

From the Rector's Study ~

A season that starts with comparatively less hospitable weather outside and concludes as we enter springtime, Lent reflects the outward environment by inviting us to go within ourselves, give time and attention to who and what we find there, then to re-emerge to refreshment and renewal in Christ Jesus. For people given to introspection and introversion, the season has some comfortable and familiar qualities. For people given more to action and external stimulation, Lent can be quite a struggle. All of this is appropriate, because Lent reminds us that being followers of Jesus is both rewarding and a challenge.

ECR is a comforting and challenging community. We who inhabit and make up the community experience it most often as familiar, safe, and energizing. This is not to say that for each of us at times our diverse community isn't also frustrating or irritating. But we all seem to understand that these are signs of vibrancy and health. Even when we cannot always agree on absolutely everything, who of us we wouldn't really want to do so, anyway? How plain and stale would all that be? We are who we are, how we are, and what we are because we insist on being a community that is hospitable in the Name of Christ Jesus and in the name of God's Love for all.

The Lenten invitation to re-examine ourselves, each of individually but also all of us collectively, helps us re-claim this special characteristic of ourselves as community. A visitor recently described the community of ECR as a 'real gem.' It was wonderful to hear. His experience here among us was a genuine blessing to him. He told me he hasn't been to another Episcopal church like us. I love this about us. And I love that we want to be this way on purpose.

Toward that end, please notice that in the latter part of May we'll be beginning a special series presented by author, musician, minister Jimi Calhoun. He has written a book rooted in his own experiences titled *A Story of Rhythm and Grace: What the Church Can Learn from Rock & Roll about Healing the Racial Divide*. This is a small expression of what I identified at the Annual Meeting in January as my intention to help us continue to open up access to the Good News here at ECR. I want us to tend to our relative lack of racial diversity here at ECR and discern to what degree this may exist because you and I have not yet learned all that God wants us to teach us about being ourselves at our best.

We'll also soon see that ECR will be hosting workshop presented by our own Ann Foxworth on helping people understand the barriers of inaccessibility for persons with visual disabilities. Our intention is to offer this workshop for other churches in the area. You may recall with me that Bp. Doyle on his visit here seemed quite impressed with the small efforts that we are already making at ECR to welcome people with disabilities the life and ministry of this community.

In addition, due to the rejection at Diocesan Council of the ECR delegation's (along with other co-sponsors) efforts to encourage the Diocese of Texas to declare a diocesan-wide hospitality to people who are gay, ECR's leadership and I are now pondering this

demonstrated need for what ECR is already offering. We don't check people's sexuality at the door before welcoming them to the Love of God and to our own affection and respect, and we never will.

ECR has been swimming against the tide in this diocese for some time, now, and this doesn't seem likely to change anytime soon. Our ministry is not to provide a domesticated ghetto of welcome to people rejected by the majority in this diocese or relegated to half-status. We will not participate in or validate such a twisted and deficient approach to what it is means to be God's community of the Church. To the contrary, while our ministry here at ECR certainly is to provide welcome to all who come to God and to the Church, it is also to bear positive witness to the Love that God has for people who are 'different' and dare to be so without apologizing for it. And we will continue to do so; for, as we learned so recently last month, our witness is needed now more than ever. There are fewer and fewer spiritual homes for people who don't quite fit the mold, or who refuse to do so. We are one such home, because we don't require anything more here than a desire to know and love God and to serve God's people.

ECR does not merely tolerate people; we do not merely accept people 'despite' their differences; we positively welcome and celebrate both the differences and the commonalities that exist among all God's people. Without the differences among us, we wouldn't know and fully appreciate the blessings that we share. Without the commonalities among us, we wouldn't know the challenges, the responsibilities, and the blessings that each of us finds around the things that make us blessedly different from one another. ECR understands well, though many would disagree and many already have, that this is what it means to be a community of God's people, a community of the Love of God for all. We will never surrender this. To the contrary we will continue to proclaim more loudly, more boldly, empowered more than ever by the Spirit of the living God.

