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PROFESSOR FRANK KIRKPATRICK SAYS ANGLICAN COMMUNION SHOULD BE OPEN TO SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS



(l) Frank Kirkpatrick '64, Ellsworth Morton Tracy Lecturer and Professor of Religion

Hartford, Conn. - Frank Kirkpatrick, Ellsworth Morton Tracy Lecturer and Professor of Religion at Trinity College, and author of *The Episcopal Church in Crisis: How Sex, the Bible, and Authority are Dividing the Faithful*, delivered this year's Shirley G. Wassong Memorial Lecture to a full McCook Auditorium on Monday night. Kirkpatrick focused on dissension in the Anglican Communion, caused by disagreements in fundamental beliefs and moral practices, primarily stemming from the controversy of whether to accept same-sex relationships and gay and lesbian clergy.

The Anglican Church has been struggling with this issue since 2003, when the first openly gay Episcopal bishop, V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, was consecrated, causing an uproar in the Anglican Communion and creating a deep rift both within the Episcopal Church of the United States and between it and the Anglican Communion as a whole. Within the Anglican Communion, opposition to the Americans' decision to accept gay bishops was strongest in Africa, threatening to divide African dioceses from Americans.

In the U.S., disagreement over Robinson's consecration led many individual parishes, and even the Bishop of Pittsburgh, a Trinity graduate, to break with the Episcopal Church. Within the Anglican Communion as a whole, the dispute caused a serious rift between more conservative Anglican provinces in Africa and those more liberal provinces in the US and Canada. Kirkpatrick noted that the dispute has led to some historically ironic developments, among them, Pope Benedict XVI's move to welcome disenchanted Anglicans into the Catholic church, including Anglican priests who are married, and the decision by Episcopalian churches in South Carolina—the same churches that 150 years ago actively defended the institution of slavery on Biblical grounds—to accept the authority of conservative African bishops rather than bishops in the US who support the ordination of gays.

Kirkpatrick argued that a "close-minded obsession with finding moral purity will lead to further splintering" of the Anglican Communion, and maintains that the opposition to homosexuality does not conform to the four authorities to which Anglicans have traditionally turned to settle disputes: scripture, reason, tradition, and increasingly, Kirkpatrick argues, experience. Experience, reason, and tradition, Kirkpatrick argues, favor the blessing of loving relationships, regardless of gender, Kirkpatrick says, and he argues that the scripture passages most often cited to support bans on homosexuality are, at best, ambiguous on the issue when one considers the historical contexts in which they were written. He says that a resistance to same-sex couples ignores experience, and is not in the best interest of the future of the Communion, or in the spirit of the religion, while history teaches us that quests for moral purity often lead to fanaticism and even terrorism. Kirkpatrick said that the main criterion of the Anglican Communion should be to strive for "an acceptance of flourishing relationships grounded in love regardless of gender."



Joseph F. Wassong, Jr. '59 (left) and Frank Kirkpatrick '64 in the Faculty Club prior to the lecture

On the specific topic of marriage, Kirkpatrick suggested the Church should get out of the civil marriage business altogether and stop serving as an agent of the State. He said the Church should continue to bless the unions of those who are legally married, but he questioned whether priests should

perform legal weddings on behalf of the State. "Why should the Church be the agent of the state?" he asked.

In conclusion, Kirkpatrick predicted that those resistant in the Communion would struggle to combat the acceptance of same-sex relationships, while there are increasing numbers of non-gay persons who are tolerant of same-sex relationships. The lecture drew attendance from local churches as well as Trinity students and faculty.

The Shirley G. Wassong Memorial Lecture in European and American Art, Culture, and History was established in 1996 in memory of Mrs. Wassong, with the support of friends, family, and her husband Joseph F. Wassong, Jr., Trinity Class of 1959. The annual lecture features members of Trinity's faculty and guest scholars in alternating years, who represent a variety of academic disciplines and areas of interest ranging from antiquity to the present day.

Biographical Sketch: A 1964 graduate of the College (majoring in religion), Professor Kirkpatrick has a master's degree in comparative religion from Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary (1966) and a Ph.D. in religious studies from Brown University (1970). A member of Trinity's faculty since 1969, Professor Kirkpatrick seeks to engage students in the ongoing conversations about religious and philosophical ideas that have influenced western civilization. His own studies of the philosophy of religion, Christian social ethics, and the history of Christian thought in the West have led him to publish six books, co-author a general textbook in the field of ethics, and write numerous articles in scholarly journals, as well as op-ed pieces and topical analyses of current religious events. His latest book—*The Episcopal Church in Crisis: How Sex, the Bible, and Authority Are Dividing the Faithful* (Greenwood/Praeger, 2008), part of the Religion, Politics, and Public Life Series produced under the auspices of Trinity's Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life—explores the controversies surrounding homosexuality and the authority of the Bible within the Anglican communion.

Wassong Lecture March 15, 2010

Thank you for this honor.

All religious communities struggle with challenges to their teachings and practices and these challenges are most painful when they come from within. At some point in almost all religions dissidents arise seeking reform, or purification, of what in their opinion are corrupt practices and ideas that have begun to infect the health of the whole body. Sometimes, if the organized religion is powerful enough, these dissidents are simply dispatched or exiled as heretics. Sometimes they are marginalized or ignored. And sometimes the dissidents prevail and the religious body itself is fundamentally changed as a result of the dissent, especially when the fever generated by the dissent is contagious enough to attract an international following.

