

Remarks by John Vanderstar

At the Episcopal Forum of South Carolina

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First let me thank you for inviting me to be with you today. It's a real pleasure to be among so many people who are determined to carry out God's mission for the Episcopal Church no matter what the obstacles.

Next let me identify myself within the structure of the Episcopal Church:

For about forty years I have been a member of St. Columba's church in Washington DC. There I participated fully in the ministry and the governance of the church. This led me to become very active in the diocese of Washington, serving under Bishop Walker, Bishop Haines, Bishop Jane Holmes Dixon, and bishop Chane. Then I became involved in the quote "National Church".

I put that in quotes because the Episcopal Church is not a USA Church but an international church, with dioceses in the Caribbean, South America and Taiwan.

As you know, the governance of the church is vested by our constitution and canons in the general convention, which meets every three years. It is bicameral: there is a house of bishops and a house of deputies – not delegates but deputies. Every diocese is entitled to send four clergy and four lay persons to represent it in the house of deputies. I was elected as a lay deputy from the diocese of Washington for the 1994 General Convention in Indianapolis, and I have attended every convention since then.

The "National Church" program is administered by the Presiding Bishop and her staff, with the assistance -- in between sessions of general convention -- of the Executive Council, which is sort of the national vestry. It has 38 elected members who serve six-year terms. Twenty are elected by general convention – ten at each session. The other 18 are elected by the nine provinces, one lay and one clergy. The diocese of Washington is in Province 3, which also includes the 12 dioceses in Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. In 2003 I was elected to be Province Three's lay representative to executive Council. Council meets for three or four days three times a year, so in the triennium it can have met once in every one of the nine provinces, including province nine, which includes the Caribbean and south American dioceses. My term expired this past summer, and later in the summer we moved to Waynesville, NC. I am either retired again or on sabbatical – we shall see what God has in store for me.

Let me turn now to the 76th General Convention, which took place in Anaheim, CA this past summer. If I had to sum it up in a few words, I would say that it was the most grace - filled convention I have ever attended. There was of course plenty of debate and disagreement about matters that came on the agenda. But there was little or none of the nasty language that had marked previous discussions of issues like human sexuality. It may be that one reason for this is the absence of the bishops, priests and lay persons who have decided to cast their lot with other member churches on the Anglican Communion. In a way, that is unfortunate, because we need to have everybody at the table and we need to know how to talk with one another respectfully and civilly, no matter how deep our disagreements.

This leads me to another very important fact about last summer's general convention. We were blessed by the presence of a large number of guests – bishops, cathedral deans, seminary deans, and other high-ranking folks -- from a number of the other 37 churches of the Anglican Communion – including the so-called global south – Africa, Latin America and Asia, where much of the conservative branch of the Anglican Communion resides. Among these guests were fifteen primates, or heads of other member churches of the Anglican Communion.

Why do I cite this as an important fact? Because our church is probably the most democratic of them all. In many of the other provinces of the Anglican Communion all the power is vested in their bishops, if not in the primate alone. We, on the other hand, spread the power out among the bishops, clergy and laity. No action of general convention is valid unless it has passed both houses, bishops and deputies, and as I have said half of the members of the house of deputies are laypersons. So these foreign visitors got a chance to see a church that is governed in most cases very differently from their own, both in our deliberative tradition and in the power given to the laity. By the way, Executive Council is even more oriented toward the laity, as we constitute 21 of the 38 elected members. And the presiding officers, who are outstanding leaders, are Bishop Katharine and the President of the House of Deputies, Bonnie Anderson – a lay person.

Let me give you just one example of the importance of folks knowing how we operate. Since the 74th General Convention held in 2003 in Minneapolis, our church and its Presiding Bishop have been bombarded with complaints about the sexual identity of the Bishop of New Hampshire. Our Presiding Bishop's, Frank Griswold and Katherine Jefferts Schori, got a lot of very negative commentary from other primates on this, but these complaints were usually phrased as complaints about the appointment of bishop Robinson, and demands were made that our presiding bishop revoke the appointment. Of course we do not appoint our bishops at all. They are elected by the clergy and laity of the diocese, and then the election must be confirmed by a majority of diocesan bishops and a majority of standing committees or of the house of deputies. The Presiding Bishop has no role in this process and no authority to revoke the election of a bishop except through a proceeding in the church's court system.

I believe it was also very revealing to the foreign visitors to learn that we are not of one mind on the human sexuality issues. That was very obvious at the convention. For example, a key resolution, d025, is the one that confirmed that the ordination process is open to all qualified persons irrespective of their gender identity. Although D025 passed by very large majorities – 72% of each order in the House of Deputies, and in the House of Bishops 99 bishops voted aye, 45 voted nay, and 2 abstained – that means there were quite a few bishops and deputies who voted not to permit gay and lesbian persons to enter holy orders. In fact the resolution itself states, in its seventh resolve,

“that the 76th general convention acknowledge that members of the Episcopal Church . . . , based on careful study of the holy scriptures, and in light of tradition and reason, are not of one mind, and Christians of good conscience disagree about some of these matters.”

How many other organizations would lay out the fact of disagreement within their ranks in such a forthright manner?

