

To the Members of St Stephens Church, Sewickley
A Letter about Denominational Realignment
From your Rector and Vestry

October 12, 2007

Dear Friends in Christ,

I write to you as your pastor and brother in Christ in a season of great importance concerning our future, and I write with the unanimous support of our Vestry. For decades under multiple generations of leaders this parish has been filled with glad followers of Jesus Christ, working for the mission of his Gospel, and laboring for the reform and renewal of the Episcopal Church - under Holy Scripture and through the Holy Spirit. At St Stephens we have been deeply thankful for this call upon our lives; we love the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we love this Church.

A Moment of Decision

As we enter the latter part of this decade, it is now evident that differences of faith and practice have torn the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, probably beyond mending. The challenges we face are rooted in longstanding developments inside western culture that are spreading worldwide. These challenges cannot be avoided, for we face them everywhere. I thank God for your endurance, your courage, and your clarity in this important struggle.

We have come to a moment of decision. After years of effort and much personal anguish, I now believe that the Episcopal Church has clarified and hardened its opposition to the historic and biblical Christian faith to such an extent that we cannot pursue our gospel mission fruitfully while remaining under its authority. Your Vestry concurs. *For the sake of our health and future mission, we believe that we must now partner with our diocese to realign our congregation and affiliate with a different Province of the Anglican Communion.*

What is the Issue?

The presenting issue is the question of human sexuality and in particular the morality of same-sex relations. Same-sex relations in a committed partnership are now held to be consistent with the Christian faith and central to the values of the Gospel by the dominant majority of Episcopal Church leadership. In 2003 the Episcopal Church confirmed Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire. It was a defining moment for our church. Subsequent Episcopal councils have rejected widespread and repeated appeals from the Anglican Communion to step back. The decision of 2003 has proven to be an irreversible action with permanent consequences. The Episcopal Church is now committed to spreading a gospel of sexual liberation throughout the Communion and the world.

The underlying issues go far deeper than sex, to the very heart of our faith, including our understanding of the Triune God, the devastating impact of the fall upon human nature, the unique work of Jesus as the only Savior of the world, our understanding of God's Gospel mission to the world, the interdependence of the Anglican Communion, the sanctity of human

life, and – above it all – the final authority and full trustworthiness of Holy Scripture guiding us through these matters. *At its core, this is a dispute about whether God has definitively spoken to us in the pages of the Bible, and about whether those pages can be read, understood, and trusted in their plain and natural sense by common people.*

Though our faith is in concert with the majority of our worldwide Anglican Communion and the historical roots of our Church, we now find ourselves fundamentally divided from the leadership in the Episcopal Church over these issues of first importance.

The tragic result of abandoning the guidance of scripture is that modern people who are caught in sexual brokenness are denied the blessings of the gospel: including forgiveness, the new birth, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to reorder our deepest affections into Christ's image. Many of us who were won to faith in Jesus out of the ruins of the sexual revolution feel this loss most keenly. The Gospel of new life is being denied to a whole subsection of our culture.

Liberal Intolerance

We have noticed a widespread and growing trend in the Episcopal Church as it pursues its progressive agenda. A distorted form of 'dialogue' is widely used to undermine confidence in Scripture and overstate confidence in uncertain science. In many places congregations and dioceses are no longer free to recruit, develop or choose leaders who share their historic faith and biblical values. Mandatory diocesan assessments are used to compel parish funding of causes in opposition to parish values. If the trend continues, acceptance will be soon required of behavior that Scripture reveals to be immoral and destructive. Litigation, hostile property claims, and presentments are being widely used against congregations and their leaders who in conscience resist or who seek the freedom to realign with other parts of our Communion. *It is clear that opposition to classical, creedal, biblical theology and ministries is being orchestrated from the highest levels of the Episcopal Church.* We are plainly being told to submit or to leave.

Our Appeals

Mindful of Jesus' guidance we have worked to bring our concerns to the leadership of the Anglican Communion. This appeal process has been going on for 10 years, and leaders from this parish have been intimately involved. We have been heartened by the broad attention and support we have received. We hoped that the Lambeth Conference, the Windsor Report, and the Tanzania Communiqué would provide a workable way forward for our ministries and the Anglican Communion itself.

