

Longing To Hope Again:
The National Reconciliation Conversations

By The Rev. Susan Russell

We filled a parish hall for four days -- lay and ordained, gay and straight – men and women from the east and from the west. We were gathered together for conversations about reconciliation -- focused on the issue “Conflict in the Episcopal Church.” What brought us to those ubiquitous round tables set up for small group discussion was the “conflict du jour”: the blessing of same sex unions. What kept us at them was the deep desire for a ray of hope that there was indeed a way to be reconciled with each other in spite of our deep differences of opinion.

That longing was expressed in these words set to music by Missouri lay deputy Mike Clark:

God who embraces all of this Earth
Heal those in sorrow, burdened with pain.
For many are broken
Many are fearful
Many are longing to hope again
Longing to hope again.

Longing to hope that this “faith based reconciliation process” might actually offer tools to enable us to communicate beyond the sound-bite, position paper rhetoric to which our discourse has been reduced. Longing to hope that there is a way to maintain the integrity of our deeply held convictions and yet stay in relationship with those who differ from us. Longing to hope that this church we love can continue to hold us all in the embrace of Anglican comprehensiveness.

For me, the most powerful exercise of the conference was the opportunity for a representative of each constituency – progressive, moderate and conservative – to offer a list of both the hurts we have received and those we have inflicted in the course of this now decades long conflict. Speaking for “the progressive side,” I offered the following: We have been hurt by:

- the assumption that we’re driven by a
- non-faith” agenda – by having our desire to fully include GLBT persons in the Body of Christ dismissed as “purely political.”
- the constant questioning of our salvation and by the threat of judgement,
- the lack of trust that we mean what we say – by accusations of “hidden agendas” and threats of “future coercion” which attack our integrity and block conversation
- the dishonoring of our relationships by defining them in terms of sexual acts. Andrew Sullivan has written, “We’d never talk about heterosexual marriage primarily in terms of vaginal intercourse or merely sexual needs; it would slight the depth and variety of heterosexual relationships.” It hurts that our relationships do not receive the same level of respect.
- name calling: Sodomite. Pervert. Morally Corrupt. By being lumped with pedophiles and prostitutes – by those who speak the words and those who do not speak out against the hate mongers.

- having the truth of our experience as GLBT Christians denied as valid – having our sexual orientation become more important than our theological orientation.
- hearing again and again that our presence in the church will cause others to leave – by having the truth of our experience held hostage by threats of schism -- having the burden of unity placed on the shoulders of our silence.

We have caused hurt by:

- the times we have participated in “then show them the door thinking as a means to resolve our differences with conservatives.
- stereotyping those with biblical hermeneutics which differ from ours as fundamentalists – by dismissing them as ignorant.
- not acknowledging the very real pain being experienced by those who see the church changing in ways that they find incompatible with their understanding of scripture.
- not always remembering what it is like to be in a minority
- by not acting with sensitivity in those places where we have become the majority.
- proclaiming a Gospel of God’s inclusive love and yet only tolerating those with conservative political and theological perspectives.

Not a complete list. Not a definitive process. But a beginning. An effort. A baby step forward on the journey toward reconciliation. At least I hope so. And that hope is more than I had when I entered the parish hall four days ago. It isn’t about changing minds or ignoring differences or tabling resolutions. It’s about engaging in the hard work of both encountering and understanding “ the other” – and coming to see each other as equally beloved of God, equally entitled to respect, equally longing to hope.

I am as committed as ever to seeing this church authorize liturgies for the blessing of unions already blessed by God. I understand that commitment to be both a vocation and a gift. The gift I took from these “National Conversations” is the understanding that the work of advocacy and the vocation of reconciliation are not mutually exclusive. And that's enough to make me hope again!