

An Open Response to

“Patient Endurance - On Living Faithfully in a Time of Troubles”

Dear Philip, Christopher and Ephraim:

I greatly appreciate your contribution on the subject of how to remain faithful in these times of challenge for the Anglican churches in North America. It is an urgent and a challenging subject. This response is not intended as a refutation,, but rather as an attempt to contribute critically to some of the issues raised by your essay. I write, not from the perspective of a theologian – professional or otherwise – but as a committed follower of Jesus Christ and as a lifelong Anglican layman with church roots that go back for many generations. As a Canadian, I am responding with particular reference to the situation in my own country, but I believe that these comments may also be relevant to many Americans and to believers from other parts of the “Old West” as well. At this stage, I continue as a member of the Anglican Church of Canada, but I now face a pressing and a practical dilemma. To what part of the Anglican Church will I belong?

There are two issues that concern me about the assumptions that underlie your comments. The first has to do with your critique of the formation of the new Province of North America. The second has to do with the nature of the challenge facing those who choose to remain within those Provinces that you have characterized as being well advanced down the road to “liturgical and even doctrinal Unitarianism”.

The Bride of Christ and the Structures of the Church

One of the most profound developments in the history of the Church over the past century – and one that has often been overlooked - has been the gradual crumbling of the “Christendom” arrangement that originated with the Emperor Constantine and endured in one form or another from the Fourth Century until very recently. Under this arrangement, the Church functioned as a pillar of the State by legitimizing the State’s authority and by stabilizing its society, in return for State support of the Church’s institutions and hegemony. Inevitably this long association had profound implications for the perspectives and the structures of the Church. Jesus told Pilate “My kingdom is not of this world”, but in the sanctuary of a Christendom church, the State flag has become as familiar as the Cross. It can be argued that Anglicanism provides one of the very clearest historic examples of this harnessing of the church by the secular state. It can also be argued that our denomination’s Christendom “hangover” is therefore especially severe.

Today, Christianity is regarded by most secular authorities in the world as outmoded, irrelevant, or outright subversive. Christians who actually believe the historic gospel are seen as either dreamers or troublemakers. It is clear by now that this change is not a temporary aberration. Even though its full impact cannot yet be comprehended, the ongoing and longer term implications are enormous. They require the re-evaluation of the role, the structures and the cultural implications of the visible Church and of our understanding of its relationship to the Bride of Christ. Most of all they require us to return to the words of the Author and Head of the Church. Jesus not only told Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world, but he was very clear that the nature of the unity of believers is relational not structural. The structures of the Church are a means to an end not the end itself.

By God's grace, the Anglican Communion is a world wide fellowship. It is no longer an institution of the British Empire. Even if the formality of establishment persists in England, it is an anachronism just like the method of appointment of the Archbishop of Canterbury by the British Monarch on advice of her political advisors. The organization of the Anglican Church is going to have to change radically to adjust to this new reality. In refashioning the Western Anglican Church, we are going to have to draw on new sources of inspiration, perhaps most notably from the explosion of Christianity in the Global South, from the recent examples of persecuted Churches in China, Eastern Europe and elsewhere, and from the experience of the world wide Anglican Communion as it has become a home for the poor and the outcasts in many parts of the world.

You have suggested that the situation of the American and Canadian Churches can best be understood as evidence of God's judgement resulting from their "pervasive misconstruals of Christian belief and practice". Given the evidence of the collapse of Christendom, it would seem at least possible that God's purposes also extends to encompass the cleansing and renewal of His Church so that it can again concentrate on its primary mission of faithful witness and evangelism.

Under these circumstances, I find your view that the creation of the new Province of North America is "at a minimum presumptuous" to be entirely unwarranted. It is open to at least two serious objections. The first is the justification of the English Reformation on which the Anglican Church was founded. The second flows from Jesus' description of Christian unity in his prayer in John 17. Our unity derives from our relationship with Christ and his relationship with the Father: "I in them and you in me". Over the centuries the visible structures of the Church have changed and will continue to do so, but the challenge to faithful discipleship remains constant as the bond of unity.

Whether in practice the new Province eventually replaces the two Provinces that are drifting into apostasy, or whether it remains a parallel structure within the Anglican Communion is relatively unimportant. What is really important is the opportunity and the commitment of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) to get on with sharing the Gospel and making disciples in an environment free from the kind of mindset that recently led the Canadian Primate to imply in a letter to his fellow Primates that the Anglican Church of Canada is obligated to adjust its doctrines simply in order to conform to the changing social provisions of the State.

