

Trouble in the Anglican World: A Pittsburgh Perspective

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By now, most Episcopalians know that their church, and, in fact, the whole Anglican Communion, is in something of an uproar. What many in the Diocese of Pittsburgh do not realize is that their diocese is at the center of the turmoil. This fact will continue to be for us a source of discomfort and stress, but it puts us in a unique position to observe events and even to have some influence over them.

It has taken us decades to get where we are now, but, tonight, I want to review primarily the events of the past year and a half or so from a Pittsburgh perspective. The Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church, and particularly Episcopalians of the Pittsburgh diocese face choices in our future that could change fundamentally the nature of the church, perhaps affecting the future of Christianity itself, and we need to be well informed.

Some Recent History

In November 2002, diocesan convention passed Resolution One, which declared, over strenuous objections, that this diocese would not accept certain actions from the upcoming General Convention, including the approval of liturgies for the blessing same-sex unions. More quietly, others were working to have such liturgies approved by the Episcopal Church, as they have worked for greater inclusiveness in the church for decades. In May, the Anglican primates, emphasizing the lack of consensus within the Communion about human sexuality, urged that, yet again, General Convention take no action on this issue.

As 2003 began, however, Anglican bishops throughout the world were preoccupied with responding to the decision of the Diocese of New Westminster, of the Anglican Church of Canada, to create a rite to bless same-sex unions, and many foreign church leaders declared themselves “out of communion” with that diocese. In England, Jeffrey John, a noted gay cleric, declined appointment as Bishop of Reading after evangelicals

brought pressure on the new and untested Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, to get John to stand down. Williams, an avowed advocate of gay ordination, at first, had seemed pleased with the appointment by the Bishop of Oxford. The about-face by the archbishop distressed his friends and emboldened his detractors.

But the seminal event of 2003 for the Episcopal Church and for the Anglican Communion was the June 7 election of the Rev. Canon V. Gene Robinson to be Bishop Coadjutor of the Diocese of New Hampshire. By all accounts, Robinson is a pastorally gifted priest who accomplished the rare feat of being elected bishop by his own diocese. (He held the position of Canon to the Ordinary, the position held here by Robert Duncan when *he* was elected bishop.) Robinson is also a divorced father of two grown daughters, and a gay man living openly with his partner of fourteen years. Bishop Duncan issued a statement denouncing the election minutes after it took place, and about half the diocesan bishops of the Episcopal Church issued statements expressing views from unqualified support to equally unqualified condemnation in the weeks that followed. Many pronouncements came from Anglican bishops outside the U.S., most of them negative, some quite apocalyptic in tone.

Opposition to Robinson's election within the Episcopal Church was orchestrated by the American Anglican Council or AAC, which was founded in 1996 to push the Episcopal Church to the right. This work thrust the AAC into the public spotlight, where it was often represented by its Vice President, Bishop Robert Duncan.

In August, despite warnings from abroad and threats from the AAC, General Convention indeed confirmed Robinson's election. (Robinson was actually consecrated bishop in November.) General Convention also adopted a compromise resolution on blessing same-sex unions that allowed, but did not require, the practice. More position statements, warnings, and ultimatums followed.

The AAC called immediately for a "realignment" of Anglicanism in America and demanded an emergency meeting of the Anglican primates to deal with what it claimed was a "pastoral crisis" created by General Convention. The Archbishop of Canterbury actually called such a

meeting, but the unanimous statement of October 17 that resulted from the meeting disappointed the AAC by failing to condemn or sanction the Episcopal Church. The AAC declared victory, however, and moved forward, having found a half-sentence in the primates' declaration that it could use to justify the revolution it was seeking: "we call on the provinces concerned to make adequate provision for episcopal oversight of dissenting minorities within their own area of pastoral care in consultation with the Archbishop of Canterbury on behalf of the Primates."

Last fall, as the Anglican Communion debated, conservative bishops in several dioceses, including Pittsburgh, Fort Worth, Albany, and South Carolina, were promoting resolutions in special and regular diocesan conventions aimed at influencing the primates and preparing for an actual split in the church. Bishop Duncan called a special convention in September to pass six resolutions. Two resolutions to change the diocesan constitution were passed at the regular diocesan convention in November. It was one of the resolutions of the special convention that caused Calvary Church to file a lawsuit against Bishop Duncan and others to safeguard Episcopal Church property.

