

The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion

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Americans like to be loved. Contrary to the popular perception of the American as arrogant, indifferent to the rest of the world, and assertive, many Americans (especially those in the Episcopal Church) are sensitive, globally aware, and if anything, rather diffident. Since the controversy around the consecration of Gene Robinson as the first openly gay Bishop in the Communion, the Episcopal Church has worked hard to assuage the reaction within the communion. However, over the last six months, there is a palpable change of mood, which this article will now document.

The Liberal View

The centre of the Episcopal Church is now fairly settled. Although there is a sizeable grouping who are unhappy with the affirmation of monogamous same-sex partnerships, the majority in the Church believe it is legitimate. The vast majority of the House of Bishops believes that such an affirmation is compatible with a credal faith. And much is made that such an affirmation is easier than – the equally right – affirmation of the remarriage of divorced men and women. Given what we learn of God in Jesus and what we now know about the settled orientation of gay and lesbian persons, it is right and proper that we recognize

the validity of the gay lifestyle. This, coupled with a pastoral reality in many places that needs accommodation, has made the leadership of the Episcopal Church confident that it has little choice but to affirm monogamous same-sex partnerships. Episcopal Church leaders have come to this conclusion out of considerable theological reflection and a careful exegesis of the cultural context of American Christianity.

On this basis, there are a variety of narratives that are shaping the leadership of the Episcopal Church. The first is the civil rights discourse of the 1960s; the second is the commitment to a transparent democratic process for the election of bishops and the full inclusion of the lay in the polity; and the third is a need to witness to a faith that is generous and inclusive rather than narrow and exclusive. We shall now examine each of these in turn.

On the first, for many this is the latest battle against injustice. As patriarchy was challenged by feminism; and racism was challenged by Rosa Parks and her willingness to sit in the wrong place on the bus; so now homophobia is being challenged by the election of Bishop Gene Robinson. In respect to feminism and racism, the justice issue was progressed by those willing to take a lead, despite the opposition. The current generation of leaders in the Episcopal Church were children and young adults during the civil rights campaign of Martin Luther King jr. This prophetic model dominates the discourse. When Martin Luther King jr. sat in his Birmingham gaol, he penned these words of

sadness to those 'white moderate' clergy who asked him to move more slowly on his campaign for justice:

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of

the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.¹

For the current leadership of the Episcopal Church, it is difficult to turn to their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters and instruct them 'to move more slowly' or 'to wait for the Communion to understand what we are trying to do.' These words from Martin Luther King jr. are applied to those who would impede this inevitable movement for justice. The leadership understands that this will provoke animosity. But they understand that history is on their side and trust that ultimately they will be vindicated.

If the present day narrative of the Episcopal Church is shaped by an earlier narrative, the civil rights discourse of the 1960s, it was the 22nd Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church who defined the conversation, if not the Episcopal Church itself then and now. The Most Revd John E. Hines, like Dr

King, was a son of the South. As American cities were burning in the 1960s, Bishop Hines made the prophetic witness of the Baptist preacher who would die in Memphis his very own cause. In the year of President Kennedy's assassination, Bishop Hines wrote: 'A bishop's job is to keep his church family on the firing line of the world's most desperate needs and to learn to accept the exquisite penalty of such an exposed position.'² Bishop Hines was anything but a 'moderate white'. In a sense the poverty and race narrative has remained a defining story for the Episcopal Church because Hines made common cause with the civil rights crusade.

In retirement and offering a retrospective on the civil rights discourse or narrative, Bishop Hines gave the Sprigg Lectures at Virginia Theological Seminary in the fall of 1976. He said:

Our world is caught up in the kind of rapid social change that can best be described in its intensity by the word 'revolution'. For, to use Bonhoeffer's phrase, 'The world has grown up.' Men and women have caught a new understanding of their society and its possibilities, and they are acting in earnest on those insights.³

Hines may have been the first to declare that, because of Dr King and his followers, a new generation of leaders would claim new possibilities for their society and their church. So it is now with the current leadership of the Episcopal

Church. Because of King and Hines, the 20th century of the American Episcopal Church has been about revolution, not the status quo.

The second is the process. Unlike the United Kingdom, where bishops in the Church of England are determined by mysterious intrigue between Lambeth, 10 Downing Street, and the Palace,⁴ Americans trust the process to an election. The conventions around these elections are very healthy: everyone recognises that this is a process of discernment, where individuals make themselves available. Overt campaigning is discouraged; instead in a series of meetings the candidates sit together and make themselves available to those with the authority to cast a vote. It is amazing how appropriately restrained the process is. It is a process that includes and trusts the laity and clergy in a diocese to form an appropriate view of their needs as a diocese and vote accordingly.

Bishop Robinson was elected on June 7th 2003. No one has questioned the process within the diocese.⁵ This was the person that the Episcopal Church in New Hampshire wanted. They had warmed to this orthodox (in terms of his affirmation of the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation) and yet compassionate, honest, and pastorally sensitive man. For some members of the House of Bishops, this was the decisive reason for supporting Bishop Robinson.

