

Dear St. Philippians,

After six years of litigation, the Episcopal Church and the Episcopal Church in South Carolina (TEC and TECSC) seek to declare victory in the legal battle with the Diocese of South Carolina. To promote their idea that the fight is over, members of TECSC have published multiple letters to the editor in the Post and Courier, and, last week, TECSC held “Open Conversations” in three locations around the Diocese to promote “Reconciliation” for “returning congregations.”

As representatives of St. Philip’s Vestry, Harry Gregorie, Sam Robinson, and I attended the “Open Conversation” in Charleston. The event was led by TECSC Bishop Gladstone B. “Skip” Adams and the Rev. William Coyne, TECSC’s newly appointed “Missioner for Returning Congregations.” It was advertised as “a roadmap for reconciliation,” and the opportunity “to listen well and respond to questions in order to offer a clear picture of how people can remain in their churches as part of The Episcopal Church.”

The word “Reconciliation” has a kind and generous tone, but, in this situation, it is worth digging into the details, considering the background, the current actions, and the facts. To what, exactly, are we being asked to be reconciled, and how should we respond?

Reconciliation is defined as “the restoration of friendly relations or the action of making one view or belief compatible with another.” Biblical reconciliation focuses on being reconciled to God and then to each other. This is accomplished by repenting of sins, seeking God’s forgiveness, and sharing unity in faith in Jesus Christ. Because Biblical reconciliation is a process, it cannot be compelled.

The Rev. Bill Coyne began TECSC’s “Open Conversation” by saying that “Reconciliation” is “the ultimate test of Christian mission,” and that “we have holy work to do.” He concluded by saying that “we want to push into God’s future with strength, courage, hope and love.” There was no mention of prayerfully seeking to discern God’s will for how to be reconciled with “returning” congregations.

Bishop Skip Adams spoke of “the common venture of our common faith.” Not citing chapter or verse, he read from Philippians followed by a prayer from the Book of Common Prayer that is used on Good Friday and at the ordination of a bishop. Bishop Adams commented that he loved that prayer because it was “so gospel oriented.” Remarking upon the prayer, he spoke of “our complete and utter trust in the providence of God.” He said, “The church is a mystery, a sacrament for the reconciliation of the world.” He reminded his listeners that “God is making all things new.”

A video from TEC’s recent General Convention showed Presiding Bishop Michael Curry addressing those attending the “Open Conversation,” saying that he was praying for “those seeking reconciliation.” Bishop Adams concluded his brief talk with two quotes from the former Bishop of South Carolina, Gray Temple, who served from 1961-1982.

Bishop Adams’s talk, combined with his choices of scripture, prayer, and quotes, seemed carefully crafted to highlight the commonalities between Anglican congregations belonging to the Diocese of SC and Episcopalians belonging to the Episcopal Church in South Carolina. The message echoed recently published Post and Courier letters to the editor. Bishop Adams seemed to say that we read the same scripture, we use the same prayer book, we ordain our clergy with the same prayer, and we share the same history; therefore, why not be “reconciled” and share common worship again?

After Bishop Adams spoke, the full meeting broke up into a time of “mingling” and an opportunity for those attending to circulate among four tables staffed with table hosts. The tables were labeled Introduction for Returning Congregations, Worship & Faith, Practical Matters, and Communication. As Harry Gregorie observed, everything, including what the Rev. Bill Coyne said as table host of “Introduction for Returning Congregations,” repeatedly communicated the perspective that the fight is over. All of the talk in the room led listeners to the belief that the SC Supreme Court had given TEC and TECSC the victory and all that was left was the implementation of this decision by the Dorchester Circuit Court, which most assuredly would be happening soon.

This is an incomplete assessment of the situation.

No mention was made of the other lawsuits in both state and federal court which will likely take several more years to litigate. There was no mention of the many challenges that will arise as the Circuit Court attempts to implement the SC Supreme Court’s five deeply divided opinions, including some issues which may ultimately be appealed again to the

high court. Nor was there any mention of recent legal filings by TEC/TECSC seeking the court-ordered removal of all parish clergy and vestries, unless they prove loyal to TEC, or the filing seeking a full, detailed accounting of every building, every coin in the coffers, every piece of silver, artwork, etc., down to the very books in the pews going back to 2008.

Are we to consider Bishop Adams's words—or his actions? As he said that night, he represents the national Episcopal Church in South Carolina. Whether he speaks or acts, he represents not only himself but also the larger Church.

Bishop Adams's words, combined with letters to the editor from other TEC priests, seek to assure us that we share a common faith, common prayer, common worship. Words such as "love," and "reconciliation" are used frequently, but clarity of definition is left deliberately vague. Self-sacrifice, sin, repentance, and forgiveness are not mentioned; instead, slogans such as "good disagreement" and "unity without uniformity" are used.

