

Majority at hearing speak against retaining B033

By Pat McCauhan and Melodie Woerman

(Episcopal News Service) A majority of bishops, deputies, visitors and others who testified before a World Mission Committee public hearing July 9 indicated they hope the Episcopal Church will move beyond resolution B033.

As many as a thousand people attended the two-hour hearing which began at 8 p.m. in the Pacific Ballroom of the Hilton Hotel. A total of 51 people testified; 41 said they hoped the church could move beyond B033, a moratorium on the consecration of bishops whose manner of life presented a challenge to the wider church. Ten others indicated they wanted to retain B033.

Following the hearing, Bishop Gene Robinson — who was among those testifying — said his "spirit is buoyed" despite stories of pain. "I was overjoyed at the hope and reconciliation people have found in our church. Someone mentioned being a beacon of light. That is a ministry we can reclaim."

The Rev. Ian T. Douglas, a committee member, said the committee would discuss the hearing in subsequent meetings and decide whether to combine some 13 proposed resolutions about B033 into one or more final resolutions to be considered by deputies and bishops.

"We as a committee have been faithful to the process of both the Committee of the Whole and the hearts and we have not yet begun to imagine what a resolution might look like," he said, immediately following the hearing.

Earlier in the day, committee member Randy Dales of New Hampshire offered an outline of the presentations to a House of Deputies Committee of the Whole. Douglas said the hearings were a key component in beginning to figure out a way forward.

The 13 proposed resolutions are: C007, C010, C015, C024, C033, C036, C039, C045, C054, D013, D021, D022, D025, all of which can be viewed by visiting the General Convention website.

Robinson of New Hampshire, who is gay and whose 2003 consecration created tensions within the Anglican Communion, called upon the committee and the church "to stand up and be the church God is calling us to be."

Victoria Prescott, a lay deputy from Fort Worth, Texas, told members of the World Mission Committee that actively supporting full inclusion took a painful, personal toll.

Before the Diocese of Fort Worth disaffiliated from the Episcopal Church, the only choice "was to be silent to full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the church." Because she advocated for that inclusion she was unable to move forward in discernment. She urged the gathering to offer "radical hospitality to those we disagree with and join together in moving beyond B033."

Bishop Mark Lawrence of South Carolina recalled that he warned against the consecration of Gene Robinson. "I said it would cause a fracturing in the Anglican Communion, that it would disrupt the mission and ministry of the Episcopal Church in profound ways we cannot fully understand. I was proven true. We are in a crisis.

Lawrence noted that "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste," because it has brought the Anglican Communion into profound dialogue it has never had before, "trying to catch up with the 21st century. Anglicanism is being challenged in a profound way," he said, "that will ultimately strengthen our common life."

He urged against the "fearfulness that wants to push ahead. Impatient fearfulness of some that if they don't get what they want right now, they won't get it at all." He cautioned wisdom, patience, and prudence.

The Rev. Susan Russell, president of Integrity USA, an advocacy group for the LGBT Episcopal community, called upon the group to heed the Presiding Bishop's message in her July 7 sermon to General Convention to have "hearts of mission pulsing blood through the Body of Christ and sending God's love out into the world."

There were some light moments during the hearing when a deputy from Southwest Florida paraphrased a Beatles song: "B033, Let it be."

"Today in the House of Deputies, we finally had a discussion, we had a heartfelt discussion. We stopped for a moment from legislating each other's hearts and relationships and honestly spoke to each other without being experts on Robert's Rules of Order," she said.

Using an airplane metaphor for the challenges within the Anglican Communion she said, "A plane needs two wings to fly. One right, one left. It's funny. Planes and birds get it, so what about us? B033 keeps us one. Let it keep us flying. God is holding us in this flight and I don't believe crashing is a good option."