Today, most contemporary mainline religious bodies/organizations/communities in the United States are facing some forms of dissension within their ranks. In most cases these in-house disputes have to do with disagreements over how to interpret the authoritative texts on which their fundamental beliefs and moral practices rest and through which they are given legitimacy. This is the issue, as the dissidents would frame it, of orthodoxy versus heresy, of what some today like to call fidelity to the "faith once delivered to the saints" standing boldly against the corrupting acids of secularism and trendiness. In the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) the essential religious authorities for orthodox belief and practice have been sacred texts (the Bible or the Koran), and the persons identified by those religions as the authoritative interpreters of those texts. In many cases today, the authority of the sacred text and its interpretation and the authority of those sanctioned to interpret it (pastors, priests, theologians, rabbis, bishops, the Pope, mullahs, imams, councils, synods, conclaves, conventions, etc.) are precisely what is being challenged by those on opposing sides of the issue of sexuality, and more particularly, of homosexuality.

As a result of challenges to the reading of the Bible on the issue of homosexuality the unity and harmony of some leading religious communities and the authorities who preside over them have come under attack.

What I would like to do in my remarks this evening is to explore how one religious body with international affiliations has come to grips with dissent and challenge around the issue of homosexuality and what the consequences are for that body with respect to the authorities to which it looks for moral guidance and orthodox teaching. I then will briefly touch on the underlying issues that other religious communities share with the religious community on which I will focus and what we might learn from its attempt to deal with them.

I have to acknowledge right up front, however, that these religious in-house disputes are increasingly irrelevant for many people who are drifting away from organized religion altogether and into what is called the ‘none-zone’, those who, responding to pollsters when asked what their religious affiliation is, simply say “none”. This disaffection with organized religion in general may turn out to be more important than the in-house conflicts that afflict the mainline religious communities.

What I will do this evening is explore the conflict presently roiling a mainline religious denomination that on the surface was historically so morally conservative and socially prominent that it was known as the Republican Party at prayer. I am referring to the Episcopal Church in the United States. Not only does it have an historical pedigree in people such as George Washington who was nominally affiliated with it, but it is also linked to a world-wide body called the Anglican Communion (which is not itself a Church but a fellowship of churches which were historically linked to the Church of England). Because of this link the travails of the Episcopal Church have to be seen in a global context, making them instructive for other religious bodies that claim universal and not just parochial appeal. In looking at the internal problems of the Episcopal Church and how it has attempted to deal with them we will be able to see how the modern world is both threatening some eternal verities and providing opportunity for creative change in religious communities, and how these communities can respond to internal dissent without splitting into two (or even more) opposing bodies.

While my talk will be primarily historical and descriptive in nature, I will not, at the end, refrain from making some suggestions as to how the conflict might be resolved in keeping with the tradition that has been normative for most Episcopalians and their Anglican brothers and sisters.

I will explore the consequences for religious institutions of attempts to “purify” them of false doctrine and practice; to base orthodoxy on a particular, even a-historical reading of the sacred texts; to determine what kinds of human experience are regarded as worthy of recognition; to create institutional structures for dividing the orthodox from the heretical; and to resolve ecclesiastical and doctrinal disputes by the creation of new authoritative structures that have not been part of a church’s tradition.

Our story begins on June 7, 2003, when an openly gay, partnered Episcopal priest, Gene Robinson, (proving perhaps that there is a gay Gene) was elected by the small diocese of New Hampshire to be its next bishop.

Gay priests and bishops, of course, have been in the Christian church since the first century, though they remained, for the most part, in the closet. Gene Robinson had been out of the closet long before his election as bishop and his election did not begin the crisis in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. Nevertheless it brought worldwide attention to how one denomination was handling the issue of homosexuality both domestically as well as internationally.

This is a story about how a group of people are struggling over how to understand and apply the authority of an ancient text, the Bible, which all sides regard as in some sense normative. The

problem is in agreeing on what that normativity means: what the role of interpretation is (some of the most conservative members of the Communion think the Bible does not require interpretation because its meaning is clear on its face), how it is relevant in different cultural and historical contexts, especially in previously colonized countries in Africa and Asia, and how it is compatible with other authorities to which this Church has looked historically. For the conservatives the issue is how to retain what they regard as absolute, unchanging truths in the midst of historical change. For the liberals the issue is how to be prophetic and speak credibly to new realities brought about by changing historical conditions.

Although they prefer the word ‘orthodox’, conservatives are deeply opposed to what they believe are the misguided actions that are attempting to strip the Church of those essentials that need to be conserved if it is to remain true to what they call “the faith once delivered to the saints.” They believe that this faith is under continual attack by the ‘world’, a term which means for them secularism, the absence of God from the structures and principles that shape both contemporary culture and the church. Secularism, or “paganizing forces”ⁱ, has substituted itself for traditional church teaching, replacing it with an emphasis on social justice issues, an idolatrous yearning for ‘relevance’ and an indiscriminate ‘inclusion’ and toleration of incompatible beliefs, all motivated by autonomous individualism, subjective judgment, a lack of appreciation for the radical nature of human sin, and a cowardly tolerance for ambiguity in the thought and interpretation of sacred authorities.ⁱⁱ The Achilles heel of mainline Episcopalianism, according to one of its critics, is a “penchant for over-adaptation to its envioning culture.” The faith which the conservatives defend is generally regarded by them as transhistorical, protected by the Holy Spirit from the contingencies of human history which threaten to relativize essential and eternal truths. Conservatives are suspicious, for example, of modern biblical scholarship that relies too much on the historical context of Biblical writings as a basis for discerning (and often dismissing) what their authors meant. For conservatives, the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and traditional teachings is the only authoritative interpreter of scripture. The authority of the Church must also be tied to its being ‘ordered’ and structured, living in faithful conformity to the historic creeds and councils of the Church, and the teachings of the bishops who stand as the guardians of the faith. Conservatives also believe that the false prophets (most of whom are in the Europe and North America, now referred to simply as the Global North) have a completely unjustified optimism about human nature and are naively overconfident that social progress can yield unalloyed benefits for all persons. This false view of human nature feeds directly into the liberals’ attraction to justice agendas for the oppressed and marginalized. Conservatives maintain that the core beliefs must not be relativized, historicized, or psychologized in order to fit contemporary sensibilities.

