

## Diocesan Convention Eucharist 2009

### Episcopals are Cool

The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey D. Lee, Bishop of Chicago

Over the past year, as you may know, we have been engaged in a communications planning process with the marketing firm, Fleishman-Hillard. It started at last year's convention with hundreds and hundreds of post-it notes. I asked you to share on them the things that most excite you about the life of our church and the work that God has given us to do. We held sessions around the diocese asking the same question: What is it that ignites our passion for the mission of the church? As People of God, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, what is it that we care most about? The answers have been rich and revealing. Our friends at Fleishman-Hillard are working with us now to create a messaging plan, the hard task of boiling all of this down into a messaging strategy, a way of speaking about the gospel of Jesus that will be true to the particular gifts God has given us in this diocese.

As part of the process, Vicki Garvey, Barbara Rosero and I recently found ourselves in a conference room on the 33<sup>rd</sup> floor of the John Hancock Building. We were at the offices of Fleishman-Hillard to meet with a group of 20 or so young adults – none of whom have any connection to the Episcopal Church or to any church for that matter. It was a focus group, representative of at least one particular segment of the population we would hope to reach with the Good News in the way we have to proclaim it. What messages would resonate with them, was the question. Out of all those we have fleshed out over the past year, which points would speak most powerfully to this particular cohort?

After a fascinating discussion for over an hour, our facilitator finally asked the group: “So, after listening to all this, what are your impressions about the Episcopal Church now?” Without a delay, one young woman at the end of the table said, “Episcopals are cool!” Great, but what does that mean? Why? “Well,” said the woman sitting next to me, “it is very cool that you welcome everybody in your church – it’s like you won’t be happy until there isn’t anybody who’s on the outside looking in.”

I believe that is another way of saying what the theme of this convention is. I believe that is the theme of our church. It is the theme of Catholic Christianity. At the most profound level I believe it describes the desire of God for a humanity, for a creation reconciled and restored to right relationship with one another and so with God himself. The point of the church, the reason for the community of faith, the only excuse for all this that we gather here to do, is that we are becoming a living sign of God's desire for the world, God's project of bringing every one of us home. I believe the bible and the vast sweep of the Christian tradition reveals just this: that God will not rest, and neither should God's people, until there is no one on the outside looking in, until there is no one who does not know that they belong to God.

So how do we do this? What is our mission strategy? Well, it might very well include ad campaigns and better web sites. We undoubtedly need more workshops on congregational development and how to incorporate newcomers. We need to become unapologetically

evangelical and be ready to say just why it is that we feed the hungry and house the homeless. Against his better judgment the bishop might just have to get on Facebook and Twitter after all. But at the end of the day, all these techniques are up to the same thing, if they are to be true to the Christian faith. They are all tools for the work Paul points us to in the reading from II Corinthians. “We do not proclaim ourselves,” he writes; “We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord ... who is the perfect image of God.” If we are to become who God calls us to be, then we must proclaim Christ, not ourselves, not a tradition, not a style, not doctrines. Nothing less than Christ, who is the embodiment of God’s desire for all people. The mighty good news we have to share is that Jesus Christ is the true vine and that when we are in him and he in us, we are held in God’s eternal and living embrace. This is the news our tired, fearful old world is dying to hear: A life-changing relationship with the living God is possible. It is possible through a relationship with Jesus Christ, who may be known, experienced, worshiped and followed in a relationship with his Body, the church.

Episcopals are cool. And my answer to the question of why that is so is something like this: It’s because we are all about relationships. The big, untidy mess we call the Episcopal Church, the even bigger, untidier mess we call the Anglican Communion, and the immense untidy diversity of the Church Catholic as it exists throughout time and space – all of it boils down to relationships. The church is a vast web of relationships we call the communion of saints. St. Gregory of Nyssa said, the only thing truly worth having is friendship with God. And the only way I know to have a friendship with God is through the human friendships God gives me. We are sacraments to one another. We proclaim Christ. Jesus the true vine said, “I am the way and the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except through me.” “I am the way,” he said, not “Your particular theological interpretation of me is the way.” No. I am the way. At the heart of the Christian faith is not a doctrine, or an idea. At the heart of our faith is a person. A person who is the dying and rising sacrament of God. A person who by his death and resurrection makes us sacraments of himself. And what’s a sacrament? Come on, say it with me now: “A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” Right. That’s exactly what we are my friends, right here, right now, gathered at this table. We are here to become again what God has already made us, a sacrament, an icon of his Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. In our relationships -- with one another and with all those out there who do not yet know they have a place at this table – we communicate the love and mercy of God. That’s what binds us together: real, messy, life-giving relationships. Not covenants or councils or papal pronouncements (not even splendid sermons from the bishop!), but only being in relationship with Christ and one another in real, sacramental, flesh and blood ways. That can mean building a school in Sudan, digging a well in Mexico, feeding the hungry in Chicago or Rockford, standing together as friends against racism and violence, prejudice and hatred wherever we find them.

Today this Episcopal Diocese of Chicago becomes just a little more accurate an image of the church to which we all belong. Today we become a clearer sign of the world God longs for, a truer image of a redeemed world, a more faithful part of the Body of Christ.

**Grow the church. Form the faithful. Change the world.**

In welcoming these new congregations into formal relationship with this diocese, we are growing the church, not just in numbers but in giftedness and faithfulness. Our increasing diversity will form us in the faith, that’s for sure. And together, we might just change the world. In our sisters

and brothers at Sagrada Familia and Nuestra Señora and First Asian, the branches of the True Vine are multiplying and the fruit we will bear together is rich and ripe and ready.

So let us be a church full of mess and muddle, a church that is genuinely catholic, for everyone. A church with bread to sustain us and water enough to wash in. Let us be a church for real human beings, a church where we honor the presence of the Risen Christ in one another with worshipful touch and profound reverence. A church looking for God in the bodies and souls of persons who are precisely not like us so that Christ's image may be more complete. Let us be a church like the one that greatest of Anglican theologians Richard Hooker described in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote:

"I pray that none will be offended if I seek to make the  
Christian religion an inn where all are received joyously,  
rather than a cottage where some few  
friends of the family are to be received."

May God make us into a church where everyone, everyone, everyone can be at home.