In the latest development, the AAC has engineered the creation of the Network of Anglican Communion Dioceses and Parishes, whose leader (or Moderator) is none other than Bishop Duncan. The Diocese of Pittsburgh joined this Network by a vote of Diocesan Council on February 3 with virtually no discussion and no input from parishes. The Network has been described as a "church within a church." It has also been called a "lifeboat" for besieged conservatives in "liberal" dioceses. The leaders of the Network intend to use it to provide the "adequate ... episcopal oversight" called for by the primates, but, whereas the Episcopal Church canons allow pastoral care by an outside bishop only with the permission of the local bishop, the ACC has termed requiring that permission "unacceptable."

What's Going on Here?

The current struggles in the Communion are not fundamentally about issues of human sexuality. This becomes clear when one realizes that the bishops, lawyers, and political strategists opposing the Episcopal

center have been fighting battles on different fronts for about thirty years. This collection of Anglo-Catholics and evangelicals—I have called them “conservatives,” but I acknowledge the inadequacy of that term—regularly rail against the “liberals” of the church and complain of the church’s “selling out” to secular society. These conservatives mobilized in response to changes beginning in the 1970s that brought about the acceptance of women clergy, a revised Prayer Book, and the expanding tolerance of gays. They have pursued strategies—mostly unsuccessful—to remake the Episcopal Church into a church of doctrinal stability that stresses individual piety and morality and is guided by a selectively literal reading of Scripture. Their most successful creation to date has been the American Anglican Council.

In recent years, the well-funded AAC has been able to influence Anglican bishops abroad, most notably, primates in the Third World. The strategy has been either to affect the Episcopal Church through pressure from the Anglican Communion or, as last resort, to split from the Episcopal Church to become a recognized province of the Communion distinct from the Episcopal Church. Until recently, the greatest triumph of this strategy was the last-minute passage of the 1998 Lambeth resolution declaring “homosexuality incompatible with scripture.” (In political terms, homosexuality is a near-perfect “wedge” issue.) Conservatives have also pushed the Primates into moving in the direction of investing power in themselves or in the Archbishop of Canterbury to discipline wayward Anglican provinces, which is usually understood to mean the Episcopal Church.

Where Are We Now?

The view from Pittsburgh has, for a long time, not been characteristic of the Episcopal Church as a whole. The conservative culture of this diocese is typical of about a dozen dioceses. The rest—nearly 100 of them—are diverse and, on the whole, moderately liberal. They are going about business as usual. The people in those dioceses who follow the news of the church are watching with interest, but not always with great concern, the “crazy” bishops in Pittsburgh, Fort Worth, Quincy, Jan Joaquin, South Carolina, and a few other dioceses. They should be more concerned.

In a September position paper, Bishop Duncan called a split in the Episcopal Church “inevitable,” and he declared that we are already two churches with two gospels. He would have you choose between a gospel of “conversion and discipleship” (his gospel) and a gospel of “inclusion and liberation” (the gospel of the Episcopal Church, which has sold out to contemporary society). Bishop Duncan constantly speaks about the “clear meaning of Scripture,” by which he means *his* meaning. Any other meaning is simply *wrong*.

In October, Canon David Anderson, AAC President stated quite clearly that the AAC, which, at first, looked to create a second Anglican province in the U.S., had decided that it must instead replace the Episcopal Church, lest *his* church be in communion with the wrong-headed Episcopalians who had voted with the majority at General Convention. In December, a letter from the Rev. Geoff Chapman, Rector of St. Stephen’s, Sewickley, and an operative for the new Network, was leaked to *The Washington Post*. In that letter, intended for churches inquiring about joining the Network, Chapman made it quite clear that the purpose of the Network was to be the ultimate replacement for the Episcopal Church, whose canons would, at some time in the future, need to be violated with impunity. He also made it clear that the Network expected not only to usurp the status of the Episcopal Church as the Anglican province in the U.S., but also to be the ultimate owner of its property as well. Although Bishop Duncan has tried to distance the Network from the Chapman letter, the fact that Chapman has long been an insider among the conservative dissidents belies the bishop’s denials.

