

The Episcopal Church's opportunity: A Church for the 21st Century

Provincial Synods 2012

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Who are we, and who is here? I would invite you to reflect for a moment and remember what God has been saying to you for a very long time: you are my beloved, and in you I am well pleased.

That is our primary identity – beloved siblings, created in the image of God, made for conversation and intimate community with God and each other. That image we bear is a community image – we don't just reflect Jesus, or the Spirit, or God the Father – we reflect that dynamic, relational Trinity. The ancient church likened the trinity to a dance, a moving, dynamic, interdependent community – that is at the same time one. It's a circle dance (*perichoresis*), but not simple revolution. It's more like a transformative and evolving spiral in multiple dimensions.

This particular community, this part of the body of Christ, is meant to reflect that intimate, divine dancing as well. We are made for deep conversation and dynamic partnership with God and *other*. The Trinitarian dance is both centrifugal, sending us out on God's errand to heal and reconcile the world, and the Trinitarian dance is centripetal, drawing us into the well at the center of the vortex, to drink deeply of living water. We meet God as the lure, the strange attractor, drawing us in to transform us in the dance. This deep conversation receives us, offers us life, and converts us for the sake of the world.

The world is deeply hungry for this creative dance – that is what the spiritual yearning around us is about, and this is what we are ultimately made *for* – to lose ourselves in this transformative dance for the sake of the world. It asks of us all that we are and all that we have, including gifts we haven't yet discovered.

At the same time we live in the midst of a world caught up in fear and trembling, even terror – and a church that can also succumb to fear. The change around us is disorienting and frightening to many. We are rapidly losing even the vestiges

of what we have known for generations. Children today are growing up with possibilities that would have been incomprehensible to their grandparents and parents at the same age – and maybe even their older siblings. Videophones were a science fiction pipe dream 50 years ago, and today you can hide one in your pocket – and not just a phone, but an encyclopedia, camera, datebook, calculator, stock ticker, radio, television, and post-modern telegraph. What’s more, the brains of kids who grow up around these changed possibilities learn and function differently.

Through all the changes and chances of this life, many people imagined the church to be the one thing that didn’t change. It may not have changed rapidly, but somebody did call it *ekklesia semper reformanda*, the church always being re-formed and re-created. This Episcopal Church has its roots in that re-forming impulse, that dance with tradition that keeps the image of God before us, ever-ancient and ever-new.

We are beginning to come to terms with the fact that we are no longer the established church in the British colonies – thanks be to God! – but in some ways we still act established, and we tend to get anxious and fearful when we discover how different things have already become. The reality is that we are already thoroughly past the established season, and we have been shrinking in size, numbers, and role for quite a while. Newer generations aren’t much interested in becoming members of an establishment organization. This system and structure has been a good tool, it’s given good service, but it’s time to reforge the tool.

That means dying to what has been – in the hope of resurrection. Death and resurrection is going on all around us, if only we will notice. This Church is growing numerically in its overseas dioceses – in some quite phenomenal ways. There are about 100,000 indigenous people in Ecuador who are becoming Episcopalians. It can seem chaotic, but the system is changing. Most of the congregations in the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe are worshipping in a local language, and that is also changing the nature of the church. Immigrant congregations in the United States are growing, and they, too, are changing the nature of this Church. That dynamic dance is drawing people in to the well at its center, and spinning re-shaped and re-formed partners out into the world.

There is enormous hunger and thirst all around us for that well of life, and there is equal hunger for compassionate and engaged relationship with the rest of creation. Congregations and gatherings around this Church who engage that yearning are discovering some of the awesome, miraculous, creative, transformative power of God to change us and the world. The challenge for many parts of this Church is learning to turn outward. The dance stops if we only drink

from the well, for that living water is a gift to be shared with the world – if it is hoarded it only leads to death.

