

Churchman

EDITORIAL

God Bless America

The triennial General Convention of the Episcopal Church has now come and gone, and with it the last hope of keeping that institution inside the Anglican Communion seems to have died. It is true that the Convention made a few gestures towards the Windsor Report which some people have interpreted as ‘compliance’ with its terms, but most observers, including many who would be sympathetic to the Episcopal Church’s official stance, have failed to see this. In their eyes, the Americans have not measured up to the test and, despite every warning, have deliberately chosen to walk apart from the rest of the Anglican Communion. What will happen next is anybody’s guess. It must not be forgotten that the Episcopal Church still includes many thousands who have not bowed the knee to the homosexual and radical feminist Baal, and most of them would be only too happy to come under the direct jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury rather than remain within their present structures. Failing Canterbury, they will settle for Rwanda or Nigeria, both of which have indicated their willingness to help out, or anywhere else that will take them in.

The plight of these orthodox American Anglicans is not properly understood outside the USA because it is generally assumed that the Episcopal Church functions like most other Anglican churches, allowing a wide variety of churchmanships and theologies to co-exist under a common institutional umbrella. This is not the case. The Episcopal Church is a federation of dioceses, each of which acts with almost complete autonomy and tends to be as homogeneous as possible. Thus ultra-liberal Newark sits alongside ultra-conservative Fort Worth, as far apart from each other as ECUSA is from Nigeria—or even further. The bishops have almost total control over who comes into the diocese, and so elements uncongenial to the dominant atmosphere can be kept out. Only in places where the takeover has been recent and there are still entrenched clergy from a previous era is variety likely to be found. Because of this, it is possible to be an Episcopalian in one part of the USA and hardly be in communion with one from another part of the same country. Furthermore, Americans are highly mobile, which creates a situation

where lay people are often left with little choice if they want to find a church of their preference. An Episcopalian moving from a conservative diocese to a liberal one may well have to go beyond the boundaries of ECUSA to one of the breakaway churches on the Anglican fringe to find the sort of church he has left behind. The rights and wrongs of these so-called 'schisms' are hard to determine, and a policy which confines recognition to the bishops remaining in communion with the ECUSA central organisation is fundamentally unjust. It is a solution which puts structures in the place of doctrine and which canonises the ungodly behaviour of some ECUSA bishops, who have virtually driven those opposed to them out of their dioceses.

If a clearly Bible-based Anglican Church could somehow be established in the USA it would stand to grow by leaps and bounds. Many people in conservative Protestant churches, as well as many Roman Catholics, secretly long for Anglicanism. The very conservative R. C. Sproul, a minister in the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) is about to publish a book called *A Taste of Heaven* in which he bemoans the loss of liturgy in Protestant churches and advocates something so much like Anglicanism as to be indistinguishable from it. Dr. Sproul cannot call it that though, partly because of his Presbyterian background, but also, and more importantly, because he has no real Anglican Church on which to model himself. Sydney is quite literally on the other side of the planet and the Africans are too culturally alien to make much of an impression, so he creates a virtual Anglican church without apparently realising that that is what he has done.

A wise, forward-looking and constructive Anglican Communion would just pull the plug on ECUSA, let it go its own way and start again, but there are powerful voices in the Church of England and elsewhere which stand in the way. One of these belongs to the Dean of Southwark, a man so unfamiliar with the gospel that he regards those who preach it as Taliban. He has claimed that there is widespread support for ECUSA in England and that any attempt to expel it from the Anglican Communion will be met with furious resistance, but his bluff needs to be called. When even the Archbishop of Canterbury speaks of the inevitability of schism, it is clear that things have moved beyond the usual limits of Anglican comprehensiveness and that something will have to give.

