

On September 30, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Hurst held a forum to discuss issues that are currently before Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth. Canon Chuck Hough and Fr. Fred Barber participated in the forum. Below are Fr. Fred's answers. (The questions were presented by St. Stephen's and are in bold-face.)

Issue of Homosexuality aside, in what other fundamental theological areas are ECUSA and Ft Worth in disagreement?

- Ordination of women
- New Testament doctrine of the One-ness of the Church (John's gospel).
 - Is schism in the church a grievous sin? The Church should not splinter, but wait for the guidance of the spirit.
- Loyalty to The Episcopal Church. Should a diocese have the same loyalty to the national church, as a congregation is expected to have to its diocese? Should a national church have that same loyalty to the World Wide communion?
- Finances. Is financing the larger church an obligation or an option?
- The Polity of the American Church

Why do these demand separation when Women's ordination for 30 years has not?

That question assumes that the true motivation for our leaving the Episcopal Church is not women's ordination. Personally, I believe that the key issue for the clergy of this diocese is not homosexuality, but women ordained to the priesthood. This issue had lost power among the laypeople, and the homosexual issue (a hot political and social issue) has been brought forth as a way to stir up the ire of the laypeople.

Why does Ft. Worth align itself in the Network with dioceses which ordain women, if that is the major issue (of dispute) with ECUSA?

There is an emotional dislike (hatred?) for the National Church. These three dioceses feel they have been abused, held up to ridicule. Their leaders (among them our bishop) have been painted as primitive fundamental backward Neanderthals. There is a visceral dislike, and we seek out others who will share our resentment. Enter the 80's breakaways (Prayer book society), the gay bashers, the Reformed Episcopal Church.

Common cause makes strange bedfellows, but they are usually temporary bedfellows. We have anti-prayerbook; anti-women; anti-gay, and the Reformed Episcopal Church that is anti-1928 book. As the coalition of the 80's fell apart, so will this one. Their glue of unity is their near hatred of the Episcopal Church. When they remove the Episcopal Church, they have lost their basis for unity.

Does the Archbishop of Canterbury, or do the Primates, have the canonical right to step in and impose a ruling concerning ECUSA and the Anglican Communion?

NO. We are not the Roman Church, the Archbishop of Canterbury is not the Pope. His only weapon is persuasion, and the right to issue invitations to Lambeth. Still, these are great powers. He can put on pressure to conform.

If so, is this likely to happen and when?

The Windsor Report, the Anglican Covenant, the Dar es Salaam communique are all tools to try to bring the unruly Anglican communion into some sort of agreement and discipline.

Do you see any compromise that both sides may accept?

Compromise is not a dirty word in the Anglican Communion. It is part of our being. It is part of our scholarship, our polity, and our being. It is the result of the ebb and flow of English common law. The latest statement by our Bishops in New Orleans is an effort at compromise. Still, the African and Southern Cone bishops are less in a compromise mode. They have the zeal of people who feel they are in the right, and that North America is clearly in the wrong.

As long as people are talking, writing, and trying to compromise, there is hope. When we start separating ourselves and not conversing, then hope starts to dry up. (I think that we - the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth - really stopped looking for compromise years ago. Our delegates to General Convention would not take part in the Communion Service. We are in "impaired communion" with a long list of dioceses in our own American Church. We have withdrawn from the Province, but not asked the province itself to sanction our exit.)

Who legally owns the property of parishes in the Episcopal diocese of Fort Worth?

The Corporation of the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth.

After the convention of 2008, who will be the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth?

Also note, that they hold the property "in trust" for the individual Episcopal congregations.

Even if your property title is still in the name of the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas. Now...if the diocese votes to remove itself from the Episcopal Church and is no longer the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth and if there are remainder congregations who rightfully claim that they are what remains of the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth...then who will be the owners of the property? And...if a diocese in the Episcopal Church removes itself... should the property not flow to the Episcopal Church? These are the questions. If we let courts and lawyers answer them, then the lawyers may end up as the ones who own the property.

Does ECUSA currently have a claim on St. Stephen's Property?

ECUSA would say that it has a remainder claim after the diocese. The Diocese would say they do not. Again, if the lawyers decide...neither may end up holding the property because it has to be sold to pay legal bills.

How would Alternative Oversight affect our ability to secure loans in the USA?

Does AO assume you remain in the Episcopal Church?

Does AO assume your becoming part of another province in the Anglican Communion?

Does AO assume you are a non-provincial church? But then what will your oversight church require of you?

