

St. Stephen's, Hurst Forum

Members of St. Stephens provided these questions.

The Rev. Canon Charles A. Hough, III and Mr. Rickey Brantley, Asst. Chancellor of the Diocese, will answer these questions with comments, on Sunday, September 30th at St. Stephen's Church by their invitation

These questions were answered with the help of Bishop Iker, Fr.'s Hightower, Reed, and Heidt. Canon Hough and Rickey Brantley also contributed.

“We believe they are questions that are on the minds of many in our diocese.”

1. *The issue of homosexuality aside, in what other fundamental theological areas are TEC and Ft. Worth in disagreement?*

Among the several disagreements between Fort Worth and TEC, the primary area of disagreement is over the authority of Scripture. Our differences about sexuality are only symptomatic of much deeper, fundamental theological differences that have been emerging in our church over the last 30 years or so. It has often been said that there are now two religions in the Episcopal Church - one modernistic and revisionist, the other historic and biblical. Our differences have to do with the nature of authority and the primacy of the Bible for moral and theological teaching; the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the self-revelation of God and the only way to salvation; the orthodox theological position on the sacraments of holy orders and holy matrimony; and many other related concerns. (Statement provided by Bishop Iker, September 17, 2007)

People may have different views as to whether women can be priests, but we vehemently oppose the attempts of General Convention to end all discussion of the issue by imposing its own one-sided view upon the rest of the church. The General Convention, even with the objections of many throughout the Church and the Anglican Communion passed mandatory Canons with regard to the ordination of women to the priesthood and the Episcopacy. The affect of this is devastating to those whose conscience dictates that the ordination of women is not a practice that is accepted by the whole Church. Many believe it is a violation of Scripture, and it certainly violates 2000 years of Church tradition. We have continued to argue agreeing with the Lambeth Conference that both sides in this conflict should be allowed to co-exist. This is called “open reception.” The General Convention of TEC has removed us from what Lambeth has provided. The effect has been the destructive consequence that no priest who is a traditionalist on this issue who is elected a Bishop will receive the necessary consents for consecration in TEC. In other words, we can not reproduce ourselves as Catholic minded Anglican's in TEC. As a small province of the historic church TEC has no authority to decide this issue or to impose its decision on its members, - a decision which goes against the universal practice of the church for 2000 years and is still opposed by the great majority of Christians throughout the world.

There are other serious theological disagreements as well. The present Presiding Bishop has said that to think that Jesus Christ is the savior of all people puts God in a very small box. She and others also have done all they can to turn the church into a social welfare organization, substituting secular sociology for Christian theology. And no attempt has been made to stop the growing custom of allowing unbaptized people to receive communion. All these issues, as well as the homosexual one are symptomatic of a move to change the nature of our religion in a way which is neither biblical nor consistent with our own tradition.

2. *Why do these demand separation when women's ordination for thirty years has not?*

Several groups of former Episcopalians did separate thirty years ago over the ordination of women and have been doing so ever since. Some have joined the Eastern Orthodox or Roman Catholic churches, but most have become members of what is known as the continuing churches – traditionally Anglican in their theology and practice but not officially part of the Anglican Communion. We as a diocese believed however that we could remain united with the rest of the Episcopal Church so long as we did not have to ordain women as priests nor accept others who had been so ordained. We even accepted that other dioceses could elect women as their bishops so long as it did not affect our own diocese.

In 1997, the General Convention of TEC made it mandatory to accept this practice, removing the process of reception, and isolating Catholic minded Episcopalians. Once again, this was done despite our pleas that TEC continue to make room for like-minded traditional Episcopalians.

All that changed when Katharine Schori was elected as Presiding Bishop. This election gave her primatial and episcopal oversight over the entire Episcopal Church including our own diocese. Apart from her theological views so contrary to traditional Christian teaching, this was completely unacceptable, not because the head of our church was now a woman, but because we do not believe that she is a bishop. In order to remain associated with the rest of the Episcopal Church we sought Alternative Primatial Oversight along with six other dioceses. To this day that has not been granted either by Katharine Schori or the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In the most recent House of Bishop's meeting in New Orleans, a plan for oversight was presented by Katharine Schori which was wholly inadequate, and has been rejected by our like-minded Bishops who were not even consulted before this plan was presented. Once again, the door has been shut and locked. This diocese, through the ministry of Bishop Jack Iker, has consistently fought for a place in TEC only to have every door shut on us.

3. *Why does Ft. Worth align itself in the Network with dioceses which ordain women, if that is a major issue with TEC?*

For the same reason that for the last thirty years we were able to live with other dioceses in TEC who ordain women. Though there are several dioceses in the Network that do so, they at least all respect and honor our position. We are united with them and with any others who, apart from the ordination issue, are trying to uphold the traditional faith and practice of the Episcopal Church in opposition to the revisions to that faith and

practice being promulgated by General Convention and our official TEC leadership. Once again, the ill advised passage of mandatory Canons in 1997 for the ordination of women, has put us in an impossible position within TEC. All of this could have easily been avoided. We believe the acceptance of homosexual lifestyles will follow the same course with the eventual passage of mandatory Canons. In effect and in reality practicing homosexuals are being ordained and the blessing of same sex unions is occurring throughout TEC. These practices will be enshrined in the Canons of the Church, given time.