By contrast, liberals are those who read the Bible far less literally, though they do assume that there are some general principles that guide its interpretation and to which they feel themselves bound: these are, in particular, the principles of social justice and compassion for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed, principles they find primarily in the writings of the Hebrew prophets and in the quasi-communistic practices of the earliest Christian churches.

I only have time to touch on some of the key elements in this story so allow me to introduce you at the outset to the sometimes arcane world of the Episcopal Church and the international body with which it claims affiliation, The Anglican Communion. As I go through this you can refer to the handout that was given to you.

The Episcopal Church in the United States traces its history back to the Church of England (or Anglican Church) which broke from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century over the issue of

the appropriate authority for the Roman Church in England: the Pope or the King. Henry the VIII, without renouncing traditional Catholic doctrine, declared himself to be the head of the Church in England and this designation is still given today to the reigning monarch of the UK.

The Episcopal Church came into existence once the United States officially separated from England, even though it continued to recognize its historical descent from the Church of England. Those congregations that consider themselves bound to the polity of the Episcopal Church that exist in geographical proximity to each other constitute a unit known as a diocese over which a duly elected bishop is expected to provide oversight. And the dioceses that constitute a nation, country, or large geographical area are called "Provinces." They each have an arch-bishop, presiding bishop or, as they are quaintly known, a Primate (pronounced 'pri-met' to avoid being confused with baboons or apes), who provides some kind of oversight of all the dioceses within the province but whose juridical power in the United States is extremely limited. Each province has its own governance structure and in the Episcopal Church it is the General Convention, meeting every three years, and voting in two houses, one of bishops and the other of lay and priest delegates or deputies.

And finally, all the provinces (presently 38) that consider themselves in historic descent from the Church of England and in continuing relationship with the Archbishop of Canterbury, a crown appointee, constitute the Anglican Communion. Historically, power in the Communion resides solely in the legislative actions of the Provinces (and within them in the actions of diocesan conventions or synods). The Provinces have historically claimed juridical 'autonomy' in relation to the other provinces and from the Communion as a whole, while at the same time claiming a unity with them in spirit. It is the lack of clarity about these juridical relationships that has troubled the waters of the Communion because the conservatives want the Communion to be authoritative enough to punish the Episcopal Church for approving Gene Robinson's election and the Communion, by tradition, has no canonical power to do so.

Central to the power issue in the Communion is an every 10 year event, known as the Lambeth Conference, to which the Archbishop of Canterbury invites all the Bishops in the Anglican Communion. Together, the Lambeth Conference, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the meetings of the Primates, and a newly formed group known as the Anglican Consultative Council (the only body to have priests and laity, and not just bishops, comprising its membership), constitute the four so-called "instruments of Unity or communion" which have some kind of undefined authority for all those who belong to the Anglican Communion.

In addition to these 4 groups the Anglican Communion has also generally recognized 3 different sources of authority for belief and practice:

Scripture (the interpretation of which is now being contested), as containing all things necessary for salvation

Reason (part of God's gift to humankind), and

Tradition (those essentials of the faith which have been taught with relative consistency over the centuries by the Church through its councils)

And more recently, though never officially endorsed but increasingly accepted in practice, is a fourth authority, the authority of Experience. It is this last authority on which I will argue that the resolution of the current crisis may well turn.

One of the problems the Communion has set for itself is reconciling these authorities with each other and figuring out what to do when one or more of them conflict.

To get to the heart of the current crisis we have to go to an event, prior to the election of Gene Robinson, which occurred at the Lambeth Conference in 1998. At that conference, for the first time in

its history (stretching back to 1867), the formerly colonized African and Asian bishops of what they now call the Global South, exercised a voice not heard in such numbers and force at previous Lambeths. Their voices and votes in 1998 were in part a rebellion by formerly colonized subjects against the descendents of their former almost all white European and American overseers, the very people whose ancestors had exported Christianity (heavily tinged with a Victorian morality and a quasi-fundamentalist reading of the Bible) into their homelands in the first place.

Allied with their conservative North American colleagues, these bishops at Lambeth in 1998 passed a notorious (but non-binding) resolution known as I.10 which has become the touchstone of conservative opposition to the Episcopal Church ever since. It said that the Communion

“in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage.” It did recognize the need to listen to the experience of persons having a homosexual orientation but it felt compelled to reject homosexual practice as ‘incompatible with Scripture’ and for that reason could not “advise legitimizing or blessing same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions”.

The response to that resolution has been the thread that ties together the acrimony and dissension now playing itself out within the Episcopal Church and the larger Anglican Communion.

What I would argue is that the conservative response to the present crisis, which it is chiefly responsible for precipitating in its desire for purity of thought and practice, fundamentally fails to adhere to any of the four traditional authorities to which Anglicanism has looked historically, even while conservatives proclaim that their position alone represents the true church.