In short...in most Anglican provinces in the Southern Cone and Africa the diocese is under the rule of the Archbishop, and he controls the property. If that is the case, then of course it would affect how loans are made.

Will members of St. Stephen's be able to vote on whether we align ourselves with the Alternative Oversight or remain in ECUSA?

Probably.

What threshold (super majority) will be required for a decision?

The bishop has mentioned 2/3 and also 3/4 majority. The executive counsel or convention would decide this. But the bishop would certainly have a strong influence. In the meeting called by the Standing Committee last Sept 22, Dean Reed mentioned by way of example, a church that wanted to leave the diocese would need an 80% ratio.

If they vote to remain in ECUSA, what will happen to the property?

We will be the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth, or we will be merged into a bordering diocese. Things will essentially remain the same. We will still be a part of the Episcopal Church and this diocese...the canons of the National and local church will still rule.

If the vote is to go with the Alternative Oversight, what will happen to the property?

It depends on alternate oversight with whom.

It depends on whether you try and do this and remain in TEC.

It depends on the province or Archbishop you align with and the canons and constitution of his diocese (if they have a constitution).

If the threshold is not met, either way, what will happen to the property?

How can it not be met? You either have 3/4 or you don't. The question might be what if you have a very clear majority, but not a supermajority. We are not a church whose polity says take congregational votes. We are a democracy. The vestry is to make such decisions. Will a majority who want to remain (or leave) let this stand without a court fight that says let the vestry decide?

In what timeframe would St. Stephen's be forced to decide its affiliation?

I believe it will be between this convention and the convention of 2008.

Since Christ Church Plano, and St. Matthias Dallas, have already transferred to Alternative Oversight from orthodox provinces, is there any reason why St. Stephen's cannot also seek Alternative Oversight from Bp. Atwood, who represents Kenya with Bp. Iker's blessing.

Talk to the Bishop about that.

Are you aware of the property canons in the diocese of Kenya?

Are you aware of the rights of vestries in the diocese of Kenya?

Do they have vestries in the diocese of Kenya?

Perhaps some of you who voted for Bishop Atwood in the recent election can fill us in on some of those points?? Oh...pardon me, there was no vote. Bishop Atwood became a bishop because the Archbishop of Kenya decided to ordain him; just as the local bishops can appoint clergy. Oh Brave New World.

Under Alternative Oversight?

I think it is important that we all understand that we don't really have "apostolic oversight" now. This is not my opinion, but that of the bishop of Dallas, Bishop Stanton. In his letter withdrawing his request for Alternate Episcopal oversight he correctly pointed out that in the American church our primate (the presiding bishop) has no power of oversight over the bishops or dioceses. The power of the presiding bishop is to preside over the house of bishops. Her other "powers" are largely persuasive.

Witness the fact that we have pretty much ignored her, and ignored the man who held the office before her (this is not a woman issue). The presiding bishop can't even make an official, sacerdotal visit to this diocese without Bishop Iker's permission.

When we enter the 'brave new world' of African oversight, we will begin to see the real powers of an Archbishop. The great freedom that we enjoy today in this American Church will not be transferred into African Anglicanism. That is not to say their system is bad, and ours is good. It is to say that they are very different, and they have a very different way of understanding power above the level of the local diocese.

Would female deacons be permitted?

Depends on what foreign diocese you align yourself with. I don't believe, for example, that Kenya or Nigeria has women deacons.

Would the parish have lay representatives at conventions?

Ask the bishop that you align yourself with. But remember, the strong voice of the laity is a unique American and Western tradition. It is not as strong as it is in America even in the Church of England. In the African and Southern Cone dioceses the idea that "Father knows best" heavily influences church polity.

Would divorced persons be able to serve on vestry and at the altar?

Since some of the clerical leaders of the Network are divorced, I would hope so. But alas, I think that the African Church and the Southern Cone have a much more restrictive teaching about divorce than we do. (They also have a more liberal understanding of marriage with multiple wives). It may be that we will go back to the stand our church took in the 1950s when (I understand) divorced people were generally seen as inappropriate for the vestry.

Would homosexual persons be able to serve on vestry and at the altar?

You're kidding...right?

As I said, I believe that the homosexual issue is really not the key issue in this diocese. But when we align ourselves (legally or otherwise) with African and Southern Cone bishops who have this as a genuine first concern, the new emerging diocese won't be able to 'back burner' it. I think it would be unlikely that "out of the closet" gay folks

would serve at the altar, or on the vestry. Can you picture the Archbishop of Nigeria having apostolic oversight over us and allowing such a thing?