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

Neither the Archbishop of Canterbury nor the Primates have any canonical rights anywhere outside their own provinces because there are not as yet any canon laws governing the whole communion. For the same reason the decisions of Lambeth Conference are not binding upon its constituent members. However, The Archbishop of Canterbury has the right to determine which provinces and dioceses are constituent members of the Anglican Communion – a right he exercises chiefly by his invitations to Lambeth Conference, but also by English Canon law. The primates also have the right to declare with whom they are in communion and with whom they are not. Though the Archbishop of Canterbury and other primates have no legal rights within any province other than their own, they can certainly determine whether a particular province is part of the Anglican Communion.

5. *If so, is this likely to happen and when?*

The primates of the Anglican Communion in conference gave the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops until September 30th of this year to declare their intentions regarding issues agreed upon by Lambeth and the primates, such as the ordination of active homosexuals as bishops and the blessing of same-sex couples. If the House of Bishops do not comply with the teaching of most of the Communion on these issues, which is most likely, the primates will then have to decide the place of TEC in the rest of the Communion. In this diocese we believe we must disassociate ourselves from the House of Bishops and General Convention in order to remain within the greater Communion.

6. *Do you see any compromise that both sides may accept?*

For thirty years we have tried to accommodate ourselves to new rulings and practices of the Episcopal Church which we find unacceptable, and in the last years and months we have tried to negotiate with those on the other side of our disagreements. But so far there has been no willingness from them to find any solution other than complete submission on our part. Nevertheless, we will be willing to continue negotiations should there ever be any sign of a new approach.

7. *Who legally owns the property of parishes in the Episcopal Diocese of Ft. Worth?*

By Diocesan Canons, all property in every parish and mission residing in the Diocese of Fort Worth is to be held in trust for those parishes and missions by the Corporation of the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth.

8. *Does TEC currently have a claim on St. Stephen's property?*

TEC contends that all property is held in trust for its use and benefit. We believe that TEC has no right to the property.

9. *Would the Alternative Oversight diocese/province have a claim?*

NO

10. *How would Alternative Oversight affect our ability to secure loans in the U.S.A.?*

It will have no affect what so ever. The bank would base its decision on the finances of the parish and the value of the property financed, as it has always been in the past.

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

After the unilateral actions of General Convention 2003, it is believed that many people at every level of the Communion were going to be forced into making some very tough decisions. The Communion itself is working through these decisions as is the province and the diocese. As things settle out, we believe the same kind of decisions will continue to be made both by individuals and congregations. One of the canonical changes coming before our convention in November are the additions to Canon 32, which allow for an amicable solution to a dispute between the parish and the diocese. The decision to re-align or not at the parish level will involve the rector and the vestry and includes a formal process through the Bishop and the Standing Committee, and if property is involved, the Board of Trustees of the Corporation of the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth. The Bishop has been very open with the clergy that he would not force a congregation to go any direction against its will. The leadership of this diocese is opposed to using the same strong arm tactics involving lawsuits that is taking place in many parts of TEC today.

12. *What threshold (super-majority) will be required for a decision?*

We are proposing a 2/3 majority vote of the vestry, ratified by 2/3 majority vote of the parish.

13. *If the vote is to remain in TEC, what will happen to the property?*

Diocesan Canons 32, 24 and 18 address this. Simply put, a congregation will need to negotiate with the Bishop, Standing Committee and the Board of Trustees. Once again, we are not interested in lawsuits.

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

There are two ways to answer this depending on what is meant by the question:

1. If the Diocese secures APO, no vote is needed by a parish to continue to be part of the diocese.
2. If the concern is, could the diocese be sued by the National Church or a local faction claiming to be the true diocese, if it goes with APO, the answer is probably no to the first and yes to the second, but this is only speculation. We believe the National Church will provide resources for a small minority of congregations willing to sue, rather than directly intervening themselves.

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

The fall back position is that a congregation is part of the Diocese of Fort Worth and its property is owned by the Corporation of the Diocese. We can foresee this happening in several places that vote against the majority stand of the diocese and this is where charity and the wisdom of the Bishop, Rector, Vestry and Standing Committee are going to be needed.

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

First Reading of Constitutional changes would be November of 2007. They do not go into effect legally until a second reading, which is likely to take place in November of 2008. Everyone would have a year to prayerfully consider what they believe and with whom they are willing to be associated.

17. *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?*

This would fall under Canon 32 as well. But if the Diocese as a whole moves that direction, it would not be necessary. If it votes not to, I suspect many parishes will be asking the same question.

