

February 5, 2012 – Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

A Message from the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church

The Executive Council of the Episcopal Church issued the following message on January 29, at the conclusion of its three-day meeting in Linthicum Heights, Maryland.

As Executive Council gathered for its penultimate meeting before General Convention, heavy rain was pelting the south windows of the Maritime Institute like hard little fists, making everyone grateful for the solace of dry warm spaces. This was Executive Council's third meeting of this triennium in this venue, a reflection of a money-saving strategy to contract to meet in a couple of places, Linthicum Heights, MD, and Salt Lake City, UT. In prior triennia, Executive Council had moved around the church, meeting once in each of our nine provinces, but our new discipline of choosing only two money-saving venues is a reflection of our willingness to adapt to changing financial conditions.

The draft budget for the 2013-2015 triennium overshadowed all the other Executive Council business at this meeting. The budget conversation began at the June 2011 Executive Council meeting, also held at the Maritime Institute, when members were challenged to "change the conversation," to seek a way to take on the adaptive challenges facing all denominations in a post-Christian era of declining interest in the institutional church. The Joint Standing Committee on Finances for Mission (FFM) already had begun working with the treasurer in mid-2011 on a financial projection model and determined that the current spending model is unsustainable. At that time, it was pointed out that the chairs of Executive Council's standing committees had previously not provided much input into the budget process. The Executive Council's newly formed Executive Committee was charged with developing a process for the triennium budget that would challenge the church to new ways of engaging God's mission.

On Friday, the first day of this meeting, Matthew J. Price, Director of Analytic Research, the Episcopal Church Pension Group, joined C. Kirk Hadaway, Director of Research, the Episcopal Church, to give a presentation of facts gleaned from the 2010 parochial reports and the August, 2011, survey commissioned by Council's Executive Committee. The survey was designed as a "rapid listening" tool directed at gaining a clearer picture of the mission activities best accomplished at the congregational, diocesan and provincial level versus at the church wide level. These two sets of statistical data, together with staff input, helped to inform the preparation of two proposed budgets for Executive Council's review and discussions.

Executive Council's five standing committees discussed the budget on Friday afternoon and reported the results during Saturday morning's plenary session. Some reports reflected theological, big picture perspectives, while other committees drilled down to comment on individual line items in the draft budgets. These reports were followed by lively discussion among table groups, the results of which were also reported out. Council's Executive Committee then met on Saturday afternoon to consolidate this information and develop a refined draft budget for Executive Council's consideration Sunday.

Sunday's discussion reiterated Executive Council's concern that the budget would reflect the vision and mission of the church, that it spring from a theology of abundance and bear the Five Marks of Mission. The discussion also reflected a real appreciation and desire to engage our internal and external partners affected by the budget. This appreciation is tempered by the understanding that the process does not always give us time to have those conversations. And so we live in that tension.

The discussion also made clear that Executive Council knows a budget is a living document. We trust the staff to work out the details and nuances of making it a real instrument for renewal of our life in the church.

Executive Council worshiped together at a noontime Eucharist celebrated by the Rt. Rev. James Cowan of the Anglican Church of Canada along with Council member, the Rev. Dr. Lee Alison Crawford, who was marking the 18 anniversary of her ordination.

In his sermon Bishop Cowan reminded us that the "'Good News' is not fair, it is about Grace and Mercy, receiving what we do not deserve, and not receiving what we do deserve."

He asked, "Who is a prophet in today's Church? How is that person listened to? Where are the communities where we see the teaching power of God? How is the prophetic and teaching power of God being used by us – corporately and individually?"

"As we strive, with fear and trembling to work out our salvation, or for what the Collect calls, "the renewal of our lives" how are we supporting and encouraging one another in our endeavors?"

These questions resonated deeply with a Council in the midst of budget work.

After another hour's deliberation, Executive Council then forwarded the budget to the Joint Standing Committee on Program, Budget and Finance (PB&F), which is meeting directly after the close of Executive Council's meeting at the Maritime Institute. PB&F will finalize a budget for presentation to General Convention.

Executive Council took a greater part in the development of this budget this triennium because it understood that in a time when business as usual no longer served the church in its response to God's mission, then budget driven by renewed vision is required. Executive Council determined to take its part in building toward new vision of the tasks before us. The effort changed Executive Council itself, shaping it to work in new ways.

"God transforms the poverty of our nature."

The Rt. Rev. James Cowan

In other business Executive Council passed resolutions:

The Resolutions presented by Executive Council at this meeting that were not on the Consent Calendar included the following:

- A statement of opposition to any laws that make the teaching of ethnic studies illegal and penalize school districts financially for incorporating ethnic studies in their curriculums.

- A statement of support of "Letting Girls Be Girls," which is a global campaign to end child marriage. See theelders.org for more information about this campaign sponsored by The Elders, which is a nonprofit organization brought together by Nelson Mandela in 2007, comprised of global leaders who offer their collective influence and experience to support peace building.

- A statement deploring the great human tragedy still occurring in the Three Protocol Areas of Abyei, Blue Nile State, and Southern Kordofan State in Sudan from the continued wholesale war waged upon her people by the Government of Sudan; a renewed call upon the United States Government to continue its economic sanctions and diplomatic efforts urgently to secure peace and an end to the egregious human rights violations and ongoing military brutality against the people in all areas of the Sudan; a reaffirmation of the church's solidarity with the Episcopal Church of Sudan and its pastors and priests, and its leadership and care for all the people of Sudan; and a reminder for all Episcopalians to continue in prayer and advocacy for all the people of Sudan, especially those in the war torn regions.

- Received and accepted a final report and the recommendations therein from the EC020 Archives Strategy Task Force that has studied plans for building The Episcopal Church's Archives in Austin, Texas. The Task Force recommends a general direction for the Archives Project in the face of economic uncertainty and institutional change and emphasizes flexibility and collaboration with a team of building and development professionals, the Archives Board, as well as DFMS executive staff. The Executive Council expressed with applause its appreciation for the work of the board, which is now completed. 