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A Look at North American Anglicanism Not in Communion with Canterbury

By Revd Chris Pierce

North American Anglican jurisdictions not in communion with Canterbury are a varied lot, and almost completely confined to the USA. What one finds in the USA, one finds in Canada, just on a smaller scale. Before the St. Louis Congress in 1977, Anglican jurisdictions not in communion with Canterbury were few in number. The Reformed Episcopal Church of the United States was the most prominent and largest. It broke with the mainline Protestant Episcopal Church, USA (now operating as ECUSA) in 1873 over issues stemming from the advance of the theological peculiarities of the Tractarian Movement.

Prior to the St. Louis Congress, keeping up with those jurisdictions not in communion with Canterbury was fairly simple. Since the St. Louis Congress it is anything but simple. Indeed, frustrations build quickly in trying to keep details straight...the easy thing would be to adopt a conspiracy theory approach and say the whole matter is a joint effort between Wippell's and C.M. Almy to increase the sales of clerical haberdashery, but to do so would be a grave injustice to all involved. Various press reports put the number of "continuing" Anglican jurisdictions somewhere between 20 and 40.

Before going further, let's define some terms. Many people call all Anglicans in North America, not in communion with Canterbury, Continuers, or Continuing Anglicans.... generically speaking they are referred to as belonging to the "Continuum." Such an approach is incorrect. The "Continuing" jurisdictions are those that are outgrowths of the St. Louis Congress of 1977 convened after the first ordinations of women to the diaconate and presbyterate.

The Reformed Episcopal Church is in similar circumstances to that of the Free Church of England and the Church of England in South Africa and is rightly termed as a "separated" Anglican body. The REC doesn't ordain women to either office but does have a lay order of deaconesses. Ironically, the REC, as a separated Anglican body, has identical theological commitments on paper (and historically) with the C of E. Its Prayer Book is the 1662 BCP with a few additions from the 1928 PECUSA Prayer Book although parishes may still use the previous REC liturgy. Its Articles of Religion are the XXXIX Articles of Religion of the C of E (subscription, not assent is required), adapted only to its non-established situation, yet the REC isn't officially recognised by Canterbury.

An aside.... before the vote was taken on Vicki Gene Robinson's election to the bishopric of New Hampshire, the last ECUSA General Convention passed a resolution acknowledging the work of the ECUSA House of Bishops in the early 1940s regarding the positive validity of REC orders. It called for further discussion and a final report to be brought to the next GC. After the consent was given to Robinson's election, the bishops of the REC publicly suspended all discussions with ECUSA.

The much cussed and discussed Anglican Mission in America (AMiA) falls in an altogether different category.... physically located in the USA, but technically a mission, sponsored by and answerable to, the Archbishop and Anglican Province of Rwanda and the Archbishop of Southeast Asia.

The bishops of the AMiA have not ordained women as yet, and may never. AMiA has allowed for a couple of self-professed evangelical ECUSA female clergy to come under its care pending the outcome of the group's two year long theological study of the matter.... which should be made public before many more weeks. AMiA parishes may use any BCP so long as its teaching is in agreement with the 1662 book. AMiA also requires subscription to the XXXIX Articles of Religion. AMiA, although not recognised by Canterbury as an official work, still considers itself in

Communion with Canterbury through its sponsoring archbishops and province. This author's personal speculation is that AMiA will conclude that female ordination to the priesthood is beyond the pale of biblical orthodoxy.

According to Mrs. Auburn Traycik publisher of, "The Christian Challenge" (a four decade old periodical with wide circulation amongst the jurisdictions of the Continuum), the major bodies that were formed out of the St. Louis Congress were: the Anglican Catholic Church (ACC); the Anglican Province of Christ the King (APCK); and the Anglican Church in America (ACA). The Anglican Province in America (APA) was formed out of an early re-alignment from within the original "Continuing Movement." In a recent story, Mrs. Traycik estimated that the APCK has membership of 7,000, and that the ACC and ACA have membership in the USA between 5,000 and 6,000 each.

The ACA is also part of the international, Traditional Anglican Communion (TAC). Internationally, the TAC claims over 100,000 members. Eighty thousand are found in India; 20,000 in South Africa; and Australia has a TAC membership of 5,000. An Australian, The Most Revd John Hepworth, is Primate of the TAC.

Almost all of the continuing jurisdictions point to the theological statement formulated at the St. Louis Congress of 1977, the Affirmation of St. Louis, as a point of common ground between themselves. (See www.anglican catholic.org/stlouis.html) Most use the 1928 BCP. There are however, some parishes that use the Anglican Missal (of Roman Catholic origin) for their liturgy...but this is also true of Anglo-Catholic parishes within the ECUSA.

The Revd Dr. Louis Tarsitano, Rector of St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Savannah, Georgia, is a self described Prayer Book evangelical. In addition to his pastoral responsibilities, he is or has been, an author (of several books), educator (seminary and college Prof.), and an associate editor of, "Touchstone" magazine. He was brought up in the Roman Catholic faith. While in RC minor seminary, his studies brought him to the scriptures and the BCP so he converted. He was ordained in the ECUSA, but was eventually driven out over the ordination of women and the forced adoption of the 1979 Prayer Book. Before leaving ECUSA, Tarsitano was the rector of a 1,200+-member parish in Denver, Colorado. Having been on both sides of the fence (in ECUSA and now out), he is a clear-eyed observer of North American Anglicanism.

