

Decorum in Denver: At the Episcopal convention

by [Jean Caffey Lyles](#) in the [July 19, 2000](#) issue

By some gracious irony, the death of Robert Runcie came while the U.S. Episcopal Church's General Convention was in session. As archbishop of Canterbury, Runcie led the Church of England and the Anglican Communion through the turbulent 1980s, seeking to hew to a "middle way" when issues of women's ordination and modernized liturgies threatened to split his church. Episcopal bishops, along with lay and clergy deputies making legislative decisions at the July 5-14 triennial Denver meeting, were able to mourn Runcie at a time when they themselves were walking the *via media* in an effort to hold the church together amid disunity over "same-sex blessings" and other issues related to homosexuality.

What was probably the convention's most historically significant action was on a different matter: the agreement to enter into full communion and "common mission" with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The agreement culminated more than 30 years of dialogue.

When the House of Bishops endorsed the plan by a show of hands with about 90 percent in favor, applause broke out, and bishops went to the back of the hall to greet Lutheran guests. The bishops broke into a spontaneous but imperfect rendering of the Martin Luther hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." There were some forgotten words, off-pitch notes and irregularities in rhythm, but the Lutherans refrained from showing any dismay.

The debate in the House of Deputies included only positive speeches, but presiding officer Pamela Chinnis dampened any celebration, warning beforehand against applause, since some who voted against "Called to Common Mission" might interpret such an "outburst" as triumphalist. She even rejected a request to sing "A Mighty Fortress," though after the overwhelming yes vote she did invite the body to sing "The Church's One Foundation" and ruled that those who didn't care to sing didn't have to. A video technician immediately flashed all four verses of "A Mighty Fortress" onto the screen, and the deputies obediently sang them.

Under the accord, Episcopal and ELCA clergy will be able to preside at one another's services of Holy Communion. Clergy will be "interchangeable," though pastors will serve a parish of the other denomination only by invitation. Each church will retain its own structure, organization, liturgy and integrity. Perhaps most important, in many urban and rural areas where churches are struggling, Episcopalians and Lutherans will be able to have joint congregations served by a pastor or priest of either body. Some congregations are eagerly awaiting the January 1 effective date when they can move into closer relationship. Asked in a press conference for examples of such situations, Bishop Christopher Epting of Iowa, one of the drafters, said without missing a beat, "Mount Pleasant and Lockridge."

Although the "Common Mission" document was approved (in revised form) last year by the ELCA, some Lutheran groups—particularly in the Upper Midwest—have continued to oppose the plan, partly because it calls for future ELCA ordinations to include laying on of hands by a bishop ordained in the historic episcopate. The historic succession is a tradition begun in the early church, in which clergy are ordained by bishops in an unbroken line extending to the present.

The Episcopal Church has taken the major step of allowing current clergy and bishops of the ELCA to be regarded as though ordained by a bishop in the historic succession. The step is not permanent, since all future ordinations of ELCA clergy are expected to follow the historic tradition.

Bishop Ted Jones, a longtime leader in ecumenical efforts, said, "There comes along a moment when we turn a corner or make a major step forward. I think that the moment has come—but I do not know that it will always be there." "If we don't pass this," said Bishop Peter J. Lee of Virginia, "we may not have this opportunity again for 50 years." "If this [accord] does not pass," said Bishop Frank Powell of Southwestern Virginia, "I will go home utterly mortified."

Calling himself "conflicted," North Dakota Bishop Andrew H. Fairfield said he might vote against the agreement for the sake of maintaining good ecumenical relations with Lutherans in his state. "There is real hostility in North Dakota," where Lutherans are dominant, he said. "The historic episcopate is viewed not as a gift but as a threat. They fear a hidden agenda. They see us [Episcopalians] as small and inappropriately arrogant."

At a press conference, ELCA Secretary Lowell Almen, the second most powerful officer in that church body, said he intended to take Episcopal ecumenical officer David Perry down to the exhibit area and buy matching stoles for the two of them to mark the occasion. “David, we’re going shopping,” Almen announced. The new relationship will be celebrated at an inaugural service on January 6 at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

On gay issues, the 832-member House of Deputies rejected—by so thin a margin that a recount was needed—the single most incendiary piece of legislation, whose meaning was apparent despite the deliberate omission of any reference to “same-sex,” “homosexual” or “blessing.” It would have directed the church’s liturgy and music commission to prepare rites for consideration at the 2003 General Convention so that the church might “support relationships of mutuality and fidelity other than marriage which mediate the grace of God.” The rites would have been included in the Book of Occasional Services, which carries less heft with Episcopalians than the hallowed Book of Common Prayer. The fuzzy language did leave one question unanswered: Could the rites also serve to recognize the commitments of heterosexual couples who choose not to enter into lawful matrimony?

Both houses must agree on any legislation for it to pass. In the House of Deputies, where clergy and lay delegates vote separately, clergy narrowly said yes to the proposal, but laity narrowly said no. The deputies’ defeat of the proposal kept the House of Bishops from having to act on it. In an unusual move, the bishops had adjourned their own session to sit in the deputies’ gallery during the debate, perhaps to inform themselves, or possibly to make the deputies aware of how concerned the bishops were over the outcome. Given that the split was virtually 50/50 on the idea of official church rites for same-sex couples, it may have been fortunate that the measure was narrowly defeated. Until a strong majority in the church supports such liturgies, a win for the proposal would be a Pyrrhic victory, hardening current positions and encouraging opponents to bolt.