Their views, I believe, fail to be faithful to the traditions of Anglicanism, fail to recognize the authority of reason, fail to acknowledge the findings of recent Biblical scholarship, and ultimately, fail the test of experience, especially the experience of faithful, and loving, gay and lesbian persons in the Church and those who uphold their relationships.

Let’s begin with tradition: Anglicanism itself began by provoking a crisis in the Church, challenging the traditional authority of the Pope over the Church in England. Second, Anglicanism has traditionally embraced what it calls comprehensiveness: a willingness to live together with a variety of points of view, some even conflicting with each other, because it believes that historically conditioned human beings are not in a position to see reality exactly as God sees it, and are not, therefore, able to articulate with absolute precision, once and for all time, exactly what the faithful must believe to be members of the church. It has accepted the ambiguities that surround any attempts to define the faith in precise terms, and the fallibility of people as they try to articulate the meaning of their experience. (In so doing Anglicanism turns around the conservative argument about liberals not appreciating sin, by pointing out that if we are all sinners, none of us can claim absolute truth for our own partial and contextually qualified views). Whatever truth is given by God, we have it in earthen vessels. By emphasizing comprehensiveness, the tradition of Anglicanism puts conservatives in the ironic position of choosing to leave the Episcopal Church because they cannot abide being in communion with people who think differently and thereby they abandon the tradition of comprehensiveness, whereas the liberals are generally willing to live alongside the conservatives without insisting on a common set of theological beliefs. Conservatives are leaving because they believe the true church has ceased to exist because it has become too comprehensive, even though traditionally the limits of comprehensiveness have never been authoritatively defined.

Historically, in its tradition, Anglicanism has accepted practices that were initially regarded as “irregular” and only later approved retroactively. For example, in the founding of the Episcopal

Church in the United States, the first bishop, Samuel Seabury, had to seek ordination irregularly at the hands of Scottish bishops whose relationship with their English episcopal counterparts was, at best, rather strained.

The Lambeth Conferences, never having had any official authority over the Provinces constituting the Anglican Communion, came about in part to deal with ‘irregular’ actions by some bishops and provinces. The first Lambeth Conference was called in 1867 to take up the so-called John Colenso affair: he was the bishop of Natal in Africa who had questioned the literal truth of Bible and tried to adapt practices of the Church in Africa to the traditions and practices of the Zulus, accepting along the way many native customs, including polygamy. He was not removed from office and the Communion did not split.

The 1948 Lambeth was one of the first to deal with the question of what constitutes the nature of authority in the Anglican Communion.

The gathering issued a report noting that the Communion rests on a territorial principle and does not require a “single pattern or mould to standardize Church policy” nor do the churches that comprise the Communion recognize any peculiar authority as being vested in the Archbishop of Canterbury.”ⁱⁱⁱ The provinces are recognized to be “each autonomous in its own sphere, and each in full communion with the Anglican Communion.” However, the Lambeth bishops in 1948 were deeply concerned about finding a basis for order in the Church, and they asked the crucial question, applicable with some revision to all religious bodies still today: “is Anglicanism based on a sufficiently coherent form of authority to form the nucleus of a world-wide fellowship of Churches, or does its comprehensiveness conceal internal divisions which may cause its disruption?”

That question is still in the process of being answered and living between the question and the answer has proved extremely difficult for many in the Anglican Communion.

The struggle for women’s ordination is another telling example of how the Communion dealt with the diversity and irregularity of practice both between different provinces and within them, without splitting apart completely.

Historically the Christian Churches regarded women, in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, as “defective and misbegotten” as compared to men and therefore ineligible for ordination.

While perhaps not accepting every part of that view The Episcopal Church up until the 1970s had never permitted women priests. But in 1973, the General Convention barely defeated a motion to affirm the ordination of women.

The issue returned the following year when eleven women were ordained as priests by four bishops. All the participants seem to agree that this was an ‘irregular’ ordination because it had not been sanctioned by the General Convention. But, they argued, it was valid since they were being ordained by bishops who were in full communion with the Church. (The parallels to Seabury’s consecration to the Episcopate are remarkably similar). In defense of their action the participating bishops, in an open letter to the church, said “we are painfully conscious of the diversity of thinking in our church on this issue and have been deeply sobered by that fact . . . [but] there is a ruling factor which does require action on our part. It is our obedience to the Lordship of Christ, our response to the sovereignty of His Spirit for the Church.”^{iv} The eleven women priests added to the bishops’ letter their affirmation that “our primary motivation is to begin to free priesthood from the bondage it suffers as long as it is characterized by the categorical exclusion of persons on the basis of sex.”

One of the participating bishops, Bishop Ramos of Costa Rica, appealed to the actions of St. Paul who had chosen to “disobey the old dispensations to extend the promises of God to the world.” He added that “in our own days others, including members of this house [of bishops] and this church,

had to disobey the law of this land and of secular and religious institutions, to abolish color of skin as a new circumcision.”^v Ironically, in defense of their actions in Philadelphia, the bishops involved were appealing directly to Scripture, not in opposition to it.

At its next General Convention in Minneapolis in September of 1976 the ordinations of 1974 were retroactively approved. In a letter the Convention sent to the Church, it said, significantly, that in its struggle over this issue everyone “dug more deeply into the issues and found that changes could be made in our tradition.”

