



THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
THE GENERAL CONVENTION

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Episcopal Youth Event: Sown in the Heart of Christ
Plenary presentation by Bonnie Anderson
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I have been looking forward to being here at the Episcopal Youth Event, as I know all of you have as well. I have been giving a lot of thought to the theme for this EYE, “Sown in the Heart of Christ”.

In 1987 I was an adult member of the design team of the EYE held here in San Antonio. What I remember most about working with others in designing that event was the hard time we had coming up with a theme for the event. It was not the fact that we couldn't think of something meaningful and catchy. It was the fact that we knew what the real theme of the event was going to be. We knew what was going to really drive the event and we knew that no matter what we called the event, the real theme of the event was going to be relationships. It was going to be about renewing friendships, meeting new people and creating new relationships. Like most of you here, at that EYE we came with the expectation of building on past relationship, and creating new relationships. What we did not bargain for is the lasting community that was developed by those relationships. I know for a fact that friendships that were made way back in last today. All this is to say that God has made us to be relational people. To be in community and to be in relationship with each other. We worship, most often pray, celebrate, and grieve in community – in relationship with others. I believe that human relationship is in the heart of Christ. The Theme of this event, sown in the heart of Christ, at its very core, is about relationships, it is about us as disciples of Jesus, in relationship with him and with each other, and it is about the seeds that have already begun to grow in us as individuals and as a Christian community.

The seed of our ministry and our relationship with Christ and each other is sown in our baptism and renewed in the baptismal covenant. We are part of a community called The Episcopal Church and it is important to know a bit of history about the community and about those who have gone before us to create a structure for us.

In the mid 1780s, lay people and clergy in the newly formed United States, came together to design a church modeled on, but not exactly like, the Church of England. The foundational belief of our Church governance is similar to democracy. Our governance is based in the belief that all orders of ministry, laity, bishops, clergy, have been given gifts by God to be used in the building up of God's kingdom. The early Episcopal church in this country began governing themselves in a House of Deputies, and very shortly, once there were Episcopal bishops here, the House of Bishops came to be. That is how we continue to govern ourselves today and we meet together in General Convention once every three years. The

presiding officer in the House of Bishops is the Presiding Bishop. The presiding officer in the House of Deputies is the President of the House of Deputies, elected by that house which is composed of 4 clergy

and 4 laity (8 deputies) from each of the 110 dioceses (+the Episcopal churches in Europe) making 111. It is a large house with approximately 800+ members. The House of Bishops, totaling under 350 members, and the House of Deputies, must all agree upon any interpretation of canons, adopting new canons or resolutions. It is important to know how we are governed as TEC because we have a somewhat unique system that honors the equal participation of the clergy, bishops and laity in the life of the church. Our governance system is a tangible example of one way we live the baptismal covenant, which all the ministers of the church periodically renew. Our governance system calls us to honor and use the gifts of all the baptized in service to Christ believing that none of the gifts or none of the “orders” is more important than any other. In addition, in answer to the question regarding the ministry, found in the BCP in the catechism, we are told that the ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons.

Most of us here, including me, are lay people. That means we are called by God through our baptism to do God’s work in the world. I want to make sure that you know that lay people, like priests, deacons and bishops are the ministers of the church. I am a minister of this church and so are you. The majority of people here today, at this EYE, are lay ministers. It is exciting to be among so many lay people and we have tremendous potential to do God’s work in the world.

I think the first thing we need to do is to understand our call to the ministry. Often in the Church we talk about the “call” to the ministry. Unfortunately, this conversation is usually only about the “call” to be a priest or deacon or bishop and the notion that lay people also discern their call to ministry most often goes unnamed. Sometimes it does not occur to us, or to others in our church that God calls us to the ministry of the laity. Let me give you an example:

A few months ago a friend of mine, who is a bishop, and I were visiting a diocese. Both of us were invited, to meet with and talk with a group of high school age Episcopalians who were part of a youth event in that diocese. These Episcopalians had prepared for our visit by thinking up questions to ask each of us. The first question, asked of the bishop, was, “How did you know you were called to be a bishop?” After my friend answered, I was asked a question. The question I was asked was this, “Do you brush your teeth with hot or cold water?”

That question really hit me. It hit me because it told me first that these great lay people, these amazing Episcopalians had given a lot of thought to the questions they were going to ask and that they had no idea that my ministry, my LAY ministry was a calling for me. I don’t think it occurred to them that as a lay person, I was called by God to my ministry. And it also caused me to think that they did not see themselves as ministers.

Later in the evening I got a chance to ask them some questions. I asked what they were thinking of doing after high school. We talked about that for a bit and most were thinking of college, a career or some kind of public service or travel. Two of them said they were thinking about being priests. Of course God calls us to do things that we never would have thought up for ourselves. In our Church there are 15,418 priests and 2,499 deacons. The number of baptized, active lay people is 2,320,506. That tells us something. It

tells us that we have a lot of people in this Church, people called by their baptism to do God's work in the world.

In answer to the question in the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer (page 855) "Who are the ministers of the Church?" The answer in the catechism tells us, the ministers of the church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.

The Catechism also answers the question "What is the ministry of the laity?" as "The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given to them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church."

So we are baptized into the community of Christ. Our church tells us we are the ministers of the Church. But sometimes it is hard for us, for lay people, to remember that we, along with the priests, deacons and bishops are the ministers of the Church. Sometimes we forget that being the ministers of this church is our job, our responsibility. Sometimes we forget that our ministry is carried out in relationship with each other. Verna Dozier, noted Episcopal lay person and theologian, called the laity of our church the "sleeping giant".

