

On Making Decisions In The Church. Anglican News, Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn, NSW Bruce Kaye 14 January 2010

Your correspondent is in South Carolina in the US for six weeks where we are enjoying the very active christian community life of the local Episcopal parish. While here I have been reflecting on the way we make group decisions. This line of thought has been prompted by things going on in The Episcopal Church and some correspondence on a blog I keep at <http://worldanglicanismforum.blogspot.com/> . The correspondence has been about the proposed Anglican covenant to re-structure the Anglican Communion in order to try and settle disputes about sexuality.

With a General Synod coming up in September this year, which will presumably have the question of the covenant on its agenda, I wondered how we in Australia might make such a decision. Adopting a covenant would mean in part giving to others the power to decide our relations with parts of the Anglican Communion. I suppose in that sense it is something that has the potential to affect the operation of our constitution and therefore could require a canon of General Synod, even a Special Bill. Those sorts of questions will no doubt be settled in some way by the General Synod itself and are not quite the issue in my mind.

Rather I was interested in how for parishes and individual Anglicans such a decision might be undertaken. Generally speaking the General Synod does not hit the agenda of many parish councils or vestries around the country. In some dioceses it does not hit the synod agenda other than for matters specifically referred to the dioceses. In some dioceses all the General Synod representatives meet before the synod to discuss the issues on the agenda.

The present conflict in the Anglican Communion and the Covenant process have been prompted by the actions of The Episcopal Church (US) and reactions to them especially from Nigeria's former archbishop, Peter Akinola.

On December 5 Mary Glasspool was elected as an assistant bishop in the diocese of Los Angeles. She will be consecrated in May this year. She is openly Lesbian with a long term partner of nineteen years (nearly double the average length of a marriage in Australia). On behalf of GAFCON its General Secretary, Peter Jensen, issued a statement on December 6 in which he said, 'Confirmation of this election will make clear beyond any doubt whatsoever that the TEC leadership has chosen to walk in a way which is contrary to scripture and will continue to do so. This settled path that the TEC chooses is contrary to the expressed will of the majority of the Anglican Communion.'

It became clear that The Episcopal Church had settled on its position and future policy some time ago at its General Convention last year. It affirmed its support for the Anglican Communion, encouraged its members to participate in the various activities of the Communion, affirmed its full contribution to the budget of the Anglican Communion and supported the listening process called for on this subject. The Convention then went on to

'acknowledge that through our own listening the General Convention has come to recognize that the baptized membership of The Episcopal Church includes same-sex

couples living in lifelong committed relationships "characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.

recognize that gay and lesbian persons who are part of such relationships have responded to God's call and have exercised various ministries in and on behalf of God's One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and are currently doing so in our midst;

affirm that God has called and may call such individuals, to any ordained ministry in The Episcopal Church, and that God's call to the ordained ministry in The Episcopal Church is a mystery which the Church attempts to discern for all people through our discernment processes acting in accordance with the Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church;

acknowledge that members of The Episcopal Church as of the Anglican Communion, based on careful study of the Holy Scriptures, and in light of tradition and reason, are not of one mind, and Christians of good conscience disagree about some of these matters.'

Clearly this is a complicated matter and it is difficult to know how best to handle a church decision on it. The final decision making body for The Episcopal Church is the General Convention.

In The Episcopal Church they have established a Task Force to prepare a report for the next General Convention in 2012 based on extensive consultation with the dioceses. Parishes have been encouraged to study the material.

In response to the request of the Anglican Consultative Council meeting last year for Provinces to comment on the revised and crucial section 4 of the Draft Covenant, the TEC Task Force distributed a set of six study questions to all the members of the General Convention seeking responses from individuals and diocesan groups of representatives to inform the TEC response to Section 4.

In Australia there has also been work done to formulate a response to these important proposals. The Standing Committee appointed a working group which prepared a response to the draft text of the covenant. Members of the last General Synod were provided with copies of this report. The General Synod resolved that the process was important and the Standing Committee was to 'facilitate an ongoing participation by the Anglican Church of Australia in any further dialogue about or development of a covenant proposal.' It is certainly good for Australia to play its part in these debates.

But there is also the important question of Australian Anglicans engaging with these issues and contributing to the decision of the church. The General Synod will need to have its debate shaped by an informed appreciation of the sentiments in the broad base of the church community. That will require good information for that church community. Information that facilitates informed discussion. It will also depend of diocesan representatives who go to the General Synod meeting being well informed about these views.

There is good material at the Anglican Communion web site <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/> and readers might like to read the discussion at

<http://worldanglicanismforum.blogspot.com/>

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