

FROM THE BISHOP'S DESK

Hardly a day goes by when I am not asked the question: "Are you going to take us out of the Episcopal Church?" Such a request indicates that the individual is unaware of the limits of power or authority a bishop in The Episcopal Church has. And, limits there are!

A bit of history might help us understand what is going on today and what is possible. At the time of the American Revolution there was not a single bishop in the Colonies. If one wanted to be confirmed or ordained it meant putting up with the dangers and difficulties of crossing the Atlantic in a small sailing ship. In deed, once the first priest ever to be elected as bishop on American soil considered what he would need to do to be consecrated, he knew that he would have to set sail for England. This is precisely what Samuel Seabury of Connecticut did.

Once in Britain, Seabury approached the bishops of the Church of England. His welcome, if you could call it that, was hardly a warm one. He was seen as one of the 'up-start' American Revolutionaries. Legally, a great hurdle stood in his way. Until that moment all bishops consecrated in the Church of England were required to swear allegiance to the Crown. This was precisely the one thing Seabury could not do. Consequently he was left to cool his heels for two years. During this time of discouragement he wrote letters back to friends and family in the newly forming nation. (To my knowledge these original letters are preserved, unedited, in Scotland to this day.) There seemed to be no way forward; and his strongest temptation was to turn around, unconsecrated, and return to the United States. At the darkest moment, however, the unexpected happened.

In Scotland, the Episcopal Church had been established quite separately from the State Church, which was Presbyterian. (Strangely enough as monarch over that country when the Queen of England is resident at her summer palace, Balmoral, she worships as a Presbyterian while in Scotland.) It was Scottish Bishops who came to Seabury. In exchange for certain promises, they offered to consecrate him a bishop. In accepting their offer he effectively tied the Church in the New World to Scotland. He promised: 1) to use the Scottish (not the English) Book of Common Prayer; 2) to change the name of the new Church from "the Church of England in the Colonies" to the EPISCOPAL Church thereby removing a name which could never be popular to those who had fought against England and no longer considered themselves colonials; and, finally, 3) to adopt the insignia or pale blue shield with the white cross of St. Andrew (Scotland's Patron Saint) rather than the white flag of St. George (England's Patron Saint) with its bold red cross. The unintended consequence of this action by the Scots eventually led the British to change their laws so that they could consecrate the next two American bishops. In so doing, perhaps without realizing where this would all lead, they created the first autonomous province of what would become our present day Anglican Communion .

There is a chapter in Church history that often remains untold yet continues to influence The Episcopal Church. While the war of the American Revolution raged on, many members of the Church wanted to remain loyal to the Crown. Their numbers were significant; and many of them escaped to re-locate in Canada leaving the American Church decimated. Those who remained in the colonies fighting for independence had little use for England with its pomp and ceremonies often connected to bishops who were members of the House of Lords. Many of these clergy were known

to maintain large palaces at great expense. The colonists, on the other hand, found that they had been able to get on very well, thank you, WITHOUT BISHOPS for years. It was noted, too, that not a single bishop from England had ever felt called to travel to the colonies. Now that a new government was being formed for the United States, titles, royalty, and a class system with preferment so familiar to those in Great Britain was scorned. Feelings in the new southern states were intense. Strong arguments were made to abandon the whole idea of bishops altogether!

When the first General Convention of the new Church met, there **were** no bishops. To this day when the General Convention of The Episcopal Church convenes every three years, it is the House of Deputies that is called “The Senior House”. Bishops are frequently reminded that they are only members of “The Junior House.” On a more serious level, however, it should be noted that even though the traditional role of the bishop is to be chief pastor, teacher and leader, when it comes to making important policy for the whole Church bishops cannot do this by themselves. Rather it takes the approval of **both** houses of General Convention.

Recently, then, while the House of Bishops in England voted to approve the Windsor Report produced by the 38 Archbishops and Primate of the Anglican Communion requiring the Episcopal Church to cease from blessing same-sex unions and electing men or women as bishops whose lifestyles caused scandal, it was pointed out in the **American House of Bishops** (who happened to be meeting at the same time) that the Junior House could NOT make policy decisions unilaterally. for the Church unilaterally. For this reason, The Episcopal Church was given extra time to reach a decision. We were allowed to defer our vote until the summer of 2006 when the matter could be brought before both houses of General Convention.

