

Grace Notes

Whitsuntide 2008

In the previous edition of this newsletter, I attempted to provide some background for the current controversy in The Episcopal Church by looking at it through the lens of what I called the "doctrine of inclusivity". Now I'd like to address the question of what course of action the parish ought to follow as we approach the time later this year when a decision regarding our status will have to be made.

Rector's Ruminations

The Strategy of "Realignment"

It may be helpful, especially to those who have not kept up with recent developments, to review what the Diocese of Pittsburgh did at its convention in November of 2007. That body voted, by a 6 to 1 margin among the clergy and by a 2 to 1 margin among the lay people, to amend the constitution of the diocese in order to open the way for a change of affiliation from The Episcopal Church (TEC) to another province of the Anglican Communion. This is what is meant by the often-heard term "realignment": a withdrawal from one Anglican "province" (geographical association of dioceses), and affiliation with another.

Since the diocesan constitution cannot be amended by the vote of only one annual convention, a second vote, scheduled for either October or November of this year, is necessary to ratify the change. If the resolution passes in both the clergy and lay "orders," the diocese will have removed itself from TEC and may then proceed to align with another province, probably the Province of the Southern Cone, which covers sub-equatorial Latin America.

The consequences of doing this are not yet entirely clear, although we are beginning to see how they are playing out in California, where the Diocese of San Joaquin has already taken a second vote and realigned with the Southern Cone. Parishes of that diocese that

are in disagreement with the decision have enlisted the help of TEC and have held an organizing convention to elect a new bishop and standing committee, and legal disputes involving the ownership of property will undoubtedly be moving into the courts. It promises to be a protracted battle with no certain outcome.

How do we decide?

Like all the other parishes and congregations of the diocese, Grace Episcopal Church is faced with the need to make a decision. How will we do that, and what will we decide?

First of all, it's important for you to understand that, on the part of the parish, the decision whether to remain with the Diocese of Pittsburgh (assuming the constitutional amendment passes on its second reading) or withdraw from it to continue in TEC rests with the duly elected vestry, not with the membership of the parish as a whole. (This is different from the way matters are handled, for instance, in Presbyterian churches, where congregational votes are taken to determine whether a local church changes its affiliation.) As a result, *we will not be holding a parish meeting to take a vote on whether to stay with the diocese or continue in TEC.* This does not mean that the vestry is not interested in what you think; in fact, the members of the vestry have been very much in touch with your concerns and opinions. But you have nominated and elected members of the vestry over the past several years with this controversy in mind, and in so doing have delegated to them authority to speak and act on behalf of the parish.

In a sense, no decision is actually necessary in order to stay with the diocese, because we are part of the diocese unless we choose otherwise. But whether or not to continue in TEC is also a choice, and your vestry and I are unanimous that this is not an option that we can in good conscience select. There are those in the diocese who are opposed to the direction that TEC is going, and yet do not agree with the strategy of realignment. They have decided that they will separate themselves from the diocese in order to continue in TEC as the "loyal opposition," seeking to bring about reform from within. Your vestry and I believe that, while this is well-intentioned, it is in all likelihood futile, given the record of the past thirty years and the unwavering determination of the leadership of TEC to follow through with its "progressive" and revisionist agenda.

The vestry, therefore, has decided that this parish must "cast its lot" with the diocese and with Bishop Duncan, whom we believe provides us with godly and principled leadership. The deputies from the parish who represent us at diocesan convention and will vote to follow that course include the two lay deputies elected by the vestry (Pat Kriever and Jim Vevers), and two clergy deputies who are canonically resident in the diocese and accordingly eligible to vote (myself and Fr. Ira). Deputies are not instructed by the vestry how they are to vote; rather, they are "deputized" to exercise their judgment and vote according to their conscience in the best interests of the parish.

Your part in the decision

What “say,” then, you might ask, do the members of the parish have in this decision? While there will be no congregational vote on the issue of realignment, *the parish membership will have an opportunity to either ratify or reject the decision made by the vestry.* At some point (possibly at our annual parish meeting in November) it will be necessary to amend the parish by-laws regarding membership in the parish. Currently, Article 2.2 reads as follows: “any member of the parish who shall disclaim or refuse conformity to the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, and of the Church in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, shall not be a member of the parish.” To choose to realign is, in effect, to choose to “disclaim or refuse conformity” to TEC,, and so unless the by-laws are changed, those who do so – including the entire vestry – will have removed themselves from the parish. The vote on the by-laws will, therefore, be a kind of parish referendum on the course of action chosen by the vestry.

This raises the question of who is eligible to vote in a parish meeting. The two basic criteria (in addition to the one mentioned above) are “membership” and “standing.” Members are those, 16 years of age or older, who have either been baptized or confirmed in the parish, transferred their membership from another Episcopal parish, or had their baptism in another tradition recorded in our parish register. To be considered “in good standing,” a member must be a communicant, recognized by the rector and wardens as an attender of services, and a “giver of record” during the previous year. If you do not meet these criteria, you will not be eligible to vote either in the election of vestry members or on the amendment of the parish by-laws. I am glad to speak with anyone who has questions about his or her status.

Upcoming congregational forums

In order better to inform you about realignment, and as a way of preparing the parish for an eventual vote on the amendment of the by-laws, the vestry and I have decided that we should hold congregational forums on a Sunday in September (date to be announced) at 12 NOON in Mt. Washington and at 7 PM that same day in Edgeworth. We have invited the Rev. Darrell Fenton, Executive Director of the Network of Anglican Communion Dioceses and Parishes, and Mr. Wicks Stephens, legal counsel to the Network, to speak to these forums about realignment and to answer any questions that you may have about it. Each congregation’s vestry members will be present, as will both its lay deputy to diocesan convention and the clergy deputies, and they will be available to listen to your concerns, as well as to explain their positions.

Our hope is that many of you will take advantage of this opportunity to ask the questions and express the concerns that may be on your heart. We would like to see the parish come through this difficult time in the life of the diocese and of the Episcopal

Church in as unified a manner as possible, “striving together,” as St. Paul says to the Philippians, “for the faith of the gospel.”

As always, however, there is room for those who disagree, and we welcome “all pilgrims to serve with us in furthering the Kingdom of God” in Mt. Washington and Edgeworth, regardless of any differences that may exist.

Please continue to pray for me and the members of our vestry, that we may lead this parish forward in the way God would have us to go, and be assured that you are all in my prayers regularly.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Fr. John

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“Come and see, follow and grow, go and tell!”