



CNI

COMMENT - Communion across difference

Can the C of I learn from the Episcopal bishops model of Christian toleration and respect for differences?

- Houston McKelvey writes.

As a long term monitor of the Episcopal Church for which I have a profound respect based on contact through worship, christian education, personal and professional friendship over many years, I was nevertheless delighted and more importantly moved spiritually by the manner in which disagreement in their much larger House of Bishops over same sex marriage was framed and nuanced following the vote at the Convention in Salt Lake City earlier this month.

Here is a model of Christian tolerance recognising profound differences and yet in Christ's name bridging those differences with love and respect. It is a model that those who are concerned about the best interests,

spiritually and materially, of the Church of Ireland would do well to prayerfully consider regardless of one's current stance on this issue.

The dissenting bishops' statement

18 bishops including the present and the retired bishops of Albany with which Down and Dromore Diocese is linked, dissented from the majority vote. The group of dissenting bishops signed a minority report on marriage titled, "Communion Partners Salt Lake City Statement". It states -

"The 78th General Convention of The Episcopal Church, in passing Resolutions A036 and A054, has made a significant change in the Church's understanding of Christian marriage. As bishops of the Church, we must dissent from these actions.

"We affirm Minority Report #1, which was appended to the text of Resolution A036:

"The nature, purpose, and meaning of marriage, as traditionally understood by Christians, are summed up in the words of the Book of Common Prayer:

“The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation, and our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. It signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church, and Holy Scripture commends it to be honored by all people.

“The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God’s will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord” (BCP, p. 423). The nature, purpose, and meaning of marriage are linked to the relationship of man and woman. The promises and vows of marriage presuppose husband and wife as the partners who are made one flesh in marriage. This understanding is a reasonable one, as well as in accord with Holy Scripture and Christian tradition in their teaching about marriage.

“When we were ordained as bishops in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, we vowed to “guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church of God” (BCP, p. 518). We renew that promise; and in light of the actions of General

Convention, and of our own deep pastoral and theological convictions, we pledge ourselves to “Maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). The bonds created in baptism are indissoluble, and we share one bread and one cup in the Eucharist. We are committed to the Church and its people, even in the midst of painful disagreement.

“Speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). When we disagree with the Church’s actions, we will do so openly and transparently and – with the Spirit’s help – charitably. We are grateful that Resolution A054 includes provision for bishops and priests to exercise their conscience; but we realize at the same time that we have entered a season in which the tensions over these difficult matters may grow. We pray for the grace to be clear about our convictions and, at the same time, to love brothers and sisters with whom we disagree.

“Welcome one another . . . just as Christ has welcomed [us]” (Rom. 15:7). Our commitment to the Church includes a commitment to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. We will walk with them, pray with and for them, and seek ways to engage in pastoral conversation. We rejoice that Jesus’ embrace includes all of us.

“We are mindful that the decisions of the 78th General Convention do not take place in isolation. The Episcopal Church is part of a larger whole, the Anglican Communion. We remain committed to that Communion and to the historic See of Canterbury, and we will continue to honor the three moratoria requested in the Windsor Report and affirmed by the Instruments of Communion.

“We invite bishops and any Episcopalians who share these commitments to join us in this statement, and to affirm with us our love for our Lord Jesus Christ, our commitment to The Episcopal Church, and the Anglican Communion, and our dissent from these actions.”

The majority response - Communion across difference

The majority within the House of Bishops responded to their colleagues thus in a message titled ‘Communion across difference’ -

“We the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church wish to express our love and appreciation to our colleagues who identify as Communion Partners and those bishops who have affinity with the Communion Partners’ position as stated in their “[Communion Partners](#)

[Salt Lake City Statement.](#)” Our time together in Salt Lake City, in conversation and in prayer, has demonstrated how profoundly the love of God in Jesus binds us together and empowers us for service to God’s mission. As we have waited upon the leading of the Holy Spirit in our deliberations, we have been reminded that the House of Bishops is richly gifted with many voices and perspectives on matters of theological, liturgical, and pastoral significance. This has been shown in our discernment with respect to doctrinal matters relative to Christian marriage. We thank God for the rich variety of voices in our House, in our dioceses, in The Episcopal Church, and in the Anglican Communion, that reflect the wideness of God’s mercy and presence in the Church and in the world.

“We give particular thanks for the steadfast witness of our colleagues in the Communion Partners. We value and rely on their commitment to The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. We recognize that theirs is a minority voice in the House of Bishops in our deliberations with respect to Christian marriage; and we affirm that despite our differences they are an indispensable part of who we are as the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church. Our church needs their witness. Further, we

appreciate that each of us will return to dioceses where there will be a variety of responses to Resolutions A054 and A036. The equanimity, generosity, and graciousness with which the Communion Partners have shared their views on Christian marriage and remain in relationship is a model for us and for the lay and ordained leaders in our dioceses to follow. We thank God that in the fullness of the Holy Trinity we can and must remain together as the Body of Christ in our dioceses, in The Episcopal Church, and in our relationships with sisters and brothers in Christ in the Anglican Communion. The bonds created in baptism are indeed indissoluble and we pray that we have the confidence to rely upon the Holy Spirit who will continue to hold us all together as partners in communion through the love of God in Jesus.” (2)

Voting in the House of Bishops was overwhelmingly in support of necessary changes in liturgy - 129 for, 26 against and five abstaining.(3).

The resolutions marked the culmination of a conversation launched when the 1976 General Convention said that “homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance and pastoral concern and care of the church,”

said the Very Rev. Brian Baker, deputy chair of the Special Legislative Committee on Marriage. “That resolution began a 39-year conversation about what that full and equal claim would look like. The conversation has been difficult for many and painful for many.”

The two basic resolutions represented compromises reached after prayerful consideration and conversation within the legislative committee, and then the House of Bishops to make room for everyone, Baker said. “I know that most of you will find something ... to dislike and to disagree with” in the resolutions, he said, asking deputies to “look through the lens of how this compromise makes room for other people.”

The C of I has but scratched the surface of this issue. As it attempts to engage more deeply, this example from the USA of sensitivity in major disagreement should not be set aside. Basically what I see in operation is “grace” - something which too many of us, myself included, here in Ireland are better at preaching about than receiving and exercising.

It is my sincere hope and prayer that the Irish House of Bishops which like their American

counterparts is not of one mind on this issue, will rise to the challenge of the inter-personal dynamics of a much smaller House, firstly, in their personal respect and Christian esteem of each other, and secondly, in modelling a manner of prayerful and informed debate which reflects grace towards those of different opinions within the household of faith.

If the bishops cannot model the model... or as our US brothers and sisters might put it, if they cannot walk the walk, they cannot talk the talk...

Houston McKelvey

(1). <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2015/07/18-tec-bishops-sign-minority-report-on-marriage-equality.aspx>

(2). <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2015/07/usa-mind-of-the-house-of-bishops-statement-communion-across-difference.aspx>

(3). <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2015/07/usa-episcopal-general-convention-approves-marriage-equality.aspx>