

Realignment: The Unvarnished Truth

At the Convention of the Diocese of Pittsburgh last November, the majority of clergy and lay delegates voted to realign the Diocese with a province of the Anglican Communion other than The Episcopal Church (TEC). It should be said at the outset that this was an illegal act, because it is not within the authority of any diocese to dissociate itself from TEC. Each diocese has been constituted by and is an integral part of TEC, to whose authority it has unconditionally acceded. Nevertheless, the diocesan leadership is presenting this as a normative constitutional change which would require the affirmative votes of two successive conventions. For this reason the next diocesan convention, which will take place in either October or November of this year, will consider the same proposal.

Realignment is being proposed, in my opinion, because the leadership of the diocese subscribe to what I call a "theology of toxicity" --- that is, a belief that the bloodstream, if you will, of TEC has been contaminated by teachings and actions contrary to what has been called "the faith once delivered to the saints." Therefore, in an effort to preserve the "purity" of the church, the diocesan leadership seeks to affiliate with a province which is purportedly untainted, or, if we may use a phrase from the Epistle to the Ephesians in which Paul describes the church triumphant, "without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing . . . holy and without blemish." The only way to preserve the church's purity, in the words of a diocesan communiqué, is "not to go on this journey with The Episcopal Church."

In all likelihood, Pittsburgh's adoptive province will be the Southern Cone, a group of about 20,000 Anglicans dispersed throughout seven dioceses in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay, with headquarters in Buenos Aires. Its primate, Gregory Venables, an Englishman, clearly believes that his province meets the "purity" criterion. Citing, among other developments, the consecration

of Gene Robinson for which act he believes TEC should be excommunicated from the Anglican Communion, he stated in a BBC interview that "a new version of Christianity, a post-modern, relativistic Christianity" has evolved in TEC and elsewhere, but that this phenomenon has not affected Anglicans in the Global South, "who," he shamelessly asserts, "have never wavered from the truth!"

Bishop Duncan, who previously maintained that remaining in TEC and seeking realignment were both faithful decisions, now declares, through a PowerPoint presentation he has shown throughout the Diocese, that realignment is the only theologically justifiable option. His presentation begins with the questions: "Is Jesus really who he said he is?" "Can we trust Sacred Scripture?" and "Are there absolute moral norms given to us by God?" Those who answer "yes" to these questions have no moral alternative, according to the bishop, but to realign. The bishop's faulty logic is evident in the fact that most staunch Episcopalians could answer these questions in the affirmative and yet not support realignment. It is noteworthy, of course, that only three or four dioceses out of 105 in TEC have considered or are considering realignment.

In an effort to explain this radical departure from Anglican practice (provinces are normally based on geographical contiguity and not ideological affinity, and their establishment or expansion is ordinarily sanctioned by the Anglican Consultative Council) the Diocese of Pittsburgh has released and posted on its website a document entitled "Frequently Asked Questions about Realignment." Some of the answers given in the Q&A are, we believe, misleading, others erroneous on their face. I thought it would be helpful to offer the following commentary on some of the answers given. Words in italics are quotations from "Frequently Asked Questions" on the diocesan website.

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“If the convention passes realignment, every parish of the Diocese will be realigned. That means that every parish will no longer be part of TEC, but will continue to be part of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh.”

This is patently false for several reasons, not the least of which is that, as I have previously asserted, no diocese can opt, willy-nilly, to leave the province of which it is a part. Moreover, if realignment happens, those entities opting to realign would, theoretically, constitute a new diocese of the province which the Diocese of Pittsburgh would join. Those entities would cease being members of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, since it is impossible for a diocese in the Anglican Communion to claim membership in more than one province. The ongoing Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh will be made up of those congregations that opt to remain in TEC. It will be remembered that in the settlement of our lawsuit, each parish earned the right not to affiliate with the Network. Surely the same principle will obtain with regard to affiliation with a different province. This is why the document states elsewhere that

clergy [who realign]. . . would be clergy of the province that the Diocese joins instead of clergy of the Episcopal Church.