In response to the commonly heard criticism that proceeding to approve the ordination of women before consensus had been reached by the church universal was improper, a Canadian Archbishop, Edward Scott, anticipating the defense of ordaining gay persons today, replied “I wonder . . . if waiting for a universal consensus [within the Communion] does not in fact rule out any action. If we are prepared to act, but also to recognize that our action must be tested by experience . . . then we may be helping the whole church reflect at a deeper level.”^{vi}

The Conscience Clause

Objections to the vote to approve women’s ordination soon began to pour in and dissent led to attempts on the part of some parishes to leave the Church. Others resorted to what some have called a “conscience clause” to that said that “no bishop, priest, or lay person should be coerced or penalized in any manner” either for endorsing or rejecting the ordination of women.

This conscience clause raises a host of issues, not least of which is why an individual’s conscience is to be respected when it comes to refusing to recognize women’s ordination but apparently not for refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the ordination of black persons. Was there something peculiar about women that could justify permitting a bishop to refuse to accept them as priests? However, one might wonder if something like a conscience clause, once having gained a foothold in Episcopal polity and tradition, might be invoked to recognize the legitimacy of the ordination of gays and lesbians in the Episcopal Church while other parts of the Communion would not be required to accept their ordinations.

Jumping ahead now to more recent events, we need to mention a 1997 statement by Global South primates meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. They expressed concern about the moral teaching on ordination of gay persons and lesbians and the blessing of their relationships going on in some provinces of the North (meaning primarily Canada and the United States). They rejected such actions on the basis of the ‘clear and unambiguous teaching of the Holy Scriptures’.

That same year the Episcopal Church’s General Convention almost passed a resolution asking for development of same sex union blessings.

Also in 1997: a report called the Virginia Report was issued by the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission which reaffirmed the traditional Anglican “tolerance for deeply held differences of conviction and practice”, including different forms of biblical interpretation. While acknowledging Scripture as the ‘primary norm for Christian life and faith’, the report insisted that the writings of the Bible must be ‘translated, read, and understood, and their meaning grasped, through a continuous process of interpretation . . . afforded by the contexts of ‘tradition’ and ‘reason’.’ (16) Reason, it said, can be understood, in part, as ‘the mind of a particular culture’ and no one culture has a ‘monopoly of insight into the truth of the Gospel.’

Shortly after the 1998 Lambeth Conference the first major conservative outpost for dissenting Episcopalians, known as the Anglican Mission in America, was created in the year 2000.

That same year saw the release of another communiqué from the primates meeting in Porto, Portugal. They declared that they have the freedom to “call one another to account” on divisive issues,

and that this clearly posed the question “of what would be sufficient grounds for a complete and definitive rupture of communion between Provinces in the Anglican family.” They said that the ‘rejection’ of the 1998 Lambeth resolution in some provinces “has come to threaten the unity of the communion in a profound way.” They urged those provinces contemplating such actions to listen to the “pain, anger and perplexity” from other parts of the Communion.

Two years later (2002) the Canadian Diocese of New Westminster officially approved same-sex blessings. And in March of that year the Episcopal Church’s House of Bishops called for delegated Episcopal pastoral oversight (DEPO) as a way for diocesan bishops to help satisfy the demands of the conservatives in their dioceses to be served by other bishops considered by the conservatives as more orthodox on these contentious issues. DEPO was agreed to but only as temporary arrangement and all delegated bishops would remain under the authority of the diocesan bishop. Conservatives immediately objected, claiming that they ought to be free to choose their own bishops, a position at odds with the traditions of the Church.

Gene Robinson was then elected by the diocese of New Hampshire in June of the following year. (2003) His election conformed completely to the protocols for the election of bishops. But the election, in that year, had to be ratified by the General Convention meeting that summer in Minneapolis. It was ratified by a large margin, even by persons who opposed the idea of homosexual bishops, in part because his election had been canonically correct. But some dissenting bishops immediately declared that this was a ‘pastoral emergency’ and that they would call on the primates of the other provinces to intervene in the affairs of ECUSA to invalidate the election.^{vii} One primate, Peter Akinola, then Archbishop of Nigeria, exclaimed that with Robinson’s election Satan had entered the church. More than a dozen conservatives walked out after the vote. A key lay leader on the conservative side bemoaned the fact that the current leaders in ECUSA have revealed themselves to be nothing more than middle class elites who came of age in the 1960s and who now listen to NPR and don’t watch Fox TV.

One significant historical irony was that the diocese of South Carolina became one of the first and most vociferous opponents of what had taken place in Minneapolis. As one reporter observed, the follow-up convention in South Carolina had an atmosphere “eerily reminiscent of the mood in Charleston on the eve of the firing upon Fort Sumter” in 1861. Some conservatives even called themselves secessionists. Also in early October a meeting of conservatives called for a “new alignment for Anglicanism in North America.” In defiance of the traditions of the Church, they called on the Communion Primates to erase traditional church boundaries and to “encourage faithful bishops to extend episcopal care, oversight and mission and to cross current diocesan boundaries.” This would become the most important part of the conservative response, directly challenging the notion of the traditional inviolability of autonomous provincial and diocesan boundaries and the authority of the bishops within them.

Early 2004 it was revealed that a Pittsburgh priest, Geoffrey Chapman, had written a memo to fellow conservatives on a strategy for dealing with liberal bishops, through attempts to preserve church property on behalf of the dissidents and through litigation to exhaust diocesan revenues, which would lead eventually to a ‘realignment of Anglicanism on North American soil committed to biblical faith and values.’

This was played out in Connecticut by six dissenting parishes and their rectors.

