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Reflections on General Convention

My sisters and brothers in Christ:

I write this letter on the airplane returning from the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church held in Anaheim, California. As is my custom, I wish to communicate to you some initial thoughts and observations while reserving some additional reflections for later conversations throughout the diocese.

To this, my eighth General Convention, I brought a unique perspective due to my sabbatical leave three months prior to Convention. This meant that the three months previous to our gathering was a time of rest and renewal for me and was not dominated by arguments, shrill and otherwise, that have become a prelude to our gatherings over the last two decades. I arrived calmer, more rested and less anxious than at any General Convention in my memory.

Though much was done that was enormously creative and constructive — redefining ourselves in various ways to being a church in mission at home and abroad, authorizing full communion with the Moravian Church, launching a \$250 million campaign for mission, reworking our disciplinary canons, and approving detailed parameters for our interreligious dialogs with other faiths, to name a very few — nothing was more closely watched, debated and analyzed than legislation concerned with two particular issues.

First, the 2006 General Convention encouraged a moratorium on consents given to bishops-elect, “when manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion.” Though the moratorium legislation (B033) was opposed by almost 30 bishops — both conservative and liberal — in 2006, it has provided for the church some breathing space and time to renew relationships across the Anglican Communion. The success of the Lambeth Conference last summer in Canterbury was due in no small part to the observance of what is essentially a voluntary moratorium for the good of the Communion. At Lambeth the Archbishop of Canterbury asked the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada to continue the moratorium.

Over the past couple of years there has been a strong effort from some quarters to repeal B033. As the letter from the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies points out, (appendix 1) the strongest of these efforts sought to repeal B033. Another group of resolutions sought to strengthen our church's non-discrimination Canons, thus repealing B033. A third, far more "conservative" approach was ultimately taken. General Convention chose in resolution D025 (appendix 2) to simply describe our canonical processes for discernment for all orders of ministry. It is clear that some interpreted this action as a repeal of the moratorium. It is also certain that many, including our Presiding Bishop and President of the House of Deputies, did not. Despite the various interpretations being offered in this church and throughout the Communion, the full implications of D025 will take a few years to discern.

The second emotion-laden issue was a proposal to ask our Standing Liturgical Commission to begin the work of preparing a rite for the blessing of same gender relationships to be presented to the next General Convention in 2012 for debate and possible approval. We were also dealing with a new reality in our country. Six states have now made marriage or civil unions between same sex couples legal. Again various interpretations have been given to the legislation (C056 – appendix 3) that emerged from General Convention. Though I voted for neither D025 nor C056, I was a part of an extended smaller conversation and drafting session on C056. I know what was attempting to be said.

We allowed a "generous pastoral response" to those bishops in states where civil marriage between same sex couples is allowed. We authorized the gathering of "pastoral and liturgical resources" from around the church so that we could see what is being used to respond pastorally to same sex couples. We invited the broader Anglican Communion into our conversations on this very sensitive matter, and we were clear that theological diversity is one hallmark of our church and would be honored as a core value. We did not authorize the blessing of same sex relationships, but asked for a report from these Communion-wide conversations at the next General Convention (2012).

Insofar as the internal policies on these two emotionally-charged matters are concerned, nothing will change in the Diocese of Mississippi. As much as that may relieve some, I also know that it will disappoint others. I have tried to be as clear as I can on these issues and I cannot foresee any change during my episcopacy. However, the Archbishop of Canterbury and, now General Convention, have invited us into a serious conversation on the blessing of same sex relationships. I believe serious reflection on the nature and relationship between the sacrament of marriage, same sex blessings, civil unions and civil marriage of same sex couples should now proceed. Our country is in the midst of the conversation. We cannot stand on the sidelines. Upon my return from sabbatical, I will begin plans for such conversations.

I return to Mississippi encouraged by the respectful tone that characterized most of our discussions. I was particularly appreciative of the way in which there was a sincere effort within the House of Bishops to listen deeply to the thoughts and opinions of all. Such respect has not always characterized the work of the House of Bishops. I am convinced that the House of Bishops is committed to preserving and honoring theological diversity within our church.

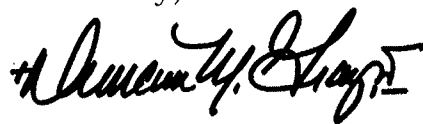
At the end of General Convention a statement was circulated reaffirming, among other things, a commitment to the three moratoria asked for by the Archbishop of Canterbury and a commitment to the Anglican Covenant process. Though I am in complete agreement with the statement, my practice as bishop has been not to sign any statement that is not a part of the official work of the House of Bishops. Thus, I did not sign the statement (appendix 4), but continue to be committed to its five key points.

As I travel the diocese over the coming weeks and months, I will be available to reflect more deeply on the remarkable experience that is General Convention. In addition, I would invite you to use the wisdom and insights of our deputation from this diocese; the Rev. Canon David Johnson, the Rev. Chip Davis, the Rev. Sylvia Czarnetzky, the Very Rev. Edward O'Connor, the Rev. David Knight, Dr. Anita George, Dr. Ed Sisson, Canon Kathryn McCormick, Ms. Bobbie Marascalco, Mr. Danny Meadors, Mrs. Margaret McLarty, Mr. Jack Conway and Mr. Ed Thurmond. They have served you well and continue to earn the respect of the wider church.

Finally, one of the many new perspectives that my sabbatical has given me, is to be reminded again how little a broken and hurting world cares about our very serious internal conflicts. In three different airports on three separate occasions, I intentionally engaged strangers in conversations about their lives with a thought of offering the Episcopal Church for their consideration. For all three our church was a real option, but one matter was an obstacle — conflict. “I really don’t care what you decide about gay or lesbian persons,” said one to me. “I just wish you’d quit fighting about it. I’ve got enough conflict in my own life to ask for more.”

May our faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ open our eyes to the world around us where hungry and hurting people wait.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Duncan M. Gray, III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and a stylized "G".

The Rt. Rev. Duncan M. Gray, III