If the realigned clergy belong to the new province, it follows that the realigned diocese itself would also be a member of that province. **The diocesan leadership, in my opinion, continues to assert that it will continue, after realignment, to be the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, in order that it may have a basis to claim a right to diocesan assets. If they were to claim no longer to be part of TEC, it would be axiomatic that no claims to property could be made.**

“Parishes [who wish to opt out of diocesan realignment] would be given time to consider whether to leave the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh by changing the ‘accession’ in their by-laws. The Diocese would work with parishes to make such a decision as conflict-free and charitable as possible. Clergy would apply to the Bishop for letters dimissory from the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh to whatever entity the leadership of the Episcopal Church sets up.”

This presumptuous statement, I believe, is misleading at best, disingenuous at worst. If realignment takes place, the leadership of the new diocese will be subject to the constitution and canons of the new province, whose ecclesiastical authority would be that province’s primate. Therefore, the “new management” would have no jurisdiction whatsoever over those of us who opt to remain in the Episcopal Church. In plain English, they just can’t have it both ways! If realignment takes place, the bona fide Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh will be declared vacant (i.e., without a bishop) and an interim

or provisional bishop will be appointed in due course, as the ecclesiastical authority for those of us who remain in TEC. Only such a bishop will be able to have jurisdiction over his or her parishes and clergy. The former bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, having left for another province, will have given up such prerogatives, by virtue of his translation to a new province.

“It is our strong belief that the Episcopal Church has no canonical (legal) grounds to depose Bishop Duncan, as was stated in recent letters to the Presiding Bishop’s Chancellor.”

The Episcopal Church, under canon law, has a right to depose any bishop whose actions warrant it. The House of Bishops is currently in possession of documents alleging, under Title IV, Canon 9, that Bishop Duncan has abandoned the communion of this church. Some 60 pages of documentation of this claim were submitted to a canonically established Review Committee, made up of

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bishops, priests and laypersons, who, finding the allegations credible, has forwarded them to the House of Bishops, who, it is our understanding, will consider the charges at its next meeting. We of course do not know what the outcome of the vote will be, but we do know that the procedure has followed strict canonical procedure. The letter from Bishop Duncan’s attorney to the PB’s chancellor, while protesting Bishop Duncan’s innocence, did not specifically address the charges made.

“The leadership of the Episcopal Church has been relentless in its persecution of individuals who have challenged their direction. They have blatantly ignored their own canons in doing so. The purported [sic] depositions of Bishops Cox and Schofield and the proposed depositions of Bishops Duncan and MacBurney are cases in point.”

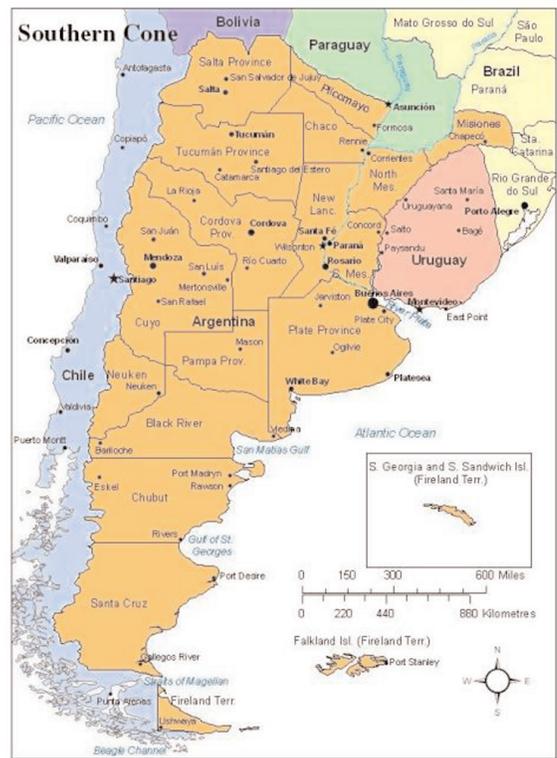
To suggest that TEC, in deposing bishops, has been motivated by a desire to persecute them is preposterous. In these cases, the depositions are not meant to be punitive, but simply to acknowledge the fact that the bishops, by their own admission or by their actions, have left TEC. The painful decisions to depose came about because the bishops in question violated their ordination vows. In the actions taken against the bishops, a meticulous adherence to the canons was observed. All the named bishops have clearly abandoned the communion of the Episcopal Church, as defined by the canons. Bishop Cox, for example, officiated at ordinations in the Diocese of Kansas on behalf of the Archbishop of Uganda,

