

## ST. STEPHEN'S AND THE BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE OF THE MISSOURI VALLEY

The election of Stephen Strawn as Bishop of the Missouri Valley was accepted with much emotion here in Texas. At All Saints, San Antonio, Father Chip Harper who had served as Rector at St. Stephen's Athens after Father Strawn's move to Quincy as well as had been a candidate for ordination in the old Southwest Diocese when Father Strawn was a priest at St. Stephen's, and other parishioners who knew Father Strawn in the Diocese realized they had to get out of the Diocese immediately and so they did. Incidentally they now have over 300 members, double their size when they left.

Some at St. Stephen's were delighted that Stephen Strawn had been elected; the priest they consider even to this day as "a real priest" in contrast to Fr. Harper or Fr. Pardue. Others at St. Stephen's, who knew Father Strawn before his move to Quincy or saw his activities during Fr. Harper's or my tenure wished to leave the Diocese and urged me to seek a quick exit like Fr. Harper's Parish. One such active family immediately left St. Stephen's and is now happily ensconced in another jurisdiction.

I was reluctant to attempt departing for three reasons.

First, I was sympathetic to the Rainwater, Byrum, Jackson, and Corder families. I knew departing would be very hurtful to them. I had learned to ignore the constant undermining of my authority by Father Strawn in the continuous flow of letters, phone calls, and emails back and forth from Quincy questioning my every move. Fr. Chip had suffered the same fate and had warned me to be aware of it and also to be very careful of their motives.

Second, for me it would be déjà vu all over again (to quote the immortal Yogi Berra). I really have never gotten over grieving the leaving of ECUSA. You don't walk away from a fifty year association without much sadness. And in the short period of time I have been in the Anglican Church in America I have also established relationships. I respect, honor and love my sponsoring Rector, Fr. Sisterman and his wife Carol, my ordaining Bishop, Louis Falk (without whom I would never have considered ordination in the Anglican Church in America), and his wife Carol, my spiritual guide, Fr. Taylor (who would have been an exceptional Bishop), as well as many other lay and clerical friends I have gotten to know and love.

And third, even if I agreed with these parishioners, we did not have the votes to disassociate. Even after the outrageous power plays of Bishop Strawn we probably were still a vote or two short and would not have made it without Fr. Lewis Berry's antics. This priest from Houston, representing Bishop Strawn and Chancellor Tara Keehr, was, for those eager to leave, the gift that kept on giving. His threats of law suits and phony Canon citations changed those wavering about disassociation to affirmative votes; threats that were ironically both illegal according to the Anglican Church in America Constitution

### **ARTICLE XI - Of Protection of Property**

**Section 1.** Nothing in the Constitution or in the Canons of any jurisdiction of this Church shall defeat, entail, or encumber the title or right of any parish, mission, school, or religious Community in any of its real property or \*personalty\*, or defeat, burden, or delay the right of any Bishop, Priest, Deacon, Deaconess, or employee of this Church to the full enjoyment of any vested portion of pension funds accrued to his account, or of any contractual right belonging to such person. No officer or agent of this Church, or of any jurisdiction shall resort to any civil court against any parish, mission, school, or religious community for the purpose of enforcing any temporal claim against the same.

and impossible because of our Bylaws and the laws of the State of Texas. Also he probably never even considered costs that the Anglican Church in America and or the Diocese would have accrued. Our Parish's insurance does not provide for aggressive law suits but does provide for adequate defense.

Following Bishop Strawn's election, aside from the continuing mail, telephone and email chatter, there was little interaction between him and St. Stephen's. We participated in his consecration. Our deaconess traveled to Quincy for the service and afterwards realized that the ministry of deaconess would continue to be undervalued by him representing the Anglican Church in America so she joined ECUSA where she is now a candidate for ordination to the Diaconate. I will attend her ordination this coming winter.

I had lost her participation early in my tenure and had worked very hard to carefully regain her confidence over the period of a year so that she became again active in our Parish prior to her departure. She was responsible for training catechists of the Good Shepherd, directed the Altar Guild and provided much valued visitation to home bound and nursing home parishioners. I truly miss her ministry and sincerely appreciate her continued availability to us for catechist training.

In November 2008 Bishop Strawn met with the Vestry and urged them to become a Mission. The Vestry, after careful consideration, rejected the offer 5-0. When visiting in February 2009 he again raised the issue and the Vestry again rejected the suggestion unanimously. At his April visitation he did not again propose Mission status.

On June 3 before the opening meeting of the Synod the Standing Committee secretly voted to offer the Synod a resolution to make St. Stephen's a Mission citing an unpaid National Church assessment. St. Stephen's two lay delegates, Patricia Muehl Newell Strawn Rainwater, onetime sister in law of the Bishop, and her current husband, Vernon were told of the decision but the Rector was not made aware of the action.

