

# The Case For Staying in the Episcopal Church<sup>1</sup>

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The purpose of the paper is to reflect on the current plan for realignment from the perspective of those who wish to remain in the Episcopal Church. This is authored by one person but has been reviewed by many who will not realign who have offered helpful suggestions.

While there are many varied reasons for staying we are all in agreement about one thing: We love Jesus and do not want to leave The Episcopal Church without a faithful witness to the Savior of the world. We believe that, like the prophets sent to Israel and Judea, we have an obligation to exhort The Episcopal Church, where necessary, to return to its first love. That is what a prophetic witness always does: calls God's people back. Prophets are not always successful in this, but they are not called to be successful, they are called to be faithful.

This paper will explore some of the practical implications of the realignment vote passing.

1. Is The Episcopal Church Apostate? Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a high degree of tolerance for disparate understandings of the faith in The Episcopal Church (TEC). There can be no question that the current Presiding Bishop has made remarks that could be fairly interpreted to be outside what is traditionally understood to be orthodoxy. Additionally, there are many stories of teaching and events across the church that would seem to indicate that theological innovations are accepted.

However, we need to remember several things about our denomination's polity. First, the Presiding Bishop has no authority in this diocese. While she acts as a spokesperson for the church and her remarks may sometimes reflect badly on the wider church, she has no ability to define the doctrine of the church or impose innovative ideas on a diocese. The Presiding Bishop may not even come to the diocese and act as a bishop without the permission of the ecclesiastical authority. In addition, it is doubtful that the current Presiding Bishop's theological views are much different from her immediate predecessors, both of whom were vocal proponents of same sex blessings and other innovations, which raises the question of "why now"?

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is reproduced from the author's blog, "Three Rivers Episcopal," which can be found on the Web at <http://3riversepiscopal.blogspot.com/>. "The Case For Staying in the Episcopal Church" may be found at <http://3riversepiscopal.blogspot.com/2008/06/case-for-staying-in-episcopal-church.html>. Obvious spelling and numbering errors have been corrected. The text is otherwise unaltered, although the layout has been changed to make the essay more readable. Comments should be directed to the author at [3riversepiscopal@gmail.com](mailto:3riversepiscopal@gmail.com). This document may be downloaded from <http://www.pittsburghepiscopal.org/unity/caseforstaying.pdf>.

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Second, the doctrine of the church is contained in the Book of Common Prayer, a document which has not changed since 1979. We have lived with this for nearly thirty years and there is no reason that we can't continue to.

Some have raised the specter of the Book of Common Prayer being revised. This is of course possible and at some time in the future even inevitable. However, permission for this originates with the General Convention which has not authorized a revision of the Book of Common Prayer. Additionally, a revision of the Book of Common Prayer is a drawn-out labor-intensive process. The last revision was approved by the Convention of 1967, and took twelve years to complete. It might also be pointed out that a revision of the BCP does not necessarily mean that it would be filled with objectionable doctrine.

We believe that, while there are notable exceptions, the vast majority of Episcopalians are what could be termed "Creedal Christians". That is, they can say the creed in good conscience, as they believe what it clearly intends to say.

2. Is There a Culture of Oppression? The leadership of the Diocese has pointed to the actions of the Presiding Bishop's office with regard to the deposition of bishops as evidence that it is engaged in a campaign to persecute those who have orthodox beliefs. It is true that the actions of the House of Bishops as well as the Presiding Bishop raise troubling questions about the application of the canons and that the process seems to be done in a heavy-handed way. There is reason for concern. However, the reason that bishops have been charged with abandoning the communion is not because they are orthodox believers; it is because they have acted to break away from TEC or encouraged their diocese to do so. It may well be that the abandonment canon is being abused but it is not being used against orthodox bishops or clergy because they are orthodox. There are many orthodox bishops (many in the network) and clergy who continue to preach and teach the faith once received unmolested. There is no reason to believe that this will change.

We would do well to look to recent elections of conservative Bishops in South Carolina and Dallas. Although the consents for South Carolina were initially blocked they were eventually given and the more recent election of a conservative bishop in Dallas appears to be headed for easy confirmation.

