



Why Are We Afraid to Talk About God?

by Patrick Keyser, Staff Writer

Evangelism is a loaded and difficult word for me. I was raised in the Southern Baptist tradition, and evangelism was a major feature of my early life of faith. The evangelistic approach of my youth was focused on conversion. We had a message we wanted to share, and we weren't afraid to do so. The methods by which we accomplished that goal, however, were often problematic.

I usually felt like I was trying to sell a product with the aim of saving souls. I never engaged in these activities because I wanted to do them or because they made me happy. I did them because someone else required me to do them. I have no memory of ever engaging in significant conversation or relationship building with anyone I attempted to evangelize. My aversion to this transactional approach to evangelism only grew with time and when I finally left behind the Christianity of my youth, I thought I left behind evangelism and everything I associated with it.

Many years later, I found my way to the Episcopal Church where, to my surprise, I encountered the opposite issue: People were often unwilling or frightened to speak about their faith at all. There was so much about the Episcopal Church that I loved. I wondered why Episcopalians didn't want to tell others about the beauty of their tradition, and perhaps more worrying, why many seemed unwilling or frightened to talk about God. I frequently hear Episcopalians reference the quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times; use words if necessary." It seems that too many Episcopalians take this idea to the absolute extreme. Why are we afraid to talk about God? Why do we struggle to share good news?

This General Convention has included a lot of talk about evangelism, as our Presiding Bishop has identified it along with racial reconciliation and creation care as one of his three key areas of focus. In his sermon at the opening Eucharist, Bishop Curry outlined a vision of evangelism as following in "The Way of Love" and adopting practices for a Jesus-centered life (www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove).

We were given a unique opportunity to experience this way of evangelism in Saturday evening's revival service. While many eagerly anticipated the event, I had very mixed feelings as I remembered the guilt

and emotional manipulation of the revivals of my childhood. While the revival was not the most comfortable experience for me, it was redemptive, for it testified again to a different way of doing evangelism. This revival was focused on love and deep, abiding joy, and the palpable sense of excitement was contagious. People were excited about the Gospel. They were joyful about the message of love revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

As I left the revival, I couldn't help but wonder how we as Episcopalians could take the excitement from that place and bring it with us to our communities. It is easy to be excited about the Gospel when we are surrounded by so many others who share our perspective. The challenge is to continue to embody that excitement in a world that is at best indifferent and at worst hostile to that message. It is the challenge set before us, and it demands our prayerful attention.

As I reflect on my own struggles with evangelism and try to envision a new way forward, I realize that, at its core, evangelism is about story telling. Though it is fundamentally about telling the story of the Good News of Jesus Christ, evangelism also requires us to cultivate and name our own stories of how we have come to know and experience the life-changing love of God in Jesus Christ. That is a good place to start. Evangelism is not about selling a product but about inviting others into the mystery and love of God. That is evangelism I can get behind.

The invitation can be as simple as the one Philip offered to his friend, Nathanael, after he first encountered Jesus: "come and see" (John 1:46).

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Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preaches at the July 7 revival. Photo: ENS

#MeToo: Let Us Get to Work

by Crystal Hardin, Staff Writer

Truth telling is powerful. And there has been a lot of it here at General Convention. Truths never before spoken have been exposed to the light. While I've seen powerful examples of this across a range of significant topics – racial justice, gender identity, compensation parity for lay employees, marriage equality – I've been most impacted by those testifying to their experiences of sexual harassment, discrimination and abuse within our Church.

One such testimony was a letter addressed to the deputies and bishops of the Episcopal Church assembled here. Do not, however, be fooled by whom it's addressed to. This letter is also for you. And for me. And for all of us who call this Church home.



The author of this letter is a group of Generation X and Millennial clergy who gathered for a weeklong conference on a seemingly unrelated topic and discovered, through the work of the Spirit and the leadership of the Rev. Kate Spelman, a disturbing truth in their midst. Spelman called together a closed meeting for women in the group, which most attended. "Every single one [of the women present] shared a story of sexual harassment, assault or gender discrimination in the Church," said Spelman. "Every. Single. One. Many, if not most, of these stories had not been shared publicly before. It was profound, and profoundly disturbing."

I am struck by how the individual testimonies of many came together as one to reach us here at General Convention. It is important to remember that each of these stories represents individual pain, hurt, fear, shame and hope. Let them not be lost. And, yet, they come to us collectively as power, the power of a truth with justice on its side. They speak a truth we must hear if we are to profess ourselves as the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement:

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#MeToo, continued

“The Church is failing to protect and advocate for the women we have called to leadership in both clerical and lay capacities. We are failing to nurture and encourage the talent which will be needed to steer the Church into a new age. Women continue to be underpaid across the Church, and underrepresented in positions of influence and power.”

