

NOTICE: THE DATE GIVEN FOR THE TEACHING MISSION EVENT IN THE SPRINGFIELD CURRENT WAS

INCORRECT. IT WILL TAKE PLACE ON TUESDAY, JANUARY 19 AT ST. THOMAS.



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LIVING IN THE BONDS OF (TOUGH) LOVE

by Bishop Daniel

on January 17, 2016

Beloved in Christ,

As you are probably aware, the Primates (senior bishops) of the 38 provinces of the worldwide Anglican Communion met last week in the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral, the symbolic “ground zero” of our life together as Christians in the Anglican way. While there were a number of topics worthy of their deep consideration and discussion, the “elephant in the room”—and therefore the subject of the lion’s share of attention—was the steadily deepening rift between the Episcopal Church and the communion as a whole over what it looks like to be mutually accountable and interdependent within the Body

of Christ.

The various churches of the communion are constitutionally autonomous, yet inextricably bound to one another. At the deepest level, these “bonds of affection” (an expression long used to describe relations among Anglican churches) are anchored to the fact of our common baptism, and God’s manifest will that his Church stand as “a sign of Christ’s love to this broken and sinful world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair” (language borrowed from the marriage liturgy of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, but certainly applicable in this context). God wants all people to be reconciled with him and with one another in Christ (see the BCP catechism on “What is the mission of the church?”), and God wants his Church to be one, as Jesus and the Father are one.

But, at a more visible historical level, Anglican churches are connected to one another by the golden thread of the English spiritual, liturgical, theological, and pastoral tradition—an ethos that was born when the gospel piggy-backed on Roman legions arriving on British soil, came to maturity through the Middle Ages and the flowering of Benedictine monasticism, got tested in the tumult of the Reformation, and was released in the power of the Holy Spirit during the great missionary movements into the territories of the British Empire during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was in that era that many of the churches in Africa and Asia got planted, churches that now represent the most vital centers of Anglicanism.

And in a still more concrete manner, we share a common life through a web of companion relationships and partnerships between dioceses and parishes across huge national and cultural differences. In the Diocese of Springfield, it has been our joyful privilege in recent years to experience ever-deeper bonds of affection with the Diocese of Tabora in the Anglican Church of Tanzania. We have also been getting to know our partners in the Diocese of Peru—and now, as that diocese seeks to become the 39th autonomous Anglican province, with the proto-diocese of Arequipa. These relationships are not mere abstractions to us, but real people whose faces and voices we know, and whose mission and ministry inspire us.

The Anglican Communion is absolutely vital to our identity as Episcopalians. It calls us out of ourselves and our time-bound and place-bound needs and perceptions. It resources our life of worship and devotion as we drink from the font of accumulated centuries of Christian experience long before the gospel even reached these shores. Our communion with the ancient See of Canterbury is the primary means by which we connect to the great Catholic tradition, the historic episcopate by which we remain

faithful to the “apostles’ teaching and fellowship” (language from our Baptismal Covenant). Without the Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church would be just one more obscure boutique American sect. It’s not an optional extra, but is of the essence of who we are.

When, in 2003, a partnered gay priest was consecrated as Bishop of New Hampshire, the result was an unprecedented strain being placed on the fabric of relationships within the Anglican Communion. It went against the settled and received teaching of the Communion, articulated in Resolution I.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference (a once-every-ten-years gathering of diocesan bishops from around the Anglican world), that sexual intimacy is intended by God to be reserved for marriage, which is a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman. (Of course, the Lambeth Conference did not invent this notion from whole cloth; it recognized the teaching as consistent with Holy Scripture and the historic doctrine of the Church.)

Since 2003, the Anglican world has been in an elevated state of turmoil and flux. A number of provinces have simply announced that they have broken communion with the Episcopal Church. Tens (hundreds?) of thousands of Episcopalians have left, and many of them have formed an entity called the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA), which holds to the traditional doctrine of sexuality and marriage, and which many leaders in the Episcopal Church have viewed as an interloper and competitor, and have treated very harshly. Provinces representing a rather overwhelming majority of Anglican Christians, having broken with the Episcopal Church, have shifted their recognition to the ACNA.

This was the environment that Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby inherited when he took office in 2013. The most recent Primates’ Meeting had been a disaster, as it was boycotted by around one-third of those eligible to attend. An alliance called the Global Anglican Futures Conference (GAFCON) loomed in the background, threatening to usurp even the See of Canterbury itself as the focal point of worldwide Anglicanism. So Archbishop Welby took the time necessary to personally visit each of the 38 provinces, to listen to the concerns of the leaders in each place, and to go about the costly work of building relationships.

