June 17, 2011

Models, paintings and photographs of widowed boats line the halls of the Maritime Institute, some showing vessels caught in mid-explosion, others detailed in all their newly launched beauty and power. Scripture often uses the sea as a symbol of danger and chaos, and the boat or ship as a symbol of the safe place God creates for God’s people – a symbol for the church.

For the last three days the Executive Council has met among these powerful symbols to talk of hard financial issues and church decline and growth, to address elephants in the room, and to speak truth to one another in love.

The Presiding Bishop began her opening address by saying she was seeing a “significant rise in readiness for mission . . . for connection to needs beyond the local congregation.” The President of the House of Deputies spoke of the need for courageous change and called for a structure that “supports mission and ministry at the most appropriate level - congregation, diocese, province or church center.”

These have been reoccurring themes in the addresses of the Executive Council’s chair and vice chair this triennium as they have repeatedly urged the Council to be creative risk takers in addressing the challenges facing The Episcopal Church.

Chief Operating Officer Linda Watt said good bye to the Executive Council, reminding members of the Church Center staff’s passion for and commitment to the mission of The Episcopal Church.

Members heard a report from the Haiti team on the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the church in Haiti and on the progress of rebuilding in the wake of the earthquake in January of 2010. They detailed the careful groundwork being laid by the team to ensure the best business practices and the highest possible use of donated resources as well as the deep faith and hope of the Haitians in the face of long term adversity.

At this meeting, Council members called one another to the work of examining not only budgets but also how we treat one another and the staff that supports our work. How do we create and honor the beloved community? How do we avoid losing our better selves, losing patience with one another in the midst of long days with everyone trying to do too much with limited resources and time? To help with our mutual responsibility to one another, the Council has adopted the use of a process observation form that will be filled out by each Council and staff member and reviewed at the next meeting. This also will be a regular part of our board development work.

We were attentive to structural matters, keeping in mind that well-functioning structures make mission more easily facilitated and supported. This was the thinking behind the decision at the beginning of the triennium to restructure Council’s committees, and once again this meeting saw the fruit of that decision. Council adopted revised Bylaws and Rules of Order for the Executive Council and the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society.

Again our surroundings reminded us that changing the direction of a big sea-going vessel can take more miles than we can currently see and more time than one might assume.

After hearing presentations from the provisional bishops of the Episcopal Dioceses of Quincy and San Joaquin, we grappled with how best to support these continuing dioceses in hard financial times as they struggle with reorganization in the wake of schism and the resultant litigation. The decision was made to respond with financial support coupled with requests for continued accountability from the dioceses on specific uses of the funds.

Wednesday dinner was a welcome respite from all this intensity. It was served outside on the lawn in lovely weather. Convivial conversations ranged from the day’s business to talk of ministries to the sharing of funny stories of liturgies gone bad.

The second day found Executive Council members walking to their committee meetings through hallways filled with attendees at a conference on waste management. Signs and displays touting garbage trucks, plastic and glass recycling systems, mulching companies, and landfills lined the halls.

All this sent us all into our committee work with a renewed awareness of the huge amounts of waste that our country produces and the creative ways being developed to deal with it as we run out of landfill space. It provided an interesting context in which to do our work.

Much of the work of Executive Council happens in committee, and at this meeting, that work resulted in several resolutions and reports dealing with issues ranging from the deteriorating situation in Sudan to budget issues to an updated agreement with Episcopal Relief and Development. We continued our commitment to the MDGs with a resolution requesting the Joint Standing Committee on Finances for Mission (FFM) include in the 2013-2015 General Convention Budget a line item of no less than 0.7% of the non-government revenue of The Episcopal Church to support the Millennium Development Goals as a visible and prophetic act of leadership in fighting global poverty.

Kathryn Tiede, liaison to Executive Council from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), spoke of the many ways The Episcopal Church and the ELCA are beginning to combine efforts in areas such as anti-racism training and research on genetically modified organisms and offered this a model worth continued exploration.

Jim Cowan, liaison to Executive Council from the Anglican Church in Canada, reflected that he found the conversations concerning the Dioceses of Quincy and San Joaquin intriguing. He asked, “How do the dioceses that have suffered as a result of schism compare with those dioceses that are marginal? There are real concerns about viability, but where do these concerns mesh with plans for the extended mission of the Church? He also observed, “We have talked about ‘pruning for growth.’ What does this mean to us? Pruning, whether for maintenance or for growth, hurts.”

As he concluded, he announced that the Supreme Court of Canada released its Decision refusing Leave to Appeal from the November, 2010 decision of the British Columbia Court of Appeal. “This removes all litigation over property matters across the country. For that I am thankful. My wish for you is that your court challenges will conclude both soon and well,” he concluded.

Other actions, reports and resolutions include: To express profound concern at the impasse between Israeli and Palestinian leaders in the process toward final-status negotiations for a two-state solution to end decades of conflict; to reaffirm this Church’s support for a two-state solution in which a secure and universally recognized State of Israel lives alongside a secure, independent and viable Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states; and to urge all Episcopalians to pray for the peace of the Holy Land.

Legislation: To recognize a large number new and returning mission partners deployed all over the world on behalf of our church.

General: Received a preliminary report from Deputy Rebecca Snow, chair of the Standing Commission on Structure, regarding a consultation over property matters across the country. For that I am thankful. My wish for you is that your court challenges will conclude both soon and well,” he concluded.

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