

January 20, 2016

Dear Parishioners and friends of Grace Cathedral:

You may or may not have heard of the actions of the Anglican Primates meeting last week. Whether you have or have not, I wanted to share a brief statement about this and provide you with accurate information on the matter, and what this means for you, since there is much incorrect information being circulated.

First, it is not true that the Episcopal Church has not been “kicked out” of the Anglican Communion, nor have we been “suspended” as many news sources have reported. You have to remember that the people reporting the news know little about our church and how its government works.

Here’s some basic information before I address the actions the primates took last week.

Who are the Primates? The Anglican Primates are the leaders of the various Anglican Churches throughout the world. Most of them have the title of Archbishop. The Episcopal Church is the only church whose primate has the title of “Presiding Bishop,” but it means the same thing. The primate is the leader of an Anglican province, generally made up of one country (the Church of England, the Anglican Church of Canada, The Scottish Episcopal Church, The Church of the Province of West Africa, etc.). The Episcopal Church is made up of churches in 15 countries. There are a total of 38 Primates in the Anglican Communion. The Archbishop of Canterbury is the Chief Primate and spiritual head of the Church. The Primates gather from time to time to discuss such things as world hunger, human trafficking, climate change, deforestation and the decline of the world’s other natural resources and, yes, church policy, theology and practices. For all that our faith holds in common, there has long been disagreement between the churches and its leaders, most recently regarding marriage (including polygamy and same sex unions) ordination of women, inclusion of LGBT persons and other matters.

What is the Anglican Communion? The Communion is made up of 38 provinces around the world. Each Church is autonomous, yet bound together by “a common faith and bonds of affection.” The Instruments of Communion are the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference (a gathering of all the bishops of the Church every ten years), The Primates meeting (an occasional gathering of all the Church’s Primates) and the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC). The ACC is made up of Bishops, priests and lay people. Arguably, the AAC is the most authoritative of the instruments of communion, as the role of the Council is to facilitate cooperative work of the Anglican Communion, advises the organization and structures of the Communion, and seeks to develop common policies with respect to the world mission of the Church, including ecumenical matters. None of these instruments makes policy or sets doctrine. That is the work of general Convention in the Episcopal Church and like bodies in the other Churches. Again, each Church in the Communion is an autonomous body.

Because each church is autonomous, and while one can think of each church as having some hierarchical structure – Anglican Churches are governed by bishops – the Anglican Communion itself does not have a hierarchical structure as, say, the RC Church does. We have no pope (the Archbishop of Canterbury is a spiritual head but has no authority over any of the churches in the Anglican Communion) and no Vatican Council. The Primates cannot make policy or set doctrine that is binding on any of the member churches. The archbishop of a church cannot set policy or doctrines even for the church he serves as Primate, much less for any other church. (In fact, most of the authority for our churches is at the diocesan level. A diocesan bishop carries a lot more authority than a primate. Again, think of the Primate as a spokesman (and a very influential one) but not as a policy maker.

So, with that background, here’s what happened at the Primates Meeting. A number of African Bishops representing more than half the churches membership (57.2 million of the 92 million Anglicans in the world are

African) threatened to walk out if sanctions were not placed on the Episcopal Church regarding their inclusive views toward marriage. These primates wanted to exclude Presiding Bishop Curry from the meeting. This did not happen. However, in order to placate the African Bishops, a hasty resolution was drawn that included the following words:

“For a period of three years ...The Episcopal Church [should] no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee and that while participating in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, they will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity.”

This was agreed to by a majority but certainly not all of the primates. I have not seen a list of who voted for it and who voted against it. Nevertheless, the important thing (or things) to remember is this:

- 1) The Primates have no authority to set policy or to sanction another Church because they are in disagreement with that particular Church's views. There are a lot of “shoulds” in the statement which carry no authoritative weight at all.
- 2) We need to resist anger and, as some have suggested, walk away from the Communion just because we feel abused or the pain of our fellow Christians attempt to exclude us. As one blogger said, now maybe the Episcopal Church can experience what LBGTs have been experiencing from the church for decades (or centuries).
- 3) This may be the catalyst to cause many of the Communion's churches and other churches as well to take a stand on the issue of being an inclusive or an exclusive community and making that stance publically known. I believe we are on the right side of this issue and following the example set for us by our Lord and our baptismal vows to love one another, to seek and serve Christ in all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

So, while this issue of the inclusiveness of all and the attempt of excluding our Church from certain areas of participation (via a “time out” for our behavior) is a big deal in the life of the Communion and its members, the Primates statement is really much ado about nothing, in my opinion. It really is not enforceable, and this will likely come to light as other Churches in the Communion and the other instruments of Communion consider this matter, though we may choose to accept the sanctions, voluntarily, as a matter of peacekeeping and cooperation. On the other hand, it could be argued that there is reason to resist the sanctions as a matter of correct polity and justice. We shall see.

I am sending this via email and U.S. Post for those without email. If you have internet service you can read more about the primates meeting and reactions at Episcopal News Service.org, Anglican News Service.org, or Anglican Communion – BBC.

Following is the full text of the Primates Statement.

For our part at Grace Cathedral, let us continue to love and serve God by loving and serving God's people. Let us continue to welcome all who come through our doors for worship and fellowship into our community of faith. And let us continue to be a house of prayer for all people.

Faithfully,
Steve+

Jesus said, Love God and love others as you love yourself. If you do this, then you are following all the commandments.

Statement From the Primates Meeting

1. We gathered as Anglican Primates to pray and consider how we may preserve our unity in Christ given the ongoing deep differences that exist among us concerning our understanding of marriage.
2. Recent developments in The Episcopal Church with respect to a change in their Canon on marriage represent a fundamental departure from the faith and teaching held by the majority of our Provinces on the doctrine of marriage. Possible developments in other Provinces could further exacerbate this situation.
3. All of us acknowledge that these developments have caused further deep pain throughout our Communion.
4. The traditional doctrine of the church in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds marriage as between a man and a woman in faithful, lifelong union. The majority of those gathered reaffirm this teaching.
5. In keeping with the consistent position of previous Primates' meetings such unilateral actions on a matter of doctrine without Catholic unity is considered by many of us as a departure from the mutual accountability and interdependence implied through being in relationship with each other in the Anglican Communion.
6. Such actions further impair our communion and create a deeper mistrust between us. This results in significant distance between us and places huge strains on the functioning of the Instruments of Communion and the ways in which we express our historic and ongoing relationships.
7. It is our unanimous desire to walk together. However given the seriousness of these matters we formally acknowledge this distance by requiring that for a period of three years The Episcopal Church no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee and that while participating in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, they will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity.
8. We have asked the Archbishop of Canterbury to appoint a Task Group to maintain conversation among ourselves with the intention of restoration of relationship, the rebuilding of mutual trust, healing the legacy of hurt, recognising the extent of our commonality and exploring our deep differences, ensuring they are held between us in the love and grace of Christ.