

**A parting letter from a senior warden in The Episcopal Church
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The Danger to our Church

As you're all aware this is sadly my wife's and my last day at St. Thomas'. Never in my wildest dreams when we came back to this little church after many years away and made the decision to remain in Upper Marlboro for the foreseeable future did I think we'd ever become part of that large group of folks known as 'former St. Thomas' parishioners.'

But now I have to talk to you from the heart. Families know that to let disagreements go without addressing them slowly destroys the bond of love and trust that holds them together. Ignoring serious disagreements only means that a price will have to be paid some time in the future. And if I didn't think the Episcopal Church's current disagreement would ever force St. Thomas' to pay a huge price in the future - in fact, the price of its very survival - I'd step away from this podium this very moment and simply walk away with the happiness of this gathering to warm me. That would be so easy. But I couldn't ever look you - or even worse, Christ - in the eye again if I did that.

I believe all the responsibilities of a Senior Warden are important, but I think his or her primary responsibility - along with the vestry - is to first and foremost guard the faith. We're a church, after all. We're here because of the faith. Without it, there would be no need for buildings or church suppers, or altar guilds. For the vestry, it's like the meaning behind a doctor's Hippocratic Oath, simply do no harm.

And so I'm going to share with you why two members of your parish family who love and cherish each and every one of you as friends and have made St. Thomas' Parish our home would drive away today for the last time and start all over again in another Episcopal parish across the Potomac River.

It's not about what anyone's done here. No one's done anything to us. Everyone has been loving and kind. No one here is pushing an agenda on us, the rector isn't being dishonest with us, and there are no disputes between parishioners that make us want to leave. Most people would say everything is calm. And it is.

But it's what's behind that calm that should scare the living daylights out of you - not just you, but your children and grandchildren.

As your Senior Warden, I've been like a seismologist who watches for earthquake activity and detects an undersea earthquake with a reading of 8.9 on the Richter scale. Because I've studied it closely from as many angles as possible, I know what an earthquake of that magnitude will mean - not today, but soon - to people who live on the shoreline and for all the people who are out on the beaches. It will be a tsunami, and it will destroy everything and everyone in its path.

My friends, there has been an earthquake deep in the depths of the Episcopal Church - and there's a tsunami coming that will affect St. Thomas' whether we close our eyes and turn our beach chairs the other way or not. For well over a year, I've been trying to warn you in the most subtle way I can that we need to seek higher ground. I've done so cautiously, in a way that wouldn't generate a controversy that would divide the parish, as has been so often the case in the past. We're a parish family, and I've openly and honestly discussed the danger with our rector and many others for some time now. I decided it was best to approach the vestry in a manner more like a mild intervention than a debate. In that conversation, it became clear to me that St. Thomas' is hopeful that the tsunami racing toward the parish will somehow simply pass us by.

As we all have an obligation to protect our families, I decided that even as I will continue to warn of impending disaster, it's my responsibility to take my own family to higher ground. It always upsets me when I see parents on the news reports when a huge hurricane is approaching who have 'decided to stay and ride it out,' their tiny children visible in the background hoping in all their innocence that mom and dad weren't going to let them be killed. To ignore the wave that's heading toward us and picking up force and height every day is simply unthinkable to me. Even if we want to disregard it for our own lives - and many of us here today have already had the chance to live full ones - why would you risk your children and grandchildren?

The desire to 'remain comfortable' by refusing to recognize the disagreement exists or try hard not to face up to it even if you know it does, can't possibly give us comfort. It's reality and the facing up to it that gives us comfort. Comfort doesn't bring us reality.

So what is this great 'tsunami' that's rolling toward us? It's a radical agenda that has as its primary target not St. Thomas' Parish, not the Episcopal Church - these will just be 'collateral damage' in its wake - but the concept of Church itself. If this tsunami can get far enough inland, your children and grandchildren or their children and grandchildren are unlikely to care about - much less be a part of - any church during their lifetimes.

So what makes me so wise as to offer such an assertion? Nothing special. I've studied the situation, prayed on it, sought to understand every aspect of it and, finally, been fortunate enough to get a sneak peek at the 'playbook' of those who caused the earthquake in the first place.

To put it another way, I've seen 'the man behind the curtain.' I know why and how the strings are being pulled and can turn the pages to see what's coming next. Like people who pick up the Bible for the first time, get bored reading all the confusing names in Genesis and turn to the more 'exciting' part - Revelation - I quickly thumbed my way to the back of the playbook. I saw the final play, then I started looking backward at the pages of strategies and tactics that would make it possible.