and has subsequently declared himself to be no longer a member of TEC. Bishop Schofield claims to have led his diocese out of the Episcopal Church and now declares that he is a bishop of the Southern Cone.

In this connection, it should also be pointed out that in another document, a March 13th letter from the Coalition for Realignment, signed by several clerical and lay members of the Diocese, including Bishop Scriven, it was stated that “the alleged evidence [for Bishop Duncan’s deposition] was submitted to [the PB] by a tiny minority of lay persons and clergy within the Diocese of Pittsburgh who have previously tried to interfere with the legitimate exercise of authority by our bishops and other elected clergy and lay leadership of the diocese though the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County. Having failed in the secular courts they now attempt to accomplish the same through the ecclesiastical courts of TEC.” This statement is flawed on several counts.

1. The fact that a “tiny minority” made allegations does not mean that the allegations are unfounded. Nor do the actions of a tiny minority suggest that they are not speaking for many who did not sign the documents in question.
2. Those of us who filed charges against the Bishop charging that he had abandoned the communion of the church were not the same group who filed the lawsuit in 2003. While the earlier action was taken by the vestries of Calvary and St. Stephen’s, Wilkinsburg, and joined by Mr. Bud Harvey of St. Stephen’s, Sewickley, the more recent document was signed by 22 individuals, clergy and lay, from several congregations in the Diocese of Pittsburgh.
3. Far from “interfering with the legitimate exercise of authority” of the bishops and elected officials of the Diocese, the lawsuit challenged an illegal action on the part of the Diocese, namely the passing of “Resolution 6,” which was in direct contravention of canon law, especially the so-called Dennis canon.
4. We did not “fail in the secular courts.” Resolution 6 was rescinded, parishes won the right not to affiliate with the Network, and a procedure was agreed to under which congregations could not withdraw from the Diocese without adhering to a well laid out process.
5. The two actions did not have the same end. The earlier action sought to prevent a canonical breach; the recent action seeks to remove Bishop Duncan from office.

If the Diocese chooses to realign, there would be few immediate consequences for parishes. No property would



immediately change hands. Expected lawsuits would largely target the Diocese.

The settlement of the lawsuit to which Bishop Duncan et al. and their attorneys agreed, makes it necessary for parishes seeking to leave TEC to recognize that “property held or administered by the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh of the Episcopal Church of the United States of America for the beneficial use of the parishes and institutions of the Diocese, shall continue to be so held or administered by the Diocese regardless of whether some or even a majority of the parishes in the Diocese might decide not to remain in the Episcopal Church of the United States of America.” Moreover, a specific process for disaffiliation is spelled out in the agreed-upon Stipulation issued by the Court. Absent compliance with those procedures, there may well be “immediate consequences for parishes.”

Clergy [who realign] would need to enter a new retirement plan.

The Church Pension Fund provides an extremely generous retirement program, with benefits for clergy and their families which are rare if not nonexistent in other retirement programs, be they in other denominations or in the secular arena. What benefits will clergy have in another province? Are they being asked to “buy a pig in a poke?” It should be pointed out, that as the bishop announced at the September 2007 clergy conference, he, after 35 years of ordained ministry, is fully vested in the CPF and is able to retire immediately, as he put it, with “a golden parachute,” even if he translates to another province or is deposed. Those, however, who have not

reached retirement age, are unable to receive benefits. Their accrued benefits in the CPF will be frozen until such time as they retire. Should death or disability occur before retirement, the benefits which they or their survivors would have received were they active in the Fund would be in jeopardy.

