

MISSION IS MINISTRY IN THE DIMENSION OF DIFFERENCE

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Mission as a word and concept comes up all over the place at this General Convention.

Here are just a few instances:

- * The Young Adult Service Corps returnees' presentations about their work in Africa, Asia and Latin America.
- * Lee Allison Crawford's witness in the House of Deputies about her Vermont parish's relationship with the Diocese of El Salvador.
- * The impassioned appeal at Saturday's eucharist from Aotearoa's Jenny Te-Paa for Anglican unity amid disagreement.
- * Tom Shaw's stories at the Reconciliation Forum about visits from the Diocese of Massachusetts to the Diocese of Maseno North and the Diocese of Jerusalem.
- * Enthusiastic passage of resolutions strengthening our missionary presence with companions around the world.
- * Testimony from many at Committee 26's hearings about how the Episcopal Church should move forward in the post-Windsor Report environment of the Anglican Communion.

Everywhere in the church – left, right and center – people are appealing to mission as the content and criterion of a faithful church's life and work. Contributing to this consensus, have been the missional emphases of the 1979 Prayerbook, the renewal of Bible study in congregations, an abiding post-60s commitment to community outreach and social justice, and the democratization of the church's global mission through Companion Diocese Relationships.

Still, the clamoring voices of General Convention can be confusing. Liturgical revision, responding to the Windsor Report, sending missionaries, supporting the Millennium Development Goals, addressing racism – how do these and more fit together in the mission on which God's sends us in the world?

Difference, another word spoken so often, is the pivotal reality. In one way, mission is everything we say God calls us to do in the Baptismal Covenant as summarized in the Catechism: restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ through worship and prayer, gospel proclamation, and work for justice, peace and love.

What's gotten people excited here in Columbus is not that general concept of mission but the cutting edge of mission that meets difference. We realize we're truly on mission when we're reaching beyond who we are as individuals and communities to encounter and form community in Jesus Christ with people who are different from ourselves. The differences may be social, ethnic, sexual, political, national, racial, linguistic, economic, educational – whatever! It's difference that makes it mission.

Ministry is faithful service to God and neighbor, and mission is the edge that meets difference. Put another way, mission is ministry in the dimension of difference.

In this perspective, so much of what we're up to here comes into focus as mission. We meet difference in pursuing evangelism and ecumenism in a secular and multi-faith world. The sexuality controversy is about difference within our church and among the religious cultures of the Anglican Communion. Missionaries make their home in environments of difference. The election of a woman as presiding bishop holds promise for rectifying historic gender imbalances. Liturgical proposals seek to honor kinds of cultural difference in our church. And so on. It's mission when we're working on difference.

A transformation of the past half-century is that Episcopalians increasingly see difference not as threat but as invitation. We now know we're incomplete without the other who is different. We now know we need the other, that we're impoverished without the other. Expanding this convention's slogan, Come, meet difference, and grow!

Where difference divides, mission travels through justice to Christ's reconciliation, as it does in the power conflicts of gender, sexuality, race, religion, economy and nation. Where difference means isolation, mission travels to form community, as when, for instance, the Diocese of Western North Carolina puts out an e-mail invitation, the Diocese of Durgapur in Bengal responds and a diocesan link is born!

In a world where people die daily over difference, such mission is counter-cultural. In God's vision, such mission makes a world of difference.

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