The Global Anglican Futures Conference, with its creation of a relational Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans (which is clearly intended to operate from within the Anglican Communion) and the subsequent emergence of a new North American Province which also seeks to remain within the worldwide Anglican Communion, but does not follow the current framework of territorial monopolies (resembling quasi-nation states) may very well be evidence that the Holy Spirit is blowing a new wind through the Church.

Perhaps, like the early church, we are being both challenged and equipped to evangelize from the margins rather than from the presumed lap of power. My experience so far of the ANiC movement, and now of the ACNA encourage me to believe that those involved are deeply committed to making disciples based on the foundation of a common biblical faith while building unity in relationships. The most powerful scriptural image that strikes me when I consider the

secularization of North America is of fields white for harvest. Who will gather in that harvest? If I decide to join the new Province of North America, it will be to try to contribute in some small way to work that I no longer believe is possible within the current confused and conflicted church structures.

Costly Discipleship

Let me turn to my second issue. I concur with your assessment that the drift to apostasy in the present Canadian and United States Provinces has reached a stage where it is no longer possible to “see any near possibility of reform” from within. But if reform is no longer a viable strategy, what exactly do you mean by “patient endurance”?

One of my greatest frustrations as an Anglican these days is not with the reconstructionists who have abandoned Christianity in favour of a secular gospel of relativism and self-affirmation. They at least know where they want to go and in a pluralist society they have every right to go there. (It is taking the Church of Jesus Christ along for the ride that I object to!) No, my greatest issue is with those who are sitting on the fence. At least in the Canadian context, I am aware of bishops and other church leaders who profess orthodox beliefs in private, but who will not speak out in public. The problem is that they do not preach what they (claim to) practice! They inhibit their clergy and their congregations. They insist on due process, but they refuse to speak up when their reconstructionist colleagues bend the rules or ignore the decisions and the entreaties of the worldwide Communion.

Based on reports from Lambeth and from my own experience with a local diocesan “indaba session”, I am convinced that this “lets just stay together and keep talking” approach is in reality a refusal to face Truth in the person of Jesus Christ. The refusal may be unwitting or it may be deliberate. The effect is the same. It plays into the hands of those relativists who see all points of view as equally valid as long as we all stay together in the reconstructionist boat. If enduring silently is what you mean by “patient endurance” then it does mean “dying in place” clutching the trappings of cultural Anglicanism in an apostate church. This is not an option that is honouring to God.

What is a legitimate option, and what I hope you mean by “patient endurance” is actively, persistently, and without compromise speaking into the corrupted structures from within. This is the well trodden path of prophesy. As with those called to be prophets in any age, it is not a comfortable or a popular job! “Patient endurance” is too passive a description for a role that sooner or later will inevitably involve facing bitter criticism, rejection and persecution from those who refuse to listen.

In his book, The Cost of Discipleship, written when he was working out the implications of being faithful to Jesus Christ within the Third Reich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of “costly grace” pursued through the obedience of discipleship. In his own case, it led Bonhoeffer to speak out not only against the Nazi Church, but against the compromises accepted by the so-called Confessing Church. In the end it led him to Christian martyrdom. None of us are likely facing such an extreme situation today (after all we are living in a pluralist post Christendom era!) but the implications for hardship and suffering are not to be underestimated. We can expect spiritual warfare. The assignment will involve venturing very close to the front lines. Is this what you mean by “patient

endurance”? If so, I believe that you have an obligation to spell it out more clearly in ways that will be helpful for those of us who are facing the alternatives that I have described.

A Final Word

I share your frustrations with glib comments about “outside” and “inside “ strategies, but as an Anglican who is seeking to be faithful to Our Lord Jesus Christ, I am still facing a choice. Do I stay or do I go? I believe that both options are legitimate, but the things that make them so also make them very hard and, often, very scary. There are no easy choices. If I join ACNA, I will be leaving behind people that I will continue to love. If I remain where I am, I will still be relying on ACNA and on those who have had the courage to create it to provide me with a lifeline of fellowship and hope to endure as an active witness within the Anglican Church of Canada.

As your paper clearly acknowledges, this is all in the hands of Our Lord. The choice that I and others must make will, in each case, be influenced by the individual circumstances in which He has placed us. Our experience of God is always that His ways are not our ways. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55) In the end there is only one strategy: His strategy. There is only one church: His Church. If we are faithful to Him, He will continue to build it on us as His foundation.

In Christ,
Mark Larratt-Smith