

Urban Ministry and the Historic Episcopate

Dear Folks,

Most of you know me from previous work on Thursday Theology and the Crossings website, though I haven't been around much this year. I've been working on my PhD in Historical Theology at St. Louis University and trying to revitalize urban ministry in the Lutheran church in St. Louis. To that end I attended an urban ministry conference a couple of weeks ago which precipitated this piece. Hope you enjoy it.

Peace,

Robin Morgan

PS – I can't seem to get apostrophes to travel through cyberspace, but I did use them when I wrote this. Sorry if it makes for harder reading.

It was intriguing to read THTH #154 on the "historic episcopate" and the "Call to Common Mission" [CCM = the document of agreement between the Episcopal Church USA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America] in light of my recent trip to Memphis, Tennessee, where I participated in a week-long urban ministry conference sponsored by the College of Preachers (an Episcopalian ministry located on the campus of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.). The conference was hosted by Calvary Episcopal Church (the Rev. Dr. Doug Bailey, Rector), a large congregation with thriving in-reach and outreach

ministries as well as social action partnerships, located in the heart of downtown Memphis.

Each day we opened with worship and Bible study. Then we boarded a bus and took pilgrimages to the sites of various ministries around the city. One morning we spent time visiting an alternative classroom for students who've been expelled from school, which is a partnership between Calvary and the Memphis public schools. One day we visited an AME church that's reclaiming, in the name of the Lord, part of south Memphis from neglect and hopelessness by developing high quality, low priced housing. One day we visited the Church Health Center where the working poor can receive low cost, top-notch medical care in a faith based environment.

In the afternoons we listened to the Rev. Dr. Renita Weems (AME clergywoman and Vanderbilt Divinity School professor) and the Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood (pastor of St. Paul's Baptist Church in Brooklyn, NY) open the Scriptures, their ministries and their lives to us. We talked about the struggles of ministering in the city: our loneliness, our sense of being out of step with the rest of the church and our need, our desperate need, for hope.

But not once did I hear the phrase "historic episcopate" raised by the 25 or so Episcopalian clergy and lay leaders nor by the rest of us who were Methodist, Lutheran, Church of God in Christ and Church of the Brethren.

Apostolic succession didn't come up as conference attendees and folks off the street held hands and sang Amazing Grace while Mama Mary played the piano during the chapel service at the Drop In Center for mentally ill street people. Nobody brought up who ordains whom when we laid hands on one another and the congregation at the Thursday noon healing service at Calvary's high altar. While we stood in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s room at

the Lorraine Motel (now part of the Civil Rights Museum) and looked out at the concrete balcony floor that still holds some of his blood, the historic episcopate didn't come up.

It just didn't come up.

What did come up is the reality, the absolute truth, that only our relationship with Jesus Christ can sustain us over the long haul in city ministry. What did come up is the reality that our hope is cross-shaped and resurrection bound. What did come up is the reality that our shalom is intimately intertwined with the shalom of the city.

Now those of you who have read my work before know how passionately I feel about the importance of deep, precise theology. It's our Lutheran heritage and destiny, it's our gift to the church catholic, it's our *raison d'être* (though sometimes it may seem to the outside world that we are really just a big club for preserving Scandinavian and German culture). We have been given the joyous and burdensome responsibility of cutting to the theological quick and speaking on behalf of the heart of the Gospel. But even the best theology isn't all there is to Christian life.

I'm a delegate this summer to our churchwide assembly. I will be in Indianapolis with delegates from across the ELCA including, no doubt, many folks involved with Word Alone [= ELCA voices opposed to the "historic episcopate" that's intrinsic to the CCM]. I will do my best to listen, to speak and to vote according to the Lutheran Confessions I promised to uphold, according to the movement of the Holy Spirit and for the good of the ELCA.

But when the speeches are droning on during the August heat in Indianapolis, it won't be thoughts of the historic episcopate – or not – which will keep me focused on the work at hand. It'll

be memories of my Episcopalian, Church of God in Christ, Methodist, Baptist, Church of the Brethren and AME sisters and brothers standing together with our hands raised in praise to our God that will keep me in my seat. It'll be thoughts of Christians of every stripe reaching out to the world with our Lord's healing wholeness and justice that will keep me on task.

So I venture a deep, precise and Lutheran paraphrase of our Lord's words. Theology and ecclesiology are made for people, not people for theology and ecclesiology.