I encourage all of us here at ECR to go within during this season of Lent. Go within personally and find the Love of God renewing God's call to love self, love neighbor, and love God with all your heart and soul and body and mind. And gather together to make this inward journey with one another. Come to the wonderful Lenten Series that begins this month, get in touch with a focused study of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and examine together the powerful challenges and blessings that Christ's sacrifice for us imply for our lives.

We are truly the community, the Church, of Resurrection. In a season of an inhospitable environment spiritually and socially, let us use the Lenten journey to rediscover, reclaim, and renew the truly unique ministry of hospitality and welcome that is ours here at ECR. Spiritual death and dying cannot stop it: new Life is rising. A new season is on the horizon. Keep watching for it. Keep being it. We are part of its dawning day.

God's Peace. Jim +

Diocesan Council 2011 – Report and Reflections from ECR's Delegation and Observers

ECR's delegates and rector submitted proposals this year for one resolution, one canonical amendment, and one new canon. To review these please go online to

<http://ignitingthesoul.blogspot.com/p/proposals-for-upcoming-texas-diocesan.html>. We also had three people nominated for election: Andy Lyon to the Standing Committee, Ann Foxworth to the Executive Board, Fr. Jim to the Standing Committee, and Fr. Jim to be the diocesan deputation to General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 2012. Our delegates this year were Andy Lyon, Linda Bryant, Shawn Oujezdsky, Sam Giancarlo, and Fr. Jim, with Alternates Susan Ledenham, Betty Stinson, Nadine Gordon, and observers Ann Foxworth, Helen Paulsen and Jeff Johnson.

In light of the misrepresentation that our proposals suffered from diocesan publications and diocesan officers in their presentations, it needs to be noted: neither ECR nor Fr. Jim is exclusively focused on 'gay rights' or inclusion of LGBT persons in the life and ministry of the Church. In fact, a close review of our proposals reveals that exactly none is focused around this issue. However, it is also the case that if our ministry doesn't include our fight for this group now, there may be no one there to fight for us later. Jesus calls us to do to 'least of these' as we do to him. Our focus on the Church's welcome of all people to the knowledge and love of the Lord makes it impossible for us to continue to collude in the focused exclusion of a distinct group simply because they make some of the people who exercise political and financial influence in the diocese uncomfortable. ECR continues to proclaim the Gospel that Jesus brings to all people, rich and poor, young and old, educated and uneducated, employed and unemployed, housed and homeless, black, brown, yellow, red, and white, native and immigrant, woman and man, gay and straight. If the Church is hostile to some, then it is welcoming to none.

In general, our experience of council was characterized by the hostility we all felt toward the resolutions and canons proposed by Andy and by Fr. Jim. Also, many of us were surprised that the vote tally for all those running for various elected positions was announced. Some of us who have served with other national organizations noted that they have never seen this done. The result was to make clear that those nominees who reflect a minority viewpoint are part of a very small minority. Some also suggested that Council's habit of using voice votes creates inaccuracies. The council delegates who shouted their 'No!' in opposition to Andy Lyon's resolution on anti-gay bullying may have been able to prevail based not on numbers, but on volume alone. Our delegation agreed that from now on, unless it is abundantly clear that a resolution has been defeated, we shall challenge the call and force a standing vote count.

There is a general assumption among our group that our proposals were both misunderstood and misrepresented in the respective committee responsible for reporting and recording submitted proposals. The Committee on Resolutions is vested canonically with receiving proposals and making sure that they are written in a proper format. The Committee may choose to gather proposals that it believes are similar and move at Council to discharge one or more on that basis. However, in recent years, this committee has far exceeded its canonical duties. This year

Bishop Doyle himself identified in his Address to Council that, "Last year the resolutions committee worked to bring people together to help present legislation that united the council around a common issue of concern. We should be proud of their work. This year in September and October our nation's headlines were filled with stories of people who were bullied. Our resolution committee has risen to the challenge after receiving multiple resolutions and has put together one resolution which in my mind captures our willingness to work together on a common issue of a Gospel importance." Our delegation remains disturbed that the bishop seems to be encouraging the Resolutions Committee to function well beyond its responsibilities and privileges to serve increasingly as an advocate for the agenda of the diocese bishop rather than as a committee serving the full diversity of the members of the Diocese of Texas and serving all the delegates Diocesan Council.

