

A pastoral letter to The Episcopal Church

Pentecost continues!

Pentecost is most fundamentally a continuing gift of the Spirit, rather than a limitation or quenching of that Spirit.

The recent statement by the Archbishop of Canterbury about the struggles within the Anglican Communion seems to equate Pentecost with a single understanding of gospel realities. Those who received the gift of the Spirit on that day all heard good news. The crowd reported, "in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:11).

The Spirit does seem to be saying to many within The Episcopal Church that gay and lesbian persons are God's good creation, that an aspect of good creation is the possibility of lifelong, faithful partnership, and that such persons may indeed be good and healthy exemplars of gifted leadership within the Church, as baptized leaders and ordained ones. The Spirit also seems to be saying the same thing in other parts of the Anglican Communion, and among some of our Christian partners, including Lutheran churches in North America and Europe, the Old Catholic churches of Europe, and a number of others.

That growing awareness does not deny the reality that many Anglicans and not a few Episcopalians still fervently hold traditional views about human sexuality. This Episcopal Church is a broad and inclusive enough tent to hold that variety. The willingness to live in tension is a hallmark of Anglicanism, beginning from its roots in Celtic Christianity pushing up against Roman Christianity in the centuries of the first millennium. That diversity in community was solidified in the Elizabethan Settlement, which really marks the beginning of Anglican Christianity as a distinct movement. Above all, it recognizes that the Spirit may be speaking to all of us, in ways that do not at present seem to cohere or agree. It also recognizes what Jesus says about the Spirit to his followers, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will

“speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:12-13).

The Episcopal Church has spent nearly 50 years listening to and for the Spirit in these matters. While it is clear that not all within this Church have heard the same message, the current developments do represent a widening understanding. Our canons reflected this shift as long ago as 1985, when sexual orientation was first protected from discrimination in access to the ordination process. At the request of other bodies in the Anglican Communion, this Church held an effective moratorium on the election and consecration of a partnered gay or lesbian priest as bishop from 2003 to 2010. When a diocese elected such a person in late 2009, the ensuing consent process indicated that a majority of the laity, clergy, and bishops responsible for validating that election agreed that there was no substantive bar to the consecration.

The Episcopal Church recognizes that these decisions are problematic to a number of other Anglicans. We have not made these decisions lightly. We recognize that the Spirit has not been widely heard in the same way in other parts of the Communion. In all humility, we recognize that we may be wrong, yet we have proceeded in the belief that the Spirit permeates our decisions.

We also recognize that the attempts to impose a singular understanding in such matters represent the same kind of cultural excesses practiced by many of our colonial forebears in their missionizing activity. Native Hawaiians were forced to abandon their traditional dress in favor of missionaries' standards of modesty. Native Americans were forced to abandon many of their cultural practices, even though they were fully congruent with orthodox Christianity, because the missionaries did not understand or consider those practices exemplary of the Spirit. The uniformity imposed at the Synod of Whitby did similar violence to a developing, contextual Christianity in the British Isles. In their search for uniformity, our forebears in the faith have repeatedly done much spiritual violence in the name of Christianity.

We do not seek to impose our understanding on others. We do earnestly hope for continued dialogue with those who disagree, for we believe that the Spirit is always calling us to greater understanding.

We live in great concern that colonial attitudes continue, particularly in attempts to impose a single understanding across widely varying contexts and cultures. We note that the cultural contexts in which The Episcopal Church's decisions have generated the greatest objection and reaction are also often the same contexts where women are barred from full ordained leadership, including the Church of England.

As Episcopalians, we note the troubling push toward centralized authority exemplified in many of the statements of the recent Pentecost letter. Anglicanism as a body began in the repudiation of the control of the Bishop of Rome within an otherwise sovereign nation. Similar concerns over self-determination in the face of colonial control led the Scottish Episcopal Church to consecrate Samuel Seabury for The Episcopal Church in the nascent United States – and so began the Anglican Communion.

We have been repeatedly assured that the Anglican Covenant is not an instrument of control, yet we note that the fourth section seems to be just that to Anglicans in many parts of the Communion. So much so, that there are voices calling for stronger sanctions in that fourth section, as well as voices repudiating it as un-Anglican in nature. Unitary control does not characterize Anglicanism; rather, diversity in fellowship and communion does.

We are distressed at the apparent imposition of sanctions on some parts of the Communion. We note that these seem to be limited to those which "have formally, through their Synod or House of Bishops, adopted policies that breach any of the moratoria requested by the Instruments of Communion." We are further distressed that such sanctions do not, apparently, apply to those parts of the Communion that continue to hold one view in public and exhibit other behaviors in private. Why is there no sanction on those who continue with a double standard? In our context bowing to anxiety by ignoring that sort of double-mindedness is usually termed a "failure of nerve."

Through many decades of wrestling with our own discomfort about recognizing the full humanity of persons who seem to differ from us, we continue to work at open and transparent communication as well as congruence between word and behavior. We openly admit our failure to achieve perfection!

The baptismal covenant prayed in this Church for more than 30 years calls us to respect the dignity of all other persons and charges us with ongoing labor toward a holy society of justice and peace. That fundamental understanding of Christian vocation underlies our hearing of the Spirit in this context and around these issues of human sexuality. That same understanding of Christian vocation encourages us to hold our convictions with sufficient humility that we can affirm the image of God in the person who disagrees with us. We believe that the Body of Christ is only found when such diversity is welcomed with abundant and radical hospitality.

As a Church of many nations, languages, and peoples, we will continue to seek every opportunity to increase our partnership in God's mission for a healed creation and holy community. We look forward to the ongoing growth in partnership possible in the Listening Process, Continuing Indaba, Bible in the Life of the Church, Theological Education in the Anglican Communion, and the myriad of less formal and more local partnerships across the Communion – efforts in mission and ministry that inform and transform individuals and communities toward the vision of the Gospel – a healed world, loving God and neighbor, in the love and friendship shown us in God Incarnate.

May God's peace dwell in your hearts,

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