Also, I don't think that "wink, wink, nudge, nudge" it is going to work in the emerging diocese. (Definition: There is someone who is gay...it is fairly common knowledge...but everyone looks the other way.) This is a long and honored way of dealing with gays in our church. I don't think that is going to work with true and real "Apostolic Oversight" from an African Bishop. They are not much into "wink, wink, nudge, nudge" when it comes to gay people. They are into jailing them.

This might also be a time to say something about the rights that WOMEN do enjoy in this diocese. I don't think we can assume that those will continue to exist as they do now under an African or Third world prelate who has a vision that women do not belong in decision making positions.

Will Ft. Worth accept women priests and bishops if these are permitted by Alternative Oversight?

Doesn't it fly in the face of all logic that Ft. Worth would seek or accept alternative oversight from a bishop or Archbishop that would accept women at the altar? IF they could do this, they could accept KJS. The key to her non-acceptance by the leadership of this diocese is not her theology, but her gender. She was rejected at her election.

At present, any priest who moves from ECUSA to serve in another Anglican diocese overseas is no longer a participant in the Church Pension Fund. If St. Stephen's goes with Alternate Oversight, will its priest still be covered by the CPF?

From the pension fund: If fully vested, their account will be frozen at the time they withdraw from the Episcopal Church. If you leave PECUSA, you leave the CPF. You are fully vested in the pension fund after ten years of service.

Also I think it is important that we all understand that the Network pension fund and the Church pension fund are quite different. The CPF fund offers a defined benefit plan...you are guaranteed so much retirement pay based on your salary, years of service, and seven highest consecutive years.

The Network is offering a defined payment plan. The payments into the fund are set, not the amount of pension. In this 401K type of plan, the oldest money gains the most growth and gives the most benefit. In the CPF plan the newest money (highest salary) sets the pension. Transferring clergy will lose the best years of the CPF plan, and not be in the Network plan long enough to have a large buildup of funds. In other words, they will be cutting out the best areas of growth in both plans.

IBM did this switch of pensions some years ago, and executives in their late 40.s and 50.s lost a lot of pension credit.

It's something you should be aware of.

There are always church members looking for excuses to leave. All this controversy will cause losses & setbacks. What measures are planned to keep and increase membership to offset this obviously difficult problem?

In Executive Council this year I suggested the diocese build a Habitat for Humanity house. It would be a project that could bring together people of different views in a common task. The Executive Council approved it by a wide margin. The Finance Committee killed it.

I think the coming schism is taking most of the time and talent of the diocesan leadership.

Churches have to face this situation themselves. They have to undertake new education programs, outreach programs, feeding programs. They have to show to new and old members that we are interested in doing the work of Christ. Most people who come to visit our churches aren't interested in our political problems. They are interested in doing the work of Christ.

Trinity August: Nothing But Nets

September: Prayer Bears for children's hospital, new adult classes, larger cell ministries, Feasting with the Saints.

October: We build a Habitat for Humanity house with several other congregations (interdenominational).

How can we take the distractions of these problems and turn them into increased focus on Jesus and spreading the Gospel?

By finding ways to witness to Jesus and finding new ways to witness to his gospel. Don't look for anyone to give you a playbook. Look around you. In the past year the diocese has cut back on college ministry, hospital ministry, and our work for the homeless and hungry is not there. This is the work of the parish. Well, do it. The diocese is concentrated on the great work of division from the National Church. It has no time for petty things like ministering on campus, helping the poor, or building houses for the needy.

All this political activity pulls churches and members of both ECUSA and the Network loyalty away from their focus on mission. What words of comfort would you offer to your members and churches?

Don't let this political stuff be what you talk about. Talk about mission. Talk about how you can take the gospel. Look around for people who need help. Build a Habitat house. Go down to a mission and serve lunch. Make sandwiches for the poor. DO MISSION. Make that your priority. When the politics is not on the front burner you can see the issues more clearly.

Given the situation, how can we, at St. Stephen's build a church under these conditions??

Literally build a church you mean?

You don't wait for ideal conditions to build a church for the glory of God. There are always lots of economic and political reasons not to do it. You need to pray and ask is this what the Lord wants us to do? Forget the politics.

The worse that can happen is that you will loose a building. So what?

From an economic standpoint...a mortgage will protect you. The powers that be will be more content to let you do what you want to do if a mortgage is involved. After all, if you desert the church...they are stuck with the mortgage.

Economically, my congregation is in a tougher spot than you are. We have valuable land and no mortgage. If the majority is evicted, there is no mortgage to stick anybody with. The land could be sold for a quick profit to the university.