

LET'S TALK "CHURCH-WIDE," NOT "NATIONAL CHURCH"

By Titus Presler

"National Church." It's a common expression among Episcopalians. I suggest we stop using it. It may seem a small point, but I believe how we talk about ourselves has important implications for Episcopalians who are not U.S. citizens, for relationships with other church communions, and for our stance toward governments.

Episcopalians use the term "national church" (with or without capital letters) fairly loosely. Sometimes people mean the Episcopal Church's headquarters, located in the Episcopal Church Center, an 11-story building at 815 2nd Ave. in Manhattan. As in: "The parish just got a mailing from the National Church." Other times people mean the staff at the Episcopal Church Center. As in: "The people at the National Church said such and so." Often the term distinguishes a diocesan program from a church-wide program. As in: "the National Church's youth program." The term may highlight a trend initiated by the General Convention. As in: "In the 1960s the National Church tried to respond to the Civil Rights Movement and the urban crisis."

So, "national church" is imprecise. It's better for us to say what we mean, whether it is the Church Center, the staff of a particular office, or General Convention. The problems with "national church," though, go deeper than vagueness.

The term "national church" dismisses the parts of our church that are not located in the United States, such as the dioceses of the Dominican Republic, Taiwan, Honduras, and others. These are not marginal places. The Episcopal diocese with the most baptized members is not Los Angeles, New York or Virginia, but Haiti, with well over 100,000 baptized members.

"National church" can betray us unawares into being insensitive. For example, when the 2000 General Convention met on July Fourth, the House of Deputies sang *God Bless America*. In that situation, deputations from outside the USA were being asked by a church assembly to sing a national song of what is for them a foreign nation.

Today we are an international church. That's ironic, for after the American Revolution, ours was the Anglican body that pioneered the idea of being Anglican without being part of the state-established Church of England. So we became "The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America," with a national identity built into our name. Significantly, "The Episcopal Church," simpler and non-national, is now an official substitute for the longer name.

The global perspective of the 21st century should prompt us to grow into the international dimension that has developed with the church's mission outreach, especially as we see the destructive effects of nationalisms around the world. The 2003 General Convention may make us even more international, for it will consider proposals that the

dioceses of Puerto Rico and Venezuela (and maybe one other diocese) be incorporated into the Episcopal Church.

There's another problem. Subconsciously, Episcopalians have often aspired to be a national church in the sense of speaking for the USA's ideals and being the sanctuary for the nation's religious life. "The National Cathedral" is an example of how that aspiration has made its way into our ethos. The Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul in Washington is a luminous edifice and the seat, or *cathedra*, of both the Bishop of Washington and our Presiding Bishop. Remarkably, Episcopalians, who constitute less than one percent of the U.S. population, have actually succeeded in promoting it as a "national cathedral," and it has become the default site for prayer services of government leaders during national crises. Calling it "the National Cathedral," though, implies both a privileged place relative to other churches and an identification of church with state that we should avoid as Christians, whether we are Americans or Ecuadorans.

It's not that nation or citizenship is a bad thing. Being a citizen of a nation is part of personal and group identity, part of one's social location. Most of the 38 Anglican provinces around the world are geographically defined by national boundaries, but national geography is a secondary, not primary, element in our identity as the Body of Christ. "National Church" removes the critical distance Christians must keep between church and state, between the vision God has for human society and the designs of political leaders and parties. Presuming to be a national church makes it harder for the church to fulfill its responsibility to prophesy to the nation. We should be just as cautious of "national church" as we would be of terms like "cultural church," "racial church," "tribal church," or "social church." The church transcends all those qualifiers, for the church must embrace the human diversity found in every location.

So what's the alternative? On the model of their biennial Church-wide Assembly, members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, with whom we are now in full communion, speak of church-wide staff, church-wide programs, church-wide tendencies. Both clear and comprehensive, "church-wide" may be the best solution. It says all that people usually mean by "national church." Yet it includes all the Episcopal Church's nationalities, avoids chauvinism in relation to other churches, and preserves a critical distance between church and nation.

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