Tarsitano, now canonically resident within the Anglican Church in America, had the following to say when asked for his take on Continuing Churches.

"One of the realities, and complicating factors, of the formation of the Continuing Churches after 1976, was that the greater number of the clergymen involved were Anglo-Catholics, rather than Evangelicals. Most American Evangelicals would not stick their necks out or lose their positions and benefits over an arguably heretical replacement Prayer Book or the "ordination" of women. Philip Edgecumbe Hughes was a notable exception, along with rectors like Houston's Robert Ingram. Thus, while perhaps a majority of the laity that joined the Continuing Churches were ordinary Prayer Book Churchmen, and likewise a minority of the members of the clergy, there was very little in the way of classical Evangelical or classical Prayer Book Anglicanism in the leadership of the new jurisdictions. This imbalance has been the major source of turmoil within and among the Continuing Churches."

It would seem to any serious observer that the matter of women in ordained ministry is a major point of conflict between Continuing jurisdictions, the REC, and Evangelicals still left in ECUSA. The REC and the jurisdictions of the Continuum are firmly opposed to the practice. Evangelicals still in ECUSA generally support it.... and if they don't support it, almost without exception they maintain a silent opposition. It is my experience that many Evangelicals remaining in ECUSA have no idea as to how strongly their "separated" and "continuing" Anglican (Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic alike) brethren oppose the ordination of women. They are flummoxed when the depth of opposition finds voice, and few can articulate it more clearly than Tarsitano.

"American Evangelicals in ECUSA have still not faced the fact that their acceptance of an unscriptural innovation such as the "ordination" of women was the necessary prelude to the unscriptural innovation of approving homosexual relations."

He continued:

"American Evangelicals have generally not been able to cooperate with Continuing Churchmen or

with the Reformed Episcopal Church because of the selectivity of their faithfulness to the Bible. Many ECUSA Evangelicals treat concerns about the lack of Scriptural warrants for the "ordination" of women as a trivial eccentricity, while demanding that all share their primarily emotional response to the current abomination of baptizing homosexuality.

“The insistence on the part of many ECUSA Evangelicals that any effort to address the current apostasy of the ECUSA must include women ministers is guaranteed to divide Anglican traditionalists and conservatives in America. They have, ironically, rediscovered the formula for creating a divided ‘continuing church,’ with the new dividing factor being the split between ‘progressive’ Evangelicals and the rest of the Anglican spectrum: traditional Evangelicals, Prayer Book Churchmen, High Churchmen, and Anglo-Catholics.”

As large an impediment to unity as female ordination happens to be...another, perhaps larger long-term impediment, is that of the widespread divorce and remarriage amongst clergy and laity. Sadly, neither clergy nor laity who divorce and remarry (in ECUSA or Continuing Churches) are an oddity.

In 1998, pollster George Barna found that 25% of all mainline Christian church members have been divorced and remarried (he found that only 21% of Atheists and Agnostics had been). Further research in 2001 showed that 12% of all senior pastors have been divorced and all but 3% had remarried. I couldn't find data on associate clergy. It would seem, at least statistically speaking, that the sins of divorce and remarriage of the clergy and laity are sins of larger numerical proportions within the life of the church than the sins of homosexual priests or couples.

It is transparently clear that the pro-homosexual lobby is correct in crying hypocrisy when self-described “evangelicals”(publicly holding to a high view of scripture) use the Bible to point out their sexual errors, yet refuse to bend their knees to the clear biblical prohibitions against female ordination and divorce and remarriage. Pro-homosexual forces see little difference between their cultural contextualisation of their pet sins, and the contextualisation done by evangelical and continuing Anglicans with their own. They argue that Evangelicals and Continuers are only against homosexual sins, not those committed by heterosexuals.

The story of North American Anglicanism not in communion with Canterbury is just as was stated earlier, a varied one. Criticisms on some points are thus quite justified. Hopefully, there will be a successful move in the near future to re-establish the historic Anglican Formularies in their rightful....and needed positions of influence and authority.

As confusing and disorienting as all of this can be, Tarsitano offers a sage-like assessment: “The Continuing Churches are not ends in themselves, but part of the recovery of traditional Anglicanism in America. Complaints that these people are disorderly, coming from members of today's ECUSA, are rather like complaints that, denied the use of the lifeboats, the steerage class passengers have tried to lash together a raft in the hope of eventually being rescued. So far, however, that rescue, which needs to come from other Anglican national churches, has never come.”

In spite of some of the problems, the Anglican expression of the Christian faith on this continent is a vibrant one. There are movements afoot to encourage greater unity. There are some signs that such efforts are gaining traction. For instance, a retired conservative ECUSA diocesan bishop participated in the ordination of a priest in the REC.

There are other churchmanship and theological issues that will have to be squarely faced if ever true unity is to occur. However, at the moment, all of N. American Anglicanism is abuzz over the recent actions of the ECUSA General Convention. Evangelicals still in ECUSA have scheduled a meeting in Plano, Texas, for early October to try to find a path forward. This might prove productive, coming as it does on the heels of the General Convention 2003 and the U.S. Anglican Congress from last December. That meeting was a trans-jurisdictional conference which saw episcopal, presbyteral, and lay leadership from most of the Anglican bodies in North America. Many of those in attendance believe that something great happened as a result.

Perhaps we're on the cusp of a true reformation within Anglicanism in North America....only time will tell.

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