TREC Letter to the Church: September, 2014

Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

(John 11:43–44)

As the Taskforce for Reimagining The Episcopal Church (TREC) has progressed in our work, we have come to see the raising and unbinding of Lazarus as a helpful way of understanding this moment in the life of The Episcopal Church. We believe Jesus is calling our church to new life and vitality, but the church is held back by its bindings—old ways of working that no longer serve us well.

We write this as we begin the final months of our work, to give you an update about our thinking and emerging recommendations for your prayerful consideration and feedback. We will publish our final report and specific legislative proposals in December 2014.

In the 18 months since we first met as a Task Force, we have been in conversation with many of you—in person and virtually—about your hopes, dreams, ideas, and concerns for the church and about our collective mission to serve Christ. We have appreciated your feedback, your encouragement, and your criticism of our work so far. We look to continue our dialogue with you in the months to come and encourage you to respond to this letter, to participate in our virtual town hall meeting that we will webcast from Washington National Cathedral on October 2, and to engage in dialogue with us as we join provincial meetings and other forums. We thank you for your input to date and for your prayers for our work together.

The Need for Change
The Episcopal Church’s structures and governance processes reflect assumptions from previous eras that do not always fit with today’s contexts. They have not adapted to the rapidly changing cultural, political, and social environments in which we live. The churchwide structures and governance processes are too disconnected from local needs and too often play a “gating” or regulatory role to local innovation. They are often too slow and confusing to deal decisively with tough and urgent tradeoffs or to pursue bold directions that must be set at the churchwide level.

Our study and observations would suggest, for example, that: ■ General Convention has historically been most effective in deliberatively discerning and evolving the church’s position on large-scale issues (e.g., prayer book revision, reform of clergy formation and discipline canons, women’s ordination, same sex blessings). This should continue to be the primary role of General Convention.
■ However, General Convention is not organized to drive clear prioritization of resourcing; address technical issues; set a clear agenda for churchwide staff; launch bold programs of innovation or reform; or ensure accountability for effective and efficient execution by the churchwide staff. At the churchwide level,
we lack the ability to focus on the priorities that are most urgent at the local level, where much if not most of our primary mission and ministry take place. Neither the Executive Council nor the Presiding Bishop’s office are fully effective in complementing the General Convention by making tough tradeoffs, setting bold direction, or driving accountability of churchwide staff to local needs. The roles of the Executive Council and the Presiding Bishop’s office are often ambiguous and unclear, and neither are structured, selected, or sized appropriately for their tasks in governance and execution. As a result, churchwide staff report significant confusion as to who sets direction. Power struggles emerge, with all factions claiming alignment with General Convention resolutions, and conflicts are resolved through churn and delay, rather than through clear analysis and accountable authority. We have not demonstrated the capacity at the churchwide level to develop the kind of strategic focus that allows us to address some of our highest and most pressing priorities. Churchwide staff functions have evolved their roles and mindsets to be increasingly responsive and supportive of local mission, but their purpose and scope are not clear and broadly understood across the church. Highly skilled people and well-developed programs are underutilized because local groups do not know they exist. In other situations, dioceses report frustration that churchwide programs are not responsive or adequate to meet their local needs. There are not sufficient systems of transparency around how churchwide resources are used or held accountable for their effectiveness and resource stewardship.

A New Paradigm
We live in an age of networks, yet our churchwide structure has not fully adapted to this organizational paradigm. The evolution from a bureaucratic/regulatory agency paradigm to a network will profoundly change the role, culture, decision making processes, and leadership paradigms of and within The Episcopal Church’s churchwide structures. This would not be unlike other significant evolutions that have occurred historically around our church’s governance and structures.

We have previously written about the historical evolution of churchwide structural paradigms and described four clear roles that we recommend for the 21st century:

**Catalyst:** The Episcopal churchwide organization should inspire and provoke all members of the church to live fully into its mission of “restoring all people to unity with God and one another in Christ” (Book of Common Prayer, p. 855). Specific examples of what the churchwide structure must and should do to fulfill this role would include inspiring and calling the whole church to baptismal ministry and helping every member interpret the world through the eyes of the gospel, including exercising a prophetic voice on social justice issues and representing the voices of marginalized people.

**Connector:** The churchwide organization should establish and maintain relationships among its member communities and constituents in order to cultivate Episcopal identity, to magnify the mission impact of local communities by connecting them to each other, and to facilitate the sharing of ideas and learning across the Episcopal and broader Anglican networks. Specific examples of what the churchwide structure must and should do to fulfill this role would include representing The Episcopal Church in the Anglican Communion; forging ecumenical relationships and alliances; exercising canonical authority to foster and preserve the church’s catholicity (unity in diversity with the wider Christian Church); maintaining the church’s institutional history through the Church Archives; and fostering communication across the church around new ideas, learning, and opportunities for collaboration.