3. Who is the Diocese of Pittsburgh? If the realignment vote passes the first question which will need to be addressed is "who is the Diocese of Pittsburgh"? The leadership of the realigned Diocese will claim that the Diocesan Convention voting to sever its ties from TEC has formally stated its desire to unite with an overseas province and constitutes the Diocese. The reason given for this is that the Diocese voluntarily decided to join TEC and can make the same decision to leave. In fact it is not clear that a diocese can choose to leave its church any more than a state can choose to leave the nation. Those who choose to stay will claim that they are the diocese.

Undoubtedly, this question will need to be answered by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in a lengthy and costly lawsuit. Contrary to the claims that, on the Monday after realignment,

the realigners will be free to do Gospel ministry again, the suit will be an enormous distraction for the leadership and elected bodies of the realigned diocese as well as for many parishes.

4. Parallels with San Joaquin. Many have asked us to look to the events unfolding in the diocese of San Joaquin which made the decision to realign late in 2007 as an example of what will happen here. There is no denying that what has transpired is chaotic and that TEC has acted in ways that seem to be in violation of the canons. However, there are several important learnings from what has happened in there.

First, the clergy and laity of San Joaquin were advised to keep quiet about their individual views on the realignment and to vote for it with the assurance that they would be free to stay in TEC after the vote, with the realigned Diocese's blessing. We have been told a similar thing, and a resolution recently proposed for our Diocesan Convention would give every parish two years to make this decision. While this sounds generous it will simply lead to the same chaos that happened in California. We now know that what will be recognized by TEC as a reorganized diocese, will be those parishes and clergy who declared ahead of the vote that they wished to remain. Hence, prior to the vote many vestries and clergy will make their decisions publicly known.

It is impractical to think that a congregation will be able to wait two years to make a decision. Our common life will cause us to make de facto decisions almost immediately. Questions of where a congregation sends its assessment or which ecclesiastical authority it recognizes will automatically indicate which entity, the realigned or reorganized diocese, a congregation belongs to.

Second, in San Joaquin those who were in theologically different places were not talking with one another. That is not true in Pittsburgh. Those who wish to stay, representing a variety of theological positions, have been meeting regularly to build trust and to create a way forward should the realignment pass.

Third, In San Joaquin discussions with the Presiding Bishop's office did not involve the breadth of those who wished to stay. We are in conversation with the Presiding Bishop's office and have been assured that their desire is for the Diocese to reorganize with a minimum of interference on their part. A plan is being submitted that would allow us to achieve this reorganization without the intrusion that was witnessed in San Joaquin.

5. Mechanism for Realignment. The leadership of the Diocese has been clear that if the realignment vote passes, every parish in the Diocese will automatically be realigned. However, they have also said that the mechanism for a parish to realign is the changing of the by-laws to remove all references to TEC. In other words the vestry of a parish can make the decision to stay, and because the parish by-laws accede to the Constitution and Canons of TEC nothing changes. However, if a vestry votes to realign, then that must be followed by a congregational meeting at which (usually) a majority of those eligible to vote must decide to remove all references to TEC from the by-laws and articles of incorporation. It is unclear why the diocese would maintain that every congregation is automatically realigned if the

vote passes, when most congregations' by-laws still accede to the Constitution and Canons of TEC. Their own logic would seem to indicate that most parishes would still be a part TEC if the vote passes.

6. **Canons.** The Province of the Southern Cone affords great autonomy to its member dioceses to order their lives in whatever way they see fit. The Constitution and Canons of the Province are relatively brief compared to TEC and do not deal with many essential issues such as discipline, ordination, or marriage (The Constitution and Canons of the Southern Cone in English is available at <http://fwepiscopal.org/downloads/PSCconstitution&canons.pdf>). The diocese has recently proposed a resolution (#3) which would adopt the Canons of TEC as “advisory policies” for the diocese. The clear intention is to continue to operate under the current system until new canons can be written. There are several problems with this.

First, the Diocese of Pittsburgh is voting to remove itself from the Constitution and Canons of TEC but now wants to use them to order its life. This seems more than a little ironic.

Second, resolutions of convention are not binding. The convention may say it wants to use the TEC canons as advisory documents, but there is nothing that compels the leadership or anyone else to do so. If someone should choose to act in a way contrary to the advisory documents, the Diocese has no recourse.

Third, the TEC canons assume a national entity which will not be in place. So for example, in the disciplinary canons, a clergy person found guilty of an infraction has the right of appeal and the province provides the court of appeal. (Province in this sense refers to geographical areas of TEC numbered one to nine.) There would be no court of appeal in the realigned system.

