
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Staying in Relationship When It Costs You Something

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Dear Anna,

I've spoken recently with two people who left their churches because, as they put it, "things had become too political." Each meant something a little different. One disagreed with her rector's political views; the other didn't—he actually agreed with them—but he was tired of hearing about politics in church. "I hear that all week," he said. "I come to church to hear about God."

That resonates with me. Yet it also reminds me that any meaningful talk about politics depends on talking about God first. The real issue, I think, isn't whether we talk about politics in church, but how we do it.

As the Anglican theologian Luke Bretherton writes in "Christ and the Common Life," politics at its best isn't about parties or power—it's about how we live together without destroying one another. That, I think, is the kind of politics the church is called to practice. Every parish meal, every committee meeting, every shared prayer is a small rehearsal in how to live with people we didn't choose. In that sense, the church is profoundly political—not because it mirrors the rivalries of the wider world, but because it models a different way of belonging.

Bretherton calls the church a "school of neighborliness." It's where we learn to hold our differences without letting them harden into divisions. When the world says, "Pick a side," the church says, "Come to the table." The point isn't to erase disagreement, but to keep relationship alive within it.

This kind of politics doesn't make headlines. It's quieter. It looks like showing up when things are tense, staying when it would be easier to go, and listening until words lose their sharpness. The church's gift isn't perfection; it's perseverance—the willingness to remain in relationship even when it costs something.

My father used to say he'd rather be in relationship than be right. For years, I thought it was better to be right. Now I wonder if you can ever be right outside of relationship. After all, real relationship requires vulnerability, attention, and the willingness to be changed by the encounter.

This, I think, is how the church should talk about politics—not as a contest of ideas, but as the shaping of a common life. It's not about winning; it's about presence. It's the slow, holy work of being with one another in love, long enough for trust to become possible again.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames