

The General Convention
House of Deputies
Saturday, July 2, 1988

ADDRESS FROM THE CHAIR

We have already remembered in prayer our former President, Dr. Charles Radford Lawrence, whose untimely death in April of 1986, deprived his loving family of a husband and father, deprived this House of a valiant and faithful leader, and deprived many of us of a kind and loyal friend. Charles Lawrence was, in the trust sense of the word, a Christian Gentleman. I simply must begin by saying, Beloved Charles, we praise God that into paradise the angels have led you, and that, at your coming the martyrs received you, and brought you into the holy city, Jerusalem. May your soul, and the souls of all the departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

Let me welcome all of you Deputies to this sixty-ninth General Convention. It has been almost exactly two hundred years since our first General Convention, and those who met 68 General Conventions ago would have been hard pressed to imagine our meeting today -- its breadth and depth, its issues, its diversity and, please God, its unity.

Special welcome to fellow veterans of many Conventions; let us all be willing to share our wisdom, but remember that, according to St. Benedict, "the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best." (Rule, cap. 3).

A special welcome to those for whom this is their first or second convention. Your gifts are welcomes, but don't neglect to seek wisdom from those who have been here before you.

To our alternates, spouses, hard-working platform and secretariat members, volunteers, visitors, observers, and media representatives, welcome!

!Atencion! Voy a hablar en espanol. A todos nuestros hermanas y hermanos en Cristo damos una bienvenida especial. Lo que ustedes comparten con nosotros es importante y nos ayudara a realizar nuestro trabajo de un modo "suavecito".

Especially to all for whom English is not your first tongue, we say please be patient with us, and help us to receive from you the great gifts you have to bring us.

What word should I speak as we begin our work? There was a strong temptation merely to say welcome and sit down. But I believe the times are too urgent, and the responsibility too great not to share with you, for your discernment, what is in this Deputy's heart.

At an Executive Council meeting held in June of 1987, our Presiding Bishop read to the Council a letter he had received from a member of the United States Senate. I believe it is a letter that every leader in our Church needs to hear. Let me read it to you:

"As a life-long Episcopalian and one who is active in our church, I hope that you and the Holy Spirit will endeavor to put some life in our Church. People need to know that God is not some distant figure but rather a living God with whom we can walk and talk, on whom we can depend, and from whom we can derive great power and peace and purpose in this life."

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"Moreover, people need to know that God is demanding. Spiritual commitment is not just a Sunday experience. It requires that we live differently than those around us -- that we must be honest and caring people who seek truth and justice and peace and love wherever God places us. The Episcopal Church continues to lose members in my judgment because it lacks this intensity of faith."

"I wish you well and trust that you will continue to speak out about the brokenness of the world, about nuclear war and apartheid and other issues of our day. But for heaven's sake, breathe some life into our church at the same time."

The Senator is so right to tell the Presiding Bishop and the rest of us to continue, not only in speaking out but, through ministries like the Jubilee Ministries, through the Presiding Bishop's Fund, and in many other ways, not only to speak out, but to ACT out to respond to the world's pain, to individuals and to try to deal with the structures that are so often much harder to deal with than the individuals.

But my dear brothers and sisters, the greatest shame of the Episcopal Church is precisely the lack of the intensity of faith. If Christian faith lacks intensity, let me tell you a secret, it means that there is very little or no faith there.

If you have met Jesus Christ in any real way, you are going to have an intense relationship -- either of antagonism or commitment. He allows no other way.

I hope that you will be horrified to know that only 41% of Episcopalians say their faith is very important to them.

According to the Washington Post/LA Times Service, "Episcopalians are less likely than members of other denominations to say that religion is 'very important' in their lives. Overall, 55 percent of Americans and 61 percent of Protestants but only 41 percent of Episcopalians said that religion was 'very important'."1 Maybe we ought to be grateful that at least 41% of those who call themselves Episcopalians say that their faith is very important to them. But we must take cognizance of the fact that 41% is the smallest, the lowest percentage of any Christian body. To me, those who say that their faith is not very important to them means that they do not have the kind of personal (note personal, not private) the personal relationship with Jesus Christ out of which comes intensity of Christian faith.

To know Him, Jesus Christ. Oh, said Paul, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and may share his sufferings. (Philippians 3:10). It is out of knowing Him, out of that intensity of faith and trust in Him, that we can begin to obey His commands, to feed the hungry, to reach out to the homeless, to heal the sick, to cast our demons, both in individuals and society, but also and above all, to preach the Gospel. Episcopalians (THIS part of the Anglican Communion) appear to be the absolute worst at evangelization. We only seem to be able to point out what is wrong with everybody else's way of doing evangelizing without really doing it ourselves.

1 Jacksonville Times-Union/Journal, March 7, 1987

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Evangelization is so much more than church growth but it least contemplates that. And we need church growth. I know that no one wants to have pointed out to them the shrinking clothes of the Emperor pointed out, but it must be done. In 1961, the last time the General Convention met in Detroit, the Bishops' Pastoral Letter apologized for the smallness of our Church as they wrote about ecumenism. They wrote, in effect, "We are only a small church of three and a half million members in a population of 180 million Americans." Twenty-seven years later, they would have to write "We are only a small church of 2 million seven hundred thousand members in a population of 240 million Americans." The population of America has increased 50%, while the membership of the Church has decreased almost 25% (23% to be exact). And, no one likes to have this said, but somebody has to say it.

Why are we decreasing? Why do we not grow? I believe it not only has to do with that lack of intensity of faith of which the Senator wrote, but also with a view of God that does not call for evangelism or growth.

The Senator wrote, "People need to know that God is not some distant figure, but rather a living God with whom we can walk and talk, on whom we can depend..."

According to John Whale, the head of religious television for the BBC in his recent book entitled The Future of Anglicanism, it is because the Church of England the other Anglican churches of the west such as our own, and I quote his words, "...will increasingly accommodate the idea of a God who does not act, and a unitarian God at that."²

Let me read those words to you again, if I may. "...will increasingly accommodate the idea of a God who does not act, and a unitarian God at that."

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If we really believe in a God who does not act, and a unitarian one at that, we have no good news to tell, or to believe.

You may well be asking why am I taking your valuable time to be lecturing your all on theological debate, and a debate in which I betray strong commitments? I am doing it because I believe that this theological question reveals the real issues that lie hidden beneath the surface issues that this General Convention will be debating and deciding. We will always disagree on the means to accomplish the purposes of God, but we can never be in harmony if we are, in effect, serving different Gods with therefore different purposes.

² The Church Times, April 15, 1988, p. 11.

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I believe with all my heart and soul that God does act, and that God is a Trinitarian, not a Unitarian God. And I believe we are here to discern the will of our God, and to do our best, with the Bishops of the Church, to lead God's people in carrying out that will, as we share what we have heard of the purpose of God as He has revealed it to us.

The basic word for you and for me, I believe, is from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, that comes (I think) from his Ethics. The main thing, says Bonhoeffer, is not how to do good. The main thing he says is not even how to be good (although that is harder). The main thing is, what is the will of God?

And we cannot know that will until we know Jesus Christ, and believe that through His Holy Spirit, He will reveal His will to those who want to obey it. Jesus said if anyone's will is to DO the will of God, then one shall then know whether His teaching is true or not. (John 7:17)

All Christians, need intensity of faith. And we will never have intensity of faith until we know Jesus Christ, and still more, until we know why He has come. The truth is we find it hard to believe that humankind has fallen, we find it hard to believe that we are fallen or that there's any such thing as sin, not just bad judgment, not just error which can be corrected by education.

The truth is we are sinners, lost and dying, and Christ died for us. Until we know that truth and tell it, there will be no vitality in the Church. But if we know that saving truth, experience it, trust it, commit ourselves to it, act it out and to Jesus, we will know the truth, and we will come to know the will of God for us, and for our decisions.

I quoted our Presiding Bishop once, let me close by quoting him again in his last address from the chair in Rapid City, South Dakota in May, 1988, where obviously our work with Native Americans was the focus. He was speaking to us just after he had learned of the death of Bishop Frensdorf, his close friend, and he left immediately afterward his address to minister to the Bishop's family.

The Presiding Bishop called the Council, despite all the difficulties we face, to a message and a ministry of HOPE. And I join in this call to each one of you, and to me. God has not withdrawn, he said. He is not a God who does not act. "God is with us," he said, "in the presence of Jesus Christ." This is the content of our mission: to preach HOPE. And, this is our message: Jesus is Lord!

"It is to Jesus that we cling. It is Jesus we share. It is around Jesus that our community of hope is built. It is through Jesus that we find the new creation, new life. This is the message."

So I say to you, my sisters and brothers, let us speak and listen and act at this General Convention with Jesus, and pray that the intensity of the faith that He gives us, the quality of the Hope he gives us, and the power of the Love he gives us, will make us obedient to act as He did, in obedience to do the will of His Father who is in Heaven. Amen and amen.