Americans are proud of this process. They believe in transparency; they believe that this is infinitely better than the elitist, secretive process found

elsewhere in the world. Indeed the very fact that Gene Robinson gets elected is a credit to the process. Everywhere else the process would have excluded such a dramatic commitment to difference.

The full inclusion of lay people in the polity and election of bishops in the American Episcopal Church has deep historical roots. In the colonial period, the Puritans in New England were suspicious of a powerful clergy and they believed that men and women must personally understand the meaning of Holy Scripture. In the 17th century colonies where the Anglican Church was established, such as Virginia and South Carolina, the democratic inclination inherent in the Puritan way took strong root in the colonial vestries. With the Bishop for the colonies resident at Lambeth Palace in London, Anglican clergy were rarely given cures or life tenure. Vestries emerged as the centres of power in the earliest expressions of Anglicanism in the New World. That historical fact proved to be alive and well as the people of New Hampshire elected a new bishop in 2003. At the subsequent General Convention, the strong voices of the laity were not to be silenced. In many ways the local church has always been the seat of authority and power in the American version of a somewhat 'dethroned' Anglicanism.

The third narrative is one particular to the American situation. The Episcopal Church has been a consistent witness against the 'fundamentalism' of all forms that have taken root in America. It prides itself in offering a faith that is intellectually thoughtful, socially sensitive, and yet true to the central creedal

claims. In a country where the majority of Americans don't believe in the truth of the theory of natural selection to explain the development of life on earth and are expecting a rapture at any moment, the Episcopal Church is rightly nervous of a theology which doesn't accommodate insights that we have learned from modernity.

The Episcopal Church has seen itself over and against religious fundamentalism since at least the 1920s when there was a resurgence of fundamentalism in certain Protestant sects, especially the Baptists and Presbyterians. Fundamentalists insisted on taking every word of Holy Scripture literally. The theory of evolution and the mass of scientific knowledge that was discovered in the 19th century were dismissed by the fundamentalists. Education was often seen as the foe, not the friend, of the Christian faith. The crusaders of fundamentalism resented deeply the implications of modern urban culture. This new expression of American Christianity came into being in a war-weary country that was moving from a rural, farm culture to a predominantly urban life. In the 1920s and in the present time, the Episcopal Church in America has challenged a faith that is separated from reason and a worldview that does not acknowledge the reality of change in the realm of culture and ideas. As with the other two narratives, the narrative which asserts the need for a faith that is generous and inclusive rather than narrow and exclusive is historically shaped, if not determined.

So for the leadership of the Episcopal Church, we have a strong conviction that the arguments for the full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons is compatible with the New Testament theme of imitating Christ; and we have these three narratives underpinning the discourse. These three narratives have definite theological roots. They also are part of the history of the Episcopal Church and its interplay with American culture.

Now the apology for the hurt was genuine. There was a recognition that the Episcopal Church did not consult with all the instruments of unity. In addition, the Episcopal Church is extremely nervous about a contrasting narrative that pits a white, wealthy minority against a black, poor majority within the Communion. This nervousness in the Episcopal Church derives from the painful narrative of the 18th and 19th century with respect to slavery and is at the heart of the civil rights discourse of the 1960s. Although it is the Episcopal Church which supports and finances the Anglican Communion, no one is daring to suggest that a way forward is to withdraw such funding.

However, the mood in the Episcopal Church is changing. There is a growing feeling that the Windsor Report is being enforced in a very uneven fashion. The call for an apology and a moratorium has been acted on by the Episcopal Church. However, the call for listening to gay and lesbian Christians is only being heeded in a nominal way; and the incursions of foreign primates into the American Church is not provoking any Communion wide response. There is

the fear that the Communion is not serious about a call for listening. The way forward for some is a way out of a communion which is outdated and irreparably divided.

For the leadership of the Episcopal Church, it is looking like this. On the issue of human sexuality, the Church is doing the right thing. On the issue of living in Communion with those who disagree, the Church is trying to do the right thing (in the apology and the moratorium). However, those who are clearly violating Windsor – Uganda, Nigeria, the Southern Cone – are not provoking the same ire from the Anglican Communion. Who is being heard and how selective is our hearing? There is this growing feeling that this is a one way Communion, which sets one standard for the behaviour of the Episcopal Church and an entirely different standard for other churches in the Communion. There are those who question the validity of the Anglican Communion in the 21st century. As the world becomes more and more an experiment in globalisation, there are Anglicans who are focused on quite the opposite: It is only the local church that matters.