Under Alternative Oversight:

18. *Would female deacons be permitted?*

Yes

19. *Would the parish have lay representation at conventions?*

Yes

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

Yes

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

As per the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer, which we would continue to use, a person who is living an immoral lifestyle that is scandalous to the Church community would not be serving on a vestry, etc. If a person who is homosexual is living a celibate lifestyle, there is no sin, therefore, no need to ask them not to serve on a vestry, etc. Homosexual orientation is not a sin. The practice of homosexuality is considered a sin as defined by Scripture.

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

It is assumed the Anglican Province we would align ourselves with does not ordain women to the priesthood or the episcopacy. It is assumed dioceses like Pittsburgh, which support the ordination of women to these offices, would be allowed to do so within their dioceses. The principle as defined by Lambeth would be to allow the question of the ordination of women to be a matter of "open reception". The two sides would be allowed to co-exist without mandatory oppressive Canons, which we currently have in the Episcopal Church.

23. *At present, any priest who moves from TEC 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?*

The CPF does make exceptions to the rule that only those who are in the Episcopal Church are allowed in the CPF. A case in point would be the clergy of the Church in Mexico. They are allowed to be in the CPF, even though they are not in this Province of the Church. There are other exceptions that have been made. It is generally understood, that if you are not in this Province, you will not be in the Episcopal CPF. If your congregation chooses to realign itself with another Province, chances are your clergy will not be allowed in Episcopal CPF. It is scandalous that the CPF is being used

as a weapon against those who are simply following their conscience as the Episcopal Church continues to teach and follow unbiblical beliefs. It should be stated the Network has already started a new Church Pension Fund.

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

If someone is actively seeking a reason to leave, they will find an excuse and there is probably no way to prevent it. The question is correct in the statement that this controversy will cause losses and setbacks. It is suggested this will be the case regardless of the direction we take or the choices we make. TEC has continued to lose members as it follows its chosen path. If we walk that path with them, we will join them in those losses as our members who hold the traditional teachings on sexuality and the traditional teachings of Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, turn from us and walk away. On the other hand, by holding fast to the Scriptures and teaching a Gospel of truth from our pulpits, we will lose those who have chosen to embrace the new understanding of sexual morality among other new trends that are in line with TEC.

We do not wish to deliberately drive anyone away, and we hope to be able to lay out the situation to our people in such a way that all involved will understand the reality of the issues that face us. We believe these issues are a matter of spiritual life and death, and choices will need to be made.

The clerical members of the Standing Committee, in order to fully inform members of this diocese what is going on in the National Church and the position that our diocese has taken, have been sponsoring meetings that have taken place this month. These priests would be willing to share this presentation and thoughts with anyone at St. Stephen's.

We are confident that remaining faithful to the "faith once delivered to the saints" will produce Church growth and vitality. God will bless our faithfulness. We are saddened that some persons will choose to follow the new religion of TEC.

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

It is the opinion of the Diocese of Fort Worth that when we stop wasting energy and resources fighting about these issues, we will have the energy and resources to turn and accomplish the Gospel imperatives of proclamation.

We will endeavor to continue to teach the Faith that has been handed down to us. For 30 years TEC has been conflicted with the imposition of new and unbiblical beliefs, which have distracted it from its mission. TEC has lost well over half its membership since the 1960's. This during a time when the population of the United States has greatly increased. This is final proof that God is not blessing what TEC is doing.

We have had to stop teaching the wonders of God's grace. We have had to spend too much time apologizing and saying that we are the diocese that doesn't do those things. We have spent too much time and money going to meetings that debate and argue over issues of morality. If we were able to take those resources of time and money and energy, and channel them into teaching people how to spread the Gospel, we would be acting in a more faithful manner.

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

We would make the basic statement to those who support the Network and to those who support the General Convention Church the following: You heard the message of God's grace and love, of God's forgiveness and his offer of life preached from this pulpit every week, and you will hear it again every week. You will not hear politics, either church or secular. You will hear the message that Jesus Christ changes lives. As long as we continue to proclaim His message, rather than our own, all things will work out. Our primary concern lies with the preaching and teaching of the truth of the Catholic faith, with the administration of the sacraments, and with fidelity to the Scriptures.

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

We would say that you will build St. Stephen's in the same way that you have built it and were planning to build it two years ago: by your faith, by your commitment to the Gospel, and by the sacrifice and faith of your parishioners who are willing to move forward, and to draw others to do the same. Many of our priests deal with the same concerns. They have put off plans for expanding the church building. Many will wait for the road we are to walk to become apparent before we do anything. Do we wait 5, 10, or 15 years? Remember that the Church, and individual branches of the church, has been in far worse condition and far worse turmoil in years past. God has always brought about a great thing by using those who remain true in faith. Our age will be no different. There is a wonderful opportunity to emphasize the grace, the love, the forgiveness and the gift of life that our Savior desires to offer to us. This is a wonderful opportunity to allow both sides of this argument the freedom to turn their attention to the proclamation of the Gospel (perhaps emphasizing "as they understand it") without the hindrance of distraction. God is faithful to his message and He will speak to hurting hearts and souls the truth. We can only trust in the Lord and do that which the Church has learned from Scripture and taught to be true.