The only real question now is who will it be? The Church of England cannot

afford to side with ECUSA against the rest of the Anglican world, and it is unrealistic to expect it to do so. For every parish that houses a gay activist group there must be dozens who have missionary links with Africa and other parts of the world—at the grassroots level, most Anglicans in England have closer ties to places like Nigeria than they do to America, ‘kith and kin’ notwithstanding. It is also give and take. My own parish has a youth worker from Zimbabwe, missionaries in Kenya, an ordinand in training from Sri Lanka, and parishioners from Australia and Sierra Leone, but not an American in sight. How many more must there be like this? Choosing extravagantly rich America over dirt-poor Tanzania would be a public-relations disaster in the United Kingdom, even if the Americans support same-sex marriage for bishops and the Tanzanians do not. Poverty cries out for sympathy and redress in a way that a wealthy consumer society intent on indulging its sexual fantasies can hardly hope to match. Few Episcopalians seem to understand this, assuming that the Church of England consists of people like themselves (only a generation or so behind them in cultural terms) and that the conservative elements within it are as weak as they are in the USA. They simply have no idea of how they are viewed by the rest of the world—arrogant, self-absorbed and utterly worldly in the way in which they treat each other, let alone outsiders.

Many American Episcopalians would be delighted if the Church of England could give a lead in this situation, but sadly this must be doubted. The recent election of a woman as presiding bishop has been rejected by American conservatives as being both unbiblical in itself and provocative in the context of the Anglican Communion, but this has not prevented supporters of women bishops in England from making great capital out of the event, as if it were somehow the gateway to introducing women bishops here as well. That will probably happen in due course, and there is little sign that those opposed to this will be able to maintain their position within the Church for very long. Some transitional provisions will doubtless be made but they are unlikely to be very secure. The divisions between high and low church opponents do not make life any easier, and it is not impossible that the end result will be a solution satisfactory to Evangelicals (on paper) but staffed entirely by Anglo-Catholics (in practice) because relatively few Evangelicals feel strongly enough about the issue to be willing to rock the boat as far as ecclesiastical structures are concerned. Evangelicals are more clearly opposed to practising homosexuals, but as the American experience shows, the two things are inextricably

linked as part of a wider liberal programme. Get the women in first and the gays will follow is the strategy; sadly there are many good people who cannot see that far ahead. They will vote for the women and then shake their heads when the gays appear—but it will be too late. The likelihood is that in twenty years or so the Church of England will be in the same boat that the Episcopal Church is in now, and there will be nobody strong enough or determined enough to rescue it from its own folly.

If the American Church is going to recover it will probably be because bishops and churches from the developing world will have taken the initiative and acted on their own. Already it appears that there will be no Lambeth Conference in 2008 if the wishes of these churches are not taken into account, and the Church of England will be split (at least in the House of Bishops) if that happens. It may be that there will be two rival gatherings in 2008, each of them claiming to be the 'real' Lambeth and both doing whatever they can to find support in the rest of the Anglican Communion. It is not a pretty prospect, but it may be inevitable. If it happens, the Church of England will have no-one to blame but itself, for having appointed so many ungodly bishops and kept worthy preachers of the gospel out of episcopal office because they are too 'narrow'.

Meanwhile, the Americans will have gone their own way and perhaps found a new equilibrium of their own. As in England, the dissenters in the USA are divided among themselves—into high, low and charismatic wings, to be precise. They have formed an uneasy coalition in the so-called Anglican Mission in America (AMiA) but they tend to be united more about what they do not want than about what they do. A natural leader has yet to emerge, and he may well provoke more division than unity in the church as a whole. The best hope for them is that some outside authority, from Africa, Asia or perhaps Australia, can act as a force for unity, knock heads (and egos) together and get the show on the road. Americans are a dynamic and resourceful people, and once they are galvanized and properly led, there will be no stopping them. Let us pray that this will happen before it is too late, and that in the end they will set an example for the discouraged and divided conservatives in the Church of England and elsewhere to follow, as the brave new church of the politically correct continues on its inexorable decline into oblivion.

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