prophetic. Obviously, I could not be in the House of Bishops during this Convention but from reports of those who did sit in on sessions of the House of Bishops, the consensus was that the House of Deputies won this "beauty contest".

The 1,100 deputies and bishops from 121 dioceses journeyed into a legislative wilderness and attempted to set the course of the church for the next three years and beyond. Sometimes the temperature of the debate inside the Phoenix Civic Plaza during the 10-day meeting matched the sizzling heat outside.

Many came to Phoenix with fear that the church was flying apart. Many bewailed the special interest groups and the pressure each was applying in pushing its own particular

agenda. 592 resolutions were presented. Slightly more than half -- 303 -- were enacted. Almost five hours of legislative time was taken up by Deputies asking to be recognized on points of personal privilege -- some of which were legitimate and some of which sorely tried the patience of the House and the presiding officer. In a body of 850 Deputies, the legislative process is cumbersome, messy and unwieldy. But even so, the Deputies were often ahead of the Bishops as the Bishops quarreled among themselves and went into Executive Session on six different occasions to talk about how they related to one another. The Deputies were often bitterly divided but they were arguing about issues and not personalities. There was a general sense of relief that we had held together in Phoenix but post-Convention reports and mailings by those who attended indicate it may be a very fragile truce.

Any reading of those reports will reveal as many different viewpoints about the Convention and the future of the Church as the persons writing them.

Let me give you some examples. One deputy wrote: "Was the 70th General Convention a light that failed? Or did it do a creditable job with some very difficult matters? Legislatively, the Convention was cautious -- and should have been. It was affected by the transitions which have been taking place in the Church, which among other things, make the legislative process work differently. We're a more fervent church. More people care about more issues and are less tolerant of back-room leadership and private deals. Both Houses of

the Convention have changed, because different kinds of people are being elected to the episcopate and as Deputies. The polite but sometimes vicious clubbiness which used to characterize the ^{G.C.} ~~Bishops~~ is going or gone. Deputies now represent a much broader spectrum of the Church. They may have a better grasp of the mission of the Church, but they have a worse grasp of the legislative process."

Observations from the Episcopal Peace Fellowship:
"Not since the Civil War has the General Convention of the Episcopal Church met in the midst of such conflict. Strongly held views on sexuality in general and ordaining homosexuals in particular were front and center. Feelings became so testy in the House of Bishops that by the third legislative day the House was starting each day with an executive session to work on group dynamics."

From THE WITNESS: "It (the Episcopal Church) is a church which is slowly discovering that it cannot legislate its way out of differences of opinion. Nearly 600 resolutions were submitted to 1100 bishops and deputies for consideration, on topics ranging from abortion to economic sanctions to whom to include in the calendar of saints. And when the final session ended, a lot of paperwork had never even reached the floor of either house."

A letter from a Bishop to his Diocese: "I share with you my observation that the House of Bishops, in terms of its voting patterns, has taken a sharp turn to the left,

in a more liberal direction, even since last September in Washington (at the annual House of Bishops meeting), both in terms of dealing with the issue of human sexuality, and in our dealing with the host of socio-geo-political resolutions that came before us. You will need to hear from our Deputies about the political climate of that House, but my observation, from the voting pattern, was that, in terms of the sexuality issue, they were more to the left than the Bishops, but in terms of the socio-geo-political issues, they were more moderate than the Bishops."

Many expressed a sense of relief, however, that things were not worse and that the Church managed to hang together for the time being.

What about the future? I have some concerns which have to do more with structure than with issues at this point because I think the structure will have an impact on how the issues are decided.

We often hear it said that those who drafted the Constitution of the United States walked across the street, so to speak, and drafted the Constitution of the Episcopal Church. The Declaration of Independence not only severed our connection with England, it also severed our connections between the American branch of Anglicanism and the Church of England. Obviously, it was the intention of the Anglican Church in America, officially called the Protestant Episcopal Church, to eliminate any use of the medieval concept of a magisterial prince-bishop, appointed by and responsible to

the king. The Episcopal Church in America quite consciously determined to recapture the primitive concept of the episcopate as wholly separate from the state and as servants of the church and not its lord. Parenthetically, let me say, that I have had the privilege of serving on the Anglican Consultative Council and its standing committee for a number of years and I have seen what we would consider as most undemocratic ways of selecting bishops in other Provinces and I presume to say that we would not be happy with those methods.

Since the American Revolution we have seen many changes occurring in the General Convention of the Episcopal Church and the centralized authority of the national church structure.

One of the biggest concerns coming out of this convention was the design of the convention itself. Bishop John MacNaughton^{WTK.} pointed out that the General Convention is not a theological symposium designed to exchange ideas and to seek the truth. Instead, it is a legislative body much like the U.S. Congress, constituted to seek consensus and often compromise on which the whole church may act. As such it is subject to the pressure of special interest groups and lobbies whose influence far exceeds their membership numbers in the church. Admitting that it may seem to some to be a funny way to run a church, MacNaughton said that he hasn't seen a better alternative.

*Changes needed
all Bricie's
comments on
target*

On the other hand, Bishop Arthur Walmsley of Connecticut, responding to the plethora of resolutions passed by General Convention urging dioceses to take some sort of

action said, "I guess what I need to say is that I do not believe that we are serving the Church well to lay the expectation on dioceses to respond to the sort of resolutions which General Convention promiscuously passes. My sense is that most dioceses will simply ignore them. The Diocese of Connecticut at least will reexamine whether we send a full deputation to another Convention unless radical proposals are in place for limiting the agenda in some meaningful way."

*A. B. + J
under look
at that*

In other actions, the Convention adopted a budget for the triennium which is about 5% lower than that for 1988-1991. This has already resulted in major restructuring of the staff of the Church Center in New York and a reduction of personnel from 291 to 239. Some dioceses who are unapp^ry with General Convention action have, since Phoenix, begun to look at ways to "redirect" monies from the National Church to diocesan and local programs. Some people suspect that the real issues here, as with the resolution asking that a plan to move the Church Center in New York be presented to the next General Convention, is an increasing frustration with what some perceive to be a growing dysfunctionality of the Church above the diocesan level. An uncoordinated federation of dioceses is not going to be effective, however, in modern, pluralistic America. *I applauded the comments of Bishop Bowman*

*this
afternoon*

We can only pray that the Bible sharing and Eucharist which occurred daily at General Convention will continue to have an impact on those who participated. Many deputies felt those times of being together in community -- however diverse

- promoted tolerance and even trust. One deputy said, "Those times of personal dialogue are not the subject of newspaper headlines, but they set the tone for our speaking the truth in love, with patience, forbearing one another, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. He quoted the late Bishop Stephen Bayne, who said, "Our unity lies not in our thinking alike but in our acting together." Are we willing to take that risk? For the sake of our Church, I can only hope the answer is YES!