

# The Parish Paper

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## THE CUTTING EDGE (PART I)

What if I were to tell you that it now appears that St. John's Church is on the cutting edge of reform in the Anglican Church? Or what if I were to say that all of a sudden we find ourselves an avant-garde parish? Is it possible that the old, stuffy, traditionalist St. John's Church is relevant to our day and age?

Well, remarkably, and humorously, the answer to this last question is yes. In the twinkling of an eye, St. John's is set on the cutting edge of the contemporary Anglican Communion

And this is how. The Anglican Church of Nigeria, a church of 17.5 million Anglicans (The Episcopal Church has 2.3 million) recently rewrote her constitution. Instead of the essential definition of the Anglican Church of Nigeria as "in communion with the See of Canterbury," the new constitution reads, "The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) ...shall be in full communion with all Anglican Churches, Dioceses, and Provinces that hold and maintain the Historic Faith, Doctrine, Sacrament and Discipline of the one Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church as the Lord has commanded in His holy word and as the same are received as taught in the Book of Common Prayer and the ordinal of 1662 and in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion." The meaning of this rewriting is profound and needed desperately in our day.

The constitution of a church is the written account of that church's mind. It is an articulation of self-identity and self-understanding. What the Nigerian Church has done is to take the substance of their faith and make all subordinate organization relevant to it. The structures of ecclesiastical history are empty without the essence of faith and practice that built these structures.

And so the church of Nigeria, faced with the radical revisionism of human sexuality in the Episcopal Church and in the Anglican Church of Canada, has sent a clarion call to the entire Anglican world, saying that her identity is found in the Catholic and Apostolic faith, just as they and we, profess in the Creeds. The Nigerians' point is that true communion is a spiritual reality and activity that comes from God the Blessed Trinity, through the mystical body of Jesus Christ, the "blessed company of all faithful people" and returns to God in lives lived in faith, hope, and charity.

But now comes the great defining idea. The Church of Nigeria

conceives of its self-identity and self-understanding as “the Lord has commanded in His holy word and as the same are received as taught in the Book of Common Prayer and the ordinal of 1662 and in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion.” The Primate of Nigeria, Archbishop Peter Akinola has denied that this means that his church is breaking with the Church of England. The Church of England Newspaper quoted him as saying, “Our intention was to make clear that we are committed to the historic faith once delivered to the Saints, practice and the traditional formularies...Those who are bent to walk a different path, may do so without us...We have chosen not to be yoked to them as we prefer to exercise our freedom to remain faithful.”

Now all of this is theoretically compatible with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Church of England. They have not as yet crossed the bridge of schism as has the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Diocese of New Westminster in Canada. The official Prayer Book of the Church of England is the 1662 edition, which the Church of Nigeria upholds in their constitution as their definitive standard of faith and practice. Whether the Church of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury will continue with this standard is a question.

But what it means for us is this. We at St. John’s have held to the substance of the Prayer Book tradition. We have used the 1928 edition which remains in continuity with the 1662 edition and all the previous editions of the Prayer Book. There are some differences, but not essential ones that change Theology or the Sacraments of the church. This is the great inadequacy of the so-called Prayer Book of 1979. It is at best a diminution of Christian doctrine and at worst a change in Catholic and Apostolic teaching and meaning. St. John’s has not accepted the newer liturgical innovations and will not. If others must do so, so be it. With the Nigerian Church and all Anglican churches that hold to the Prayer Book, we participate in a common theological and liturgical mind. Recent liturgical innovations may not be wholly invalid, but they are woefully inadequate and subversive of the profound gift of the Prayer Book tradition.

Now I am aware that some will argue that there are local adaptations of the Prayer Book in Nigeria which admit of African music and custom. And this is true. But my reply is that the Prayer Book has never anywhere been adhered to with strict legalism. There were for a century in the Episcopal Church alone “low,” “broad,” and “high” church uses of the Prayer Book. But the great advantage to that old true diversity, not the current abstract whimsicality sold as liturgical insight, was that the doctrinal standard was present in the Prayer Book and the Ordinal and the Thirty-nine Articles, and these had continuity with the entire history of the Catholic and Reformed inheritance we call Anglicanism. The current flexibility that comes with local usage, as is the case at St. John’s, is acceptable within the larger framework of doctrine and discipline.

And I am also aware that someone might ask me if we are prepared to put down the 1928 Prayer Book and go back to the 1662 Prayer Book if it meant a greater unity within the Anglican Church as a whole, and my response would be yes, because the spiritual and liturgical essence are the same.

So you see, it is truly a remarkable fact that all St. John’s has stood for and against in order to maintain the integrity of doctrine and

discipline in the Prayer Book has now surfaced as the cutting edge of reform and unity in the Anglican Communion. Our grandparents and parents knew they were on to something, however fallibly they held it. The wonder is this: the truth and goodness and beauty of the Anglican Way, "received as taught" in the Prayer Book, has now been justified by the trials of Christians in different cultures and adverse circumstances around the globe, and even into this perilous time of the contemporary world. And so St. John's finds herself on the cutting edge, avant-garde; it is a remarkable fact of providence. May we thank God for what we have, and humbly and faithfully use it.

(to be continued)

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