Then, in the midst of these efforts, the General Convention in 2015 raised the stakes even further by changing the canons of the Episcopal Church to be gender-neutral with respect to marriage, purveying a provisional liturgy for the solemnization of “marriage” between couples of the same sex, and setting in motion the process of Prayer Book revision that would end with these changes being set in stone.

In such a context, the Archbishop was satisfied that calling a gathering of Primates was both necessary and worth the risk, and he did so. The first mystery, of course, was whether all or any of the Primates from the GAFCON provinces would even agree to attend. But they did—apparently, however, on the condition that the ACNA Primate, Archbishop Foley Beach, be invited as well, which he was. Even so, there were rumblings that it would be a very short-lived event, with GAFCON Primates insisting that Archbishop Beach be seated *in place of* Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, and that if this demand were not granted at the very outset, there would be an immediate and catastrophic mass walkout.

I, among very many, feared this prospect. It would have been a disaster, and would have effectively signaled the demise of the Anglican Communion, and added to the already scandalous obscenity of division within the Body of Christ. I was in anguish as the Primates assembled a week ago, and began to do more heartfelt spontaneous praying than I have engaged in in a very long time!

So, it was with immeasurable relief last week as I watched one day follow another, and there was no news of a walkout. As it turned out, only one Primate, the Archbishop of Uganda, felt constrained to leave early when it became clear that Presiding Bishop Curry was going to be allowed to remain in the meeting. (We have been told that he did not do so in anger, but out of a sense of duty, given some promises he had made to his own fellow-bishops back home.) The rest of them emerged from their meeting on Friday having released a communique that affirmed their unanimous desire to continue to walk together. They announced an intention to hold Primates' Meetings in 2017 and 2018, and to plan for a Lambeth Conference in 2020. This is all tremendously encouraging news, and I give great thanks to God for it! Like anyone else, I don't always feel like my prayers get answered in the way I would like, but, in this case, they were in abundance. Unity, however, is inevitably costly, and the "bill" for this "cost" was delivered directly to the Episcopal Church. It is the will of the Primates that the Episcopal Church stand down, for a period of three years, from full participation in Anglican Communion affairs, particularly from representing the communion in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, and from voting in the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) on matters that pertain to doctrine and polity. This is not a "punishment," *per se*, but a natural consequence that flows from General Convention having overreached, changing the essential nature of a sacrament without even seriously consulting with, let alone having striven patiently for consensus among, the other churches of the communion. General Convention did not do this naively, but consciously, with full knowledge that

proceeding would rend the fabric of the bonds of affection, and cause potentially irreparable harm. Each Anglican province is autonomous, but there are organic consequences when one province behaves in a way that the others believe abuses its autonomy. Those consequences are now in effect for us in the Episcopal Church. I write as a loyal Episcopalian, yet I believe that the action of the Primates in this case is not only appropriate, but actually quite restrained. I had been personally preparing myself for something much more stringent. Of course, the process of “spin control” has already begun in earnest, from one end of the ideological spectrum to the other. Many Episcopalian leaders are voicing a resolve to persist even more fervently in what they articulate as a gospel-driven struggle for justice. Many are expressing pride that the Episcopal Church is in a position to exercise prophetic leadership and bear costly witness to the rest of the Anglican world on behalf of gay and lesbian Christians not only in the U.S. but in those very countries represented by the GAFCON primates. My own wish for my own church at this time would be for the grace of humility. I do not expect my friends and colleagues to suddenly abandon their commitment to prophetic justice, even as I do not intend to abandon my commitment to the authority of scripture and the received teaching of the Church. But I do believe that we all might need to hold our views a little more loosely and charitably than we do. Humility is an elusive aspiration, in that precisely in the moment we believe ourselves to have attained it, we have failed to do so. Yet, it is not, in its difficulty, any less worthy of our efforts. These are my thoughts some 60 hours or so since the Primates’ communique was made public. In brief, I am relieved, and soberly grateful. Of course, looming questions remain: What will happen when three years are up and the Episcopal Church has not changed its position? What will the ACNA’s future relationship with the Anglican Communion look like? And these two questions are, in fact, rather closely related. But for the near term, the Primates (under the incredible leadership of Archbishop Welby, who is surely the right man for this hour) have bought us some time, some time for the Holy Spirit to be given rein and allowed to operate among us in sovereign manner. Jesus still lives and is the Lord of his Church.

+Daniel Springfield

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