If we look past words and punitive legal filings to larger actions, recent resolutions passed by the Episcopal Church at General Convention highlight ongoing theological differences. The Episcopal Church is not what it once was; it is not even the same Church it was when we left in 2012.

Consider just a few of the Resolutions from TEC's General Convention held in early July. Resolution A068, a "Plan for the Revision of the Book of Common Prayer," was passed. This Resolution authorizes "the ongoing work of liturgical and Prayer Book revision for the future of God's mission through the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement. And, that it do so upon the core theological work of loving, liberating, life-giving reconciliation and creation care." It "Resolved, That bishops engage worshiping communities in experimentation and the creation of alternative texts to offer to the wider church," and "Resolved, That our liturgical revision utilize inclusive and expansive language and imagery for humanity and divinity." We may share a common prayer book now, and common language for God, but there will be a newly revised prayer book in the foreseeable future, and the 1979 BCP will be, in TEC's words, "memorialized."

Consider some of the reporting on this issue. Before the vote, the Very Rev. Samuel Candler, Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta and chairman of the committee that put forward Resolution A068, said, "Book of Common Prayer revision could easily involve more than language of how we refer to God. Revision of the prayer book certainly is about expansive language, but it is also about proper stewardship and care of creation. How we see our salvation, atonement theology. There are lots of features that would represent the breadth of the Episcopal Church and our theology since 1979."

In her July 6, 2018, article on GetReligion.org, reporter Julia Duin wrote, "I have no doubt the denomination will vote to create a new prayer book and de-gender God as much as possible. Some clergy have been doing this for years, such as a clergywoman at St. Mark's Cathedral in Seattle who was replacing the 'He' pronouns for the Holy Spirit in the fourth-century Nicene Creed to a 'She' years ago. The fact that one just doesn't change the Christian church's most recognized creed didn't occur to her. For those of you used to praying to 'Our Father who art in heaven,' it seems curious the matter is being debated, but apparently Jesus' references to God, as reported in Scripture, no longer settle this issue."

Later, after the Resolution passed, Dean Candler added, "The church is always reforming. Our prayer is always reforming. We are excited to be part of that."

The 79th General Convention also passed Resolution B012, extending the use of the trial marriage rites for same-sex couples, which were approved three years ago, until such time as they can be incorporated into a revised prayer book. Dean Candler told a reporter that "supporters of prayer book reform believed the right to marry trumped the right of theological conscience."

B012 makes those rites available in every diocese where allowed by civil law, regardless of whether the bishop of each diocese holds opposing theological beliefs. "Resolved, that in dioceses where the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority (or, where applicable, ecclesiastical supervision) holds a theological position that does not embrace marriage for same-sex couples, and there is a desire to use such rites by same-sex couples in a congregation or worshipping community, the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority (or ecclesiastical supervision) shall invite, as necessary, another bishop of this Church to provide pastoral support to the couple, the Member of the Clergy involved and the congregation or

worshipping community in order to fulfill the intention of this resolution that all couples have convenient and reasonable local congregational access to these rites.” In other words, those bishops who theologically oppose same-sex marriage are no longer allowed to exercise such authority over their diocese. Is this what is meant by “good disagreement” and “unity without uniformity”?

For provinces of TEC outside of the U.S., many of whom oppose same-sex marriage, and where same-sex marriage is not allowed by civil law, Resolution A086 was passed. A086 authorized “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant.” Again, bishops who hold theological beliefs in opposition to a ceremony that blesses couples living together outside the bonds of marriage must “invite, as necessary, another bishop of this Church to provide pastoral support to the couple, the Member of the Clergy involved and the congregation or worshipping community in order to fulfill the intention of this resolution that all couples have convenient and reasonable local congregational access to this rite.”

Interestingly, with no apparent sense of irony, the Resolution also declares “that this Church continue to honor the theological diversity of this Church in regard to matters of human sexuality.”

There are voices of concern about Resolution B012 within the Episcopal Church. ENS reports that Bishop Love of Albany, who opposes same-sex marriage, said, “[some believe] that this is a new thing that the Holy Spirit is revealing and that the Episcopal Church is being prophetic in putting this forward and ultimately the rest of the body of Christ will come to understand that.” But he added, “we have not had an honest look at what God has said about this issue and how best to help people who find themselves in same-sex relationships.”