So there we have it. Being the laity of this church is our primary job. It is our primary job because we have made promises at our baptism, first on our behalf by someone else, but then several times during each year when we renew our baptismal covenant. We may have secondary jobs in our life – like right now for many of you, your secondary job is being students.

This is not an "either or" but in your secondary job, being a student, you need to always let your primary job tell you HOW to do your secondary job. Your primary job, one of Christ's own, is your way of being in the world, not matter what your secondary job is.

In the future you will probably have different secondary jobs. Jobs like accountants, and mechanics, and social workers, and athletes, and nurses, artists, teachers, administrators and line workers, politicians and doctors, caregivers and assistants. But none of those are the primary job.

Our primary job is to fulfill the promises we make at our baptism. We can use our secondary job to help us do that, but our primary job is to do what we promise to God and to each other that we will do in our baptismal covenant. We are baptized and marked as Christ's own forever. The church supports the authority that we have by our baptism and supports us as ministers of God's church in the world.

Our baptism is the river that runs through and under and over and beside the path of our life. Our path of life may take turns and twists like all paths do, and sometimes the river of our baptism will be out of sight and not easily heard, the river is still present, flowing as the irrevocable and unconditional bond of love between us and God and each other. Like any flowing river, the river of our baptism cannot be reversed.

So we know that we have a job to do, because we have answered "I will with God's help" in our baptismal covenant. We want to do these things we have promised, we want to: continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers" We want to: persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord" We want to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ"

We want to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves”

We want to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being”

We are baptized, marked as Christ’s own forever. God’s church tells us that we are ministers. It says it in the prayer book. So there is this river of life rushing right by us and we do not have one single clue how to jump in.

Doing what we are called to do as the laity is a little like, as author Ann Patchett says, “a garden snake swallowing a chicken egg. It’s in you, but it takes a while to digest. (Ann Patchett, “What Now?”, p.60). That’s certainly true for me and it may be true for you also. A lot of my own life has seemed happenstance. It just is. But I keep my baptism certificate on the wall by my closet where I can see it everyday and be reminded of who I have promised to serve and what I have promised to do. And if I look back at the path that my life has taken and imagine that I had dropped breadcrumbs on the path along the way, including stopping at the places I stopped to pick up pebbles of wisdom, whether I wanted them or not, my life is a series of connected dots and the breadcrumbs show a path of purpose where God can be seen acting in my life surely and steadily.

I have some challenges for you:

When you say the words of the baptismal covenant, mean it. For example, every day we have the chance to respect the dignity of every human being. You know what I mean. At the very least, treat other people the same way you want to be treated.

Take the authority of your ministry seriously. Insist that other people take it seriously too. Don’t spend a lot of time convincing people you have authority. Build relationships and go on with your ministry.

Listen to yourself. You have good insights. Trust them. Remember your primary job is to represent Christ in this world. Then figure out what you are going to do with, as poet Mary Oliver calls it, “your one wild and precious life.”

Pray that you see the work of God in everything. God does not just stay in Church. Relentlessly look for God everywhere and when you see God acting in your life, you can be assured you are on the right path. Most importantly, from Nelson Mandela’s inaugural speech taken from Marianne Williamson’s Course in Miracles:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate,
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant? Gorgeous? Talented? Fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small doesn’t serve the world.
There’s nothing enlightened about shrinking
So that other people won’t feel insecure around you.
We were born to make manifest the story of God that is within us.
It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine,
We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our own fears,
Our presence automatically liberates others.*

In 2005, Nelson Mandela said, “Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation.”

Do it. In the Name of God, **be great.**

Story of The River, written by Flannery O'Connor was acted out by the EYE drama team while it was read by Bonnie Anderson during this presentation.

I am reminded here of a short story written by a favorite author of mine, Flannery O'Connor. The title of the story is *The River* and it is a story about baptism. In this story, a boy named Harry who is about 5 years old lives in a city apartment with his parents who neglect him, drink too much, and have lots of parties. He lives a lonely life of sleeping with the pillow over his head, making his own breakfasts after scavenging for food left over in the kitchen, and of playing quietly by himself in the morning so as not to wake his parents who are sleeping in the next room. "He seems mute and patient," describes O'Connor. "like an old sheep waiting to be let out."

One day a woman who comes in the apartment occasionally to clean and babysit, takes Harry with her to a revival down at the river. They go there by bus and Harry seems glum and limp as they travel to a country river bank where people have gathered to hear a traveling preacher. As Harry and his companion approach the river bank, the preacher, who is said to be a faith healer as well, stands in the water talking in a twangy voice about Jesus.

He yells to the people, "Listen to what I got to say, you people! There ain't but one river and that's the River of Life, made out of Jesus' blood. That's the river you have to lay your pain in, in the River of Faith, in the River of Life, in the River of Love, in the rich red river of Jesus Blood, you people!"

The babysitter suspects that Harry has never been baptized. At her request, the preacher, standing in the river, takes the boy in his arms. Harry suddenly realizes that this is not a joke, although where he lives and everything he has ever known is a joke. The preacher tells him that if he is baptized he won't be the same anymore—he'll count for something. "If I baptize you," the preacher says, "you'll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you'll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?" "Yes," says Harry. Suddenly the preacher dunks the boy under the water and repeats the words of baptism, saying again to the surprised child, "You count now; you didn't even count before." When Harry returns home to his apartment it is filled with strangers, partying friends of his parents. Heavy with sleep he walks through the smoke-filled noise towards his room. When his mother quizzes him about the events of the day, Harry replies simply, "He said I'm not the same now. I count."



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