

**Report on the 212th Annual Council of the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia
January 26-27, 2007 • Richmond, Virginia**

Thank you for the privilege of serving as St. John's delegate to Annual Council. If you have ever wondered what the Diocese does, this is definitely the place to find out! It was energizing and inspiring to work with and learn from more than 1,000 other Episcopalians, both clergy and lay, who filled the Marriott ballroom to capacity—providing a living illustration of not just how big our Diocese is, but also how broad.

I worshipped with members of Korean and Hispanic congregations from Northern Virginia, received reports about our eight retirement communities and six church schools, discovered that our Diocese supports the only Episcopal missionary in a particularly dangerous part of Sudan, listened to wonderful meditations given by the Bishop of Auckland, New Zealand, and cheered when we welcomed a parish to full church status, one that its rector says is both evangelical and proud to be a loyal member of this Diocese. Here in Virginia, we truly minister to and reflect the entire Body of Christ, we value our relationships with the rest of the Anglican Communion, and there is room for everyone at our table.

A more experienced delegate quickly pointed out these feelings of joy and unity were not typical of most Annual Councils in recent history. The reason for hope and optimism this year, of course, was the election of the Rev. Shannon Sherwood Johnston as bishop coadjutor. You have probably read about him on the front page of the *Times-Dispatch* yesterday, or in the *Virginia Episcopalian* earlier. These descriptions, while factual, fail to capture his tremendous personal charisma, spiritual courage and energetic faith. I believe he will not only help hold our Diocese together, but also strengthen it. The Rev. Johnston received the majority of lay delegate votes on the second ballot, and carried both orders on the third ballot to win the election. He will be consecrated on May 26 at the National Cathedral, will serve as coadjutor until Bishop Lee retires in the next two to three years, then will become our diocesan bishop.

If electing the bishop coadjutor was exhilarating, facing the challenges posed by breakaway congregations was sobering. Both Bishop Lee and Bishop Jones spoke to these challenges in their addresses, and both are firm in their resolve to regain property claimed by churches that vote to leave the Diocese. By canon law, property belongs to the Diocese, which holds it in trust – preserving the legacy of the generations that came before us, and holding it secure as our legacy to the generations that will follow. Legal action to reclaim property may prove to be a long and expensive process, but it comes only after all other alternatives have been exhausted. At the same time, the Diocese is supporting and encouraging the faithful Episcopalians who do not want to leave the church and who are re-forming congregations.

Following the episcopal election, the second day of council seemed a little anticlimactic, but it was nonetheless necessary to amend and approve the Diocesan budget and take action on a series of resolutions and proposed changes to the Constitution and Canons of the Diocese. These and other actions of Council are summarized below:

Action on Resolutions

R-1a, Day Laborers – Called for commending local officials and community leaders who have established worker support sites to help ensure that day laborers are treated fairly and in a manner which benefits their communities. Also calls for forwarding a similar resolution to the next

General Convention. This came from Region V, where the town of Herndon created a worker site. *Adopted* with minor editorial changes.

R-2, Resolution Process – Based on recommendations of a task force that was authorized by the 211th Annual Council to improve the process by which resolutions are brought to and acted on at annual councils. The goals were to improve the process by facilitating dialogue, avoiding last-minute decisions on matters that merit thoughtful contemplation, reaching consensus on controversial issues, avoiding hurtful confrontation and increasing the effective use of Council time. *Referred* to the Committee on Constitution and Canons for further study.

R-3, Millenium Development Goals – Endorsed the United Nations' Millenium Development Goals as part of our mission focus. The goals were endorsed as the church's top mission priority at the 2006 General Convention, and consist of: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental stability and developing a global partnership for development. *Adopted*.

R-4, Designation of October 30 as a Memorial for James Markham Ambler – Proposed commemorating the Christian model and service of Dr. Ambler in the Diocese of Virginia, following national guidelines for the church calendar. Also proposed the Diocese sponsor a resolution, to be presented at the 2009 General Convention, that Dr. Ambler's name be added to persons listed in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. Dr. Ambler was the physician on an Arctic expedition that ended in tragedy in 1881 when its ship was trapped in Siberian ice for 22 months. He remained at his post until death. The resolution was brought by Leeds Parish, Markham, of which Dr. Ambler was a member and where he is buried. *Adopted*.

R-5s: "Local Option" Regarding the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions – Called for allowing individual parishes, on a trial basis, to develop their own position and practice, neither compelling nor prohibiting parishes from conducting blessings of same sex unions. Asked that the policy be reviewed for final approval in 2010. The resolution was based in part on a resolution passed at the 2003 General Convention. *Substitute adopted* calling for further theological conversation, affirming the Windsor Report's call for compassion toward those who are marginalized, and recommending a commission to discern a possible emerging consensus on the issue and report to Annual Council in 2008.

R-6s: Support for Faithful Episcopalians in Congregations within which a Majority Vote to Leave the Episcopal Church – A statement of affirmation for Bishop Lee's encouragement and support for members of breakaway parishes who wish to remain Episcopalian. (St. Stephen's, Heathsville, is one of these parishes. They have reconstituted a Vestry and sent delegates to Council.) *Adopted* with minor editorial changes.