Diocese of Springfield Bishop Daniel Martins said, “This most recent General Convention has constrained the authority of bishops to simply prohibit same-sex marriage within the diocese. This is deeply lamentable. It undermines and erodes the ancient and appropriate relationship between a bishop and a diocese as chief pastor, teacher, and liturgical officer...” He called the process of requesting an outside bishop’s assistance “harsh” and “a source of deep personal sorrow—indeed, heartbreak—for me.”

Regardless of how one thinks about same-sex marriage, TEC has now concluded that bishops who theologically disagree with a culturally popular position held by the wider Episcopal Church must willingly relinquish their pastoral authority over their flock in these matters. This is but one issue. What will popular culture demand next? It begs the question: Who leads the Episcopal Church, the world or the Lord of Heaven?

As if in answer, the Rev. Dr. Peter Moore, St. Michael’s Scholar in Residence, wrote recently, “TEC has denied that the Scriptures should be the supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct and voted several times to reject that historic proposition.” Gone is the belief that all scripture is breathed out by God. Gone is 2,000 years of Apostolic tradition, “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” These are uncharted waters, and, as the ancient maps used to say, here there be dragons.

To summarize, here are reasons why we cannot simply “reconcile” with TEC and TECSC:

1. At past General Conventions, TEC has repeatedly voted down resolutions stating that Holy Scripture is the supreme authority of the church.
2. TEC is moving forward in the process of creating a new Book of Common Prayer and will “memorialize” the 1979 BCP. TEC has authorized clergy to experiment with creating new liturgies and language for their congregations.
3. TEC has undermined the historic authority of the relationship between a bishop and his flock.
4. All members of our clergy, for whom we as a congregation searched far and wide to be our pastoral teachers and leaders, would be expelled. TEC has already sought this in legal filings, and admitted it last week at the “Open Conversation” in Bluffton. When asked if “reconciliation” applied to the clergy and if they could keep their jobs, the answer was that no clergy could remain in place, but in five years would be eligible for another call in the event that they complied with the Episcopal Church. Clergy families would be left homeless with no income source. Congregations would lose their pastoral teaching and Biblical preaching.
5. Vestry members would also be out, replaced by new lay leaders, loyal to TEC, elected in a TEC- approved election. No consideration would be given to the fact that the current Vestries are the duly elected lay leaders

of the congregation. The message is clear: TEC knows better than you who should lead your congregation. Again, this has already been requested in legal filings.

6. Most importantly, by simply “reconciling” under TEC’s terms, we would be stating that our public stand for the unchanging nature of God’s word was not a serious theological stance. Recently, a state legislative leader told me that our fight for the inerrancy of God’s word was the most courageous thing he had witnessed in his lifetime. The world watches what we do. Our children watch as well. What legacy of faith will we leave them?

Acknowledging the universality of sin, the Biblical Jesus addressed the sinner with love, just as we seek to do, but he rebuked and condemned the sin. Never once did Jesus condone or explain away sin. Scripture reminds us that the wages of sin is death. Over and over in the Bible, we are called to repent, to turn away from the path that leads to death. We are all sinners, every single one of us. There is a darkness lurking in us, and that is why we so desperately need a savior. Jesus died for our sins. He conquered death so that we who believe in Him, and who live out that faith by repenting of our sins, may have eternal life. In John 8, when Jesus addressed the woman caught in adultery, he did not condemn her but told her, “From now on, go and sin no more.”

Shortly after the Rev. Jeff Miller arrived at St. Philip’s, he commented that he was delighted to find a congregation of Bereans. In Acts 17:11-12, the Bereans “received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many therefore believed...” Whatever was preached or taught was carefully checked against Holy Scripture. When the words rang true, the people believed.

Returning home after the “Open Conversation,” I looked up Bishop Adams’s scripture choice from Philippians. It was chapter 4, verses 4-7: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

When seeking treatment for the deadly disease of sin that haunts us all, how are we to respond to Bishop Adams’s words? May we continue as Bereans, listening, then examining Scripture to see if such things are really true. Let us remember that the mission of the church is the saving of souls. In combating the disease of sin, we risk the loss of a soul. We save our own souls and the souls of others by faithfully believing and generously sharing the unchanging truth of God’s word and the richness of God’s love.

I read the Philippians passage cited by Bishop Adams, and then I read on. Would that Bishop Adams had continued to read the next few sentences of Paul’s letter. The passage continues: “Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things. What you have learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me – practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

If Bishop Adams had read and earnestly applied the rest of the Philippians passage, we might have had a truly “open” conversation.

Let us continue to be Bereans, checking what we are told against the word of God, that, in the words of the apostle Paul to the Philippians, “we may work out our own salvation with fear and trembling” and be reconciled to God, the life-giving father of all.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” Isaiah 40:8.

Soli Deo Gloria!



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