This is not a playbook that's knowingly being used on us by anyone in the parish. The brilliance of the strategy is that in it each of us can find something that seems to make sense, something we can support, something that we can even advocate, but no one in our

own little family is forcing anything down our throats. All of us, after all, have shown that we're really all just trying to be good Christians.

But that's where the benign and unknowing acceptance of the strategy ends. Forces in the diocese are hard at work with the playbook carefully tucked under their suit jackets and vestments, working each small part to create the synergy to achieve the ultimate goal. In many other dioceses, and indeed all the way to the Presiding Bishop's Office of our national church headquarters, the strategy is being carefully played out like a chess game. The tsunami is being strengthened day after day, even as our Children's Choir rehearses, the ladies in the Altar Guild place flowers on the altar, and as good people are educated for ministry.

You don't just see it here. Go down the road to other small Episcopal parishes. I've visited many churches throughout the diocese and I see much the same in most small country parishes. Everyone is holding their breaths that the great wave won't engulf them, and as they do, their numbers dwindle, the money goes away, and they will most surely be overtaken. And they'll eventually be dots on a map of historical parishes where people will visit on a touring bus, but where all the parishioners are gone.

Then there are courageous parishes - even small ones - that have seen the storm brewing and taken prudent measures so that when it passes, they'll be able to survive it and go on worshiping God when it's run its course. All Saints in Chevy Chase, Christ Church in Accokeek, Christ Church in Port Republic, and Truro Church in Fairfax are just a few among them. They've 'gone to higher ground.' Not as individuals, but as parishes.

What is this 'higher ground?' its members of a congregation standing together arm in arm in faith to guard the faith from the coming onslaught against it. It's certainly what I've wished St. Thomas' could be - like a beacon of faith in the countryside - standing first for the faith against all harm that might come to it. It's a fight I would gladly lead were there a congregation to follow.

If there is one fight in our lives which we should all be a part of before we take up permanent residency out there in our cemetery, it's the fight for Christ and the faith. Many of our folks fight great fights for land rights or other worthy causes. But when it comes to standing up boldly against the most serious assault on our church since the English Reformation, these same people are notably absent. Surely Christ should have at least equal status to real estate and land policies.

Does the Danger Really Exist?

Some of you doubt the very notion that there's a serious and divisive situation in the Episcopal Church today. Please don't rely on me or any one person to sway you. Make your own decision from the following facts and then decide on your own whether this is serious enough:

Over 40,000 faithful Episcopalians left the Church last year (didn't just change congregations, but left it altogether).

100 entire congregations have left together to form new churches or worship under the protection of foreign Anglican primates or bishops.

11 dioceses have formed a Network within the Episcopal Church structure in opposition to the direction their Church is going.

These dioceses represent 1,100 clergy, 735 congregations and 176,000 faithful communicants.

Cathedrals and multi-million dollar retreat centers are being closed down and sold to raise money for the Episcopal Church due to losses of parishioners who took their money with them.

The Washington Diocese alone is tapping \$1.9 million from a trust fund just to continue operating (\$1.4 million this budget year alone).

In the Diocese of Newark (NJ), where there is reputedly the strongest support of any diocese for the Episcopal Church's new agenda, 40 parishes are projected to close this year.

22 of the other 37 provinces in our Anglican Communion have declared impaired or broken communion with the Episcopal Church.

15 of these 22 provinces now officially recognize only the Network - not the Episcopal Church - as the voice of Anglicanism in the U.S. These 15 provinces represent 55 million Anglicans.

Faithful priests all over the country are being deposed and inhibited by their bishops for speaking against the church's 'new direction.'

The Episcopal Church is suing a number of Episcopal congregations for their church property in a number of states who won't go along with the new 'doctrine.'

Two parishes in the Washington Diocese have joined the Network in opposition to the church's policies and 13 vestries in the Diocese of Maryland have joined together as 'confessing vestries' whose congregations refuse to follow the church's new policies.

While it's quiet in our small corner of the countryside, you're free to render your own judgments as to whether these facts represent business as usual in the Church or something more. I myself contend that the tremendous damage already recorded was merely the first - and smallest - wave of the tsunami that will eventually hit. Whole dioceses, parishes, entire congregations and thousands of individuals like my wife and me are 'going to higher ground' - to help prepare for the onslaught.

