

Wrong Direction

Our work is to repent for 1
made this schism

As 2007 drew to a close, delegates to the convention of the Diocese of San Joaquin voted to leave The Episcopal Church for an affiliation with the Province of the Southern Cone. By doing this they hope to disaffiliate with what they see as an apostate church, and remain as a constituent part of the Anglican Communion. The Presiding Bishop expressed sorrow at their actions, wished them well on their spiritual journey, and promised appropriate legal action. This response, while gracious in some respects, is not the best our church can do.

The Episcopal Church has just experienced its first major schism since the Reformed Episcopal Church broke away in 1873 over, among other things, baptismal regeneration and the ritualism of the Oxford Movement. An entire diocese has chosen to leave The Episcopal Church, and others may follow within a year.

Our relatively small church is about to be rent asunder. As for those who are choosing to leave, I have nothing to say. They are free to do as they choose.

For those of us who remain, I do have some thoughts.

My experience with this church dates back to 1943 when, as a 9-year-old Baptist, I was sent to sing and be trained in an Episcopal Church boys' choir. It was across the street from the larger Baptist church in which I had been brought up and in which I had been baptized on the basis of my own decision. The world I discovered there was rich and inviting. Much later, in college at Duke University, I chose to be confirmed and to seek ordination in The Episcopal Church.

Theological Education

My seminary, the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Mass., introduced me to serious theological thought and I prospered in that environment. When I left, I continued to study theology: historical, philosophical, and systematic. Into those disciplines I incorporated a study of ethics and moral theology.

During this time I moved from parish ministry to university ministry back to parish ministry. Having weathered the storms of the civil rights movement in the South, the anti-

war movements of the '60s, the church's reactions to the General Convention Special Program, and prayer book revision in the '70s, I backed off from the fray and took stock of the church to which I had pledged my vocational life.

What I saw did not fill me with hope. Vocations and calls to ordained ministry were becoming supplanted with persons offering themselves for ordination who had decided on some basis or the other that they possessed "the gifts for ministry." As chair of the commission on ministry of a large diocese, it confounded me that so many were second or third vocations, in middle age, and, in the case of the women, frequently divorced.

It became harder and harder to figure out what was driving the desire to be ordained. At times it seemed that every time someone decided to try to be more serious about their life as a Christian, they ended up seeking ordination. Whatever lay ministry and the priesthood of all believers ever meant, it was lost in the dust of the rush to ordination.

Our ordination processes got more complicated and lengthy, but the products of that process were less and less impressive. Now we reap the whirlwind we sowed. Sermons have less and less spiritual and intellectual depth. If there is personal conviction, it is well concealed. And the clergy are as inept at administration as are physicians but not nearly as well educated on a year-to-year basis.

Though we are ostensibly heralds of the gospel, we are easily content to prefer relevancy to a bright and consistent witness. Ever compassionate and inclusive, we have lost sight of the primary reason for our compassion and inclusion. We have been known to confuse the United Nations Millennium Development Goals with the gospel which engenders our interest in these goals. If the first victim of war is the truth, so the first victim of "relevancy" is a clear witness to the gospel.

We have a schism. We are wounded. We do not need to judge those who have left. Our work is to repent for the drift that made this schism possible.

Our guest columnist is the Rev. Phillip C. Cato, a priest of the Diocese of Washington. He lives in Potomac, Md.

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