

# **Our job is to feed the sheep, says the Presiding Bishop in the closing Eucharist sermon**

By Lynette Wilson

*(Episcopal News Service)* In the final hours on the final day of the 76th General Convention, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori reminded the bishops, clergy, laity and guests of the power of words.

"We've heard lots of words these last 11 days. We've used those words to make policy, to claim our missionary heartbeat, to bind ourselves in solidarity with the least, the lost and the left out, she said in her July 17 [sermon](#). "Some of us have even had to eat our words – unexpected things have happened, we've made mistakes, and we may even have misused our words. We have eaten Word, sacramental Word becoming flesh in us, that our words might come closer to that original Word."

In following with the liturgical cycle, and the day's eucharistic theme, Living Ubuntu: Feast Day for William White, the day's collect spoke of White's "wisdom, patience and reconciling temper." White presided over the Episcopal Church's first General Convention in Philadelphia in 1785.

In White's day, Northern and Southern Anglicans were divided over the idea of bishops, their passions fueled by "their fears about monarchical power and its misuse," Jefferts Schori said.

"The Anglican Communion is in a dither like that right now: Do we need more centralized authority, or do we need to honor the gifts and voices of every member of our churches? Our budget decisions at this convention have challenged us to move from more centrally authorized mission toward more local mission support," she said. "Indeed, how do our structures serve God's mission?"

White's gift of reconciling temper, Jefferts Schori said, "is the kind of word I want to leave you with.

"White modeled the gift of Anglicanism – holding together in tension polarities that some are eager to resolve. He was a master of 'both/and' thinking and living. He had the audacity to change his mind – you only have to compare his early writings with his later ones to see how far he moved in his understanding of what this church might become."

Tension like that of White's "and/both" thinking "keeps hearts pumping and mission thriving" and also drives some people crazy, Jefferts Schori said. "What's more important – justice or mercy? Inclusion or orthodoxy? Ministry grounded in bishops or in baptism?" she asked, encouraging those present to take the long view.

"Most of those polarities are false choices. The long view says that if we insist on resolving the tension we'll miss a gift of the Spirit, for truth is always larger than one end of the polarity. Tension is where the Spirit speaks," she said. "Truth has something to do with that ongoing work of the Spirit, and it can only breathe in living beings capable of change and growth."

From there, Jefferts Schori turned to John 21:15-17, the day's Gospel, in which Jesus challenges Simon Peter concerning his love for him: "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

Each time Simon Peter answers, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." And each time, upon his answer, Jesus instructs Simon Peter to tend to Jesus' sheep.

"What are the lesser loves, what does Jesus mean when he asks if Peter loves him more than these? Does he mean the other disciples? The fish they've just had for breakfast? The vocation of fishing? Or maybe the whole package? Whatever it is, it has to move into the background if Peter is going to feed and tend the flock," Jefferts Schori said. "Around here I think it has something to do with how right we think we are. What or who are we more in love with, than Jesus?"

The church's job, like Simon Peter's job, is to feed the sheep.

"Nothing else matters a whole lot. And Jesus is clear that it's not just the flock right in front of us. There are other hungry sheep that we don't see every day, which is one reason for many shepherds. We may all be sheep, but we all also share in the work of shepherds," she said.

General Convention passed hundreds of resolutions during its 10 legislative days: resolutions addressing rites for blessing same-sex marriages, developing ecumenical relationships, opening ordination to all people, reversing environmental destruction, among many others.

It is the job of bishops and deputies to convert these directives into "digestible food" to feed the sheep in their home pastures, Jefferts Schori said.

"The food you have to offer has to be digestible and attractive – it needs to be good news, if you're going to tend the sheep around you. Going home with a list of complaints, or full of anger about what you wanted that didn't pass, is only going to generate indigestion. That is not an act of love. Sure, every flock finds a few noxious weeds in the pasture, but healthy sheep learn to how to avoid them. Tending the sheep means leading them to good pasture and caring that they might grow. What food will you take?"