The “rites” proposal grew out of a request from the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music by the 1997 convention to study the theological implications of such services. The commission came back with a “local option” measure that would have allowed each diocese that so desired to craft its own liturgies. The piecemeal approach was widely deemed less desirable than creation of rites for the church as a whole.

The resolution on rites was the last of eight paragraphs in a longer statement pieced together by a special committee out of several proposals. Among other things, the statement:

- Declares that the church should provide a safe, just structure where all can use their gifts and energies for mission.
- Acknowledges that while sexuality issues are unresolved, some couples in the church are living in marriage and some in “other lifelong committed relationships.”
- Expects such relationships to be marked by “fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication” and “holy love.”
- Affirms that those on various sides of a heated issue have a place in the church, and that those whose perspectives differ should be brought into conversation, in a context of awareness of church teaching on the sanctity of marriage.

As cautiously hedged as the statements are, the Episcopal Church has nonetheless come closer to voicing an acceptance of gay and lesbian couples than most of its sister mainline bodies are willing to do. The compromise document, as adopted, appeared to satisfy those who had feared widespread membership loss, bishops declaring themselves out of communion with the presiding bishop, and the threat of a major schism. Close observers, noting that Presiding Bishop Griswold either preached or presided at every official Eucharist, surmised that he firmly intended to keep the conversation on a spiritual plane and off the hot-button issues.

Before the eight-part proposal came to the floor, the special committee held three hearings at which anyone—whether bishop, deputy or visitor—could sign up to speak for two minutes. This kind of nonparliamentary airing of issues, a common practice at Episcopal conventions where hotly disputed issues are on the table, serves to cool the tone of debate on the floor by allowing many points of view to be aired beforehand. One evening hearing drew a crowd of 700.

Speakers who testified tended either to tell highly emotional stories of their experiences or to present logical, rational appeals to scripture and tradition. One point of view that seemed to have much more presence among Episcopalians than in other church bodies was “ex-gays” and their supporters, who believe it is possible, with prayer, counseling and other treatment, to “leave the homosexual lifestyle” and become a born-again heterosexual. One speaker from this group said “ex-gays” are the “most oppressed” group in the church, and are derided by gays and lesbians

who say such transformation is unlikely.

A few by-the-way incidents related to gay and lesbian issues inevitably drew media notice. Soulforce, an ecumenical band of pro-gay protesters, showed up July 4 in their recognizable white T-shirts to get themselves arrested—as they had done earlier this spring and summer at national gatherings of United Methodists, Southern Baptists and Presbyterians. (The National Conference of Catholic Bishops is said to be next on the itinerary.) So far, they have reportedly paid \$80,000 in fines, and the source of funds for their travels remains a mystery. The denomination's one openly gay bishop, Otis Charles (retired from the Utah Diocese), joined the group in blocking an entrance and was duly handcuffed.

The “Great Salt War,” an incident in the House of Deputies that failed the “decently and in order” test, demonstrated that Episcopalians care very much about courtesy and decorum. Lay delegate Louie Crew of the Newark Diocese rose on a point of personal privilege to complain that a Dallas deputy had sprinkled salt under the chairs of the deputies from Newark, New Jersey, and asked that proceedings halt until it was cleaned up.

The offender, clergy deputy Nelson Koscheski Jr. of Dallas, rose and explained that sprinkling “blessed” salt was a symbol of cleansing and healing, and he was sorry if anyone misunderstood. He was an equal-opportunity exorcist, having salted not only very liberal deputations (like Newark) but also very conservative ones (like Dallas). He called the strong negative reaction a “rush to judgment” and said he had hoped to speak a “clear word of pain at seeing the church and those I love turned aside and identified as heterosexual sinners.” (His reference was to a failed statement on “heterosexism,” a term defined roughly as the societal system that creates power, access and other life advantages for heterosexuals. The proposers of the statement also felt misunderstood when deputies took the word as a name-calling epithet similar to “homophobe.”)

The flap did not end there. The head of the Dallas deputation went to a mike and apologized on behalf of the whole diocese. The incident was reported in the House of Bishops, leading to prayers in a circle around the bishop of Newark. Finally, Koscheski went into conference with his Dallas bishops. Shortly thereafter he resigned his seat as a deputy and went home, possibly to await additional disciplinary action. The point had been made: the dignity and order of the house had been violated.

Episcopalians were taken aback when a publicist for singer Judy Collins announced in a muddled press release that Collins had decided not to appear at a July 10 benefit celebrating the 60th anniversary of Episcopal Relief and Development. Collins was quoted as saying she was “shocked” that the Episcopal Church, of which she is a member, “does not have an official national church policy allowing ministers to officiate at same-sex unions or ordain openly gay people.”

In a press briefing, Bishop Charles Duvall commented that Collins’s state of shock suggested that “her engagement with the church has been somewhat minimal.” “She should have come and done her ministry here,” added Deputy Herb Gunn, voicing disappointment that Collins was behaving like the “people who pull out instead of engage.”

Gunn’s observation underlined what became a bright thread running through the 11-day convention—Episcopalians who strongly disagree on divisive issues can hold their church together only if they are willing to keep the conversation going.

In other actions, the convention:

- Approved a “20/20” project to double the 2.5-million-member denomination’s membership by 2020.
- Voted to declare all Episcopal property a “tobacco-free zone.”
- Voted to urge the Boy Scouts of America to change its policy of discrimination against gay youth and adult leaders, and to encourage congregations that sponsor or host scout troops to open a dialogue with scout leaders, scouts and parents.