

The Episcopal Church in the Balance

by The Rt. Rev. William E. Swing

Monday, 10 April 2006

On my last visit to a congregation a member of the choir, with tears in her eyes, said to me: “My vicar retired, my bishop is going to retire, and the Episcopal Church has been kicked out of the Anglican Communion. That is more loss than I can handle.” Her genuine lament stays with me.

My short reply on the spot: “You’ll soon have a wonderful new priest, this time next year you all and the new bishop will be off on high adventure pursuing the mission of Jesus Christ, and the Episcopal Church is very much part of the Anglican Communion. You will be just fine.”

My longer reply with pen in hand: the large issues that are now hanging in the balance are (1) freedom in the Body of Christ, (2) accountability of Episcopal bishops to the Episcopal Church, and (3) the nature of church property. Let me explain.

I. Freedom in the Body of Christ

We would not be having the present turmoil around homosexuality if the Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church did not have an elevated doctrine of freedom in the Body of Christ. Because we are caught up in the new creation that springs from Resurrection power, we are an expansive people. We have the freedom to disagree but stay together, freedom to discriminate and also welcome everyone, to live with contradictions. We even have the freedom to self-destruct and completely forfeit our freedom. If we had a magisterium or a final authority, we would not be this far into the turmoil. We are where we are because we allow the Holy Spirit to move us into the chaos as a precursor of a fresh order of a new creation.

I do believe that we are fighting over freedom, among other issues. One side says that we have moved from legitimate freedom to illegitimate license. The other side says that freedom has given us a new perspective on the worth of people, a perspective from which we cannot back down.

Therefore, there is a mad dash to create a worldwide final arbiter – a Windsor Report or an archbishop or instruments of unity – which would settle matters in a reasonable way, which would put an end to all of the mischief caused by freedom. The whole of the Anglican Communion is wrestling with this. I am a freedom man, but you know that.

II. Accountability of Episcopal Bishops to the Episcopal Church

When I was a young priest, I used to watch the old bishops wrestle over the current challenges of the day. Often they violently disagreed, but at the end of the day they were the House of Bishops. Not so now. There is a minority of bishops who will not receive Holy Communion with other bishops. They have litmus tests. “Were you in New Hampshire? Have you ordained a woman? “Whatever is the ultimate turn off, it is clear that this minority had created its own Mini-House of Bishops. It usually meets at the same time and a few miles away as the House of Bishops. And

far, far beyond that they claim their legitimacy is based on keeping faith with the majority of the Anglican Communion and its Primates, not in its collegiality in the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church.

This has enormous consequences. If there are legitimate bishops who have no accountability to all of the bishops of the Episcopal Church, then we will have to come to a new accountability. Presently each bishop at his/her consecration promises that “I do solemnly engage to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.” Further when the question is asked of the new bishop, “Will you share with your fellow bishops in the government of the Whole Church,” the answer is, “I will by the grace given me.” Up to now, the Episcopal Church could depend on the word of its bishops to uphold its unity. But no longer.

Now the opposite is so clear. All of the dioceses that have threatened to leave are guided by bishops who have threatened to leave the Episcopal Church. No diocese with a loyal bishop has threatened to leave. It is the bishop who is the key. If the Episcopal Church cannot depend on bishops to keep vows and the unity of the Church, then there has to be a new accountability, and we suffer in the birth pangs of this reality. Do the shepherds lead the sheep into the fold or out of the fold?

III. The Nature of Church Property

As you probably know, a group known as the American Anglican Council has morphed into the Anglican Communion Network. They have a plan to carry out a realignment of Anglicanism on North American soil whereby they would replace the Episcopal Church as the sole Anglican presence in North America. They have an elaborate scheme for proselytizing, transferring oversight of congregations, and redirecting funds of the local congregation. And negotiating “property settlements affirming the retention of ownership in the local congregation!” Ah, here is the final rub! “Who gets the house in the divorce?”

Well, the Anglican Communion Network held a conference in Pittsburgh in November, and the great man of the movement, Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria, had these surprising words to say to the faithful. “They (the Episcopal Church) may get the building, but you will get the blessing. What God is looking for is your faith, not your facility.”

Here is an African who is a supreme missionary. He calls people into pilgrimage. Leave everything behind and follow. God will provide. This is not good news to the Network strategists. They want to stay home and live in our buildings. Think hostile takeover, and you get the picture of these folks, who pledged to “carry out guerrilla warfare against the Episcopal Church.” They talk pilgrimage; they intend mutiny.

If folks are so horrified with the election in New Hampshire that they leave the Episcopal Church, I understand. It is a matter of principle. If folks want to use the events in such a way as to catapult themselves into elevated authority, then I think it is a matter of power. The property issue tells the tale. This fight is about power, not principle.

The Diocese of Pittsburgh adopted a policy of releasing diocesan control of property to any congregation which sought to disaffiliate with the diocese. In the Diocese of Florida a representative of five parishes leaving the diocese proposed that these parishes keep their properties. In the Diocese of Los Angeles, an Orange County Superior judge ruled that two breakaway parishes were the rightful owners of their church buildings and other property. You see, if the parish holds title to property as an implied and express trust on behalf of the diocese, then we all stay together. (All parishes except one in the Diocese of California have signed articles of incorporation stating exactly that.) But if the Network is successful in farming out the properties to local congregations, then if a split happens, they can harvest the properties in their new alignment.

In Conclusion

I have been ordained for forty-five years, and during that time the Episcopal Church has navigated through the storms of black civil rights, prayer book revision, women's ordination, and same-sex issues. Presently we are in deep and troubled waters over the national takeover plan of the Network, with the international cooperation to shun, discredit, and by-pass the Episcopal Church. Trusting in the Holy Spirit, I am totally convinced that we will endure and thrive as we always do. And we will take on harder challenges in the next forty-five years.

I do believe that the Episcopal Church is a brave, supple, obedient part of the Body of Christ and is alive to the Incarnation in the 21st century, as well as centuries past and centuries to come. We are not everything or necessarily the best thing. But we are uniquely created by the Spirit to do the will of God as we see that will beckoning to us. We will not always be pleasing to the world or to ourselves or to other Anglicans. But we do try through song and conscience, praise and action to please the One God of all and to embrace all the children of God and all of God's creation.