As Bishop Duncan and his supporters attempt to build their Network, life in the Episcopal Church goes on. Those of us in places like Pittsburgh are not at all happy that the national church seems to have done little to resist the conservative insurgents. In fact, however, the Presiding Bishop has no real power over bishops, and it may be only presentments and trials that can bring Bishop Duncan and his colleagues to heel. On the other hand, the Calvary lawsuit, while still in its preliminary stages, seems to have cooled the enthusiasm of the dissidents for outright succession, for fear of losing their churches.

Uncertainty exists on one other front. The primates insisted on the Archbishop of Canterbury's creating a commission to study how the Communion should react to problems in individual provinces. It is clear that many conservative primates want to enforce discipline among the traditionally independent provinces, and the commission, they hope, will endorse this idea. The ultimate effect of the commission's report, now expected in about 11 months, cannot be predicted, but it is difficult to see how any report can fail to anger some significant segment of the Anglican Communion. It is even possible, irrespective of what the commission says, that the Communion will split between the more liberal churches and those of the so-called "Global South."

What Should We Do?

If you love the liturgy of our church, but you long for the moral clarity and biblical literalism of the Southern Baptist Convention, Bishops Duncan, Iker, Ackerman, Salmon, and the rest, are your heroes. According to our bishop, you are already a member of the Network of Anglican Communion Dioceses and Parishes. Write approving letters to Bishop Duncan, sit back, and wait for him to complete his *coup d'état* against the Episcopal Church. If, on the other hand, you value not only the liturgy, but the notion of Anglicanism as the middle way, the *via media*, which looks not only to Scripture, but also to tradition and reason for guidance, then you want to oppose the Network of Anglican Communion Dioceses and Parishes, along with its prescriptive theological statement.

If you fall into the second category, here are some of the actions you can take:

1. Keep informed. The best tool for doing so is the Internet.
2. Organize programs to discuss issues and keep one another informed.
3. Pray for the unity of the church.
4. Make sure that your church continues to support the Episcopal Church. As of January, the diocese is no longer sending any money to the Episcopal Church, USA. Individuals, if their

churches are not sending money to the Episcopal Church, can send their own checks directly.

5. Elect deputies and vestry members committed to supporting the Episcopal Church.
6. Work for the defeat of the two constitutional amendments that are up for final approval at the 2004 diocesan convention.
7. Have your parish pass a resolution stating that it does not wish to be considered part of the Network of Anglican Communion Dioceses and Parishes.
8. Join Progressive Episcopalians of Pittsburgh, which is spearheading the fight to preserve the Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh.
9. Make you church one that exhibits the best qualities of the Episcopal Church—tolerance, hospitality, and open-mindedness.
10. Support Episcopal programs and organizations, such as ECW, ERD, EFM, and Daughters of the King. Consider carefully whether outreach to particular organizations is supporting those who would destroy the Episcopal Church.
11. Jealously guard church property. Bishop Duncan and many congregations in this diocese would probably not be in the Episcopal Church today were not church canons and civil law preventing them from leaving with church property. Do not believe that the current conflict is not about money and power.

Most importantly, do not buy into the contention that Bishop Duncan is defending Anglicanism. He is advocating a strain of fundamentalism radically opposed to Anglicanism. Having failed repeatedly to get his way through democratic processes, he is now relying on intimidation and deceit. We must not let him win.

I would like to close by quoting the editors of the Web site *Anglicans Online*. In their introduction to their site this week, Cynthia McFarland and Brian Reid end with the following thoughts:

Some churches demand coherence and strict adherence to doctrine, others accept any belief as long as the believer attends regularly. To us the essence of Anglican Christianity is that, within the guidelines of scripture, tradition, and reason, we can agree to disagree but come to the same Table—even if on different sides. We cleave to the middle way, in which we each have whatever level of personal relationship with God we are comfortable with, relying on corporate worship to keep us centred within the boundaries of love.