What the Crisis Isn't About

So what is it that's behind this dangerous agenda? A radical agenda orchestrated by supposedly 'gay rights' activists that seeks far more than just rights. Who in this congregation is not for equal rights for all people? Who in this congregation wants any among us to have fewer rights than us? I can tell you from experience that all those dioceses and parishes who are standing in opposition to the Episcopal Church's new direction aren't against those things. And I seriously doubt that any of us are.

But it's not about equal rights. That's simply the strategic sound-byte. It's about taking human experience and desire, laying it up next to Holy Scripture, and asserting that it's the Holy Scripture that's in error and has been for these almost two thousand years. That behaviors - not just sexual orientations, which are completely neutral - are not only acceptable, but that bishops and priests should now both affirm and call down God's blessing upon them.

Most changes - like women's ordination - come about by the presentation of theological arguments that show how they line up with Holy Scripture. No such case has been made for the Episcopal Church's 'new thing.' They simply did it 'with good intentions' by a vote at a convention. Those other sins remain, of course, 'but we're voting this particular one to no longer be a sin.' The real eye-opener here is this: Most of our bishops consider the Bible pretty much irrelevant today except to prepare sermons.

You should know that at that same convention in Minneapolis in 2003, 60% of the Episcopal church's bishops voted against - yes, against - a resolution to reaffirm the beliefs of their ordination vows and the agreements of belief of the Anglican Communion signed by our presiding bishops over the years. Reaffirming beliefs would have been a good way to help calm the crisis. Not being willing to reaffirm them - as the Church's leadership - speaks volumes for where our denomination is heading.

I'm proud to stand up each week and reaffirm my belief through the words of the Nicene Creed. Can you imagine what it would be like if the lay reader asked you to stand up and together reaffirm our faith through that creed and 60% of your congregation remained quietly seated?!? Welcome to the Episcopal Church of the 'anti-war, free love' '60's-generation bishops. They are the perfect group upon which to work a dangerous and radical agenda because they believe their degrees on their walls confer upon them wisdom not held by a bunch of simplistic Apostles. Those Apostles may have walked on earth with Christ, but we are now told how 'unenlightened' they were and that 'they just didn't understand all of this back then.'

As a friend of mine used to say, 'I was born on a Tuesday, but not last Tuesday.' I'll take what the Apostles said any day.

The Real Agenda

This well-organized but radical fringe has a goal that goes well beyond anything any of my own gay friends have ever voiced support for - the ultimate demise of the Church itself. Not just the Episcopal Church - but all churches.

Why this goal to get rid of the churches? Because when society has completed its transition to open acceptance of all types of sexual behaviors, the Church will be the only place left where doctrine and discipline stand in the way of people being free to follow any norms they desire.

The Church simply has to go if people are going to be free to do as they wish without admonition.

The best way to beat down opposition to this dangerous agenda is to paint all those who recognize it and are determined to stand in their way as 'anti-gay' or 'homophobic' - a strategy used all over society today. How many times have you heard that our Church's controversy is about nothing but sex? Or that we're all wound around the axle over 'homosexuality.'

But we're all adults here. Let's look at the facts: We live, work and worship together with people of all types and of differing sexual orientations. In the almost eight years my wife and I have attended St. Thomas', no one to my knowledge has cared one iota who is black or white, old or young, gay or straight. As I said at the beginning, we're all a family of Christians. And Christians by definition accept all people who come to God. They love one another. Otherwise, they really have no business being called 'Christians.'

Whether our behaviors will find favor with God when the Day of Judgment arrives is unknown. We only have the Word to go by, and we can follow what Scripture says or not. It's a personal thing and we're all in the same boat. I personally hope for my sake that God is a merciful one - or at least has a sense of humor when I arrive! One thing I do know is that I will personally pin my hopes for salvation on what the Apostles passed down, not on a vote at General Convention, past or future, whether they vote away and affirm my own sins or not.

Another popular way to quell dissent is to repeatedly encourage everyone 'to get back to the things that are really important.' We should all 'focus on other things.' Nonsense. These are hugely important issues and we can address them and still do all the other 'important' things. These pleas are simply a way of saying 'take your eye off the ball and, quick, look over there.!'

The strategy being worked on us depends on two lines of attack, one against society in general, and one against the churches. The strategy against society - like a guerilla war - began subtly and picked up more and more steam as it achieved success over the past four decades. In this case, it's been over forty years of one small success after another.

The strategy is so brilliant that we should all wish this bunch was directing our war on terrorism today.

The strategy to soften up the society is necessary to lay the groundwork for the strategy on the church, simply because people in churches live in that society.

