

'Holy conversations' build up the Body of Christ

Diocesan ministry conference speaker urges participants to learn to tell their faith stories

• **By Emily McDonald**
South East Area ETE Correspondent

The way to bring people to — or back to — the Episcopal Church is to “tell your faith story,” the Rev. Charles Fulton told representatives from 20 parishes attending the diocesan Ministry Conference on April 19 at St John’s Cathedral, Knoxville.

“Invite someone to have a conversation about faith,” said the speaker, who is the director of congregational development for the Episcopal Church. Invite the person to go to church, take a walk or have a cup of coffee.

“Don’t forget the young,” he said. “Talk to people who don’t go to church. Ask why they think people don’t go to church.”

The conference theme was “A Time of Truth and Hope for the Episcopal Church,” based on a booklet Fulton wrote with the Rev. James Lemler, former director of mission for the Episcopal Church. Conference participants each received a copy of the booklet.

Fulton began by explaining that his job involves gathering statistics and watching trends for the whole church.

“We’ve been counting all right, and, unfortunately, things are going in the wrong direction,” he said. In figures based on parochial reports for 2006, Fulton said the average Sunday attendance for the church was 765,326, “but we lose about 400 each Sunday.”

According to that trend, he estimated attendance across the church would be 730,000 on the next day, Sunday, April 20.

“We are getting smaller quickly,” he said. The number of parishes in the Episcopal Church was 7,155 in 2005 and 7,095 in 2006. Only 6 percent of Episcopal congregations have more than 300 average Sunday attendance; 63 percent have fewer than 100.

He added that the downward trend, which is projected to contin-

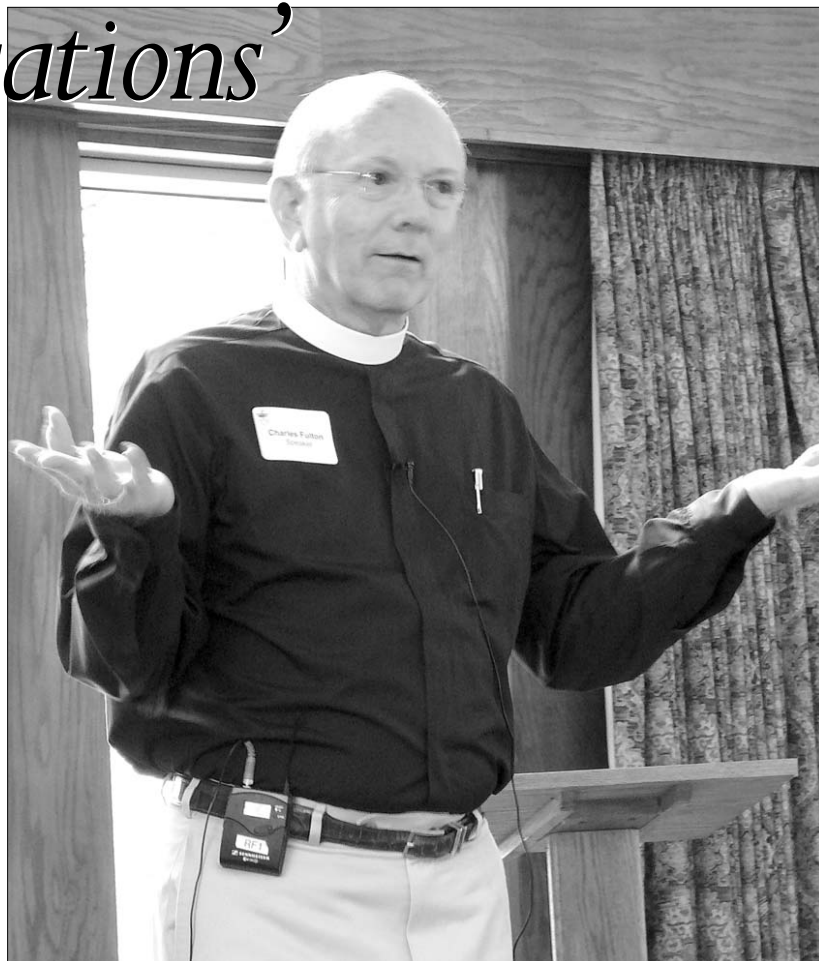
ue, began prior to 2003, the year the General Convention assented to the election of an openly gay partnered man, the Rev. Gene Robinson, as bishop of New Hampshire.

