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DIOCESAN SURVEY RESULTS

The results of the Diocesan survey of opinions about the next bishop of Georgia carried out in September have now been published on the website www.georgiabishopsearch.org. Though not without flaws, it is nonetheless instructive about some aspects of opinion in the diocese of Georgia.

The first and most egregious of these flaws was the question about "diversity of thought and custom" in the diocese of Georgia, a concept so vague as to mean anything or everything. Nonetheless, seventy four per cent of respondents thought it "vital" that "we embrace and celebrate" it. Fortunately, after offering that hostage to fortune, a questions about liturgies gave it some meaning. Here too, the question was not unflawed, since it locked together support for the 1928 BCP, the 1979 BCP, and post-1979 liturgies as a package deal. There was no option to choose just one of these, which would have been much more instructive of the state of opinion. Framed as it was, it was difficult to vote against, and the numbers show it (eighty-seven per cent in favour). We must be grateful that the legitimate place of the 1928 PrayerBook has been acknowledged in our diversity.

Support for diocesan unity was huge (ninety-one per cent). Support for unity with the Anglican Communion was also huge (eighty-six per cent). Sixty-one percent affirmed that "we are in agreement more often than not in matter of tradition, liturgy, music, theology, faith, etc."- an affirmation that looks fragile in the light of the thirty-six per cent who disagreed.

Fifty-two per cent identified themselves as "theologically conservative" (versus twenty-four per cent liberal and twenty-two per cent in the middle). Once again, however, what this meant is hard to make out, since there were no questions about the authority of Scripture, the Creeds, or historic Faith and Order as set forth in the Prayer Book. What it meant in terms of the "hot-button" issues of the day was, however, spelled out with commendable clarity. Opposition to same-sex marriage was strong (seventy-two per cent, with only nine-teen in favour), although the opposition drops to fifty-two per cent when the question concerns same-sex blessings (forty-one per cent in favour). Support for celibate homosexual clergy is high (fifty-eight per cent), but opposition to "partnered" homosexual clergy is strong (sixty-two percent opposed, thirty per cent in favour). Diversity clearly falls within certain clear limits.

In another area, however, theological conservatism was very much in the minority. Support for the ordination of women was very strong (seventy-five per cent think has been good for the diocese and seventy-eight support it "theologically": only seventeen per cent disagree). That is no big surprise: in a pragmatic and egalitarian culture and church, in which opponents of women's ordination do not speak out, few have reason to question this innovation. The only glaring inaccuracy was the word "theologically": if this matter is thought about at all, surely it is thought about as a matter of civil rights, not theology.

The next step in the search for the next bishop of Georgia is the posting of a "diocesan profile" based on the survey results, and the opening of nominations (which will close January 15th). A short-list of nominees will then be invited to tour the diocese, with an electoral convention tentatively slated for September.

However spotty the questions, the results of the survey indicate a diocese self-consciously conservative about marriage, eager for unity within itself and with the Anglican Communion, and ready to accept the 1928 Prayer Book as well as the 1979. Our expectation must be that the candidates proposed by the Nominations Committee fit within those parameters.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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