Then in 2004, at the urging of the Archbishop of Canterbury, a select body appointed by him issued the Windsor Report suggesting how the Anglican Communion ought to respond to the actions of the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of New Westminster.

The report expressed its ‘regret’ that ECUSA and New Westminster had bypassed the ‘instruments of unity,’ but also chastised those bishops who had engaged in ‘border crossing’. It also asked the TEC to provide a theological explanation of why they did what they did in accepting the election of a gay man to the episcopate. And it asked TEC and New Westminster to express regret for their actions and to have their bishops consider withdrawing from representative functions within the AC.

While reactions to the Windsor Report were being mulled over in the Episcopal Church, its General Convention, meeting in 2006, elected the first woman presiding bishop in the Communion, Katherine Jefferts Schori. Later, at a Primates’ meeting in Africa, some primates refused to take communion with her (in part because she was a woman and in part because she supported gays and lesbians becoming priests and bishops and having their relationships blessed).

But the Convention also voted, in a bow to the Windsor Report, (B033) to exercise ‘restraint’ in (but not prohibit outright) electing anyone to the episcopate whose manner of life ‘presents a challenge’ to the wider church, which was widely understood as referring to gays and lesbians. Delegates also pledged not to authorize public rites for blessing same sex unions (but would permit non-liturgical blessings in the context of a pastoral response to same sex couples, which the 2003 Primates’ Communiqué had also accepted in principle).

That same year individuals in 15 Virginia parishes announced they were affiliating with African provinces and the legal dispute over who owns the property of their parishes began in earnest.

The following year, 2007, the Primates’ issued a Communique from Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania which called for a pastoral council for helping those who cannot accept their bishop or presiding bishop. It demanded that TEC commit to not ordaining gay persons or authorizing same-sex blessings. In response to this communiqué the House of Bishops met in September and reaffirmed the 2006 General convention’s acceptance of ‘restraint’ but also openness to providing blessings to same sex couples as a pastoral act. The Pastoral scheme for intervening bishops proposed by Dar Es Salaam was decisively rejected because it would compromise Provincial autonomy.

Dissatisfaction with TEC reached a new point in December 2007 when individuals, including the bishop of the Diocese of San Joaquin, voted to disaffiliate from the Episcopal Church and its bishop was subsequently deposed. It should be pointed out that dioceses and parishes cannot secede from the Church: only individuals can do that.

Then in June 2008 the conservative-organized and created body GAFCON (Global Anglican Fellowship Conference) met in Jerusalem just prior to that year’s Lambeth conference. It urged many of its members not to attend Lambeth that year and 220 bishops did not attend, many in protest against those US bishops who participated in the consecration of Robinson who would be attending.

No actions were taken (by design) at the 2008 Lambeth Conference even though the ABC pushed his new notion of a Communion wide Covenant that would bind the provinces together in a new way around some common core of belief and practice. But there was no agreement on the details of the Covenant and no idea when, if ever, it might be fully developed and submitted for approval to the Communion as a whole, or what its consequences would be for those Provinces that did not sign on to it.

In the Fall of 2008 more defections from dioceses in the US took place: The majority of those voting at the diocesan conventions of Pittsburgh, Quincy (Illinois), Rio Grande, and Fort Worth also voted to leave and their bishops were subsequently deposed or resigned. Those Episcopalians remaining in these dioceses came to be called “remaining” Episcopalians, including many opposed to the ordination of gay persons but who were still willing to live in disagreement with fellow

Episcopalians.

Late in the fall of 2008 former Pittsburgh bishop Robert Duncan (a Trinity college graduate) proposed the creation of a non-geographical Anglican province in the United States, called the Anglican Church of North America, which would, he hoped, take its place alongside the other provinces in the Anglican Communion and to which he was named as Archbishop. Non-geographical provinces do not exist in the Communion at this time. There are also numerous obstacles to getting such a province recognized (e.g., through the Anglican Consultative Council which must advise on this, there have to be discussions and consultation with the secretary general of the AC or the ACC, the good will of the province from which the new province would be created, the Primates' approval, and support from the ABC, none of which have yet happened).

In the summer of 2009 the Episcopal Church held its most recent triennial meeting of its General Convention, in Anaheim, and produced some significant resolutions that have continued the controversy to this day. The three most controversial resolutions all dealt, not surprisingly, with sex. The D025 resolution affirmed that "God has called and may call" to "any ordained ministry" gay and lesbian persons who are living in "lifelong committed relationships" according to the criteria for marriage laid down in the 2000 Convention: "fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God." The Convention also linked itself directly (some might even say obsequiously) to the Anglican Communion with which it is in a strained relationship. It reaffirmed "the continued participation of the Episcopal Church" in the Communion and, in a not too-subtle reminder of where the money comes from, recommitted its financial contribution to the AC which amounts to over a third of the AC's budget. But the D025 resolution did not formally annul the continued exercise of restraint called for by resolution B033 from the previous convention. In passing D025 TEC was saying, in the opinion of many of its proponents, that there is no theological impediment to the ordination of gay persons.

Giving some weight to the possibility that the resolution will not be a catalyst for schism, 70 primates, priests, and laity from other parts of the Anglican Communion, many of whom had opposed Robinson's election, were present at the Convention as observers. Almost all were reported to have been impressed with the way in which serious differences of opinion could still be fought out in the same family and many admitted, in words that would not have warmed the conservatives' hearts, that their own presence at the convention "is a refutation of Episcopalians' worries that their church has been pushed to the margins of the worldwide body".

