

# Four-footed ambassadors attend hearings

## Prayers urged for loss of companion animals

*By Sharon Sheridan, July 11, 2009*

*Editor's Note: The following article from ENS is accompanied by a personal note from Dn Aileen Aidnik.*

[Episcopal News Service -- Anaheim, California, used with permission] Two of the most engaging visitors to July 11 hearings on proposals for developing prayers for the life and loss of companion animals didn't speak a word. They just wagged their tails.

Service dogs Emily, soon to become companion to a disabled veteran, and Kona, who assists her owner plus shepherds her own ministry – Dogs for God – attended the Prayer Book, Liturgy and Music committee meeting, where eight people testified to the need for liturgical resources to minister to those whose companion animals die. They described such resources as pastoral as well as tools for evangelism and fostering stewardship of creation.

Sue Grisham, co-founder of the Episcopal Network for Animal Welfare, urged the committee also to recommend developing prayers for those with sick or dying animals or considering euthanasia for a pet.

“This is not a feel-good resolution for those of us who love dogs and cats,” said the Rev. Lee Shaw (Utah), proposer of one of the resolutions. “This is not a soft, furry resolution to be disposed of.”

Rather, he said, it responds to a pastoral need, particularly in ministering to children, for whom an animal's loss often is “their first real experience with death,” and for elders, for whom a pet “may be the last relationship this person has on earth.”

The Rev. Bradley Wirth (Montana) described how, when his childhood dog Topper died and later when his 87-year-old mother's dog Lindy died, “the church was silent.”

“It’s not because the church was mean-spirited, uncaring or callous,” he said. “It was because the church had not trained priests to be there.”

Creating such liturgical resources also reflects a concern for the stewardship of creation, Lee said. “This shows our profound response for this rather lively part of God’s creation.”

“It is a key element of the theology of the sacredness of creation that is a part of the ubuntu convention,” agreed the Rev. Stephen Keplinger (Utah), adding, “A once-a-year animal blessing is just not cutting it.”

It’s also an issue of ministry, Shaw said. “For some people ... these are four-footed furry ministers of God’s good news.”

That’s precisely what Kona does, said the Rev. Lisa Golden, chair of the Los Angeles Diocesan Program Group on Disability. She described how the Belgian shepherd helped her recover from a disabling illness and now helps her serve others through the diocese’s Dogs for God program, which teaches disability awareness. “I cannot tell you the ministry avenues that Kona has opened up to me,” she said, joking, “I’m her chauffeur.”

Likewise, Emily, a black Labrador, is part of a program at St. Francis Episcopal Church, Fair Oaks, Calif., that trains and places service dogs with veterans. Some veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder help train the dogs, said Deacon Aileen Aidnik, assistant training program director. “The healing that takes place in those classes [is] beyond anything I can describe.”

“These are members of our families. It’s not just an animal,” she said, reminding listeners of the people who remained in dangerous circumstances after Hurricane Katrina rather than abandon their pets.

*-- Sharon Sheridan is copy editor, Episcopal Life Media.*

-----  
*A note from Dn. Aileen Aidnik, St. Francis Episcopal Church, Fair Oaks, Calif.*

Basically, I came down to General Convention with Emily to do a presentation for the Province 8 Discovery Center about our St Francis PET Center and Service Dog School--letting everyone know about the program and that we place service dogs with injured veterans free of charge. Upon arrival, we were interviewed by the Integrity team. Then

at the Integrity reception, I was told about the resolution before the Music and Liturgy committee re: including prayers for service dogs and the death of a pet into the BOS, and could the presenter borrow Emily? He asked me to say something in support of the resolution. So we went and were among several speaking in favor--but the cool part, which I learned later, is that a committee member thought it was a frivolous resolution until I came to the podium, and allowed Emily to enter into the



*Photo: Dn. Thalia Johnson (camera phone)*

### **Emily with deacons and the Archbishop of Canterbury**

space in front of the tables where everyone could see her. That was the moment the person changed her mind and supported the resolution!

Emily wasn't the only service dog here--there was also Kona, a therapy dog whose owner spoke at the committee hearing, and a couple other dogs whom I saw but didn't get to meet. Then Marcia, the priest at St. Francis where I serve, arrived with Lizzie, who is trained for pastoral care. My friend was Lizzie's trainer before she was returned to the program for Marcia. So she and Emily are good friends. They have been seen together over the past couple days. When the photographer needed a photo for the article, he didn't want another one of Emily, so I directed him to Marcia and Lizzie, whom we'd just left a few minutes before.

Backing up a bit, I was asked to serve at a communion station at Eucharist for the first 3 days. Because my name starts with "A" I was assigned station 1, which was in front and just below the altar. We were to take the pitchers of wine and baskets of bread up and place them on the altar, go back down the stairs and wait for the appropriate

time to collect them and go to our stations to fill the chalices and baskets. Emily accompanied me on each day, so everyone saw her walk up the steps to the altar with me. The day the ABC was there, he saw Emily and did a little double-take, and I just grinned at him. After the service, he posed in the back behind the altar with all of us deacons--standing next to Emily and I. I got a chance to tell him about the ministry and her upcoming placement with an injured veteran.

Last night, we went to the reception honoring Bishop Browning, who asked about her and why I had her. She got her photo taken with him, and today we met Bishop and Mrs. Griswold!

If I had been thinking ahead, I'd have put a sign on Emily saying "One minute with Emily--\$1." I think I could have funded the program for the next year!! She's had sooo many people asking about her, wanting to pet her, get "kisses" from her etc. Many have said they recently had to have an animal put to sleep, or commented on how much they miss their pets at home! Some have read the article about her and known right away who she is! I've been passing out cards and fliers about our program all week. One bishop from the North Carolina area has several military bases in his diocese, and was thrilled to know about us. So it's been a really positive experience.

We go home tomorrow, but Lizzie will stay a couple more days. Hopefully the healing presence of the dogs will continue!

*Aileen*