Jim Toy, a visitor from the Diocese of Michigan, told the gathering he supported "whatever legislation and action needs to be taken to provide free access to all the sacraments for all the baptized." Adapting the popular Christmas carol, he added, "O Little Town of Anaheim, how still we see thee lie ... O Holy Child of Anaheim, be born in us today."

One deputy, the Rev. Bob Haskell from the Diocese of Albany, favored continuing B033 "because I would like to stay in the Anglican Communion. Jesus wants us to be united and if we have conversation with Methodists and Moravians, how much more are we to keep with our Anglican brothers and sisters?" he said.

He challenged those testifying at the hearing who "intimated that persons who speak in direction I'm speaking would consign them to hell. These are crude stereotypes. That would not be my position. Others would say persons who speak in favor of B033 would not include gay people in churches." He added that gays and lesbians have taught Sunday school and been lay leaders in his congregations.

"I would like to help our gay brothers and sisters be liberated and healed," he added. "Some of the gay people I've had in my churches have been there because they said it is the only church they could find where they were both accepted and encouraged to work toward healing and escaping from their compulsive lifestyle."

Another deputy said "I hear we must stick with B033 because the Bible tells us so. I was unhappily married for 30 years because the Bible said I could not get a divorce. I and my children endured constant abuse because the Bible said the husband has control of wife and family ... when he literally tried to kill me, I left. By the way, the Bible said 'do not kill.'

"Now, when I see two people love each other, believe me, we should remove any hindrance to their love and ministry. Please let us move forward with our ministry."

Nancy Key, a first-time deputy from the continuing Diocese of San Joaquin, recalled the struggle to remain faithful to the Episcopal Church in her Central California Valley diocese.

Referring to the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson, she said: "In 2003 I stood up in a room full of people and claimed my allegiance to the Episcopal church and pride in what they had done in the election of Gene Robinson.

"For four to five long years, we fought fiercely to be like Jesus, to claim that we, too would stand against discrimination of anyone. The flashpoint in that diocese was still women and the

Episcopal Church stood by while it happened. Please do not let us down again. We are talking about all of God's people. That is the seminal point of my baptismal covenant. We diminish ourselves when we exclude any others." A special session earlier in the day moved the House of Deputies from its usually methodical, parliamentary method of conducting business into multiple one-on-one, face-to-face conversations between deputies about Resolution B033.

The house took the unusual step of meeting as a non-legislative committee of the whole for an hour. About half that time was taken with a detailed explanation from the Committee on World Mission of what led up to the resolution's adoption in 2006 and what options are available to this meeting of convention.

The Rev. Randy Dales (New Hampshire), World Mission vice-chair, offered five possible actions for deputies to consider:

- * Take no action at all, leaving B033 in place;
- * Reaffirm the action of the 75th General Convention (no resolutions so far have been offered to do this);
- * Specifically disavow B033;
- * Affirm the existing canonical structure for elections of bishops (which includes a non-discrimination clause) and disavow any restraints that would require that the canons be violated, thus negating the effect of B033; or
- * Draft a new statement affirming the full participation of partnered gay and lesbian members in all orders of ministry, including ordination as deacons, priests or bishops.

The Rev. Gay Jennings (Ohio), committee chair, then asked deputies to turn to someone seated nearby whom they didn't know and engage in what she called "respectful listening" by discussing their stories of B033, the church's story of the resolution and what God is calling the church to do in 2009.

The deputies then recessed as a committee of the whole until 10 a.m. July 10, when 30 deputies will have the chance to offer remarks on the topic. Speakers were chosen at the end of the July 9 session when deputies picked up randomly numbered pieces of paper. Deputies holding the 30 lowest numbers will be entitled to speak for two minutes each on July 10.

The intent of the two one-hour special sessions, Dales said, was to offer deputies, especially the members of the Committee on World Mission, the chance to listen to "a broad spectrum of voices in this House." The committee will craft a resolution or resolutions on the matter to bring before the House of Deputies. Any such resolutions would also have to be approved by the House of Bishops.