Two other resolutions regarding sexuality also emerged from Anaheim. C056, recognizing the existence of civil unions for gay and lesbian persons in a number of states and the need for a "renewed pastoral response," called for the consideration of and collection of "theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same gender relationships", and, in the spirit of caution and a slow march, for the reporting of their work to the next General Convention in 2012. Resolution B012, acknowledging the legality of same-sex marriages in some states, called for "generous discretion" in the way in which the Book of Common Prayer is applied to the blessings of Marriages. The resolution did not authorize clergy to perform same-sex marriages but gave them the latitude of adapting, in a pastoral context, the office for the celebration and blessing of a marriage.

Following the Convention Pope Benedict XVI issued an invitation to dissatisfied Episcopalians to come over to the Roman Catholic Church with the possibility of retaining their liturgies and, for those married priests, to continue to function as priests without abandoning their spouses. The initial response to his invitation did not suggest a large number were going over to Rome despite their

differences with the Episcopal Church. And he may have inadvertently sown the seeds of dissension within his own Church.

The Covenant process first proposed by Archbishop of Canterbury (ABC) Rowan Williams also continues apace. In its latest iteration (The Cambridge Ridley Draft) the Covenant would create something like a two-tier relationship within the Anglican Communion between those churches willing to subject themselves to all the resolutions passed at the Lambeth Conferences and the other tier which would be given some latitude to diverge in practice on some contentious issues (read homosexuality). The vote in Anaheim commended the draft to the dioceses for study and comment and asked for them to report back to the 2012 General Convention.

Property disputes also continue, though in almost every case Courts are accepting the deference to hierarchy principle that holds that if a church has a canonical law that treats parish property as being held in trust for a diocese and diocesan property as held in trust for the whole provincial church, dissidents cannot claim title to that property when they abandon the Episcopal Church. The only diocese where a decision that might permit local control of the property to prevail is in Virginia and that case has not yet been decided. Shortly after the convention, and lending support to the idea that the moratorium is over was the election of a gay partnered woman the episcopate in the diocese of Los Angeles.

And there things stand for the moment.

In the final part of this talk I want to look at two of the arguments used by the conservatives to challenge the way in which the Episcopal Church has treated the issue of Biblical authority and of homosexuality.

A quote:

“And who are we that, in our modern wisdom, we presume to set aside the Word of God . . . and invent for ourselves a ‘higher law’ than . . . Holy Scriptures? Who are we that virtually blot out the language of the sacred record, and dictate to the majesty of heaven what He shall regard as sin and reward as duty? Who are we that are ready to trample on the doctrines of the Bible . . . ?”^{viii}

This passage is not, as you might have thought, an attack on homosexuality but a defense of slavery on Biblical grounds, by man who would later become the presiding bishop of the Episcopal church. Anticipating the language contemporary conservatives use against liberal support for gays and lesbians, he says that Abolitionism is worldly and ephemeral, ‘inebriated by too copious draughts of the spirit of the age,’ infected too much with rampant democracy, individualism, and personal autonomy.

Other pro-slavery clergy had pointed out that God blessed the patriarchs with slaves and one said, “If the scriptures do not justify slavery I know not what they justify”.

This defense of slavery on Biblical grounds should at least give pause to those attacking homosexuality on what they consider to be the same so-called plain uninterpreted meaning of the Bible.

Turning now to the Bible on Sexuality

Many biblical scholars today would agree that the Bible knows nothing of homosexuality as a natural condition or orientation, expressed through love and affection. Instead, the Biblical condemnations are primarily of sexual acts (many coerced and bordering on rape) between persons whom it believes fit into certain categories and who transgress those categories in their sexual acts.

The story of Sodom is the one that has traditionally been taken as a condemnation of men seeking sex with other men. Conservative scholars translate the desire of the men of Sodom to know

the strangers who are being sheltered by Lot as a desire for having sex with them. Other scholars point out that this is really a story of the lack of hospitality (and was so treated later in the Bible), or about inter-species sex (since the visitors whom the men of Sodom wanted to ‘know’ were really angels).

Another crucial text is the purity codes of Leviticus. This text must be seen against the background of finding ways to keep the people of Israel from being defiled or polluted by their pagan neighbors. Purity practices rested on not mixing or polluting the categories which God created: such as mixing the wrong foods, or allowing menstruating women into the Temple without undergoing a ritual bath. The key text for dealing with homosexual sex in Leviticus is the condemnation of a man lying with a man, thus violating the category differences between men and women and placing one of men in the sexual act in an inferior position (since one of the men will be acting as if he was a woman). Yet Christians no longer feel bound by the kosher laws and no longer, except in Uganda, seek to put homosexuals to death (as Leviticus demands), or to denying church attendance to menstruating women. So it is unclear why this particular cultic prohibition on an act of impurity should survive today, especially when Paul sought to annul many of the purity codes related to food and circumcision in reaching out to the Gentiles.

In the New Testament, Jesus never refers to homosexual acts at all. Paul’s treatment of homosexual relations regards them as at worst shameful (reflecting the cultural view of his time), and as a punishment for a previous and more basic sin: that of disobedience to God. Paul clearly knew nothing of mutual, loving, faithful relationships between persons of the same sex. Thus the Biblical treatment of sexuality must be contextualized and not treated as an a-historical fetish as many conservatives tend to do.

