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MEETING THE CANDIDATES

Last week the six candidates for election as Bishop of Georgia addressed public meetings in Savannah, Albany, and Augusta. Here are my initial impressions of the six candidates, based on the Savannah meeting. As in all such debates, the competition is for the perceived middle ground of motherhood and apple pie. We heard a great deal about diversity as a strength, support for small congregations, church growth, et al. The challenge was to "square the circle" of liberal-conservative divisions over sexuality. The most specific answers came to questions about these matters and also the Anglican Covenant. But without probing follow-up questions we really do not know much about the fundamental commitments of the candidates.

Scott Benhase. Not a hair out of place or a laugh-line flubbed in his smoothly polished presentation. Would introduce same-sex blessings only when authorized, and only where priest and vestry consent. Supports the Anglican Covenant, although without explanation of how this can be combined with the previous policy. If Georgia wants to elect a company man, this is the candidate. A bit too bland?

Patrick Gahan. Texan. The most doctrinal of the candidates, and also the only one who seems to have the most clearly worked out (and road-tested) policy ideas for helping the shrinking diocesan numbers to begin growing again. Though conservative on marriage, made a convincing claim to pastoral concern for gays. Georgians may embrace him as a game-changer for a declining diocese or they may balk at his forceful, football-coach manner. Not bland enough?

Frank Logue. Modest, young, "authentic". Perhaps the most impressive presentation. Convincingly opposed to homophobia but at the same time opposed on scriptural grounds to same-sex blessing and ordination. In favour of the Anglican Covenant, though regrets the necessity of it, and thinks the Diocese of Georgia is willing to sign on. Georgians may balk at his comparative lack of experience (9 years a priest). What's inside the authenticity?

Dean Taylor. Frankly, a dull presentation, although more lively in smaller groups. Pre-occupied with inter-faith issues (perhaps not the first concern of Georgians); opposed to the Anglican Covenant (a more defined position than his essay would suggest). Would like to square the circle on sexuality issues but indicated it might not be possible. Is his honesty enough?

William Willoughby. Seemed stiff and nervous in presentation. Embraces ambiguity as principle of comprehensive unity, with the natural consequence that it was unclear where he came down on divisive issues. Can he tell us what his ambiguity adds up to? Diocesan roots (more than 20 years at St. Paul's) may command support at the polls.

Stephen Zimmerman. Rambling, run-on answers to questions detracted from presentation and made it difficult to discern the point he was trying to make. Interested in educational formation. On same-sex blessings, he is in favour of a policy which is "compassionate, courageous, and cautious" – which means, what? Some hearty laughter at his jokes may indicate a surprising level of support.

NOT CONVINCING

In response to the criticism directed at her General Convention Opening Address, Katharine Jefferts Schori has published an explanation of what she said. "Apparently I wasn't clear". Whether her explanation clarifies what she originally said, or obfuscates it, is a question that different people will answer in different ways. Some will think that this what she meant all along. Others will wonder whether she has not snatched up the fig leaf of orthodoxy to cover up her heterodox teaching.

What she meant to say, she now says, is that "we give evidence of our relationship with God in how we treat our neighbors, nearby and far away. Salvation is a gift from God, not something we can earn by our works, but neither is salvation assured by words alone." That's unexceptionable so far as it goes. Doubts, however, remain, and not inconsequential ones. Classical Anglican doctrine could not have talked about good works as she does (at length) without clarifying their relationship with individual faith (see the Articles of Religion XI-XIV). It insisted that there is no right relationship (justification) of the individual with God without faith, and that there are no good works of neighbourly love without individual faith either. Without faith, our good works turn into Pelagian works-righteousness - which do not restore us to right relationship with our neighbour, or to God. Yet Jefferts Schori can only repeat her negative account of individualism, and on the relation of faith to justification and good works she is strikingly silent. She disclaims Pelagian works-righteousness – "salvation is a gift of God" – but given that she cannot say how that grace operates through the faith of the individual, there is nothing in her theology to prevent a collapse into it. She can issue a further clarification, if she wishes, explaining that she is in favour of justifying faith too (though this would involve backtracking on her "individualism is heresy" theme): but the lacuna is troubling. If you are striving to assure critics of your doctrinal orthodoxy, how do you 'overlook' faith?

Moreover, classical Anglicanism would also have said that faith has a doctrinal content. Schori seems unable to speak of doctrine in positive terms – only the comment about the insufficiency of "words alone". Even her doctrinal affirmations have an oddly tentative ring. "We anticipate the restoration of all creation to right relationship, and we proclaim that Jesus' life, death and resurrection made that possible in

a new way." Does this mean that restoration was possible in another way? Or that it is only a possibility? And just how does "Jesus' life, death, and resurrection" make this possible? We can read a classical account of the atonement into that phrase, but we have no reason to do so. Many do not. Perhaps she is once more being "unclear"? She concludes with another unimpeachable platitude, that salvation "is a mystery. It's hard to pin down or talk about." That's a cheap exit. The Biblical concept of "mystery" does not mean "vague" or "ambiguous".

As an effort to set to rest the doctrinal anxieties of her critics, Ms. Jefferts Schori's response is remarkably ineffective. It leaves us with a choice of conclusions: either she is not capable of the requisite theological clarity, or she really does not want to be clear. Given a bishop's role as teacher of the faith and focus of unity, neither conclusion is re-assuring. GGD

KJS's response may be read at:

http://www.episcopalchurch.org/80050_113959_ENG_HTML.htm

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