This is a time to recognize and claim what most characterizes this Church. What elements of our identity are essential, what can't we relinquish? I'm going to assume that the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral is the ground from which we start the conversation (scripture, creed, sacraments, and episcopacy). This is a starting point, and I'd invite you to reflect on it and add to it:

- We understand ourselves as the middle way, rooted in the catholic tradition and deeply incarnational, growing differently in multiple local contexts.
- We read the scriptures thoughtfully, open to a variety of understandings of the living word of God.
- At our best we value diverse theology, liturgy, music, and persons, understanding that the Trinitarian dance is a blessed company of all sorts and conditions of faithful people and their gifts. Divine creativity is reflected in that welcoming and varied community. We are adaptable to those varied local contexts, for God is still creating.
- We understand that new occasions teach new duties, and that tradition is meant to ground us, but not like a tar pit or fossil bed.
- We understand that all the baptized are gifted, formed, and sent as God's mission partners into the world.
- We value the voices of all in decision making, recognizing that the spirit anoints many prophets and leaders.
- We also affirm a strong desire and ability to partner with other Christians and with other people of faith, knowing that God is working in ways beyond our full or immediate understanding, and that reconciling the world to God in Christ needs God's whole body.

That reconciling mission continues to shape and transform us, as we join the Trinitarian dance. We've grown and developed in our understanding of mission in recent years, moving from talking about the Church's mission to God's mission, understanding that God is leading this dance in ways beyond our ken. We've embraced the 5 Anglican Marks of Mission as a template for thinking about the broad scope of God's mission, and we've grown in understanding that it's always bigger than any one part of the Church can fully engage. A shorthand summary of those 5 Marks: mission is about the good news of the Reign of God, it's about evangelism and Christian formation, it's about serving the least of these, it's about confronting systemic injustice, and it's about caring for the garden^[1]. We've engaged some particular kinds of mission in our work with the MDGs and domestic poverty – and we're being transformed in the process.

God is still urging new ways of engaging the rest of creation, and a significant challenge right now involves how to dance in a rapidly changing world. That

hunger for good news around us means we have to keep learning new ways to tell the old, old story, and to understand evangelism in new ways, e.g., as Dwight Zscheile puts it, as “initiating others into the Kingdom of God for the first time.” We are relearning that we have to go out into the world to do it, rather than waiting for the hungry to enter our beautiful red doors. Increasingly that means that those primary encounters are no longer limited to Sunday morning or inside church buildings. What does that imply for familiar structures and systems?

I certainly can't claim to know the details of this emerging church – no one can, yet – but it will need to be more flexible and open to varied expressions of church community. We're also going to need increasingly collaborative decision-making processes, and distributed leadership that carries both authority and accountability. We need leaders and systems comfortable with risk and entrepreneurial creativity that are able to form disciples as apostolic adventurers. Formation and education can build dignity as beloved children of God and friends of Jesus as well as capacity for service in God's mission. Everyone needs to be formed as partners in that creative Trinitarian dance – as members of communities who learn shared stories, shared values, and shared dreams.

All of our structures and systems need to be shaped around partnership in God's mission. They should facilitate, support, and expand that engagement. A lot of our current structures and systems focus on internal dynamics and regulation. We tend to measure things that are inward looking, like how many people sit in the pews on particular Sundays. We don't measure how many people in the larger community are invited into transformation through the ministries our members engage in outside what we call “the church.” We don't measure how kenotic we are, how much we give ourselves away; we measure how much money we take in. How might we begin to account for the coming reign of God in our midst and around us, or how adventuresome we are in dancing out into the world?

If we are people who value that Anglican sense of ordered freedom, then we need to learn to live in the creative tension between complete order and complete freedom, both of which are ultimately deadly – order because it's not open to change, and complete freedom because it has a hard time with enduring relationship. Abundant life and creativity come in the dance between what is finished and utter chaos. That lively tension applies to all parts of our lives, including how we make decisions.

