

# THE DIOCESE OF INDIANAPOLIS

The Episcopal Church in Central and Southern Indiana

March 15, 2007

Dear Friends,

Attached you will find a pastoral letter to be read or disseminated within the week. The extra background stuff, the stuff on the purple sheet, you can use or pitch - it's not part of the letter. Do with it what you will.

I am on my way to the House of Bishops' meeting and will return next Thursday evening. It may help you to know that we do not plan to craft a response to the ~~Primates~~ at this meeting. We will have conversation, we will listen to each other, and we will try honestly to raise all the concerns and questions we carry with us. We will pray, and we will try to discern. Then we will rest with it.....

I will send a rather shorter (!) pastoral following that meeting. Know that you are in my thoughts and prayers - and I thank you for yours.

Blessings,

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+Cate

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The Episcopal Church in Central and Southern Indiana

March 15, 2007

## **A Pastoral Letter to be read and/or disseminated to all members within a week of receipt**

Dear Friends,

I am writing to greet you in the name of Our Lord during this holy season of Lent, and to offer what I hope will be words of encouragement during a time of confusion, and perhaps, of anxiety in our Church.

Many of you will have heard or read about a group which calls itself "St. Michael the Archangel Anglican Church." This group is composed of persons who have become convinced that the Episcopal Church is unfaithful in some way, and their mission is to attract Episcopalians to their company. Their stated mission is to "provide a safe haven for traditional Anglicans," and any others who may exhibit interest in them.

They have affiliated themselves with the Diocese of Bolivia, which belongs to the Anglican Church of the Southern Cone of America, adopting an alternate view of the mission of the Church and its lines of authority and decision making. Such an affiliation is contrary to "tradition," and has been condemned by several Lambeth Conferences, the Windsor Report, and the Primates' meetings in Dromandine (2005) and Tanzania (2007). No bishop is permitted to enter or seek to exercise jurisdiction in another diocese without the invitation of the diocesan bishop. It is, according to everything Anglican, unlawful.

In the Diocese of Indianapolis this group seems to be led by two clergy who are canonically resident here – The Rev. Thomas Tirman, priest, and the Rev. Charles Conover, deacon. Each of them is currently under discipline initiated by our Standing Committee and myself on the grounds that they have violated the Canons and abandoned the Communion of this Church.

It may be helpful to point out that over the past forty years or so a number of groups have formed, citing grievances with our Church. They have taken exception to the revision of the Book of Common Prayer, our stance on abortion (which, by the way, is not pro-choice), the ordination of women to priesthood and episcopate, the use of any kind of expansive language in reference to God and humankind or even of contemporary language in worship, and most recently, decisions to affirm that gay men and lesbian women have been carrying out faithful ministries among us and are qualified to serve in the ordained ministries of this Church.

They will often assert that they are vitally concerned about the authority of Scripture, and that the teachings of the Bible are being subverted by priests and bishops who are dishonest, unfaithful, and "counterfeit Christians."

These groups have various names; "Forward in Faith," "The Network," "The American Anglican Council," "The Convocation of Anglicans in North America," and perhaps others. The last three have virtually the same membership lists, overlapping groups of leaders, and the same purpose – which is to supplant the Episcopal Church and have themselves officially recognized as *the* Anglican Communion Province in the United States. It should be noted that they have refused to be open about this goal, even now. The assertion has been made that if only the Episcopal Church would repent and amend her ways they would not have to take this course. Yet they have already taken it by attempting to form new congregations under foreign authority, in defiance of the very documents and resolutions they cite as authoritative!

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Such actions can leave our members feeling confused and anxious – if not to say embarrassed – that their Church and its leaders are coming under attack. It can be difficult to know what to say when friends and neighbors ask, “What in the world is going on in your Church?”