Predicting the future is always difficult. However, the signs are that the progressives in the Episcopal Church are now getting impatient. Certainly anecdotally some are resigned to a 'federal' Communion (analogous to the Lutheran Federation) and perhaps some realignment where Scotland, South Africa, New Zealand, and Canada, keep the American Church company in a

progressive Anglican Communion. There is a growing feeling that the General Convention of 2009 will lift the moratorium on the election of gay bishops. And, even though the leadership of the Episcopal Church is opposed strongly to such talk, some are even starting to suggest that if the Communion doesn't take some action against the primates who are violating the jurisdiction of the Episcopal Church then the American Church should start moving into other provinces. The Convocation of American Episcopal Churches in Europe could invite membership from congregations in the United Kingdom;⁶ and using the money saved by withdrawing support for the Anglican Communion could go to Church planting in Nigeria, where congregations are created which fall under the jurisdiction of the American Church. The offer of a church building and access to American resources might be very attractive to congregations in Nigeria.

Why the Communion Matters?

At Virginia Theological Seminary, we have a Center for Anglican Communion Studies. We take the view that it is vitally important for the Anglican tradition to survive this crisis as we learn to practise continuing conversation. We fear a future where Anglican polity is undermined by competing primates planting churches in different parts of the world. We believe that the challenge of living in a global village means we must find a way of living together. Indeed, Anglicanism is the strongest narrative that we have as the Episcopal Church in the United States. The current conflicts are helping the American Church recall that our identity as Anglican Christians matters greatly. It is not a narrative that

we can take for granted or step out of. As Anglicans, our identity as a Communion has been most shaped by our communion with the earliest Christian Church. This recovery of our theological and historical identity will help the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion to move to a new chapter in a very long narrative.

It is a commonplace to talk about Muslim-majority provinces and Secular-majority provinces. The drift of the Muslim-majority provinces is to take a conservative position on human sexuality; and the Secular-majority provinces take to take a more liberal position on human sexuality. All provinces are in the business of witnessing to the faith: all are frantically trying to win persons to Christ. The different contexts need to be recognised and respected. This lack of respect is a key factor in our continuing lack of communication, as is the lack of tolerance.

We would like to see the Episcopal Church work hard to stay in the conversation. We cannot talk to ourselves alone. We must talk to others and, yes, to those who live with us but who are not part of the Christian family. To do this the following is important. First, the instruments of unity must continue to insist that it is wrong for foreign primates to interfere in a different province. This is not simply theologically important (a vow of obedience to a bishop doesn't make much sense if I can always switch to a different bishop who agrees with my prejudices), but it will also prevent a scenario where everyone is everywhere

starting contrasting forms of Anglican churches. Second, it is important pastorally for the rest of the Communion (especially those sympathetic provinces such as Scotland) to reach out and reassure the American Church that there is an understanding of how much we are trying.

And for the American Church, it is important for us to resist the simplicity of the position of the progressives. The Communion in so many ways matters. The pressures of the first Lambeth in the 1867 came from the Episcopal Church. We wanted to be part of an Anglican family as a part of our internal self-identity in the United States. Although we are relatively small denomination on the American religious scene, we are part of a big and important family. My ordination as a priest is recognised by 80 million Anglicans worldwide. In addition, in the same way that Roman Catholic numbers have remained at a steady 25 per cent of the American population because of immigration, so Episcopal numbers could continue to benefit from immigration from Anglicans in the Communion. If we are in the Communion, then it is easier to benefit from such immigration. In addition, our witness to the full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians needs our presence in the Communion. Anglican gays in Nigeria and Uganda need to know that there is an Anglican province which affirms the legitimacy of the orientation.

Part of willingness to stay in the Communion should include maintaining the moratorium on gay bishops at the next General Convention. The appropriate

Biblical metaphor is Paul's advice on 'eating food offered to idols'. One does not always insist on that to which one feels entitled. Gay men and women will continue to be ordained; the welcome to lay gay people will be as strong as ever. For the sake of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, we will abstain from the full exercise of our rights.

At the enthronement of the Anglican primate of the Episcopal Church of the Province of the Sudan in the spring of 2008, the Most Revd Daniel Deng Bul was challenged by one of his peers: 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go with others.' Some would say that we have not gone fast enough. Others would say we have gone far in the wrong direction. It is certain that Anglicans, whatever their theological convictions, must go with each other in the years which are before us. The Anglican Communion is not our invention, nor is it our narrative to construct. We are stewards of a Communion which is God's gift to the Christian family. We must tell the story of that gift and live the truth that the Anglican Communion is God's not ours.

Notes

¹ Martin Luther King Jr. , 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail', found at http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

² Kenneth Kesselus, *John E. Hines: Granite on Fire*. (ETSS 1995) , p.1

³ Available from Virginia Theological Seminary, Sprigg Lectures, 1976

⁴ We understand that this is changing. And it is increasingly clear that those Bishops nominated by the Church will be accepted by the Crown. However, at the level of some Cathedral Deans this continues to be the process.

⁵ One could argue that the Diocese had an obligation to look beyond the needs to the diocese and recognize the wider debates in the Communion.

⁶ We understand from Martyn Percy (to whom we are grateful for an extended conversation) that the property and assets of the Church of England are entirely secure. So this would involve church plants in the UK.

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