Our churchwide governance work is largely based on parliamentary democratic methods. We have evolved a system that gives great attention to the details of process and structure in how decisions are made. We have a representation system that has at least something to do with interest group politics. We have made legislative decisions over the last few decades that have done great good in

opening us up to the movement of the spirit. We have also done damage in voting, by creating winners and losers about several hundred issues at every General Convention.

There are other democratic ways of decision-making that are more deliberative, that depend on conversation and consensus more than on up-down, yes-no voting. We've begun to learn something about indaba in recent years, and to learn more communal modes of discernment. Our tradition is actually more deeply based in discernment, reflection, and prayer in community than it is in voting. Even those 11 disciples who had to replace Judas didn't vote – they cast lots, and they took the one who was chosen, seemingly by random methods. They trusted in the leading of the Spirit. I'm not suggesting that we start throwing dice, but I do want to suggest that we have the ability to listen far more widely to the spirit at work in the lives of Episcopalians and of local faith communities than we did in the days when white, landowning men rode horses for days to gather in a small room and vote. Can you dream of a church that is able to listen to 2 million of us reflecting, discerning, and finding a way forward, in God's time, without an arbitrary deadline? Can we dream of a Church that is engaged in creative and distinctive ways with the variety of cultural communities around us? Can we build a system that is responsive to emerging possibilities, following the leading of the Spirit?

We are a people gathered by God to join the dance. We're challenged to respond to God's creative work in local contexts, in continuity with the ancient tradition of the friends of Jesus. We're invited to imitate his way of living, to eat and drink it in, and then to share it with others. We have tended to describe that as a linear sequence, as in "be bathed to belong to the body, be formed by eating, and then go and live like Jesus." The world around us seems to be leaning toward a far less linear mode, something like "behave, be formed, co-create" – rather more like that interactive dance with God.

Formation and practice are about the transformation from self-focus toward community with God and neighbor. This body called a Church is meant to image the same transformation, which is from solo to corporate leadership, polycentric teams, and reflecting a divine leadership community. The Trinitarian icon shares authority and leadership; those gifts are dynamic, fluid, and distributed, and like the life God offers, those gifts are meant to be given away, not hoarded. That is a great part of the baptismal theology in our 33 year old prayer book. This is a risky thought, but perhaps it's mature enough for a death and resurrection experience.

A thought experiment about shared ministry. What might crowd sourcing have to do with the movement of the Spirit? The same way of being that has brought us YouTube and Weather Underground[2], sourced by local contributions and

creativity, and networked to serve a far larger community, might also be reflected in this body. That's actually how the body called the church started – very local communities of godly intimacy that began to be networked in ways that could challenge the principalities and powers. We're doing it today through networks like EPPN, the churchwide discernment about the Anglican Covenant, the wider conversations reflected in the SCLM's work, Nets for Life, engagement with MDGs, and innovative partnering for mission like Jubilee Ministries. Imagine what might be possible if we began to think about the Spirit's creativity or innovation in this way. What could it mean for church planting? Evangelism? Governance? Responding to environmental damage or climate change? The kind of ministry called micro-volunteering[3]? Theological conversation, liturgical development, and discovering the gifts of local and global communities?

If we want to save the life of this Church, we're going to have to lose it. If we want to find life within this body, we're going to have to give it away. We are once again being invited to let go of our idols and turn to God – to drink from the well and join the dance. This is kenotic work, self-giving work, what God does in pouring out the divine self into human flesh. We are here to serve God's people and God's creation, rather than ourselves. The Episcopal Church will learn who it is in this age when it learns how to give itself to the dance, to drink from the well and be spun out into the world – for the life of the world.

[1] <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm>

[2] Weather forecasters, not the 1960s radical group, though the names and distributed leadership have common roots.

[3] I have 20 seconds, what good will I do with it? Possible answers – say a prayer, measure the air quality and share it with a network, take a picture of injustice, greet a stranger...