R-7s: Companion Diocese Relationship Study – Called for identifying and creating relationships with up to four foreign dioceses in the Anglican Communion for mission work, mutual encouragement and prayer. (The Diocese currently has ties to the Diocese of Renk in Sudan and the Diocese of Christ the King in South Africa.) The goal is to further strengthen our relationships in the Anglican Communion. *Substitute adopted* calling for a task force to develop recommendations for presentation to the 213th Council in 2008.

R-8: Negotiations with Departed Congregations – This was the only resolution proposed on the floor of Council this year. It asked the Bishop to continue his attempts at reconciliation before

the Diocese takes legal action to reclaim its property from the parishes that have formally severed ties with the Episcopal Church. *Withdrawn* after the open hearing by those who proposed the resolution.

Action on the Constitution and Canons

C-1 [Local option for absentee balloting in Vestry elections] – Proposed by a task force that was authorized by last year’s Annual Council as a result of requests from congregations that wanted (for example) to allow shut-ins and members who travel frequently for business a way to participate in Vestry elections. This generated a lot of debate about the importance of attending the annual congregational meeting, as well as concerns about potential abuse of the proposed option. *Motion failed, 252-189.*

C-2 [Providing a larger pool of people who could be appointed to the Vestry of a mission church]. This would have allowed persons who have not transferred their membership to the mission to serve on the mission Vestry. *Referred* back to the Committee on Constitution and Canons for further work.

C-3 [Requirements for churches that wish to incorporate] –Thanks to a recent change in Virginia law, churches now are allowed to incorporate (you may remember this being on the ballot if you voted last November; it was a referendum item). The intent of this proposal was to make clear that churches that choose to incorporate still accede to the constitution and canons, jurisdiction of the Bishop and authority of the Diocese. *Referred* back to the Committee on Constitution and Canons on recommendation of the Chancellor and Committee.

C-4 [Allowing for two collegiate delegates at Annual Council] – This amendment was brought forth by Region V and the campus ministry in Harrisonburg, which serves four colleges. While regions elect high school youth delegates to Annual Council, college students involved in campus ministries have not been represented. Campus ministry is a Diocesan priority and a growth area. *Approved* with minor clarifications; must be voted upon again next year because it is a constitutional amendment.

C-5 [Restructuring the membership of the Commission on Ministry] – Proposed changes to the number and type of persons serving on the Commission on Ministry, which oversees the identification and training of spiritual leaders, from initial discernment and acceptance into the ordination process through seminary and ordination.

This amendment arose from a task force that was established to examine the process for discerning calls to lay and ordained leadership in the Diocese. It also was occasioned by changes to the general church canons at the 2003 and 2006 General Conventions and recommendations regarding the permanent diaconate that were adopted at the 209th Annual Council.

The new process developed by the task force envisions making resources for discernment available to all baptized persons, providing leadership opportunities to clergy and laity, and establishing the diaconate as a separate and equal order in the Diocese. The Diocese already has trained 12 spiritual discernment facilitators, begun working with 17 parish discernment committees and established an Episcopal Leadership Institute and a Deacons Formation Institute.

Approved as amended by Council to require that all members of the Commission must be adult communicants in good standing of a church in the Diocese (not just baptized persons).

Other Actions of Council

Full Church Status. Consented to granting full church status to the Church of the Messiah, Chancellor. It is a small parish outside Fredericksburg that has worked steadily for 15 years to reach this milestone. It was very moving to see its members—black and white, adults and small children—process onto the Council floor behind their church banner as parish musicians led us in song. The vicar, The Rev. James Reed, is the father of a recent St. Margaret's graduate. He now has been called as rector.

Budget. Approved a Diocesan operating budget of approximately \$4.5 million. This is based on pledges from churches, and is an increase of about \$250,000 over 2006. The increase was made possible because even though some churches have left, others have increased what they give to the Diocese.

We are urged to prayerfully consider whether our parish can increase our giving. The treasurer reported that the national average for parish giving to the Diocese is 14.5% of income; in Virginia, it is just 6% (with some large parishes carrying more than their weight).

There is concern about the potential legal costs involved in securing church property; the Diocese drastically cut its administrative costs this past year to cover those expenses, which were only just beginning. That said, you will find that the budget places proper emphasis on established priority areas, including mission, youth work and congregational development.

Standing Committee. We elected four new members of the Standing Committee, which is charged with maintaining the structure, continuity and integrity of the Diocese; approving any financial encumbrances; consenting to episcopal elections in the national church; overseeing the ordination process; and serving as a council of advice to the bishops.

It is essentially the board of directors of the Diocese, meeting monthly and requiring much dedication and commitment on the part of its members. Nominees typically have served on or led many Diocesan task forces/committees/organizations and additionally may possess professional skills that are useful, such as legal or financial expertise.

New lay members: Martha High, St. John's, McLean and Alexander Slaughter, St. James, Richmond.

New clerical members: The Rev. Susan Goff, St. Christopher's, Springfield and The Rev. Daniel Robayo, Christ Church, Luray.

I truly appreciated this opportunity to see our Diocese in action and to participate in its deliberations on behalf of St. John's Church. Please let me know if you would like any further information about any of the topics summarized in this report.

Respectfully submitted,

Jenni Brockman
Delegate