

The Bishop's Message
October 2008

AND NOW, AFTER SALT LAKE CITY, WHAT?

I write this "Message" on September 25, which on our Church calendar commemorates the life and ministry of Sergius of Moscow. Sergius, as perhaps you know, was an example of Russian spiritual life at its best. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Monastery of the Holy Trinity which became a center for Christian renewal in Russia. Pilgrims would come from far and near to worship and receive spiritual instruction and pastoral encouragement.

A week ago today the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church took what a majority of the Anglican Communion is regarding as an uncanonical and immoral decision by voting to depose the Right Reverend Robert Duncan as a bishop in The Episcopal Church and, therefore, the Anglican Communion. What we did has little if anything in common with the kind of Christian Gospel to which Sergius witnessed. Contrary to his ministry, we only appear to talk of reconciliation while practicing what looks to many like retribution. What we in the House of Bishops apparently do not understand is this: Just because we say it is -- doesn't make it so!

The Presiding Bishop has said the action taken was "worked carefully and prayerfully," but in the minds of many, our action was neither. Rather it appears the smell of blood was in the water and the sharks were hungry and schooling.

It did not appear careful for the following reasons: 1) Proper notice of the proposed action was not given; 2) The Canons of our Church were breached in declaring there were a sufficient number of members present to authorize the action; and 3) Bishop Duncan has not abandoned the Communion nor does he intend to do so. Additionally, one prayer doesn't necessarily make any situation "prayerful."

Proper Notice: The first I knew for certain of the proposed action taken in our business meeting was after I arrived in Salt City on Tuesday, 16 September. I had heard rumors but I never received official notice. The night before the business meeting, the bishop of the Dominican Republic asked if the information provided at the meeting regarding the resolution to depose Bishop Duncan was available in Spanish. We were told it wasn't but would be available in the morning. Clearly, the matter did not receive the proper preparations.

The Canons: The clear reading of "a majority of the members eligible to vote" means the whole of the House of Bishops, not just a majority of a quorum present. Using the formula of the Presiding Bishop and her Chancellor, it requires more votes to consent to a bishop's retirement than it does to depose one. Surely that cannot be the canon's intent.

Abandonment of the Communion: Within hours of the vote to depose Bishop Duncan and before the Presiding Bishop took action, it was announced by

the Archbishop of the Southern Cone that Bishop Duncan had been received as a bishop is good standing. What we have now is a situation in which Bishop Duncan is in full communion with more Provinces and their dioceses than the Presiding Bishop and The Episcopal Church. Sadly, we continue to demonstrate we do not understand what the Anglican Communion is and how we as the Episcopal Church relate to it. Contrary to what we say and do, The Episcopal Church is not the "Communion;" we (currently) are merely one of 38 Provinces in it.

During the morning and first part of the afternoon session, the proposed action was discussed (debated?) in a "Committee of the Whole." In my view the arguments to depose Bishop Duncan were shallow at best. It was obvious there was an intent to interfere with the Diocese of Pittsburgh's Convention (Synod) which takes place the first weekend in October. It was felt, if Bishop Duncan were removed, there would be a stronger court case for The Episcopal Church to retain Church properties if the Diocese voted to withdraw. It is difficult to imagine a civil court would honor The Episcopal Church's claim that civil law is in our favor when we tortured our own canon beyond recognition in order to achieve a desired end. We either are not aware of the ethical principle that "the ends do not justify the means," or the agenda was so important we simply ignored it.

Finally, the one prayer said by the House Chaplain between the debate and the vote could not begin to redeem what had taken place nor what was about to take place.

Perhaps one of the more disturbing aspects of the whole procedure was the clear hypocrisy present. I kept hearing that we as bishops need to be accountable and we need to hold each other accountable. Obviously we were not thinking about the many bishops who allow clergy to commune the non-baptized. Nor were we thinking of the bishops who quickly declared after Lambeth that they would not observe the moratoria cited by the Archbishop of Canterbury as necessary for the good of the Communion, thereby placing their agenda above the Anglican Communion itself. I guess it just depends on who's doing the accounting.

In 2003, we heard a lot about the Gamaliel test (Let it be, if it's not of God, it will not endure; if it is of God, man will not be able to confine it) in relation to the action taken by the General Convention held that summer in Minneapolis. We haven't heard much about it since. It might have been appropriately applied to Bishop Duncan, but it was not. In any case, here's a question: Does anybody believe the decision made in '03 is working? If one does, I'd be interested in why they do. By every measure it is not, except perhaps that we may *think* it is. But as I said, that doesn't make it so.

Over the last week it has occurred to me numerous times that our time in Salt Lake City might have been much more profitably spent if we had explored the reasons why so many people are leaving the Episcopal Church as individuals, as

congregations and now as dioceses. Though the situation is unprecedented, we think it is all about “them” and not “us.” And we say we want to be accountable?

We all understand, good decisions resolve destructive issues, while bad decisions exacerbate them. Only the naïve and uninitiated could possibly think some kind of real resolution was achieved a week ago, when in reality fuel was added to the fire. Our action then was just another in a long succession of bad decisions that cannot possibly serve our Church in any constructive manner no matter what we think. We will not have to wait very long at all to know that the crisis is growing.

What now? It remains to be seen what the Archbishop of Canterbury will do; what the Anglican Consultative Council will do; and what the Primates will do. Will an additional Anglican American Province be recognized? Will another Anglican American Province replace The Episcopal Church? Will the majority of the Anglicans separate from Canterbury because they no longer will abide more of the same inaction? Some decisions have already been made. Many more will be made in the very near future.

I continue to be committed to “keeping on keeping on.” I will continue to refuse being an “institutionalist.” Instead, I will follow where the Gospel leads and the Church has taught because eternity is a long time and we are dealing with salvation issues. Revisionists are advised that they had better be correct because what’s at stake is a person’s eternal destiny. No one can be one hundred percent sure what they believe is correct. That’s why our confidence needs to be well grounded. For Christians that means not making it up as we go along. It means believing Jesus is nothing less than Lord and Savior, the Incarnate God, who died for our sins, and rose again that we might have eternal life as opposed to eternal death (damnation), and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit who changes us from what we are into what God created us to be.

I thought seriously of putting all this in an Open Letter to the Presiding Bishop and the Members of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church. Then I thought better of it. A long time ago my grandmother taught me that in specific situations a person would do better to “save one’s breath to cool one’s porridge.” This appears to me to be one of those situations. All the compelling points as to why the proposed action was inappropriate were made most notably by Bishops Howe, Love and Lawrence, and summarily rejected by the House of Bishops. The rush to depose Bishop Duncan overrode logic and justice and the deed was done. Why then revisit the issue with them? Would they be likely to recant? Alas, Babylon!