
Should The Anglican Communion Concern Us?

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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I am not always excited when some issue concerning the Anglican Communion appears in the evening newscasts or in the morning newspapers. Our primary "mass media" stories are either about catastrophe or conflict. We, the general population, will listen to news about floods, fires, and crashes or about some issue of perceived momentous conflict.

Most of the news about the Anglican Communion delivered in the public press since 2003, has been about perceived momentous conflict. I have done my share of responding, defending, justifying, applauding and complaining. But I have also taken the time, deliberately, not to respond.

The reason I have not been eager to respond to every new pronouncement or to every threatened ultimatum is that I have raised a family before. I have had my share of household members-including myself!-who have been all too eager to raise the urgent anxiety of our case in order to get our way. But in order to raise a family, I must realize that not every conflict is momentous. Not every conflict is urgent. Not every conflict is even a conflict.

There are really two ways to ask the present question about the Anglican Communion. Should the Anglican Communion concern us? My answer is "Yes." But: Should the Anglican Communion be perceived as a monolithic institution in momentous conflict? My answer is "No."

A bit of history: Some have claimed, rather legitimately, that it was the United States Episcopal Church that itself "created" the Anglican Communion of churches. Until we created a new church constitution, in 1789-a constitution which established both our independence from the Church of England and our devotion to its principles-there was only the Church of England. It was an Anglican Church spread abroad through colonialism.

John Booty, in a lovely little book titled *The Church in History*, describes well this early "holy community:" "The American descendant of the Church of England was to be a democratic church among other democratic churches cooperating with one another for the sake of the Gospel. [This] was something dramatically new in Anglicanism, appropriate to the realities and aspirations of the new nation. And yet, William White [to be the first bishop of Pennsylvania] did not consider that he was suggesting anything radically new. The democratic episcopal government for the Protestant Episcopal Church was modeled upon governmental structures in the early church, where "it was customary to debate and determine in a general concourse of all Christians in the same city; among whom the bishop was no more than a president.' (White, *The Case of the Episcopal Churches in the United States Considered*, 1782, page 8).

John Booty further reminds us that the first edition of the new Book of Common Prayer (1790) states that "it will also appear that this Church is far from intending to depart from the Church of England in any essential point of doctrine, discipline, or worship; or further than local circumstances require." "Here," says Booty, "they relied on the distinction between that which is essential to salvation and that which is not, that which may change and, indeed, must change with the times" (John Booty, *The Church in History*, pages 65-66).

Obvious to most of us, The Episcopal Church in 2003 made some clear decisions. They were made after decades of previous

debate and discussion. Most of us knew that others in the Anglican Communion were not in the same place as us; some of our friends in the same pew were not in the same place as us. We had made the same sort of decision when we allowed women to enter the ordination process. We were making decisions and statements "as local circumstances required."

Now, one easy way to describe present discussions within the wider Anglican Communion is that we continue to debate what is "essential" to the faith and what is "changeable." This type of discussion does not need to be characterized as momentous conflict. It will continue for a long time, no matter what dates or deadlines or requests are set before us. We have never been a worldwide, universal, and hierarchical church like our faithful friends in Roman Catholicism. We are truly a communion of churches, and we believe God works through that communion.

Meanwhile, I seriously doubt that the Episcopal Church will overturn previous statements on issues of sexuality. In fact, as most of you know, I hope we do not turn back at all. We still have a long way to go in appreciating the gifts and talents of every member of Christ's body; and we still have a long way to go in blessing wholesome and holy relationships. I have no problem with The Episcopal Church, within Christendom, being in a minority on some issues. In fact, when one includes Roman Catholicism and the Orthodox, it is very much a minority position in Christendom even to ordain women.

Ultimately, despite our political fascination with the majority and the minority, we Christians are not called finally to be either in the "majority" or in the "minority." We are called to be faithful to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That is the essential of the Christian faith. Though I wish it would, it will never be the role of the mass media to publicize the faith of the Episcopal Church! Indeed, that is our role. Speak faith to one another. In time, in God's time, the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ will lead us into all truth (John 16.13).

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