The Strategy Against Society

Here's the strategy for the society at large:

Teach the children from an early age through schools and other organizations that making judgments - especially moral ones - is a bad thing (everyone should be unconditionally accepted).

Preach and model moral relativism (what you think is good or bad depends on the situation) at every opportunity; there are no absolutes when it comes to good or evil.

Where debate has been traditionally encouraged, particularly in high schools and colleges, launch a program of 'political correctness' to stifle it; stating values or viewpoints other than the 'correct' position is not only discouraged, but prohibited.

Give support to hate crimes legislation, then expand it to include hate speech to quiet open dissent, where people may actually be arrested for voicing their views in public; only protect open speech that supports the radical agenda.

Moving the Strategy into the Church

This strategy, which has been highly successful, sets the stage for people's thinking about the church. Here are some key points to their strategy for the churches:

Find a church of relatively small membership but wide recognition with the most liberal philosophy and the most 'flexible' theology: The Episcopal Church

Flood that church with as many radical activists as possible, including ordaining priests.

Build those numbers over years, and combine with activist laity to achieve strategic placements on national church councils and diocesan staffs.

Find the state with the lowest 'churched' population of all 50 states in the nation - a 'weakest link' - and vote in an activist priest as bishop. New Hampshire.

Force a vote at General Convention to approve his consecration and at the same time another to approve 'blessing rites' for non-celibate homosexual partners in spite of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops recommending strongly against it and almost the entire Anglican Communion pleading with the Episcopal Church not to do it.

Label those who oppose these moves as ‘un-inclusive’ and ‘un-Christian’, regardless of whether grounds for either assertion exist.

Paint African and other ‘Two-Thirds World’ Anglicans as ‘simple’ and ‘backward’ as reasons for their opposition; like the Apostles, they’re too ‘simple’ to understand that the Bible really isn’t correct.

Force those who disagree - clergy and laity - either out of parishes altogether or into submission (use jobs and pensions for leverage against clergy; use church property against laity).

Weaken belief in Holy Scripture:

Teach that Jesus is not the only way to God –

Teach that the Gospel has simply been misunderstood all these years –

Teach that other religions are equally valid; Christianity holds no sway over others –

Affirm all ‘feelings’ and behaviors –

Teach that transformation by Jesus is unnecessary; what you want to do is paramount –

Ultimately point to the fallacy of the whole Bible, not just selected portions.

Eventually, belief will be sufficiently weakened to support the activist’s ideology that not only do human desire and experience trump Holy Scripture, but that lacking a valid foundation, belief in Jesus is illogical. Transformation from what? Redemption from what? Neither is any longer necessary. ‘Come as you are, stay as you are’ will be the prevailing call. Jesus - and His death for our sins - becomes irrelevant.

The failure of the Episcopal Church or its decline into near irrelevance will be the jumping off point for attacks on other churches until there no longer exists a moral authority which can challenge the elevation of human desire and experience.

So am I saying our rector is part of this agenda? I think only in the sense that he’s been trained and educated over the decades to passionately believe in the nice part of the agenda that appears so benign. He’s a decent and gentle person and I think he has a strong faith. I’m sure he doesn’t recognize the dangers of the larger agenda and would speak out loudly to tell you it isn’t there. Sometimes when you’re in the ‘belly of the beast’ everything seems pretty normal. It’s only when someone makes noise fighting the beast from the outside that you realize you’re not where you thought you were. That’s my friend Hugh’s predicament. Like I said earlier, I don’t buy the new packaging of our faith. He does. It’s the biggest thing we disagree on.

Reason for Hope

As brilliant as this strategy is, however, thousands of faithful Episcopalians have seen through it and are coming together to counter it. It’s true that ‘All it takes for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing’ and I’m thoroughly heartened that a lot of good

men and women recognize the danger are not just standing by and ‘doing nothing.’ I think Martin Luther had it just right when he said:

‘If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not professing Christ, no matter how boldly I may be professing Christ.

Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved. To be steady on all battlefields besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.’

I plan to be where the battle rages. I hope in all sincerity that St. Thomas’ will in time realize the danger, go to higher ground and keep this beautiful little parish from becoming nothing more than a historical site in years to come. It’s a battle I’d stand beside you in.

Don’t just take just what I’ve written here or any one person’s viewpoint to decide which way you want to look at the problem. There is a massive amount of information on both sides of the issue, and if you really care what happens to your parish, go out and find it. It’s that important.

In the love of Christ and in His promise of hope,

Bill Boniface, Senior Warden