**Capability Builder:** The Episcopal churchwide organization should support leadership development centered around the critical skills necessary for individual and communitywide Christian formation in 21st century contexts. The Episcopal churchwide organization should also ensure that the church is a learning organization—rapidly learning from successes and failures across the church and rapidly sharing these lessons across the church’s network. Key capabilities needed in today’s missionary context include skills in ministry, community organization, reviving congregations, planting congregations, multicultural leadership, evangelism, Christian formation, reaching new generations, and reaching new populations. The expertise in these areas lies primarily at the grassroots level, but the churchwide structure can foster mutual learning, especially on a peer-to-peer basis. Specific examples of what the churchwide structure must and should do to fulfill this role would include cultivating and
fostering the sharing of expertise for targeted training and professional development. Convenor: The Episcopal churchwide organization should assemble the church in traditional and non-traditional ways as a missionary convocation. The Episcopal churchwide organization should also convene the church with the broader Anglican Communion, with ecumenical church partners, and with other potential partners and collaborators in proclaiming Christ’s gospel and living the Five Marks of Mission.[1] – Specific examples of what the churchwide structure must and should do to fulfill this role would include convening a General Missionary Convocation both in person and virtually, potentially concurrent with General Convention.

Implications for Existing Churchwide Structures
To begin to change the church’s operating paradigm in the ways that we believe will be necessary, we have identified several “critical path” priorities and have worked to more fully develop them. We have concluded these areas are in the most need of our attention if we are to make the church work more effectively in our 21st century context. These changes will not fully transition the churchwide structures and governance to the network-based model that we describe above. The work of reimagining our church and restructuring the church’s institution will need to be an ongoing process of adaptation as our context continues to shift and change. Taken together, however, we believe addressing these areas constitute a critical first step and will enable further change. We must streamline and focus the scope of our churchwide agenda, to become a more distributive, networked, and nimble church that is focused on local faith formation and local mission and that enables and accelerates local innovation and adaptation; while at the same time enhancing, not diminishing our prophetic voice to the world around us.

At the churchwide level, we must select and fully empower clear and effective leadership to define agendas, set direction, develop expertise around complex issues and their implications, make tough choices, and pursue bold and disruptive ideas where appropriate. There are implications for the General Convention, for the Executive Council, the central executive function of the church, and for General Convention’s Commissions, Councils, Agencies, and Boards (CCABs).

Once the direction is set for the work necessary at the churchwide level, we must empower a lean churchwide staff to build capacity across our church and act as network catalysts and network builders. This staff must be directed and supervised by professionals with deep and relevant expertise and experience in the areas that are the focus of their respective projects. The scope of mission-related staff work should be specific and time-bound (see “Developing Recommendations” below).

We must create accountability in our churchwide structure so that we are able to measure whether that structure is following the direction that has been set, ensuring a high quality of work, and driving efficiency. For churchwide staff, this means that objectives must be set at the start of any project or endeavor with basic, guiding metrics that are tracked and reported.

We believe that addressing these priorities will enable the church to continue to evolve and streamline its governance and structures in areas that we have not addressed. We also believe that addressing these priorities will enable the church to be more effective in addressing its most complex and urgent issues where deep study and bold action is required (e.g., sustainability of stipendiary clergy; implications for clergy education and pension structures).

Developing Recommendations
The recommendations that we will submit to the church and to the 2015 General Convention will likely take several different forms:

1. A complementary set of resolutions that suggest amendments to the Canons and Constitution in order to implement what the Task Force considers “critical path” changes to churchwide structures, governance, and administration. We will strongly recommend that these resolutions be implemented as a total package.
2. Draft resolutions for further streamlining of churchwide structures and governance that our work tells us represent the wishes of a large segment of church members and that we believe should be debated and resolved in the 2015 General Convention.
3. A recommended agenda of serious and deep issues on which our church must take urgent action in order to be as bold, adaptive, and resilient as it needs to be over the coming decades, plus an illustration of how this agenda would be effectively and efficiently informed and progressed if our legislative recommendations were adopted.

4. More specifically, the “critical path” proposals we are considering putting forward in the form of General Convention resolutions calling for amendments to the Canons and Constitution currently include:

- Improvements to the effectiveness of the General Convention, e.g.:
  - Limits to the overall length of the General Convention and efforts to focus and prioritize its legislative agenda.
  - Reduction in the number of legislative committees for General Convention
  - Express permission for legislative committees to let resolutions die in committee
  - The evolution of General Convention to become a General Missionary Convocation of the Church, with networking and sharing around mission and ministries its primary focus, and hopefully reducing the scope and size of legislation and both legislative bodies, while still increasing overall participation and relevance to mission at the local level.

