

A LETTER TO THE DIOCESE FROM THE REV. LESLIE REIMER

November 16, 2007

Dear People of the Diocese of Pittsburgh,

This week marked the thirtieth anniversary of my ordination as a deacon here in Pittsburgh, and thirty years serving as a clergy person in this diocese. From that perspective, I view the current situation as tragic and heartbreaking. I know and respect the faithfulness of the people of Pittsburgh. I remember that in the difficult early days of women's ordination, those who disagreed deeply were able to stay together, never denying the faith or good will of those on the other side. I know that Bishop Appleyard, who ordained me, believed that the Episcopal Church was large enough to encompass all points of view, including those of the founders of Trinity School for Ministry, and could never have imagined the bitterness of our present time. And so it seems tragic to me that the good, faithful people of Pittsburgh have been led to such an extreme theological position, and to making extreme decisions at the November 2007 diocesan convention. I am writing with the hope that some of you may be willing to take a step back from the edge.

The extreme decision is represented by Resolution One, and by proposed constitutional and canonical changes approved at the diocesan convention. At most four dioceses are pursuing similar paths. This number does not reflect, as some would claim, a pioneering spirit. Rather, it is the course chosen by a very small minority, even within those who disagree strongly with recent actions of the Episcopal Church. Clearly there are those who no longer find their spiritual home within the Episcopal Church, whose strongly held and genuine beliefs impel them to leave this body. In July of this year, Bishop Howe acknowledged this reality, and outlined what he called the "honorable way" of disagreeing with the Episcopal Church, which is to leave, as individuals or congregations, and without an effort to retain property or to take an entire diocese. Unfortunately, Pittsburgh has been led to consider a different approach, one much less clear and much less honest. The canonical arguments about why this action is impossible are accurate. Unfortunately, it has been very difficult to penetrate the confusing rhetoric used to describe the diocesan position in order to raise these questions in a way that can be heard or understood.

Our conversation has been hampered by the tendency to dismiss or demonize certain individuals or groups. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Episcopal Church, the Presiding Bishop, PEP, the rector of Calvary Church, and even Archbishop Desmond Tutu are not above contempt. Anyone who sincerely disagrees or asks a challenging question is suspect. The positions and actions of the Episcopal Church have been exaggerated and misrepresented. The faith of individuals, as well as their theological positions, has been judged and impugned. The willingness of the Episcopal Church to provide space and support for conservatives has been rejected as if it never had been offered.

I was struck by this recent statement from a group of Episcopal clergy in the Diocese of Georgia. Listen to their description of our church at this time:

Standing in the middle, whether it be in traffic or two conflicting views can be a risky business, but it is how Episcopalians and most of their Anglican brothers and sisters have chosen to live. In fact much of what is being said about the Episcopal Church, from whatever direction the traffic is flowing can be very misleading...

We accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and we believe that fundamentalism, polarization and the secularizing of religion are dangerous for one's spiritual health. We continue to stand for listening to one another, being inclusive, taking our history seriously, taking Scripture seriously, and engaging mystery and paradox.

We adhere to the ancient Creeds of the Church and we believe Holy Scripture is the inspired Word of God containing all things necessary for salvation. We further believe that the Sacraments provide a sure and certain means of God's grace...

All this being said, as in any denomination, there are many individuals, both leaders and parishioners, who hold a variety of beliefs, but in the Episcopal Church no one individual, no one vestry, no one leader, may dictate or pretend to represent the exclusive Faith of the Church. We recognize along with the apostle Paul that we all see through a glass darkly. But if we can make an effort to take one another seriously and listen to each other as fellow members of The Body of Christ, we might all see a bit more clearly and charitably. (from the Savannah Morning News, October 25, 2007)

What a clear and strong statement. It could be affirmed by Episcopalians who hold widely divergent positions on many issues. It expresses the reality of the Episcopal Church beyond the narrow confines of our local view, so dominated by controversy. It offers the vision of mutual regard and conversation which are foundational for the Episcopal Church and for Anglican theology. It articulates important truths in a voice which has sadly gone unheard in our diocese.

Instead, I fear that faithful people in Pittsburgh are being taken to a place they never intended to go. Rather than being enriched and stretched by the wide theological and cultural sweep of global Anglicanism, we are asked to enter into alliances with those from other continents who happen to share our prejudices. Rather than being a church unified by common prayer and faith, we are asked to enter into a schismatic realignment based on what we disagree with and what people we refuse to accept. Rather than being a church where individual reason is valued and questioning is welcome, we are asked to enter into a system guided by a hierarchy of Primates and Bishops and a more closely defined covenant or doctrine. Rather than being offered a choice of remaining a minority voice within the Episcopal Church or leaving it in a clear, decisive way, we are asked to commit to a diocesan strategy which still leaves many questions unanswered. We are being led into unnecessary uncertainty and conflict.

The Bishop of Pittsburgh urges his supporters to follow this extreme, unclear path. In describing the stand he feels called to take, he speaks of martyrs and characterizes this time as Good Friday. Yet as he invokes these powerful images of suffering, it is difficult to see exactly what the risk is for Bishop Duncan. He speaks from a position where his Episcopal Church pension is full and secure and his substantial salary increase is assured even in a diminished diocesan budget. The uncertain path forward does not necessarily guarantee the same for all who are being asked to take it. I do not for a moment disparage Bishop Duncan's theological views, or his call to stand up for what he believes. I also recognize that for some in this diocese, life in the Episcopal Church is no longer tenable, and with sadness I acknowledge that some may choose to leave. I simply ask that people consider carefully the extreme decisions and actions being put before us. Is there a way to avoid becoming entangled in this complex, uncertain strategy? Is there a path that offers more clarity and integrity?

In a perfect world, I might argue for a plan which would keep all of us in the Episcopal Church, able to hold divergent views with trust and respect for each other's commitment to

the Gospel. In our less than perfect circumstances, I still hold the hope that many people of widely differing positions will choose to stay together as Episcopalians in Pittsburgh. It would honor the faithfulness and commitment of so many people in this diocese whose relationship with God in Christ has been formed in the Episcopal Church, and who are in danger of being uprooted from this strong and credible faith tradition. It would reflect the reality that the Episcopal Church can embrace people with many different views.

I believe in this vision of the Episcopal Church, a community united by common prayer and mutual respect. For me, the open, inclusive, welcoming stance of the Episcopal Church is a reflection of the commandments to love God and to love our neighbor. I appreciate the gift of a church that calls everyone, male and female, gay and straight, to faithfulness in their lives and in their relationships. I am challenged by the call to work for justice and freedom for all people. I am saddened by narrow, polarizing views which obscure this vision. I am concerned for the people of this diocese in this contentious time. It is not too late to step back from the edge. Listen again to our brothers and sisters in Georgia, who give voice to my hope for all of us:

We in the Episcopal Church are willing to risk, that at the end of the day, we might be convicted, of being too compassionate, rather than too judgmental; too inclusive rather than too exclusive; too moderate rather than too extremist.

Faithfully yours,
Leslie Reimer