Now, to summarize my position: Conservative arguments generally fail the four fold test of Anglicanism:

They repudiate the tradition of comprehensiveness and the historical and therefore fallible and contingent development of thought and practice in the church, and ignore the realities of ambiguity in the development of the Church they claim to be faithful to.

They employ an unsophisticated and highly selective method of biblical interpretation out of keeping with the best standards of modern biblical scholarship, especially those having to do with reading the text in its historical context.

They also are facing a growing consensus in the scientific community that regards homosexuality as a perfectly natural part of some people’s orientation.

They also are given to hyperbolic statements that tend to discredit their own position (Duncan claims his group is like the Confessing Church under Nazi persecution, expecting at any moment what he calls the ‘red martyrdom’ of a bloody death for his beliefs, and identifying himself with Martin Luther reforming the Church in the 16th century).

It is therefore hard to escape the conclusion that many, if not all, of the American dissidents are simply, for the most part, men trying to maintain their privileged positions of power as new minorities challenge them.

I would also suggest that no movement built on the principle of exclusion and fear of the other, with nothing more positive to say about the quality of human relationships, can survive in the long run. An intolerance for ambiguity suggests a closed, dogmatic mindset that will find it increasingly difficult to live in a multicultural, diverse, and global society. Even in the small circles in which they might prevail, I would suggest their obsession with achieving doctrinal and moral purity will eventually lead to further splintering as one faction after another splits off searching for the holy grail

of even purer purity, and as they splinter they will further destroy the unity they so assiduously have tried to preserve. Bishops brought up in a culture in which democratic decision making involving the laity, no matter how flawed in their opinion, will have to deal, often in a subservient position, with Primates and bishops from cultures in which authority is always from the top down. This might very well make it harder for them to make common cause with each other on other issues once they move beyond their agreement on the moral odiousness of homosexuality.

But the final authority on which Anglicanism has rested and which the conservative position generally fails to meet is the test of experience: conservatives studiously ignore the experience of gay and lesbian persons who have established relationships that meet all the tests of faithful, committed, loving unions (the same standards that have been held up for heterosexual marriage). And there are increasing numbers of non-gay and lesbian persons, especially of a younger generation, for whom sexual orientation for themselves or for others is a non-issue. They will, I predict, increasingly abandon the so-called purifiers of the Episcopal Church if they continue to preach intolerance for and rejection of gay and lesbian priests, bishops, and relationships. Even younger evangelicals are more open on the issue of homosexuality than their older counterparts. A new generation of Episcopalians will look for evidence of the quality of relationships (regardless of gender) and for a church which values those relationships. Attending to the nurture of loving mutual relationships grounded in the love of God should be the primary business of the Church. It should not be making a fetish or false god of biological orientations that, in the context of genuine love, harm no one and can be the occasion for the fullest expression of love. If people can't find the nourishing of love in the Episcopal Church, they will go elsewhere but definitely not to the alternative offered by the conservatives. But, I believe, the Episcopal Church will stick to its guns and the conservatives will face the bleak prospect of trying to preserve a version of the Church which will have little or no prospects for long-term survival.

So what provisional lessons does this suggest for other religious bodies dealing with similar issues: in closing let me suggest a few:

1) Exercise humility about the ability of human beings to find, articulate, and impose what they consider to be absolute truth and absolutely pure morality. The whole problem, as I see it, is that institutions are incapable of containing absolute truth because they are composed of finite fallible people whose claims and practices are shot through with historical ambiguity and changing contexts. This fact should lead to:

2) An acceptance of a variety of points of view provided they all work for the flourishing and enhancement of loving relationships grounded in the love of God. This is the fundamental principle on which all thought and practice should be based. All else should be in service to this principle.

3) Be sensitive to the concerns of other bodies within the same religious body but don't let them become absolute barriers to doing what your part of the body thinks is right, as long as it is in the service of building up and nurturing the deepest, most loving parts of our humanity

4) Beware of the historical record of those seeking purity at all costs leading to the continued splintering of the very body whose purity they want to achieve: the search for purity in the formulation of absolutes inevitably leads to the frustration of never achieving one's aim. That in turn leads to fanaticism and, in the worst cases, to terrorism, because fundamental (read religious) errors have no rights, including the right to be tolerated.

If these lessons can be learned, the churches in crisis today stand a good chance of working out their differences without chaos, catastrophe, or irredeemable fracturing.

Endnotes

- ⁱ The phrase is from Ephraim Radner and George R. Sumner, "Introduction," Reclaiming Faith: Essays on Orthodoxy in the Episcopal Church and the Baltimore Declaration edited by Radner and Sumner (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 5.
- ⁱⁱ See Russell Reno, "At the Crossroads of Dogma," in Reclaiming Faith: Essays on Orthodoxy in the Episcopal Church and the Baltimore Declaration, 111-112.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See The Lambeth Conference 1948: The Encyclical Letter from the Bishops; together with Resolutions and Reports (London: S.P.C.K., 1948), pp. 82-94.
- ^{iv} Sumner, The Episcopal Church's History: 1945-1985, 27.
- ^v Marrett, The Lambeth Conferences and Women Priests, 60-1.
- ^{vi} Sumner, The Episcopal Church's History: 1945-1985, 29.
- ^{vii} Episcopal News Service, 8/6/03. Robert Duncan, Bishop of Pittsburgh, called it a "pastoral emergency". ABC World News Tonight 8/6/03
- ^{viii} John Henry Hopkins, "Bible View of Slavery," (NY: Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge, no. 8, pp. 117-132, quoted in Robert Bruce Mullin, Episcopal Vision/ American Reality (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 207.