The first vote taken by the House of Bishops refused to ratify what was requested of us by the rest of the Anglican Communion. After a hurried all night meeting, a handful of bishops cobbled together a motion to be presented on the last day of Convention. Rules of Order were overlooked. Pressure to pass the motion in order to remain a constituent part of the Anglican Communion and to guarantee a seat at the Primates’ next meeting for the newly elected Presiding Bishop was unprecedented. What came out of the General Convention was woefully lacking and unacceptable. Given all of this, the Primates demonstrated an amazing generosity and charity.

Meeting in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania the Primates were willing to “go the extra mile” to preserve the Anglican Communion. They gave the American Church an additional six months, until September 30th –in fact– to revisit their request. There was no question that this date was a deadline. No-one knew what the consequences of rejecting the Primates’ request might be. Some have speculated that the Anglican Church of Canada –far more liberal than its American counterpart– saw the handwriting on the wall. Fearing, perhaps, they might be removed from the Anglican Communion they voted against publishing rites and ceremonies for the blessing of same-sex unions. Yet, as one Canadian bishop has warned, all is not what it seems, for at the same time they passed resolutions affirming the wholesomeness of homosexual unions.

It was an American bishop who invited the Archbishop of Canterbury to participate in the September meeting of the American House of Bishops in New Orleans. Significantly, this meeting was scheduled to conclude only days before the September deadline. Along with the Archbishop of

Canterbury members of the Primates' Steering Committee and the Anglican Consultative Council were invited. The Rt. Rev. Henry Luke Orombi, Archbishop of the Province of Uganda, spoke for some of them –however– when he announced he would decline this invitation because he knew that the American bishops would say nothing new. He spoke prophetically. What he could **not** have known was that the Archbishop of Canterbury would declare the date of September 30th had never been intended to be a deadline but only a point at which dialogue from different positions could begin. Since that announcement, it is likely that more than one Primate has spoken to the Archbishop, for he has modified what he said. The Global South, however, has not wavered. Those bishops **knew** what they had said in Dar es Salaam; and they are standing firm.

So, where does all this leave us? Two dioceses have positioned themselves to remain in the Anglican Communion should the American Church be asked to leave or be given a secondary status. “But,” you might ask, “what about **us**?” We have come full circle to where we began. The question “Are you going to take us out of The Episcopal Church?” has a simple and straightforward answer. “No.” No matter what I might believe is the right thing to do, I cannot take the diocese out of The Episcopal Church. I have **never** been able to do this. This is NOT because the present day mantra from New York is correct when it states, “Individuals can leave but Dioceses and Parishes cannot”. Such a notion has only recently been dreamed up. There is no Canon Law to substantiate this. Why? No-one ever contemplated the possibility of a diocese or a parish WANTING to leave.

The Episcopal Church is made up of autonomous dioceses who have **voluntarily** joined with others creating the General Convention. This was true from the very beginning when the first Convention was called. No National Church or General Convention has ever created an autonomous diocese. Dioceses need to exist prior coming into union with others. The reason that neither I nor any other bishop can remove a diocese is that this decision belongs **only** and **properly** to the clergy and people of the diocese. When a vote is taken, I will not be among those casting a ballot. Clearly it will be the will of the diocese as a whole and not that of a single person or even a small group of leaders.

The vote before us, as it will be before other dioceses, is not to **leave** The Episcopal Church. Rather, it will be to **remain** within the worldwide Anglican Communion with its heritage and universally accepted teaching based on the word of God. To this end, Primates in other parts of the world have been giving serious and prayerful consideration to welcoming into their Provinces dioceses that want to remain in the solid, biblical, traditional teaching of the Church down through the centuries and who want to continue to worship God through the liturgy we have always known. Those who claim they want to remain Episcopalians but reject the biblical standards of morality, the ultimate authority of the Bible, and the biblical revelation of God to us in His Son the **only** savior of mankind, will –in the end– be left solely with a name and a bureaucratic structure.

What is it, then, that we should be seeking? Where is the Lord in all of this? What is His perfect will? How can we glorify Him and advance His kingdom? Apart from these questions which lead us into His reign are not other concerns, ultimately, distractions? As we wait on Him to speak to our hearts, how essential it is to remember those who have asked the same questions in earlier times, whether during the American Revolution, the Civil War, or our present circumstances and have, indeed, heard His voice and been given the grace to be obedient.

+John- David