- Clarifications around the role of the central executive structures of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society (DFMS)
  - Presiding Bishop retained as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Church, Chair of the Executive Council, and President of DFMS, with managerial responsibility for all DFMS staff
  - President of the House of Deputies (PHoD) retained as Vice President of the Church, Vice Chair of the Executive Council, and Vice President of DFMS
  - Presiding Bishop responsible for nominating three people to serve in the following offices, with concurrence by the PHoD: Chief Operating Officer (COO), Treasurer/Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Chief Legal Officer. These positions would serve at the pleasure of the Presiding Bishop. Approval for the Presiding Bishop to fire any of these officers would not be required from the PHoD or the Executive Council.

- Changes to the role, size, and selection of the Executive Council
  - The role of the Executive Council clarified as a “governance” role, similar to a non-profit Board of Trustees
  - Size of the Executive Council reduced from 40 to 21 members (retaining proportionality among the orders) to improve its effectiveness as a Board
  - Executive Council membership to include the Presiding Bishop, the President of the House of Deputies as ex officio voting members, and the COO, Treasurer/CFO and Secretary as non-voting members, plus 20 members elected “at large” rather than as representatives of each province

- Reduction in the number of CCABs and their scope
  - Elimination of all Standing Commissions except the Joint Standing Committees on Nominations and Program, and Budget & Finance
  - Charging the presiding officers to appoint such task forces as might be necessary to carry out the work of a General Convention on a triennium by triennium basis.

- A transition in the mission or program-related staff of DFMS to a primarily contractor-only model
  - Contractors to be hired based on a specific project scope, length, and set of objectives
  - Project effectiveness to be monitored by the Presiding Bishop’s office and reviewed annually by Executive Council against a set of pre-agreed metrics
  - Staff in “support functions” like Human Resources, Finance, IT, Legal, Communications, or Archives would not be impacted

In our final report, we will illustrate how these recommended changes would help The Episcopal Church to more effectively and efficiently address critical and urgent agenda items, with the flexibility to innovate and experiment more rapidly and to adopt bold courses of action where necessary.

In the course of our work as a Task Force, we have identified and are continuing to develop a set of
agenda items that we believe must be addressed by The Church in coming years. These agenda items include:

- Building capacity and capability across the Church around evangelism, community leadership, and non-traditional parish formation
- The sustainability of a fully stipendiary clergy model and the likely predominance of mixed models of employment and clergy leadership
- Implications for seminary education, requirements, and debt burden
- Opportunities for Pension Fund policy changes to improve clergy and lay leadership incentive alignment
- Diocesan viability, the number of dioceses, and assessment requirements/expectations
- Parish viability, the number and geographic distribution of parishes, and fostering new church plants

We believe that addressing these types of issues will require strong, inspired and accountable leadership, informed input, and, in some cases, quick action. With the changes we have recommended in churchwide structures, governance, and administration, we see these issues being addressed as follows:

- The General Convention would call for these issues to be part of the DFMS agenda, to be directed by the Presiding Bishop’s office and accountable to the Executive Council and to subsequent General Conventions.
- The Presiding Bishop’s office (most likely through the COO) would identify the expertise and type of resources required to effectively study these issues and to develop recommendations. The Presiding Bishop’s office, in consultation with the Executive Council, would charter time-bound projects with specific objectives and metrics, and it would hire qualified contractors and establish advisory boards as necessary. The Presiding Bishop’s office would direct these projects and the people hired to accomplish them.
- The Executive Council would review and provide appropriate oversight of DFMS’s total portfolio of projects relative to pre-established metrics on an annual basis.

Conclusion

It is important to state clearly and emphatically that the work of innovation and adaptation is already underway at all levels of the church. It is clear that with or without the General Convention, with or without any recommendations from TREC, the re-imagining of our Church is already and will continue to take place. The Holy Spirit has breathed new life into the Church at countless times and in countless ways in the past, and the same Spirit will continue to do so in the future. Our hope is that our recommendations will ultimately help focus and direct the extraordinary spiritual, human, and material resources God has entrusted to us toward a clear set of priorities that will help us be most faithful and effective in continuing to participate in God’s mission in the world.

A Prayer for Our Continued Work

Holy Spirit, who broods over the world, fill the hearts and minds of your servants on the Taskforce for Reimagining The Episcopal Church with wisdom, clarity, and courage. Work in them as they examine and recommend reforms for the structure, governance, and administration of this branch of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. Help them propose reforms to more effectively proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to challenge the world to seek and serve Christ in all persons—loving our neighbors as ourselves—and to be a blazing light for the kind of justice and peace that leads to all people respecting the dignity of every other human being. Be with The Episcopal Church that we may be open to the challenges that this Taskforce will bring to us, and help the whole church to discern your will for our future. In the name of Jesus Christ our Mediator, on whose life this Church was founded. AMEN

[1] To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. To teach, baptize and nurture new believers. To respond to human need by loving service. To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

For more info, questions or comments, contact TREC members at reimaginetec@gmail.com
TREC plans a churchwide meeting on October 2. Details are available here.