People want to be part of a church that is growing, attracts young people and has a balanced budget. In reality, however, many churches can’t afford to hire full-time clergy, have fewer people giving money, have trouble maintaining facilities and have aging congregations.

Fulton then talked about what the church and the culture were like when he began his ministry 40 years ago and how things have changed today.

Then:

- The church was fairly stable and hadn’t changed much from the church in which his parents grew up.
- People would have said they were living in a Christian culture. “The values of the church and the culture weren’t that different.”
- The church’s mission was not to make new Christians, but to bring in the two percent of Christians who were already disposed to the Episcopal way of thinking.
- “Evangelism wasn’t us.” The thing that explained growth was the Anglo birth rate: “The best ways to be Episcopalian were to be born one, marry one or have a college conversion.”
- The church was multi-generational, and the congregational ministry was cradle to grave.
- The dominant spirituality was that of habitation and dwelling. In other words, to find God you had to “go to church,” and you “supported” the church.
- Most congregations weren’t engaged in hands-on outreach. Outreach was carried out by the diocese.



Photos by Sharon Rasmussen

The Rev. Charles Fulton discusses concepts from the booklet, “A Time of Truth and Hope for the Episcopal Church,” which he co-wrote with the Rev. James Lemler. Fulton was the speaker for this year’s diocesan ministry conference, held April 19 at St. John’s Cathedral, Knoxville.

Now:

- Children are not growing up in the culture their parents grew up in. For example, young people graduate from high school and don’t continue to go to church. More women are working, and drug use and sexual activity are more culturally prevalent.
- The amount and kinds of communication available today far exceeds that of 40 years ago. Technology is routine for younger generations.
- People don’t necessarily believe everything they hear in church. They believe in God but not only God. The new model is to “be” and “do” church.
- The concept of time has changed from being measured in a lifetime to increments of seconds.
- The culture is not Christian, although 98 percent of the population say they believe in God.

- We are afraid of failure in bringing people to the church; we must give ourselves permission to fail.
- “Every congregation I know has some outreach.”

In comments on Fulton’s then-and-now comparison, the Rev. Betty Latham, rector of Nativity, Fort Oglethorpe, noted that when she was growing up, the parish youth group was a social outlet. The Rev. Canon Stephen Askew added that, to young people today, diversity is not at all unusual, much less a goal; it is simply a fact.

Chip Finn of St. John’s Cathedral, Knoxville, asked if the church was in competition with other denominations. “We are not stealing people,” Fulton said. “In East Tennessee tomorrow (Sunday), most people are not going to be connected to a faith community. We need to look where people are not going to

church.” “Episcopalians are going to have to get into the conversion business,” he said. “That is foreign to what we thought 40 years ago.”

Latham pointed out another major change between the church of today and the church of 40 years ago: “Priests and the laity are equal.” Fulton agreed, saying, “40 years ago, we never talked about the laity having ministry. We have conditioned the laity to all sorts of roles.”

The old approach of signing people up for church isn’t going to work anymore, Fulton said. “There are people out there stumbling around who don’t know what God’s purpose for them is. We have to listen and be engaged in the work of conversion and evangelism.

“We are looking for people



Above, Kae Wrinkle of St. Andrew, Maryville, talks about young people in the church, and asks what role confirmation classes have in reaching them. Fulton said the teen years are too late to begin discussing faith issues with children. "We need to help parents start a conversation with their kids," he said.