What Episcopalians can say about our Church is this:

- 1) We are Bible based. We center our worship and reflection on four passages from Scripture each Sunday, and we encourage ALL our members to be praying the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, which provide us with a nearly complete serial reading of the Bible every two years. If you are not yet practicing this discipline there is no time like the present to begin. Talk to your priest or visit the diocesan web site where you will find a link to Morning and Evening Prayer.
  - 2) While we honor and revere the Bible, we do not worship it. We count these writings as “word of God” not as dictated by the divine tongue, but as revealing God’s desires for us. We claim them to be inspired, but not free from the human errors of misunderstanding, mistranslation or misinterpretation. We engage in as much scholarly work as possible to help us interpret and apply scripture in ways that are both faithful and honest. We take the Bible seriously enough not to try to take it simplistically. (Do you remember what you thought turning the other cheek means – and that it isn’t at all what you’d been taught before some scholarship was done?)
  - 3) As Anglicans we rely on Scripture, Tradition and Reason. We count the sacred writings as inspired, but also realize that they are not the only vehicles to wisdom and knowledge. We do not insist on the false dichotomy of science vs. Bible – celebrating the truth we can learn from each, not trying to force out of the Bible scientific information it was never intended to give us. Science can tell us when and how life began to emerge on this “fragile Earth, our island home;” it cannot tell us why. For that we look to the Biblical accounts, which offer us the view of ourselves as created in God’s image, and as beloved, first last and always. We celebrate the reason God has given us, and seek to be faithful stewards of it. We use our brains! We also reflect on the path the Church has taken through the centuries, learning what we can from its mistakes and its glories.
- To give ultimate honor or obedience to anything which is not God is to commit idolatry and to open ourselves to spiritual peril. I discovered a helpful quote recently (Barth?) “Anything which is made an idol will inevitably demand human sacrifice.” We don’t need any more of that....it’s been done, and “it is finished.” We are not called to sacrifice each other on the altar of “my sense of righteousness/faithfulness/holiness is greater than yours.” Anglicans strive to remember that nothing – not our own traditions, our own reason or even the writings of scripture – is God.
- 4) The articulation of our faith is in our worship. What we pray is what we believe, and the shape of our faith is articulated in the Book of Common Prayer (which itself has deep roots in scripture). It is in our prayers that we lay out what we believe about baptism and new birth, sin and reconciliation, sickness and death, marriage, ordination, and the sacred encounter with God in the Eucharist. If you do not yet own your own copy of the BCP, I urge you to obtain one, and begin to study it front to back – not because it is the last word on what is faithful, but because it will help to ground you in what has been preserved and distilled, and acquaint you with your heritage.
  - 5) The Episcopal Church is Sacramental. We insist that the things of this world are used by God to connect us to the deepest truths of the Spirit. The human life of Jesus (Incarnation) is the reality of God’s life among us as one of us. Baptism is the tangible response of claiming adoption by the Spirit and becoming Christ’s own forever. The bread and wine of the Eucharist take on the reality of Christ’s Body and Blood, to nourish us, through what is tangible, with the spiritual reality of God’s presence and love. The formation of our members centers in these sacraments, disclosing our obedience to Christ, who has commanded us to continue them.

6) The Episcopal Church reaches beyond itself in mission and ministry. Nearly every diocese and parish has an overseas partnership, in addition to involvements in local outreach. We know full well that the Church exists as much for those who are not members as for those who are. As disciples of Jesus the Christ we seek first to bring light to darkness, hope to despair, healing to sickness, comfort to sorrow, and life into the valley of death. We are to feed the hungry, house the homeless, visit the sick and the prisoner. The faithful life, then, will be one in which we make as much room as possible for those who are in need of what we have to offer, and will be characterized by mercy and compassion. To the extent to which we manage to make the graciousness of our hearts apparent to the world around us we will be living faithfully and will draw others to our way of life and faith.

7) The Episcopal Church values unity without insisting on uniformity. We have not been commanded by Christ to come to agreement; we have been commanded to love one another as he has loved us. We simply cannot do that if we insist on walking away from each other over disagreements. Our disputes over issues are not being held in private, nor are they the sole focus of our attention. Dispute is not the root of schism – the willingness to judge others unfaithful is. We care deeply for those who disagree with us, and at the same time we will not allow anger and condemnation to set our course or to dictate our sense of mission.

