

# A Fork in the Road?

By Walter Bowman\*

April 15, 2008

Some time in the past, Bishop Duncan made the statement that the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh had “reached a fork in the road.” This is an interesting metaphor, given the fact that Pittsburgh is located at a “fork” where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers join (with the reputed unnamed underground “river” beneath the Point) to form the Ohio River. I personally like this metaphor, since it provides a rich combination of symbolic possibilities regarding our diocese, The Episcopal Church, and even the Anglican Communion. However, I look at this metaphor somewhat differently than does the bishop, not only by using the image of rivers instead of roads, but also in the context of the metaphor.

The bishop’s analogy has us swimming upstream in the Ohio River and having to make a choice whether to swim to the left up the Allegheny River, or to swim to the right up the Monongahela. We therefore must swim in opposition to the currents that push against us on such an upstream journey. In my view, we should not be wasting our energy by swimming upstream and fighting *against* the currents, but rather should be swimming downstream—*with* the currents, and moving not towards a point of division, but towards a point of coming back together to further God’s work in the world. These “currents” represent some of the things that I hold dear in my religious life: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, represented by the Allegheny, Monongahela, and invisible underground rivers; and The Episcopal Church represented by the Ohio River. Just as the Allegheny, Monongahela, and invisible underground rivers merge together to create, shape, and define the Ohio River; so should we, *guided* by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, merge together our diverse opinions, perceptions, and ideals to continue the creation, shaping, and defining of The Episcopal Church.

I am not a theologian, nor am I a member of the clergy. I am but a simple layperson who, throughout seven decades, has come to know and love my Lord, and The Episcopal Church. As a “cradle Episcopalian,” I was raised in a very high Anglo-Catholic Episcopal church in Georgia—one with all the “smells and bells” associated with such a church, even to the point of using *St. Vincent Acolyte Guide*. I’ve been from the East Coast to the West Coast—in “high”

---

\* Walter Bowman is a member of Calvary Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

churches and “low,” in small churches and large, and even sometimes in no church. I’ve been involved in the trials, tribulations, concerns, debates, arguments, and issues of The Episcopal Church for most of my young-adult and adult life. And in all these times, I always found joy and meaningfulness in the fact that in good times and bad, in ups and downs, and in peace and turmoil, we have always been family—and “family” as Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu talked about in his acceptance message upon receiving a joint honorary degree from the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh in October 2007, in that all people, regardless of their differences, are “family.”

And as a family, we always had the ability to argue and fight with one another while maintaining mutual respect and closeness for each other as a family. But now

- *My heart breaks* as I see us losing that ability, that feeling, that understanding that family members have of one another— simply because we have ceased to talk with one another;
- *My heart breaks* at the marginalization of some of the more “liberal” members in our diocese by the “conservative” majority;
- *My heart breaks* by the marginalization of some of the more “conservative” members in other dioceses by their “liberal” majorities;
- *My heart breaks* over the fact that barriers have been built that hinder communication and discussion of opposing opinions— barriers that we ourselves, and others, have put up;
- *My heart breaks* when I see and hear members of our family engaged in what is termed in negotiations “uncivilized disagreement”—disagreement whereby one attacks another person personally, instead of attacking the position of the other person;
- *My heart breaks* over the fact that we no longer appear to have the ability for open, honest, and ongoing dialogue between “*all sorts and conditions of men [sic]*” (and women);
- *My heart breaks* over the broken relationships in my family;

and my *passion* lies in working to re-establish those relationships—regardless of what happens in our diocese in the future.

Yes, we have many differences, but then that has always been true in the history of Christianity. Admittedly, I do not agree with some of my brothers and sisters in The Episcopal Church on some of the “issues” that face us today. However, I honor and accept their convictions on these issues that may differ

from mine and will fight for their right to have those convictions just as passionately as I will fight for my right to have mine—without judging the right or wrong of either. I must do this, or else I run the risk of violating the *two great commandments* that our Lord gave to us as guides for our life in the world.

I don't know if we will ever be able to resolve, in our lifetime, the issues that face us today. I *do* know that without relationships of openness, honesty, and acceptance between us, we will never be able to resolve them. And I *do* know that even if we do resolve them, it will not be done by us alone, but only through the grace of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When our Lord called James and John, they were in their boat with their father Zebedee, mending the tears in their fishing nets. James and John immediately leaped out of the boat and followed Jesus, leaving Zebedee behind mending the tears in the nets, so that when the boat put out on its next voyage, it would be whole. We have tears in the nets of our family, and there need to be those who, like Zebedee, will stay behind in the boat and mend the tears while others move forward to prepare the boat for the next leg of its journey. That has become my passion; that has become my calling—to work to mend the tears in the relationships between the members of our family, so that regardless of what happens to the boat, the family will remain a family.

Somewhere along our journey downstream in the past, some of us took different and sometimes difficult tributaries, just as the shepherds and wise men of old took different and sometimes difficult routes to and from that small town of Bethlehem. Ahead of us indeed lies a fork in the river. I pray that fork, like Bethlehem, is where we can again begin to merge together in dialogue, under the guidance of the Holy Trinity, to continue to shape and define The Episcopal Church, just as the Allegheny, Monongahela, and invisible underground rivers in Pittsburgh merge together to shape and define the Ohio River.

I have no other agenda. Let others more qualified than I am wrestle with theology and the mechanics of canon law, structure, and polity. Those are beyond my qualifications. I chose—nay, I am called—to work to repair the tears in our nets; to devote my time, energy, prayers, and abilities to rebuilding the personal relationships between my family members so that, regardless of what happens in the future, we will remain ... family. And I ask and pray that others join me in this endeavor—to rise above the rhetoric and emotion that tends sometimes to blind us to what is truly important: our relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ *and* with one another.