Above, Johnathan Perry of St. Thomas, Elizabethton, considers a point, while at right, the Rev. Charles Fels of Good Shepherd, Knoxville, taps notes into his laptop at the diocesan conference.



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who want to be sent out, not signed up," he said.

Kae Wrinkle of St. Andrew, Maryville, asked about the role of confirmation in reaching the young.

"It is a lifelong work of formation," Fulton said. "If we wait until they are 13 to 16 to raise faith issues, it's too late. We need to help parents start a conversation with their kids."

"The word 'conversation' is not part of a traditional confirma-

tion class," Wrinkle said.

Fulton said we need to have "holy conversations," in which we tell our faith stories. They so often lead to real connections, he said. He referred particularly to page 20 in the "Truth and Hope" booklet, which outlines steps one can take to identify and share his or her faith story. "Stories trigger stories," he said, and conversations and connections result.

This kind of evangelism is very Episcopal, he added. "It is very inviting, invitational. I want to do it like Jesus did: He walked

beside them or talked to them.

"There is a world out there that wants to hear it," he said. "It is the story of spirituality and practice, not how to fold a purificator. He referred particularly to page 20 in the "Truth and Hope" booklet, which outlines steps one can take to identify and share his or her faith story. "Stories trigger stories," he said, and conversations and connections result.

"Our job is to help people know God is working in their lives," Fulton said. "My ultimate goal is to help the person name the yearning within them, not to get another Episcopalian."

"Truth and Hope: A Time of Truth and Hope for the Episcopal Church," is published by Forward Movement, (www.forwardmovement.org). To share your faith story or to read others', visit www.episcopalchurch.org/faithstories.htm.

Pew Forum releases second report on religion from survey of 35,000 Americans

— WASHINGTON

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released its second report on the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey late in June. This new analysis examines the diversity of Americans' religious beliefs and practices as well as their social and political attitudes. It follows the first report of the Landscape Survey, which was published in February and detailed the size, internal changes and demographic characteristics of major religions in the United States.

"Most people will be surprised that a majority of adherents in nearly all religious traditions, including a majority of evangelical Protestants, say that there isn't just one way to salvation or to interpret the teachings of their own faith," said Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum.

Based on interviews conducted in English and Spanish with a nationally representative sample of more than 35,000 adults, part two of the Landscape Survey explores religious beliefs and practices of the American public, as well as social and political attitudes of religious groups.

The report finds:

- Seventy percent of Americans with a religious affiliation say that many religions – not just their own – can lead to eternal life. Most also think there is more than one correct way to interpret the teachings of their own faith.

- Most rank the importance of religion very highly in their lives, and a plurality wants to preserve the traditional beliefs and practices of their faith, while only a small minority wants to accommodate their religion to modern culture.

- Ninety-two percent believe in the existence of God or a universal spirit, but only 60 percent of those believe that God is a person with whom people can have a relationship. One in four – including about half of Jews and Hindus – see God as an impersonal force.

- Three-quarters of Americans report praying at least once a week, with large majorities among most religious traditions saying they pray on at least a weekly basis, and almost two-fifths report meditating at least once a week.

- People who regularly attend worship services and say religion is important in their lives are much more likely to identify as conservative, and this pattern extends to many religious traditions.

- The connection between religious engagement and political attitudes appears to be especially strong when it comes to hot-button social issues such as abortion or homosexuality. For example, about six in ten Americans who attend religious services at least once a week say abortion should be illegal in most or all cases, while only three in ten who attend less often share this view.

- A majority of nearly every religious group supports stricter environmental regulations and believes the government should do more to help Americans in need.

- Majorities in most faiths say it is more important to focus on problems here at home than to be active in world affairs.

The Pew Forum is updating its online presentation of the findings at religions.pewforum.org. New features include interactive mapping by state, dynamic charts and a variety of other tools that allow users to explore beliefs and practices plus social and political views of major religions in the United States.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life is a nonpartisan, non-advocacy organization and does not take positions on policy debates. The Forum is a project of the Pew Research Center, which is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. ■