Truth telling is dangerous. It challenges systems that depend on silence for power. Truth telling is often met with violence. In our Church systems, that violence is our silence. Our apathy. Our inaction. We must do violence no longer. Testifying before the Committee on Safeguarding and Title IV, Spelman offered them a charge:

“Our Presiding Bishop has charged us to meditate on the life of Jesus. I charge you to meditate as well on the lives of the women in the Gospels – who are too often unnamed, too often ignored, and whose stories are too little told. I charge you to consider the fact that many of the stories you heard at the House of Bishops listening session on Tuesday night cannot and will not be told with names attached – and that many others are yet to be told in any format – because it remains easier and less costly in many places to [leave] a church or diocese than to bring an offender to justice. I charge you, in particular, to remember the story of the Syrochœnician woman whose testimony changed the mind of God, and, I think, the course and context of the Jesus movement. I charge you to hear again the stories of the women who have been abused, harassed or exploited by the Church – and to consider what stories are not being told.”

This charge is for our ears, too. Let us hear the testimony of women within the Church. And, then, let us get work.

Crystal Hardin is a seminarian at Virginia Theological Seminary, a recovering attorney, and an accomplished photographer.

Overheard at GC79

Collected by Center Aisle’s staff

Some of our favorite snippets of conversation, testimony and/or goofiness from around the Convention Hall and environs:

“I move that we strike the beheading of John the Baptist.”

In the elevator: “Are you from Rhode Island?” “I am. I’m the bishop of [Rhode Island].” “Well, congratulations and condolences.”

“Cemetery faculty member” (while presenting a seminary faculty member for election to the General Board of Examining Chaplains).

“It seems that the Spirit speaks whenever we get our way.”

The House of Bishops whistling the “Jeopardy” theme song while the Secretariat looked up the number of a resolution before the House.

On Monday, July 9: “Well, welcome to this, the 34th day of General Convention.”

“The question is, do we want to continue making sausage? I don’t know, maybe we like the way the pig looks already. Or, does that not fit the metaphor?”



Tomorrow is our last print edition for GC79. We hate to go, but you can find us at centeraisle.blog, and look out for “Overheard at GC79” tomorrow, offering snapshots of what really moved us over the past 10 days.

Accountability and Reconciliation

The Title IV Conundrum

by the Rev. Dr. Mary Thorpe, Director of Transition Ministry, Diocese of Virginia

“Grant that in all things [the priest] may serve without reproach, so that your people may be strengthened and your Name glorified in all the world.”

– *Prayer for the Ordination of a Priest*

That phrase “serve without reproach” implies a standard of behavior, one that is described in more detail in the ordination liturgy. Whenever there is a standard of behavior, there is usually a mechanism to hold one to account. Most professional disciplines have some mechanism for accountability. After all, we are human. More often than we care to admit, we stand alongside St. Paul: “For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate,” (Romans 7:14-15). While sin is never a good thing, transgression becomes more than a personal matter when it occurs in the context of ordained ministry, because of the cleric’s power to do great harm. We are held to a higher standard, rightfully so.

And so the Episcopal Church has created a mechanism for accountability for clerics, providing the opportunity for those who feel they have been harmed in some way by an ordained person to name the harm and seek justice. This mechanism is the canonical process described in Title IV of the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church.

The canon has evolved in recent years. Before, it followed the model of a military tribunal. In recent years, it has been oriented in a more spiritual direction: that of a way to seek reconciliation and healing while still holding priests and deacons to account. This pendulum swing has been difficult. It is impossible to craft an accountability process that can handle all possible situations. The variables are endless. Even so, there are ongoing attempts to modify or amend the process to create safety, clarity, due process, transparency, confidentiality—and these aims sometimes compete and wrestle with each other.

This General Convention is once again addressing resolutions that do precisely this. In light of the #MeToo movement, a number of resolutions have been introduced creating a safe space for filing claims under Title IV and, for a limited period of time, having no statute of limitations for those offenses that are sexual in nature. In the interest of avoiding conflicts of interest, proposals related to external or church-wide intake processes have been offered. In the interest of transparency, proposals related to exclusion of nondisclosure agreements are being considered. Other proposals are on the table as well. In many cases, there are unintended consequences and conflicting behaviors. Attorneys, bishops, complainants, respondents, all see these proposals through their particular lens, and wrestle with the implications of each change. It is slow work.

Here’s the challenge: A linear process such as the military tribunal model is relatively simple to understand and the protocol is well-defined. But an accountability loop that has as its aim reconciliation and healing is a different thing, because we know that the work of reconciliation is non-linear. It requires recursive loops and multiple paths, because the seeking of truth and the response to offense is slow, messy work. In the words of Paul again, this time in 1 Corinthians 13, we “see in a mirror, dimly...”

And yet there is the never-ending need to try. Justice, mercy, healing – this is the work of the Church, even when the Church is attempting to rectify offense and pain within itself.

What results will we see from the deliberations on changes to Title IV? Some greater clarity and change, perhaps, especially in support of those who have been victims of sexual offenses. Without a doubt, many questions to explore further, to try and make the process less abstruse. The Committee on Safeguarding and Title IV has a daunting task: to see not in a mirror dimly, but with a brighter, clearer light, for those who are accused and for those who have been hurt. If we cannot make this happen in our Church, after all, how can we make it happen in the world?