8) The Episcopal Church includes all its members in discernment and decision making. Bishops have certain kinds of authority, as do priests who have charge of parishes. But clergy do not speak for the Church without regard to the input of others. Clergy and laity are always involved, from the election of the parish Vestry and Bishop's Committee, to the selection of Diocesan Convention delegates, Standing Committee members, and members of Commissions on Ministry. Every Diocese elects Deputies to the General Convention – they are not selected by bishops (or ought not to be!) – and it is the General Convention, which speaks for the whole Church. When bishops and deputies cannot agree, no group or person has the ability to dictate a decision. I cannot tell you what the Church will or won't be in this place any more than you can dictate that to me. We work together to hear what God is asking of us and to respond to that invitation. This is a polity which calls us over and over to the humility of conceding that no one person, no one group, will ever lay claim to infallibility. That characteristic belongs only to God.

9) Episcopalians are people who know they are loved by God and who want others to know that truth as well. If we were to erect a billboard at the edge of town it would not say "AVOID HELL!" It would likely say, "SEEK LIFE IN THE KINGDOM!" The first focuses on all that is imperfect and urges fear of it. The second focuses on what is good and invites participation in it.

The current strife in the Anglican Communion has been characterized as being about homosexuality. I must tell you that I do not believe that to be true. The struggle is not over whose sexual orientation and life is or is not acceptable to God. It is not even over the authority of Scripture, since many of our detractors find themselves able to disregard any number of scriptural mandates in their own favor!

This is a struggle for power and control. It is about who will define the mission of the Church, who will direct it, who will control the resources for it, who will be included in it and receive the benefit of it. It is about the seeming need of some persons to style themselves as superior to those who are different, or who disagree with them, and to leave no room for questioning or for the traditional "roominess" of Anglicanism.

This struggle is not even about maintaining the Anglican Communion. Several Lambeth Conferences, the Windsor Report, and two Primates' gatherings have mandated that every Province in our Communion must have a process to listen and learn about the experiences and lives of gay and lesbian members. They have reiterated the traditional Anglican polity that diocesan boundaries are not to be crossed without invitation. Neither of these mandates have been met by certain of our Provinces – Nigeria and Bolivia notable among them.

Background, which may be helpful.....

From the time of Elizabeth I, the Anglican Churches have not taken the path of either confessionalism (Lutheran or Calvinist) or anathema (Roman Catholic). We have not claimed that scripture is our only source of wisdom and authority, nor have we invested any one person with papal authority. We have articulated our teachings and beliefs in the words of our prayers, and have balanced our confidence in scripture with the witness of the traditions and experience of the Church and with the reason, which is one of God's primary gifts to humanity.

During the turmoil in England following the Reformation, the Anglican Via Media emerged, providing a way to define and live out the faith in broad terms – making it possible for people on different points of the devotional, political and theological spectrum to find themselves included in the teachings and life of the Church. It was a stance of political expediency, but it also had the spiritual humility of granting that no one group of people at one point in history can grasp all the truth for all time. It allowed us to be gracious and accepting of each other even in disagreements, granting one another the assumption that we are all trying our best to be faithful. One Archbishop has written that Anglicanism is not broad for the sake of inclusion, but rather is comprehensive for the sake of the truth.

The Anglican Communion evolved in much the same way as the British Empire spread and the Church of England took roots in all sorts of new soil. The Provinces of the Communion have never been intertwined in authority or polity. Our liturgical and decision-making structures have evolved in compatibility with our contexts, and until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century we had little to do with each other. Only since that time have the bishops of the Communion been gathering – at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury – to share their thoughts and information about their various ministries. The records of the first gatherings of bishops makes it clear that there was no intention to style those meetings of bishops as legislative, and that the Conference had no synodical authority to mandate the inner life of the various Provinces. The Provinces of the Anglican Communion have always been auto-cephalous – or, self-headed – and even the Archbishop of Canterbury was not deemed to have anything like “primatial authority” within the Communion. In fact he does not have it in England! Even so, assumptions were made that we were all very much alike.

