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From Columbus: Danforth's challenge to the Episcopal Church

Saturday, June 17, 2006

ENS [Episcopal News Service] The Rev. John Danforth, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, challenged the Episcopal Church to a "higher calling" of reconciliation during the June 15 Presiding Bishop's Forum: "Toward a Reconciled World."

The forum drew an audience of more than 500 people to the Greater Columbus Convention Center.

The Episcopal New Service's Convention Nightly newscast for June 17 consists of Danforth's speech. You can find it at http://www.episcopalchurch.org/75164_ENG_HTML.htm

The full text of Senator Danforth's address follows:

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you very much. Bishop Griswold, thank you for your introduction. I am a person who needs an introduction to the General Convention. This is the first General Convention of the Episcopal Church I have ever attended in my life and I am leaving tomorrow morning. I have preferred a softer and gentler version of politics.

Ladies and gentlemen, I really do come from the outside. I have never been involved in the General Convention or any other form of what you might call "church politics," and I am clearly not one of the great thinkers of the Episcopal Church. I am basically an old politician. I spent most of my life in public life or observing public life. So I come here hoping to be helpful, and maybe the most helpful thing that I can do is to try to give you some outsider's perspective on this General Convention and on our church.

Here is the world today and you know all of this: terrorists hijack our planes and fly them into buildings; car bombs explode in Baghdad; suicide bombers blow themselves and other people up in markets in Tel Aviv; rogue states seek nuclear capability and the means of delivering nuclear weapons. It's a far more dangerous and unpredictable world than it was during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union as it was, was at least predictable, and it wasn't crazy.

We are dependent, increasingly, in the United States and in the world on oil from the most unstable parts of the world. Without it, our economy, our way of life, is radically changed. The energy policy that we now have in the United States is such that it can be boiled down into hoping for warm winters and cool summers.

We're in the process now of raising the debt ceiling of the government to \$10 trillion. The federal debt has gone up 47 percent in this decade and we are increasingly vulnerable to the good will and the confidence of other countries that invest in the United States. Our two major social benefit programs are facing bankruptcy in the foreseeable future: Medicare in 12 years and Social Security in 34 years. And against this backdrop the Senate of the United States voted just a few weeks ago that the Star Spangled Banner should be sung in English. It spent three days debating an amendment to the federal constitution designed to define what marriage is and the Senate is poised later this month to take out the constitutional amendment to prohibit burning the American flag.

Last week I was in Monterey, California, on a panel speaking to about 175 officers of our military at the U.S. Naval Graduate School and Foreign Language School for Armed Forces. The main subject was the balance in national security with privacy rights. But we also talked about national defense, and we talked about Iraq, and the young officers who were there were also interested, generally, in the health of the country -- economic health, in particular, of the country. But it took place while this gay marriage amendment was being debated on the floor of the Senate, and a number of officers present asked the same question. They said, "We are at war, we've been there, we've been to Iraq." One of them said he has been there for three tours: we've been there. We're at war and how can the United States Senate be devoting its attention to the issue of gay marriage?

Now, some of these young officers came up to me afterwards and it was clear that they didn't approve of gay marriage, but they wondered how our government had gotten on this particular track at this particular time. The fact is that all of these are difficult issues, whether they are the economy or energy or certainly Social Security.

These are very difficult issues in the best of times, but to even discuss them requires some common ground, and that common ground is provided by the center of American politics, not by the fringes, and it's the center of American politics that has eroded. And the common ground has been cut out from under us because the talking heads and the people who get the time on television and the people who are the most active and articulate in representing our political parties are on the fringes, and they don't speak for most Americans, and therefore we're at the situation of stalemate in addressing some of these issues.

Religion is either the direct cause of some of these conflicts or it contributes to the very polarization that makes addressing the conflicts so difficult. Terrorism obviously is religiously inspired; so is fighting in Iraq; so was the north/south civil war in Sudan; so was Kashmir; so was Bosnia, and on and on. People kill each other because they believe that God commands them to do so. And in our country, thank God we are not killing each other in the name of religion, but religious people acting in the name of Christ have championed the wedge issues that divide us, that cut the common ground out from under us, and make even discussing important questions so difficult. The marriage amendment, the issues of religion in public schools, the display of the Ten Commandments in court houses, the sad case of Terry Schiavo, and the list goes on.

The question I believe the Episcopal Church should be addressing is whether we as an Episcopal Church intend to be part of the problem, or whether we intend to be part of the answer, and that is the question that I ask you to think about during this General Convention and to talk about, not only in public forums but among yourselves when you're sitting at the table sharing a cup of coffee or a bite to eat: to talk about whether our church intends to be part of the problem or part of the answer.

Virtually all of the public attention on this General Convention has been on the issue of sexual orientation. I don't want to downplay that issue, because obviously, you have to deal with it and it's an important question. But I simply want to raise with you the basic question of whether that issue is truly the centerpiece of the Episcopal Church and when you're thinking about it, I ask you to consider these factors. First, it is the most divisive single issue in America today and secondly, when you think about how we're so focused on the Episcopal Church and so focused on how we deal with this issue, bear in mind that over 99 percent of the people in the United States are not Episcopalians and they really don't care, with all due respect, Bishop Griswold, who our bishops are. And they don't care whether rites for blessing same-sex relationships are found in the prayer book or on the Internet. It's not on their screen and I can't give you data relating to the three quarters of one percent who are Episcopalians, but I bet you the average person in the pew doesn't care much either.

I say this because I know you're intentionally focused on all these issues and all of these resolutions, but whatever you do on the Sunday after this Convention adjourns, all of these people including yours truly in St. Louis, Missouri, are simply going to toddle off to church on Sunday just the way we always did.

