

One Faith, Many Voices

By Susan Lindley

Episcopalians are not highly visible here in Lutheran country. But for a few days last August we took the national stage, as scores of reporters descended on our General Convention, held in Minneapolis for the third time. The national press focused on two particular resolutions: consent to the consecration of Canon V. Gene Robinson, a gay priest in a long-term committed relationship with another man, as bishop-coadjutor of New Hampshire; and a resolution that allowed – but did not require – same-sex blessings with the permission of a diocesan bishop.

The second resolution alone might not have drawn national attention, for it was crafted in committee as a compromise. Previous General Conventions had moved toward greater openness to homosexual people through affirmation of their civil rights and their fuller participation in church leadership, without authorizing the creation of an official liturgy for the blessing of same-sex unions. Like most mainline Protestant churches in the United States, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Episcopalians are divided about homosexuality. Typically, churches deal with such division by appointing study commissions or postponing action until greater consensus emerges. In Minneapolis, consent to Gene Robinson's election couldn't be postponed or compromised. The people in the Diocese of New Hampshire elected him, and the bishops and deputies at General Convention had to vote "yes" or "no."

In both the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies, the vote was "yes" by solid majorities, but there was a fervent minority voice of opposition. Following General Convention, some opponents left the church, voted in special diocesan conventions to repudiate General Convention's decisions, withheld funds from the national church or called on the heads (or "primates") of worldwide Anglican provinces to intervene. Others who voted "no" accepted the decision of General Convention, the highest governing authority of the Episcopal Church, and in traditional Anglican fashion agreed to disagree on this issue while remaining united in worship and commitment to the gospel. Many others rejoiced at the decision.

As a lay deputy from the host diocese, I was proud of my church. We emphasized the need for courtesy and respect at General Convention, especially on divisive issues. Several press reports commented on our “civility.” Deputies and visitors told us Minnesotans how much they appreciated the friendly volunteers, the smooth arrangements, the social opportunities on Nicollet Mall and the perfection of Minnesota’s summer weather.

I truly believe we did the right thing in consenting to the election of Gene Robinson. Although I had never met him until we sat in close proximity in the House of Deputies, his courtesy, patience and grace under trying conditions impressed me, as did the New Hampshire delegation’s enthusiasm about him. They have known him for decades as a deeply spiritual and compassionate priest. I voted “yes,” in part, to honor New Hampshire’s choice.

Opponents claim that sanctioning any form of homosexual behavior is against scripture. Those of us who voted “yes” agree that promiscuous or exploitative sexual behavior is wrong – whatever one’s sexual orientation. But Anglican tradition has never endorsed a literal reading of scripture. Since the English reformation, we have emphasized the primary authority of scripture for “those things essential to salvation,” but allowed for diverse interpretations and insisted that tradition and reason are additional sources of authority for the church.

The issue is not that one side accepts scripture and the other rejects it. Everyone who reads the Bible selects what to take literally. Is slavery acceptable? What about women’s ordination? Can Christians collect interest on loans or eat pork?

We who voted “yes” would emphasize Jesus’ message of love and inclusion in the light of more sophisticated medical and psychological knowledge. Just as the Jerusalem council broke with tradition in permitting Gentiles to become Christians without fully converting to Judaism, we may again be called to break with tradition. Other Episcopalians disagree, and I respect their right to do so.

Unfortunately, the civility that characterized General Convention has disappeared in some quarters. The primates met in England in mid-October and issued an ambiguous formal statement that, in typical Anglican fashion, satisfied neither side. Gene Robinson was consecrated bishop on Nov. 2. Some conservatives in the United States are

threatening to break with the Episcopal Church, and some primates have declared a state of impaired communion.

I hope and pray we will continue to find ways to honor our differences while affirming our common faith. Nevertheless, I support the vision of inclusion that our vote represented.

Susan Lindley is a professor of religion at St. Olaf College.