

The Episcopal Church

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Episcopal Presiding Bishop preaches at House Of Bishops: *We're here to figure out how to bring more light into a world.*

[September 16, 2010] At the opening Eucharist of the House of Bishops meeting in Phoenix, AZ, on September 16, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori noted in her sermon, "We're actually here to change some light sources – to figure out how to bring more light into a world in great need of it."

Referring to the recent trip to the Mexican border by members of the House of Bishops to learn more about the migrant experience, she said, "We've been a bit charred by that experience – some of our self-preoccupation, ignorance, and prejudice has burned away."

She concluded, "I trust that the flames lit or fanned along the border will inflame this body to a greater willingness to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and a knowledge of the presence of God in the midst of all the peoples of this earth. That would indeed be a worthy candle."

The following is the text of the Presiding Bishop's sermon:

September 16, 2010
House Of Bishops
Changing Contexts for God's Mission

The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori Presiding Bishop and Primate The Episcopal Church

How many Anglo-Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? None. We prefer candles. Though in this part of the world, most churches use ersatz candles filled with oil. Candles do very strange things in this kind of heat.

We're actually here to change some light sources – to figure out how to bring more light into a world in great need of it. We are talking about how to be light to the nations in our myriad different contexts. We'll consider evangelism and liturgy – and yes, candles *are* very useful in some contexts – and we'll look at light-bearing in the forms of leadership development, immigration reform, our care for creation, and healing the aftermath of the destruction in Haiti.

The hope is that we will leave this place having shed a good deal of light on a couple of those areas, and struck a flint to some other candles.

The light that we have to share has been passed from hand to hand over centuries and millennia. Isaiah's vision of God's people as a beacon on a mountaintop had something to do with the pillar of fire leading the wandering forerunners of Israel through the desert. Our sanctuary lights give continuing evidence of that understanding, as do the human light-bearers of many generations. Jesus

on that mountaintop in Galilee passed the flame on to his disciples: go, baptize and teach, and pass on the light of the world.

We are the heirs of countless flame-passers since, including the literal ones like the Oxford martyrs. You know the story – Latimer telling his fellow bishop Ridley as they were about to burn, “Play the man, Master Ridley, we shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace in England as I trust shall never be put out.”

We’re not necessarily looking for a house full of that sort of human candles – most of us probably feel a greater calling to be lightbulbs. We *are* looking for fire-starters, flinty leaders who help pass the flame to others, and we need those who will help to focus the wind of the spirit on flames that need to burn much more brightly. How will we find people who can build a connection that will let the energized spirit flow into other bulbs? – those ready and waiting to shed light into the world. Together, we have opportunities to gather the light like a forest of candles that drive out the shadows of persecution, want, injustice, loneliness, and despair.

The very act of bringing this body together strengthens our light-bearing capacity – we burn brighter when the energy of others surrounds us. This is both a good physics experiment (it takes magnets and gas bags) and it’s a demonstrable spiritual reality. The productivity of our burning depends on what we offer – the gifts we already have, and the willingness to let the spirit/wind spark those gifts into flame. Are we vulnerable enough to let God light something new in us?

Today we remember Ninian. He was Bishop of Galloway in southern Scotland, born to a Christian clan chief around 350 and baptized early; he died about 430 CE. The beginnings of his life remind us that anonymous Roman soldiers brought the flame of Christianity to Britain long before the evangelists whose names we know. As a young man, Ninian walked to Rome to be educated, he was eventually consecrated bishop and sent back to care for his fellow Picts. He stopped at Tours along the way home, may have met St. Martin, and probably brought some stone masons home with him. The church he built on the south coast of Scotland, Candida Casa, the White House, was likely the first stone church in Britain. He also brought home the monastic idea of a vowed religious life, which would develop strength and novelty in the British Isles – like double monasteries, sometimes with women like Brigid and Hilda leading both, even communities with married persons and children. But more than anything else, what distinguished the later monastic tradition in the Celtic lands was its missionary work. Monks didn’t necessarily stay home – some ventured to Iceland and Greenland, as well as east and south.

Ninian melded the gifts of Roman Christianity and the Celtic Christian traditions of the land of his birth. His ministry was remembered and revered for centuries, even though we have very little historical detail. What was remembered was his gift for presenting the gospel in contextually appropriate ways – something that is supposed to define Anglicanism.

A central focus in our contextual work in this gathering concerns our Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters – both in the nations to the south of us and within many dioceses of this Church, in the United States and beyond. Most of us recognize that Latino populations are a rapidly growing demographic in the United States, and communities where we desperately need to be able to tell the old, old story in new language, idiom, music, and image. We have something to learn from each other and from outside this body. Our brothers and sisters who serve in Latin America can teach us about increasing self-sustainability and stewardship, as well as about cultural nuances in the several Latino nations. Many bishops in the United States have stories of success and failure to share as well, and we

need to learn from both. Ninian has something to offer here as well – his evangelical work was highly successful during his lifetime and for a generation or two afterward, but the Pictish people drifted away – Columba complains about “former Christians” among the Picts. Missionaries have plenty of work to do in every generation.

New contexts and new populations have always produced voices that insist on excluding the foreigner. Jesus’ own understanding of his mission develops – the woman at the well convinces him that he’s supposed to serve all nations. Ninian crossed into northern England and into some other contexts, even if he didn’t enter them all in the British Isles. Europe is consumed right now with debates over the rights and place of Muslims in larger society. The past ten days have brought a remarkable example of what a firestorm can be produced by a small mind in Florida. The world was set ablaze with a message that most of us would not see as good news. Imagine what kind of flame might be lit by a message that truly reflects the gospel!

Some 30 members of this body, more than that, bishops and spouses have spent the last three days on the Mexican border. We’ve been a bit charred by that experience – some of our self-preoccupation, ignorance, and prejudice has burned away. A number of us were surprised by the grace and courtesy of the Border Patrol officers we met and spoke with, and by the measured compassion of a rancher. We were profoundly moved by the stories of recent migrants, we were seared by confronting a lengthy line of crosses representing deaths of migrants – people whose bodies literally burned themselves out in the desert south of us.

These crosses – and many of us brought them back with us – each one bears the names or marks the person whose name is not known, of those who have died trying to cross the border. They have lit a flame that will not soon be put out. I trust that the flames lit or fanned along the border will inflame this body to a greater willingness to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and a knowledge of the presence of God in the midst of all the peoples of this earth. That would indeed be a worthy candle.

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