

The Bishop and the Mission of God? Or: Now why is he going to Sudan and El Salvador?

by the Reverend Ian T. Douglas, Ph.D.

[Editor's note: This is the first in a series of four guest columns that will appear in this space during Bishop Ely's sabbatical.]

Why would the bishop of a small, rural, Episcopal diocese in the Northeast of the United States choose to spend his hard-earned sabbatical in some far off country in Africa or Central America? More specifically, why is it that Bishop Tom is spending his sabbatical visiting Sudan and El Salvador? What in God's name does travel to distant lands to encounter the churches in radically different contexts have to do with the needs and realities of Vermont? These are key questions before the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont, as well as before the Anglican Communion at this time.

To understand why Bishop Ely has been led to travel to Sudan and El Salvador, we need to consider how the office of bishop is called to serve and advance the mission of God as well as how the realities of the Diocese of Vermont have informed Tom's sabbatical planning.

Since 1835, The Episcopal Church has affirmed that all Episcopalians through baptism are members of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of The Episcopal Church, and as such we are called into God's mission at home and around the world. The same General Convention stated that if the church is first and foremost a missionary society and if every baptized person is called to a life of mission, then the bishop is to be the chief missionary. The role of the bishop is to lead the church forward in mission, to go ahead of the people to extend God's healing community and to motivate the faithful to full participation in God's mission of restoration and reconciliation.

As the chief missionary, the bishop has

a vocation to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in the world. The examination of the bishop in the ordination in the Book of Common Prayer (p. 517) says that: "A bishop in God's holy Church is called to be one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ's resurrection and interpreting the Gospel, and to testify to Christ's sovereignty as Lord of lords and King of kings." The bishop is to take the lead in proclaiming the good news of the Gospel and the truth of Christ's resurrection in the real world, the world of lords and kings. A bishop who does not see the world as her/his diocese will not be a bishop whose point of departure is the *missio Dei*.

The bishop's outward orientation toward the needs of the world does not mean that she/he neglects the concerns of the church, its people or its ordained leaders. For the bishop is also called "to guard the faith, unity and discipline of the Church; to celebrate and provide for the administration of the sacraments of the New Covenant; to ordain priests and deacons and to join in ordaining bishops; and to be in all things a faithful pastor for the entire flock of Christ" (BCP, 517). In these services to the household, the bishop serves God's mission as a point of reconciliation and unity: within the diocese and across diocesan, national, and ecumenical borders.

The bishop's calling, to the world and to the church, is thus to be the chief mis-

sionary. This bi-directional call, to the world and to the Body of Christ, is not easy. In both spheres, the bishop must seek and serve God's restoring and reconciling love. If she/he does not, then the authority and power of the *episcopé* is lost. Without a primary commitment to God's mission the bishop cannot be the bishop.

In my conversations with Bishop Tom as he has prepared for his sabbatical, I have found that his sense of episcopate is deeply informed by this bi-directional understanding of the bishop as chief

missionary. There is seamlessness between Tom's experience and awareness of the needs and hurts of the wider world and the vocation and calling of the Episcopal Church in Vermont.

As a newly ordained bishop, Tom and the people of the diocese were called to host the meeting of the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church ten days after the atrocities of 9/11. It was in Burlington, that the bishops of The Episcopal Church pledged

to "Wage Reconciliation" in the face of calls for retribution and a "new crusade" against the terrorists. In a similar fashion Tom and the people of the Diocese of Vermont have been radically open to what God is up to in the wider world through the witness of young Sudanese men in Burlington and the ministry of the Rev. Dr. Lee Alison Crawford as canon missionary for the Anglican Episcopal Church in El Salvador. The hurts and pains of the wider world that cry out for the reconciling love at the heart of God's mission has not been far from my view.

And so, seeking to live more deeply in his bi-directional call as chief missionary for and with the people of the Diocese of Vermont, Tom is off to Sudan and El Salvador. May his time living with, and learning from, Christian sisters and brothers in other churches of the Anglican Commu-



nion draw him and the people of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont more deeply into God's mission of reconciliation for the whole world. There is no more urgent calling for the Anglican Communion in these difficult times and for the world for which Christ died and rose again.

The Rev. Dr. Ian T. Douglas is Angus Dun Professor of World Mission and Global Christianity at Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, a member of the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church and a member of the planning team for the 2008 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops.

Darfur: It's a new face of "Never Again" again

by Peter Galbraith

What's going on in Darfur, Sudan long after Congress and the President called it genocide? Why do we tolerate genocide in certain parts of the world and respond more aggressively in other regions? Who are the disposable people of Darfur? Why should you care and what can you do?

I have talked to a number of faith communities around the State of Vermont about Darfur over the past two years, and I am available to speak about this issue at your parish. I can be reached at Carlo-way@aol.com or 802-862-7623.

Peter Galbraith is a member of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Burlington, and he served as a General Convention deputy in 2003 and 2006.

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