Fourthly, none of the proposed resolutions reference the Constitution and Canons of the Southern Cone. If the Diocese realigns with that Province will it be under their canons? If they are, then there will be conflicts between the Southern Cone's Constitution and Canons and the “advisory documents” (for instance in the election of a bishop).

A constitutional issue yet to be addressed is that the Constitution of the Southern Cone defines the geographical limits of the Province and does not extend to North America. The Constitution also requires that any constitutional changes be approved by the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC). As the Constitution now stands, the Diocese would be prohibited from joining the Province. The Southern Cone has announced that it is in the process of amending its Constitution, but there is no scheduled meeting of the ACC which typically meets every two to three years.

7. **Property Issues:** Perhaps the most distasteful aspect of the proposed realignment would be the inevitable lawsuits which will arise over parish property. While many of us who wish to remain with TEC have no desire to enter into such suits, it remains to be seen how TEC will respond. The history of TEC thus far, indicates that it will fight aggressively to retain control of parish property. There is a very real possibility that those parishes that realign will lose their property and assets. At the same time the Diocesan leadership has consistently stated

that it will deal graciously with those who wish to stay, and where possible give the property to parishes whose deeds indicate it is owned by the parish or lease property held in trust by the Diocese. The irony of this situation is that many congregations face a choice of realigning and being sued by TEC for their property, or staying in TEC and having the property “given” to them by the realigned diocese.

7. Women Clergy: None of the dioceses in the Southern Cone ordain women. In fact, none of the participants in the Common Cause Partners are particularly open to ordaining women. The Southern Cone has given verbal consent to allow the realigned diocese to continue to ordain women, which is consistent with the autonomy they generally show their member dioceses. However, a big question remains about the place of women in the Province and how the culture of The Southern Cone and Common Cause will treat them. How accepted will the ordained women of the realigned Diocese be in an entity that largely prohibits the practice?
8. Closing of Parishes. Church growth experts say that, in general, for a congregation to be financially viable it must have an average Sunday attendance (ASA) of one hundred. In the diocese of Pittsburgh, there are twenty-five such congregations out of sixty-seven. Of those, perhaps fifteen (those with an ASA of one-hundred-fifty or more) would be able to absorb a significant loss of members. Congregations which are near one-hundred, say seventy-five to one-hundred twenty-five on a Sunday can ill afford to lose any pledge units. The loss of ten or twenty units will place many congregations in extraordinary financial stress. Congregations need to realistically assess what will happen if the realignment passes. In some cases it will make no difference, as either way the vote goes people will leave. However, there will also be congregations where the passing of the realignment would mean such a severe financial stress that they could no longer afford full time clergy and in some cases may have to close.
9. Windsor and Lambeth. Many in the Diocese are acting as though the Windsor Report is irrelevant to the current crisis. It is not. The report recommended that the Communion create a covenant document which would define how we live our lives together as disparate provinces. That covenant has been through several drafts, which can be found at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/index.cfm>. The covenant will be one of the major items discussed at Lambeth this summer. After the covenant is finalized it will go to the various provinces for ratification. Canterbury has been clear that failure of a province to approve the covenant will reduce that province to some secondary status in the Communion. In all likelihood, the General Convention of 2009 will have to consider the covenant. If approved, we have agreed to cease pushing theological innovations which have torn the fabric of the Communion. If the General Convention does not approve the covenant, then there is a considerable possibility that Canterbury would recognize the decisions of individual dioceses. Those who approve it would be constituent members of the Communion. It is almost certain that by late 2009 the Diocese of Pittsburgh would be declared a constituent member of the Communion regardless of what TEC has decided. In other words we and the other dioceses who approve the Covenant would be declared the legitimate expression of Anglicanism in the United States.

10. Faithfulness. We end where we began — with faithfulness. Many of us believe that we have been called to bear witness to the truth. In the current environment, none of us has been required (or even asked by TEC) to teach, practice or believe that which is contrary to the faith once received. Given that fact is it appropriate to separate, given the call to be one body under the headship of one Lord? Staying in TEC will have some pain associated with it but we believe that Jesus calls us to lives of sacrifice. While this paper has dealt with many of the practical realities of realignment passing the primary reason we are staying is to bear witness to the truth, to serve a God who meets brokenness with redemption and death with resurrection.