

## **GENERAL CONVENTION: SACRAMENT AND DISCIPLESHIP**

By Titus Presler

General Convention is sacramental.

Politics expresses discipleship.

These assertions are counter-cultural in the Episcopal Church today. As heirs of the 1960s, we are skeptical of institutions. We embrace the work of small, local groups in the church, but we suspect that national structures are mere bureaucracies and that large meetings are simply their spinning wheels. With the individualism inherent in American religion, we treasure our personal and local spirituality, but we marginalize community life on the larger scale.

Yet when I plunge into General Convention, my experience is that I am entering a sacrament of the Church, an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace. And the politics that engage me at General Convention I experience as an expression of Christian discipleship, that is, individuals and communities seeking to follow Jesus. These experiences give me energy, hope and joy amidst the pessimism that often pervades discussion of national issues and the upcoming General Convention. Moreover, I believe these experiences are grounded in an incarnational theology that is central to us as Anglicans.

The Church is the Body of Christ, we say in our catechism, but we tend to reserve that affirmation for our parishes and, maybe, our dioceses. When discussion touches the Episcopal Church as a whole, many people question its usefulness, its faithfulness, its authenticity. "It's too political," is a frequent complaint. People assume that politics is something unsavory and unfaithful, and therefore unworthy of the Church of Jesus Christ.

What we need is a theology of the institutional Church. In our deep-seated ambivalence, we say that we value tradition, but we dismiss the structures by which such a tradition is mediated into our future. We wax eloquent about the Body of Christ in

Corinth or Philippi, but mutter darkly about its legislative work in Phoenix or Philadelphia. Of course, much criticism is prompted by dismay at particular decisions, but that is precisely where we need a bedrock understanding of the Church that offers us confidence beyond the ebb and flow of particular issues that concern us.

Theologically, the visible, institutional Church is grounded in the major realities of our faith. As the Body of Christ, the Church echoes and enacts the rhythms of the Christ event: incarnation, cross and resurrection. The enfleshment of God in Jesus signals God's embrace of the real, the human, the physical. The human and social dimension of the Church, therefore, is not an awkward, distasteful circumstance, but an essential means through which God works in the world, just as God has always worked through covenanted communities.

From his crucified suffering, Jesus cried out that he was abandoned, yet God was there in the desolation, embracing us in our alienation and sin. So also, God is present in the turmoil and strife of our church life, not abandoning us even when we hurt one another deeply. God's victory over the power of sin and death in the resurrection of Jesus declares that the last word in our church life is not our disputatious confusion but God's Holy Spirit working in the Body to bring forth new life and mission in the world.

If all this is true, the Church is a sacrament of Christ, and General Convention, like all our gatherings, is a sacramental event of the Body of Christ. In that event, we are called to receive one another not as potential allies or adversaries but all equally as God-bearers. General Convention, then, is not a corruption of our calling, but a gathering of God-bearers. We gather not simply as an aggregate of individuals, but as a sacrament of the Body of Christ, an outward and visible community sign in which is working the invisible grace of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the world.

But what of the politics? Isn't it bad that the Church gets political? No, because politics is incarnational. Politics is simply the articulation, negotiation and use of power to accomplish objectives. As such, politics is inevitable, and it is naive to imagine that

human interactions can be non-political. Relationships with the neighbor next door, the local store clerk, vestry members, even prayer group partners — all these relationships have a political dimension, because there is power in each relationship that must be mediated to get work done.

The Church is political because it is real, social and historical, and because it seeks to shape a future for the real, social and historical human family. As the Church gathers to so use its power, Convention life is inevitably political. The question is *how* power is being used and to what ends. Are people sharing power or monopolizing power? Do we use power to advance the gospel or to increase our own prestige? Are we diminishing one another in our negotiations or treasuring one another even as we disagree?

Political work at Convention, in short, can be discipleship work. As we seek the mind of Christ, as we take counsel with others for advice or persuasion, as we devise wordings that meet the concerns of fellow travelers, as we dispute issues with the otherwise-minded — all of this can express our discipleship when we do it with love and with alertness for what God is up to among us and in the world.

The call to Convention is a call to sacrament and to discipleship. Deputies and bishops will doubtless fail many times to respond faithfully to that call, both in community life and in political action. Discerning, however, that this is indeed the call may help us to let go of our protective cynicism. It may impel us to join the Spirit's movement in empowering the Body for work in the world.

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