It has only been over the past forty years that we have begun to appreciate the range of differences that exist in the Provinces of the Communion. When The Episcopal Church in the United States made it known in the 1960's that we would begin allowing for the remarriage of some divorced persons in the Church, the furor around the Communion was deafening. A similar uproar occurred when The Episcopal Church resolved that artificial birth control was an acceptable way for married persons to manage the size of their families.

Over the past twenty years we have become aware of the many ways in which the Provinces of the Communion have always been different, most especially in approaches to biblical scholarship, polity, and the exercise of authority – and who could be ordered priests and bishops.

Until the Lambeth Conference of 1998, new bishops in the Provinces of Africa assumed that the Bible was read and interpreted in exactly the same way all over the Communion, and were distressed to discover that some Provinces had taken on practices which they considered to be forbidden in the Bible.

In some Provinces a rather fundamentalist and literalist approach to Scripture is favored. This approach often attributes equal weight to all the writings – giving what is read in Leviticus equal status with what is read in the Gospels. This seems curious, since it disregards the fact that even within the Judaism of Jesus' day there were disputes over interpretation, and centuries of both written and oral traditions which made it impossible for one group to claim complete inerrancy in its interpretations. This does not seem to deter our brothers and sisters from their insistence that there is no room for interpretation – even given that Our Lord engaged in such thinking and teaching on a regular basis. They assert that the “plain sense” of Scripture is obvious and that interpretations, which do not match their own, are unfaithful and wicked.

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In many Provinces the bishops exercise their authority in unilateral ways, speaking for the dioceses they lead in conformity to their own tribal or paternalistic contexts. In some places the bishops regard themselves as the living embodiment of Church order – one Nigerian bishop even boasted to a gathering I attended that he tore up the Constitution of the diocese because “I am the Constitution!” The Archbishop of Nigeria, who was present during this gathering, merely rolled his eyes!

Clergy from Africa who have visited this diocese have sought me out to ask for funds, assuming that as bishop I control our funds. When I try to explain that I am not a corporation sole and that the funds are allocated by the budget, they respond with frustration and anger. At home, the bishop controls the purse strings absolutely, so they consider me unwilling to help them and lacking in generosity.

We need also to consider what we hear about the numbers of members in other Provinces of the Communion. First, in many places there is no ability to keep records. Imagine trying to keep careful records of baptisms and confirmations in Sudan - a country torn by war for more than twenty years! It simply doesn't happen. The bishop of Iran explained to me that he dare not keep such records, since the government might seize them at any moment, and use the information to oppress members. Any figures coming out of that country would be guesswork.

It is also a part of African culture not to be clear about numbers. It is impolite to ask an African how many children he has, because if an enemy knows the number of children he can determine what force he needs to defeat you. Remember that Samuel railed against the people when they demanded a king, telling them a king would count them, make them pay taxes, and conscript them into labor.

When our dear friend Bishop Garang visited here in 2003 he told the story over and over of how he traveled from place to place preaching and baptizing. Every time he told the story the numbers grew larger! His own culture would not accuse him of being deceitful – he was emphasizing the great need of people to hear the Good News and their fervent response to it. Large numbers make the story more effective, even though there is no way to be certain what the numbers really are. The reaction to inflated membership figures here, however, would be scorn.

What we are facing just now is the clash between very different cultures and the desire of some to take advantage of that clash to press their own agendas.

The church of the Southern Cone of America comprises the Dioceses of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. The Primate is the Most Rev. Gregory James Venables. The Bishop of Bolivia is the Rt. Rev Frank Lyons. In 1974 the Archbishop of Canterbury gave over his metropolitanical authority for the dioceses of the Southern Cone and the new province was formed in 1981.