I believe that we have a higher calling. I believe that we have a more simple message and I believe that that simple message is the context in which we should see all of the issues and it's exactly the same message Bishop Griswold mentioned in his introduction. It's what St. Paul said. I believe that the central message of the Episcopal Church and of all Christians is and should be that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and that he has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation.

When Jesus prayed that we all may be one, didn't he mean it? So that to me is particularly the message of the Episcopal Church. We have always, always seen ourselves as the middle way. We have always seen ourselves as the place where all kinds of people can come together around the same altar and say the same liturgy and have all kinds of different views, all kinds of political views, theological views. That's the Episcopal Church and it's going to continue to be the Episcopal Church.

People used to say the Episcopal Church is the "Republican Party at prayer." Alas! Don't think this is some wimpy message. It's not a wimpy message. It's a prophetic message. It's a message that God is transcendent and God transcends any of our perceptions of God and that God is big enough to incorporate and encompass the perceptions of all kinds of people, even those with whom we most adamantly disagree. And if this is the message of our Episcopal Church we're no longer going to be seven tenths of one percent of the population that nobody cares about. We are going to be the church with a message that the world is waiting for; clearly, what those officers in Monterey are waiting for.

I do believe that you do agree, that ours is a special calling to the ministry of reconciliation. I believe that you agree with that. Therefore where do we go from here? I think we should be doing two things. One, speak, and the other; act. By speaking, I mean if [it] is our view that ours is the ministry of reconciliation, articulate that point of view or as we say in politics, "roll it out." Maybe you could do that at this Convention. Maybe you could figure out some way that all of the debate could be encompassed within the concept of the ministry of reconciliation. Maybe you could figure out some way of passing a resolution that this is the centerpiece. Politicians give the answers that they want to give. I think that when people ask you about the divisive issues - - the things that are in the press -- I believe that every answer should be prefaced with the main point of our church is the ministry of reconciliation. That's what we're about.

Then I want to talk to you about the long haul, because it's one thing to pass a resolution, but most resolutions are forgotten. I've gone to political conventions. I've never participated in drafting a platform. I've never read a platform, and I've never felt bound by a platform. I invite you to join my club.

Whatever happens at this Convention, I hope that it is bringing the message of the ministry of reconciliation. Then on the long haul, the point is to stay with the message. To stay with the message, because none of the issues, even the divisive issues that you're facing and debating and you're going to vote on, they're really not going to be settled just like that. These are long-term issues and the question is whether the context is also long-term, so I hope that the next presiding bishop will take the ministry of reconciliation as a focal point. I believe that the next presiding bishop should task somebody to assume special responsibility for keeping us on message. I think there should be a whole series, over the long haul, at great venues of our church such as the Washington [National] Cathedral. I believe that bishops should pepper their congregations with pastoral letters about the importance of the ministry of reconciliation. I believe that at the parish level, there should be all kinds of forums and sermons and material available on the subject, and I think that our great thinkers should help us reclaim this ministry of reconciliation and do a much better job of fleshing it out than I could ever do.

Second, in addition to speaking about it and articulating on it: act on it. You're going to hear about mission: the mission of the Episcopal Church. This is not only important in its own right but it's important because mission is a way of looking beyond ourselves, beyond the inside baseball to the world outside.

Kofi Annan, in April, wrote a report to the General Assembly of the United Nations on terrorism, and he said there should be a highly visible constructive dialogue between respective workers and different religions. The Episcopal Church should take it upon itself to say to Secretary General Annan, "We volunteer to lead that." We could help form an interfaith mediation service to address very practical questions of the religious element of conflict, such as the application of Sharia law in Khartoum; that kind of thing. We could do that. It's a practical thing and we could do that and take the lead in that, and we do things at the local level as well.

Bishop Smith had been our bishop in Missouri for about a week, I think, and there was this hateful thing said about Muslims in St. Louis, and he convened an interfaith press conference to address it. That's the ministry of reconciliation. His predecessor, Bishop Rockwell - when he talked on the radio - shock-jocks said hateful things. He organized a press conference to address that. That's the ministry of reconciliation. I can't go through a whole list, you can think of things. But what I am saying to you is, very respectfully, if we look for things that we can do that are part of the ministry of reconciliation, we can find all kinds of specific things that we can do at the national church level and at the local level, that are far more important to most people

than whoever we might consecrate as a bishop.

If God does call us to a ministry of reconciliation, how you conduct yourselves at this Convention is important, because it would be very hard for our church to present itself as a broken answer to the problem of the world. If we can't hold ourselves together, it's hard to see how we can present ourselves as a force to hold the world together, and, if we can't exchange the peace with one another, it is hard to explain to people how we purport to be agents of peace.

A broken church is a sad church. There are these little splinter churches, and I read the paper in St. Louis in which they have little ads for so-called Anglican churches. Maybe they are. I don't know what they are. One of them meets in a mortuary and it's not one of these bright colonial mortuaries, either. It's limestone and stained wood and then the Sunday School meets for 45 minutes. The fifth graders are in parlor B. I don't want to make fun of people, but it's sad. A broken church is a sad church. Don't be a sad church. Don't go to the mortuary before it's absolutely necessary.

So I plead with you ladies and gentlemen. Figure out a way to hold this together. I don't have any specific solutions, but put whatever you do in the context of the higher calling of the ministry of reconciliation. Put that first and let everything else fall into place. If you can't resolve every difference, try to make the start at resolving some. Agree to disagree if that's necessary, and if you succeed in shifting the emphasis of this church to the ministry of reconciliation and closing the differences that separate you, you will deliver a powerful message that will spread well beyond the Episcopal Church, and it's a message for our little corner of Christianity that will be heard all over the world. It is the message that we have heard: the call to the ministry of reconciliation, and we are answering that call.