We were stunned by the rapid, summary dismissal of the Tanzania Communiqué by our House of Bishops and Executive Council early this year, and by their failure to provide adequate protections for dissenting dioceses and parishes. We understand this to signal a decided rejection of Anglican Communion authority, of our most deeply held values, and of our future ministries. *We believe there shall be no viable long term future for our parishes in this church unless we make unacceptable compromises on matters of first importance.*

What is God Doing?

It seems to us that God is raising something up, even while he is bringing something down. We believe we are seeing the end of denominationalism, built on geographical and hierarchical structures that no longer hold to the faith that gave them birth. In their place in the West, we are witnessing the rise of a creative family of networks, built on shared conciliar leadership, non-geographical structures, local property ownership, vital evangelistic mission commitments to the contemporary world, solid confidence in the full trustworthiness of the Bible, and a common vision for disciple-making. These networks are unified by people and congregations freely believing in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, eagerly learning from and trusting in the Scriptures, and the confession of the Nicene faith. All of this testifies to the work of the Holy Spirit. Threats are not used to gain consent, but instead God is drawing people who happily surrender to his gracious gospel work. There is a growing movement of this kind within American Anglicanism called the Common Cause Network. We believe God is behind it, and we wish to join it and help it grow.

What is our Plan?

Working with friends overseas and around the country, our Diocese has developed a plan to realign with an overseas Province of the Anglican Communion which shares our faith and our values. In doing this, we would also partner with the growing Anglican network taking shape in North America outside the Episcopal Church. Parishes that wished to remain in the Episcopal Church would be given that option.

This realignment will take three actions of our diocesan Convention to complete. The first step comes at Diocesan Convention this November 2nd and 3rd. Steps two and three would likely come next October or November. Steps one and two would change our Constitution, giving us the right to choose our affiliation within the Anglican Communion. Step three would actually select the new Province of affiliation. We are one of four, perhaps five dioceses that are preparing to take these steps together over the next months. Other dioceses and parishes look on with hope to see if a realignment path can be opened. We believe we have the right and responsibility to do this.

What is the Cost?

Our plan will be opposed, certainly in Convention, and probably in civil and church courts as well. We believe we have a strong case and significant precedent within the Anglican Communion and American law. But there are difficulties to face. There are many who would love to see us go, but not with any of the church buildings or endowments we own. There are many congregations in our diocese who find their survival threatened by these developments within our Church. No one, on either side of this dispute, looks forward to extended litigation. *The cost could be sharp for many, but the price of inaction would be even worse.*

We will probe every opening for a negotiated settlement along the way that is fair, generous, and gives our ministries the opportunity to move forward unfettered into God's future. It will take patience, endurance, wisdom, grace and much prayer to see what is possible. Perhaps the Episcopal Church will respond with a solution that will pull our Communion back from the brink of division. We should have a good picture of how this is likely to resolve within a year, and perhaps sooner. We trust God for the road ahead, confident of his leading. It is a walk of faith,

like that of Abraham. *If there is a difficult cost, we ask God to give us the heart to bear it with joy, and with trust in him. We remember that Jesus' most oft repeated command was, "Fear not..."*

What is our Heart?

We have not wanted to act in haste, as our congregational life over the past 40 years attests. We are concerned that the history of the Church is littered with the wreckage of strife and division. We do not wish to add to these ruins. We are mindful as well that our own hands are not clean in the development of this history, and are particularly brokenhearted over the pride that has too often accompanied our witness. We beg God and others across our Church for the forgiveness we need.

So we wish to carry our convictions with grace and humility, not with judgment. We know that God is concerned to correct things in us as well as in others. We are eager for that correction. We want to speak with clarity and charity towards those we oppose.

We are mindful of the wisdom of Gamaliel (Acts 5.38-40), who in a season of persecution persuaded the religious authorities to release the Apostle's with these words:

"Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." His speech persuaded them.

I think, in the end, this is what we will need to do: to carry ourselves with 'clarity and charity', and to trust one another to God, confident that in due time he will sort it out. More than anything we wish to see God's Gospel future for our Church. Towards that future, we now move, asking your partnership, your prayer, and your support.

Geoffrey W Chapman, Rector Fred Dale, Senior Warden Michael Mullin, Junior Warden

With the unanimous support of the Vestry