You will also note from this language in D025 that the resolution gives legitimacy to the dissenting point of view, a profound courtesy that the conservatives do not generally extend to those of us who take the more progressive viewpoint. They demonize us and cast their disagreement as a case of heresy or apostasy. Your own bishop, according to “Episcopal life,” says we have adopted a “gospel of indiscriminate inclusivity,” which he says has “challenged the doctrine of the trinity, the uniqueness and universality of Christ, the authority of scripture, our understanding of baptism, and, now, that last refuge of order, our constitution and canons.”

I could not disagree more. I believe that instead what is involved here is differing interpretations of scripture and of human experience. Jesus told us that

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot hear them now. When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth . . . ”(John 16:12-13.)

Over the course of history, God has laid before us a host of serious issues. Galileo posed one, many long years ago. In more recent times, and in our own country, slavery was a major issue, with different folks reading the biblical precedent differently. Did you know that there were Episcopal bishops who defended slavery on the basis of scripture? And that bishops and priests owned slaves? And that numerous Episcopal Churches were built by slave labor? Fortunately the abolitionists won that battle. In our own time we have gone through turmoil over the role of women in the church, especially with regard to their participation in holy orders, and in fact this controversy still rages in some quarters.

Now it is human sexuality that is before us. Is resolution d025 a bold forward step, or is it heresy? I warmly supported this resolution, because I firmly believe, based on my own

extensive study of scripture, that this is what God wants us to do. But I quickly add that others may have a different view, based on the same scriptures, and I respect that. Time will tell where we come out on these questions.

One key element of the controversy within the church and the Anglican Communion about human sexuality is what is known as the "listening process." As far back as 1978 – yes, I said 1978 – the bishops at Lambeth resolved that they should listen to gay and lesbian persons. Actually talk with them, not just about them. In effect the resolution says let's find out just what these people are like and let's then decide how we should treat their hopes and aspirations. But how do you carry out such a process in a country like Nigeria? Homosexual persons in that country are potentially subject to prison terms of up to fourteen years, and there is at this moment legislation pending in that country that would increase the maximum punishment to life in prison, with even the possibility of the death penalty for what is termed "aggravated homosexuality." How can gay and lesbian persons in such a country offer themselves for conversation with the church leaders – even assuming the church leaders are interested – when to identify their sexual identity could result in long prison terms?

But there is a powerful need to educate many folks around the Anglican Communion. A bishop friend of mine told me that at Lambeth back in 2008 he was in conversation with some brother bishops from other countries about human sexuality, when one of them asked "why is there so much homosexuality in your country? Aren't there enough women?" Another bishop said, "when a gay couple breaks up, I can imagine that the one who was the husband will do all right but what would happen to the one who was the wife?" Another friend, who happens to be an "out" lesbian, was at an Anglican gathering when someone from south Asia asked her what the daily life of a gay couple was like. Her response was to the effect that they get up in the morning, have their morning ablutions, eat breakfast, feed the children their breakfast if there are children, then go off to work and school, possibly stop at the supermarket on the way home, get supper on the table and consume it, then help the children with their homework and/or read a book or watch television, and then retire. The other person then said, "So it's not all about sex."

Tell me, do we need a wide ranging educational process on these issues? Minds might be changed, just as mine was.

Let me return to resolution D025 and specifically let me encourage you to print it out and read the language yourselves. Just go to www.EpiscopalChurch.org, navigate to "general convention," then to "legislation," where you will have an opportunity to find any specific resolution to download. You will I think be very intrigued to see the title of the resolution: "Commitment and witness to the Anglican Communion." The text follows this lead by making clear our profound commitment to remaining in the Anglican Communion notwithstanding these differences. In other words, we have rejected the proposition that because we see these human sexuality issues differently from many of the other member

churches of the communion we are declaring our intention to walk separately. Not so. We believe the communion is a gift of God and one that enables all of us to do a better job of carrying out the mandate given to us in Matthew 25 : to heal the sick, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, visit the prisoners, and so on. Those are the important issues.

As is often the case, it may well be that the women of the Anglican Communion will provide the leadership that is needed. A least once a year women from all around the Anglican Communion meet in New York at the same time as the UN commission on the status of women. These are wonderful affairs, as it gives these women an opportunity to talk with one another about the problems in their own countries – domestic violence, discrimination against women and girls in education, the greater burdens women feel with regard to poverty, and so on. These women have repeatedly made it clear that differences of opinion about human sexuality are not – repeat, not – going to get in the way of working forcefully -- and together -- to address these problems.

After all, the Anglican Communion is not just the Arch Bishop of Canterbury, or the 38 primates, or even the hundreds of bishops who attend the Lambeth conferences in England every ten years. The Anglican Communion is clergy and lay people working forcefully – and together – to carry out the mission God has lain upon us. A good many USA Dioceses have companion diocese relationships with foreign dioceses. A good many parishes – including my own former parish in Washington – send people to other countries to help build schools and churches and to perform other helping activities. A good many Episcopalians participate as individuals in international networks like the mothers' union. That is the Anglican Communion, and it is here to stay, no matter how many people try to tear it apart. To quote Gamaliel in the book of Acts,

“ . . . If this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God.” (Acts 5:38-39)

I believe what we are doing is indeed “of God” and that it will not be overthrown.