This accusation [that the Diocese of Pittsburgh is being targeted as a diocese that the president of the national Episcopal Women's Caucus called 'decidedly hostile to women'] is entirely without grounds. To the contrary, the Diocese has not just a goodly number of female clergy members, but is proud that many key clergy positions of leadership are filled by women, including the Canon Missioner and the Cathedral Provost.

The number of women clergy and the positions they hold notwithstanding, it must be remembered that at the 2005 Convention of the Diocese, a resolution whose purpose was to celebrate women's ministries on the 30th anniversary of ordination of women in TEC failed until an amendment was introduced which "equally" recognized the theological position of those who oppose the ordination of women! From where I sit, that is a slap in the face to ordained women in the diocese. But this should come as no surprise. The diocesan leadership has long "danced" around this issue in an effort to placate colleagues in the Network and elsewhere who adamantly oppose the ordination of women. Indeed, in his address at the 2006 commencement at Nashotah House, Bishop Duncan said of women's ordination that it is unclear at present whether God intends to bless this "new understanding," and that it may well take a century for the church to sort the matter out.

It is noteworthy that the Province of the Southern Cone manages to be "all things to all people" when it comes to this issue. It is a place which manages to satisfy Fort Worth's requirement of only aligning with a province that does not approve the ordination of women, as well as Pittsburgh's requirement that

"we would not join any province that would not allow us to continue our witness and our practice of women in Holy Orders. The Southern Cone has said emphatically that they would welcome us under these circumstances."

In light of the Southern Cone's forked-tongue approach to this issue, do the realigning women from Pittsburgh seriously expect that their orders will be fully respected and embraced in their new spiritual home --- a home in which their sacerdotal presence, in effect, compromises, in the opinion of the new province, the purity of the church?

Pyrrhic Victory?

Pyrrhus of Epirus (318-272 BC) was one of the most successful ancient Greek generals. Because many of his battles, though successful, cost him staggering losses,

he has bequeathed to our language the term "pyrrhic victory." General Pyrrhus said of his defeat of the Romans, "One more such victory would utterly undo us." After that battle, in which he lost most of his own men, the biographer Plutarch wrote this of him:

The armies separated . . . For he had lost a great part of the forces he brought with him, and almost all his particular friends and principal commanders; there were no others there to make recruits, and he found the confederates in Italy backward. On the other hand, the Roman camp was quickly and plentifully filled up with fresh men, not at all abating in courage for the loss they sustained, but even from their very anger gaining new force and resolution to go on with the war.

Can it be that General Pyrrhus is Bishop Duncan's Hellenistic alter ego? If the Convention votes in favor of realignment (by no means a foregone conclusion!) it will be a pyrrhic victory at best. Many of the bishop's "particular friends and principal commanders" have already left him, and many of his infantry, I predict, will abandon him as he charges toward Buenos Aires. One thing I have learned from my participation in the "Across the Aisle" group (the coalition of conservative and progressive forces in the Diocese committed to remaining in TEC) is that many parishes in the Diocese are deeply divided on the issue of realignment. The "strong, broad base of support" of which the Coalition for Realignment boasts may be wishful thinking. Based on my observations, many Episcopalians in this diocese are unwilling to give up their birthright for a mess of pottage of such dubious nutritional value. Some parishes seem to be all for realignment, but upon scratching the surface, we often learn that it is the position of the clerical leadership and not the laity, or the vestry and not the people, or even the delegates to Convention and not the rest of the congregation. Moreover, there is concern that some parishes may not have either the numbers or the resources to survive the effects of realignment. This might be the most devastating evidence of a pyrrhic victory.

Even if realignment takes place, and the quest for *ecclesia purissima* is achieved, at least in the eyes of those seeking it, there will be enough of us left behind who will have gained new force and resolution to go on with the mission of the church. As others carve out a chapel whose leadership will of necessity be bereft of women, racial minorities and those of homosexual orientation, the rest of us will continue to endeavor to usher in the Kingdom of God, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, nor slave nor free, nor male nor female, but one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

Faithfully, your rector and friend,

