

[send this](#)[bookmark](#)[print](#)[close](#)

The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.36 No.34

St. Mary Magdalene (Trinity IX)

07/24/05

"MASTER OF THE HOUSE, KEEPER OF THE ZOO ..."

The Bishop of Connecticut brings this tune to mind. In a recent action inhibiting one of the priests of the diocese, which is in his charge and care, Bishop Andrew Smith seems to have contradicted the work and intention of the Anglican Communion. It appears that he is not following the counsel of the Lambeth Commission, recently affirmed by the Anglican Consultative Council. Oh, that Bishops could shed the skin of bureaucratic power structures and live into the freedom of the Gospel!

The present situation in Connecticut is this. Recently, Bishop Smith inhibited the Rev. Mark Hansen for the technical reason of "abandonment of the communion." In addition, without any warning or consultation with the Vestry, representatives of the Bishop appeared at St. John's, Bristol, changed the locks on the doors, and in effect seized the church property.

The inhibition of Fr. Hansen means that he is suspended from acting as a priest for six months unless the reasons for the inhibition can be cleared up before then. If at the end of six months, the bishop concludes that the inhibition was justified, he proceeds with formal deposition and removes the priest from the ministry.

Bishop Smith has used the technical reason of "abandonment of the communion of this church" because, according to one report, Fr. Hansen went on an unauthorized Sabbatical and the parish stopped making payments on a building loan. Fr. Hansen denies this, and claims that he went on Sabbatical with the full knowledge, support, and approval of the Vestry, apparently to earn more money to pay for special medical services for his son. In the view of the Bishop, Fr. Hansen did this in a way that left his parish uncared for. Fr. Hansen and the Vestry claim that Fr. Hansen acted responsibly and that he provided adequate pastoral care for both weekday and Sunday services as well as general pastoral care.

Fr. Hansen and the people of St. John's believe the real reason for the bishop's action is found in the strained relations that exist between that parish and him. Because Bishop Smith voted for the consecration of Gene Robinson as the Bishop of New Hampshire and participated in his (irregular and invalid) consecration, St. John's, along with five other parishes in the Diocese of Connecticut, had applied for Adequate Episcopal Oversight. This arrangement was first suggested by the Primates of the Anglican Communion as a way for orthodox parishes to

continue to function and to relieve them of the spiritual authority of a bishop who has broken with the moral teaching of Scripture and the Anglican Church as a whole. The bishop's office denies that this previous tension, stemming from the parish's appeal for Adequate Episcopal Oversight, is the reason for Fr. Hansen's inhibition, the seizure of church property, and the placement of a priest there by order of the Bishop. Representatives of the American Anglican Council have met with Fr. Hansen and the Vestry and believe that the Bishop has acted punitively and without sufficient cause. Now Fr. Hansen and the Vestry have appealed to the recently constituted "panel of reference," called for by the Lambeth Commission and appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, which will review controversial pastoral provisions made for parishes by bishops, such as this one in Connecticut.

What a world! What a church! The whole business is intolerable, and there are no doubt many sides to the problem. But as it so often happens, the weight of the crisis falls upon the bishop, upon his discretion, wisdom, and compassion. And it seems that, while he may have had some concerns, the actions of Bishop Smith were premature, insensitive, and destructive.

The Anglican Communion has spoken and acted wisely in dealing with the Episcopal Church. Steps have been clearly laid out as to how we all should proceed in the serious aftermath of the (pseudo-) consecration of Gene Robinson. We are now in a process which seems to be, however slowly, working and gaining momentum. The Anglican Consultative Council has followed the suggestion of the Primates and voted to ask the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church in Canada voluntarily not to participate in its deliberations until the Lambeth Conference of 2008. As of now, three of the four so-called Instruments of Unity have agreed that the Episcopal Church undergo this discipline and follow the process outlined in the Lambeth Commission Report. Our own Bishop is doing just that and so are we.

But as we do, there is something to remember. The fact is that no Christian or parish can be in a spiritual relation to a process. We believe we must be in a spiritual relation to a bishop, principally to the Lord Jesus as the great Bishop of our souls, but then to our own diocesan Bishop. Bishop Louttit has affirmed the Lambeth Commission and so have we. Ours will be, with him, a mutual compliance, which we hope will not be broken. As for St. John's, Bristol, we hope that Bishop Smith will relent, hand the keys of the property back to the Vestry and Rector, and pursue the Delegated Episcopal Oversight as called for in the Lambeth report. Which brings me to my final point.

What does it mean to be a bishop? When St. Ignatius said that Christians should look to their Bishop as to Christ, and when St. Ireneaus said that the Bishops were the guardians of the sacred tradition, they understood that Bishops were given the greatest of gifts. Theirs was to be the role of reflecting upon, teaching, and administering the Gospel. Their *raison d'être* was simply that and no other. Oh yes, canons and church discipline would be part of it, but only a secondary part meant to insure the spiritual life of the church, just as practical wisdom stands in relation to the knowledge and worship of Almighty God. Bishops, therefore, were to be spiritual fathers, who cared for their flock as their first priority. They were to be truth-tellers, come what may. Athanasius showed us the way, living

and speaking contra mundum and in this spent much of his ministry in exile.

Bishops exist to proclaim the Gospel of Christ Jesus. It is not their own. They are not innovative theologians, especially when it comes to Moral Theology. They are responsible for handing on the tradition of Jesus Christ, faithful to his word, faithful in administering his sacraments, and faithful to the life of prayer. A bishop may be quite profound in his reflection on the Gospel. In this way he must be a truth-teller, and a defender of that truth, no matter what the cost may be. But he is not in essence a bureaucrat, a CEO, or a politician. He is a minister of Christ, a servant, a beggar in spirit who breaks the bread to share it with all who are poor in spirit.

It is time, now, for bishops to exercise an holy imagination, to forsake the present bureaucratic structures, power dealings, and canonical rigorism, and to rethink again the great privilege simply to advance the Gospel, thoughtfully and with charity. One can hope and pray for such an holy imagination to catch fire in the souls of our bishops. And yet we know that, in a fallen world, bishops will be imperfect, and life with them will be difficult, as it is with rectors and all figures of authority. It is best finally to act faithfully, with resolve, and even with humor. Just hum the tune: "Master of the house..."

The Rev'd. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

send this

bookmark

print

close

[Report Errors](#) | [Comments](#)

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.