

Ferment within the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion

Colleagues,

In my weekly routine, Thursday is a “you gotta,” i.e., you gotta produce another ThTh posting. [Today’s number is 144. That’s 12 dozen already—a gross of you gotta’s!] After which comes Friday’s “you get to.” You get to go to the brown-bag weekly lunch hour meeting at St. Louis University. And what happens there? An ecumenical mix of folks, eight to ten of us most often—men and women—assembles in a seminar room of that Jesuit stronghold to munch on sandwiches and chew on theology.

The SLU Jesuits publish a journal, THEOLOGY DIGEST. Every Friday at high noon the TD staff presents an essay they’re considering for future publication and we have at it—and, once in a while even, at each other. Since we’re all good friends by now, siblings in the faith, it’s great fun. Real grounds for saying TGIF, Thank God it’s Friday. Definitely a “you get to.”

Today’s ThTh 144 comes from one of our Friday folks, Warren Crews. The Rev. Dr. Warren E. Crews is Dean of the Episcopal School for Ministry, Diocese of Missouri, and Priest Assistant, Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Webster Groves, Missouri. Thanks, Warren, for this essay.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Ferment within the Episcopal Church USA

Ed mentioned to me [at last Friday’s Theology-Digest get-

together] that most Lutherans think that it is only Lutherans who agonize about things like the historic episcopate, while Episcopalians live a happy conflict-free life. To demonstrate the obvious, he pointed out to me two articles from the March edition of Episcopal Life, the official national monthly Episcopal newspaper, and asked me to comment on them for the readers of Thursday Theology. Both articles are about a group of conservative Episcopalians who are unhappy about a variety of things they see going on in the Episcopal Church. Among their complaints are a bureaucracy that stifles mission, liberal bishops who persecute conservatives (especially those who do not accept women or homosexual priests), liberal bishops who spout heresy and go unpunished, and liberal bishops who condone and/or ordain homosexual clergy.

A number of these conservatives and their congregations have taken the novel step of withdrawing from the Episcopal Church and becoming part of dioceses in Africa and Asia, which share their conservative views. Last year, two Americans were consecrated missionary bishops by African and Asian bishops to care for these congregations and their clergy and to plant new ones. The primates (heads of national churches) of the 38 Anglican Churches around the world recently discussed proposals for the Anglican Communion to develop ways to discipline the wayward American church (and other first world churches of like mind). As expected, they decided to study the matter for another year and discuss the proposals in greater depth at their meeting next year. The issue is not going to be resolved quickly or easily.

What is my take on all of this? Although I prefer to accentuate the positive and believe that the press distorts the size and influence of the dissidents, it is only honest to admit that there are issues and tensions within the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. At the 1998 Lambeth Conference (the

once-a-decade meeting of all Anglican bishops) the bishops of the third world were clearly in the majority and were determined to make themselves heard on a variety of subjects. African and Asian bishops, who frequently are being seriously challenged by militant Islam, wanted to be able to go home with a resounding condemnation of homosexuality. They also expressed their displeasure with the Episcopal Church's decision to make mandatory the ordination of women in every diocese. They began the discussion of whether the Anglican Communion should have disciplinary procedures for those national churches which ignore Lambeth Conference decisions. American and other first world bishops were put on notice that they belong to a worldwide church, which is no longer dominated by sophisticated, white liberals.

Americans and others fired back saying that each national church must faithfully seek to proclaim the gospel within its own culture, and that missionary methods will differ greatly from culture to culture. Any attempt at creating an Anglican pope (the Archbishop of Canterbury) and curia (the primates) would only stifle mission and create division. They succeeded in getting Lambeth to condemn the novel practice of one national church sending "missionary bishops" into another national church without their being invited. The two articles describe what has transpired since 1998.

In this country there have indeed been cases where conservatives have been persecuted for their views by liberal bishops. Some bishops have resisted the formation of new "conservative evangelical" congregations and have refused to send seminarians to the more conservative seminaries. Some congregations that conscientiously object to women priests have been forced to accept visits by women bishops. So, the conservatives do have their list of real grievances. I regret that these conservatives have come to feel that schism is the only way to be heard. It is

sad that some conservatives have slipped into a Donatist mode of thinking that they cannot accept the ministry of bishops who take controversial positions. Some of the persecution has been a natural reaction to such refusal.

But, it is fair to ask whether such grievances typify the Episcopal Church. I think not. We have a long history of valuing ideological diversity (e.g., high church, low church) and of working out our differences peacefully. Most conservatives in the Episcopal Church have chosen a different path—that of demonstrating the fruits of a vision of a healthy, growing Church. They in fact have helped give birth to a new evangelical impulse in the Episcopal Church. Our national church has adopted a plan called “Vision 20/20,” which calls for the doubling of our membership by 2020. Diocese after diocese is adopting plans to pursue that goal. For example, recently the Diocese of Virginia announced plans to raise twenty million dollars for the planting of new congregations. A similar plan to recruit younger and more “entrepreneurial” clergy is falling into place around the country. Our Presiding Bishop is constantly moving us into a deeper listening process where all voices are heard. There seems to be a new spirit moving within our church.

Wouldn't it be ironic if these positive new trends were the result of the tensions caused by those who have chosen to leave! Perhaps, the crisis they precipitated has helped to open our hearts and minds to a fresh, new movement of the Holy Spirit.

Warren E. Crews