After receiving and accepting Andy Lyon's proposal this year, the Resolutions Committee contacted him repeatedly to urge him to redraft his resolution or to work with the sponsors of two other resolutions that included the word 'bullying' in them to draft a new proposal that would merge all three; this despite the fact that this was all well past the due date for submission of proposals. After several meetings and conversations, Andy and Fr. Jim concluded that the Committee was annoyed that Andy's proposal 1) focused on the phenomenon of anti-gay bullying, and 2) that it called on the Executive Board to issue a press release and to communicate with state and federal legislators. They further concluded that the resolution favored by the Committee and ultimately promoted by the bishop was vague, mentioned bullying only once and only in passing, and called for no actual action to be taken by the leadership of the diocese. When Andy and Fr. Jim communicated to the chair for the Committee that they would not be merging Andy's resolution, the chair was clear that this decision would not be looked upon favorably and was unable to assure Andy and Fr. Jim that the resolution would even make it to the floor of Council for debate and vote. Our delegation found this experience with the Committee prior to Council to be oppressive and threatening.

One of ECR's delegates remarked, "as a first time attendee, I felt I was prepared as I had carefully studied the several proposals written by Fr. Jim and by Andy Lyon. I expected some discussion during the [pre-council] workshop which started at 1:00 on Friday [of Council]. I was surprised that we were finished at 1:15! Talk about 'cut and dried!' The committee head was totally disinterested. While I knew Andy's Resolution on the Sin of Bullying was not recommended, I had hoped the people in the room would listen to our view. My comment on inclusion felt like a pebble dropped into a cold, deep, dark lake!"

Two others of ECR's delegates and alternates offered: "Over a period of thirty-five (35) years, there were many occasions when [I] attended meetings similar to our council meeting. Such meetings fall primarily into two broad categories, that is, first, an open participative meeting where participants are encouraged to share their points of view. Some of the views are appropriate to become action items. The second category is the closed, non-participative, and top down meetings/lectures. People are expected to say, 'yes sir, yes sir, three bags full' and be good soldiers following orders. Both [of us] are significantly disappointed in the manner

and atmosphere in which the bishop ran the council meeting. It follows the construct of a closed meeting; that is, everything was decided before hand and yet, we are sure some thought it [was] great....There is no doubt that the bishop has consolidated his power. He is an iron-fisted chief executive. The business sessions on the whole were a farce.

Some positive points of the council meeting are ease of registration, most exhibits, new delegate workshop, and the opening service. We agree that ECR and a few other churches (delegates) vividly express a liberal stance that significantly differs from the bishop's stance. This is a brave undertaking. The council delegates as a whole are conservative or just afraid to be seen as going against the bishop's conservative beliefs. This experience leaves us to question the holiness and spirituality of the Church of the Diocese of Texas. In short, all are not created equal, and all are not invited to God's table. There is a wide gap between the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Church of the Diocese of Texas. Too Bad!"

Our delegation shares a concern that the Bishop seems entirely unresponsive to those in the Diocese with opinions that differ from his, and that the Bishop's actions indicate a consolidation of his political power. Concerning the Bishop's Address, one of our observers was very upset about the bishop's statement that 'we Episcopalians sit in church waiting for others to come to us'. She expressed to him via his blog that actively supporting such movements as Cursillo would go a long way toward Evangelism. She received no response from him, but received positive responses from others on the blog.

Speaking for ECR's group in general, one of our Alternates noted, "I admired the bravery of Shawn Oudjezdsky as he told his personal story of first being bullied at the age of 5 years [old]; it continued for years and resulted in several suicide attempts. As I listened, I was so proud of Fr. Jim and Andy who stood in support, between Shawn and the Bishop and panel of dignitaries. Mind you, this all took place in a ballroom containing close to 500 people! I was excited when an amendment was proposed to support passage of Fr. Jim's Canon on Pastoral Care. It seemed perfect to me, i.e. getting the bishop's approval for prayer services for committed couples [gay or straight]. Without any discussion, it was soundly defeated by a voice vote..... NO! That was painful. This Diocese is not responsive to the inclusivity which our culture is now demanding and which Jesus demands of his followers. We only pretend to be and that pretense is a very thin one. However, I think if the voting had been done anonymously, the defeat would not have been so overwhelming. That's scary."

While we all appreciate that Council was able to pass some resolutions regarding criminal's rights and the rights of their victims, we couldn't help but note the irony that the diocese is more comfortable tending to the civil rights of criminals than to the human rights of persons who are gay. It was clear to us that anything that hinted of affirmation in this diocese of gay persons was going to be resoundingly and officially suppressed.

One of delegates summarizes our collective experience well:

"To paraphrase A Tale of Two Cities, 2011 Council was "the best of times and the worst of times". The opening service at Trinity Episcopal Church in The Woodlands was marvelous. The setting was beautiful and the

music was wonderful. The best part of council to me has always been the opening service because of the voices raised to God in music. How beautiful and harmonious we all sound together. An opening service held in a church setting as opposed to a convention arena is always a good thing. The hospitality extended to all by the three host churches was great. The exhibits were great. Everyone was very helpful and all was well organized.

Unfortunately, the business meeting was a disappointment. More time was given over to lofty speeches and reports than to discussions of the proposed resolutions and canons. The bishop's address talked of the importance of changing how the church does things. He referred to resolutions being fine to make and pass but we must act on them. Yet at the end of the business meeting, it appears the Diocese of Texas is quite content to change nothing, to talk the talk, but not walk the walk.

Andy Lyon's resolution against bullying was not recommended by the Committee on Resolutions and Canons because it was viewed as the same as another more general resolution. The difference was that his resolution specifically referred to the bullying of gay teens or those perceived as gay. He authored this resolution in response to the sad events of last year when too many young people thought they could no longer endure their lives and decided to end them. His resolution had action items in it, calling for the Diocese of Texas to publically support legislation against bullying. Those who spoke in support of Andy's resolution provided heart wrenching stories of the bullying they or their family members had endured while those against it did not want bullying defined as actions specifically against one segment of the population. Both resolutions were good, so I am at a loss to understand why both could not be passed. We had several resolutions regarding prisoners and the treatment of those who have served their time in prison, but none of these were regarded as redundant.

Fr. Jim's proposed canon to allow priests to provide pastoral care to those outside the bounds of recognized relationships, i.e. those in life-long committed relationships but not allowed/able to marry by law or due to financial considerations. This canon was presented by the committee as changing the sacrament of marriage or changing the prayer book, yet a reading of the proposed canon contained nothing of the sort.

Last year, a resolution requiring the Executive Council study the possibility of extending Diocesan Council to more than one short day and to report back to Diocesan Council was passed. The Bishop advised [us that] the report he received did not recommend extending council so he and his wife would be hosting an annual "family and bluegrass" gathering at Camp Allen in 2012 or 2013. I am not quite clear how such an event will foster meaningful discussions on important issues that are brought before Diocesan Council or how a separate gathering with a separate cost will be anything other than a feel good gathering for those who can afford both the time and money. I feel that once again meaningful discussions of both of the aforementioned proposals were sacrificed to the altar of a short and efficient business meeting, and everything had been decided beforehand with delegates present to merely rubberstamp what the committees had already decided. To paraphrase another saying: 'And other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, did you enjoy the play?'"