On June 4 during a break in the synod business session Bishop Strawn alerted the Rector of plans to introduce the resolution. The Rector called a member of the Vestry who assured him that his personal check will be covered if he pays National Assessment and authorizes him to tell the Standing Committee that if reduced to a Mission the Parish would leave the Anglican Church in America. The Rector writes a check for \$570, pays assessment and notifies treasurer, secretary, and chancellor that if classified a Mission "we are gone." The Synod unanimously votes to table for one year the resolution to make St. Stephen's a Mission.

On June 14 the Vestry calls a special meeting of the Parish to consider disassociation from the Diocese. The meeting to consider disassociation was scheduled for July 5, 2009 in full compliance with the Bylaws of St. Stephen's Anglican Church, Inc., a duly constituted and registered corporation in the state of Texas. Those individuals that were communicants in good standing in compliance with the Bylaws on or before June 14, 2009 were notified by first class mail, proof of mailing obtained. The Bylaws rules for communicants in good standing are nearly exact copies of the Diocesan Canons thus rendering Accession issues moot.

On June 16 the Bishop suspends the Rector citing confidential conversations the Rector has had with Fr. Bart Ryan, Fr. Robert Giffen, and Fr. Clayton Holland. The Rector had actually talked to other priests but they respected their ordination vows and honored the ageless prohibition of a priest divulging confidences shared with him by another soul. The suspension is for an indefinite period of time in direct violation of the Anglican Church in America Constitution.

## ARTICLE IX - Of Courts

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A sentence of Suspension shall specify on what terms or conditions and at what time the suspension shall cease.

On June 17 the Parish is declared a Mission by the Bishop citing Diocesan Canon 17.1

17.1 Designation and Legal Status:

**A.** A non-dependent congregation, often called a Parish, shall have no fewer than twenty Baptized Members, of which not fewer than ten shall be Communicants of this Church, and shall be capable of supporting on any mutually agreed basis a full or part-time Clergyman, and shall be otherwise self-supporting.

**B.** A dependent congregation, often called a Mission, is any congregation which does not meet the criteria set out in Canon 17.1, Section A., above.

We have 34 baptized and 28 confirmed communicants in good standing and the Rector is being compensated as agreed. The Bishop also claims to now be the Rector. After two unsuccessful attempts to persuade the Vestry to accept Mission status, one blocked effort by unanimous vote at the Synod to impose such status; he misleads the Standing Committee to uncannically declare the Parish a Mission.

On June 28 the Bishop attempts to fire the entire Vestry and names Fr. Holland, Priest in Charge and appoints a Bishop's Committee including Mr. Robert Corder who at that time was not even a communicant in good standing according to the Parish Bylaws and Canons of the Diocese,

3.2 Corporate Worship

**C.** It is the responsibility of every communicant member of the Church to celebrate and keep the Lord's Day (Sunday), and the other Holy Days of Obligation, by participating in the public worship of the Church, and to receive the Holy Communion at least on the Feasts of Easter, Christmas and Whitsunday every year. *And other similar Canons*

clearly a violation of the Bylaws of St. Stephen's Anglican Church, Inc. as well as the Diocesan Canons.

On July 5 the Parish met to consider disassociation from the Diocese. Fr. Lewis Berry representing the Bishop and the Chancellor of the Diocese, Tara Keehr, threatened, with their approval we assumed, all gathered that there would be "lawsuits and endless depositions." He claimed the Rector had no right to vote nor did the Jr. Warden who also is a member of the Anglican Catholic Church in addition to our Parish. When asked for specific citations for either claim he could not produce same. If indeed a Canon prohibiting multiple memberships were in effect it would invalidate the ministry of David Moyer, the very excellent Anglican Church in America Bishop of the Armed Forces and even the first six months of the ministry of Fr. Ryan, the Canon to the Ordinary for the Diocese. The Parish voted to disassociate from the Diocese and the Bishop was notified.

On July 7 the Bishop notified the Parish that the Diocese accepted the Parish's disassociation. However the Rector was not released from his suspension. Two letters of inhibition were received by the Rector.

Letter 1. As a result of your continued refusal to remain out of St. Stephen's as evidenced by your presence at a called Parish Meeting, which also is in violation of an admonition of this Bishop, your status of suspended has changed to Inhibited. You are now in violation of Canon 51(6), Violation of your Ordination Vows. There remains the possibility that other charges under Canon 51 will be added as a result of out review of your conduct since you were suspended.

CANON 51 - Of Offenses for which Bishops, Presbyters,  
or Deacons May Be Tried  
Section 51.1

...

(6) Any act which involves a violation of his Ordination vows.

These charges are patently false. I was told in Bishop Strawn's letter of suspension that was in itself a clear violation of the Constitution of the Anglican Church in America, not to minister and I did not minister. I was told to worship elsewhere and I attended services at the local ECUSA Parish. I did attend the called Parish meeting because of my responsibilities, not as an ordained minister, but as a parishioner communicant in good standing of St. Stephen's Anglican Church, Inc. Such right of association is guaranteed to me by the US Constitution, Amendments 1 and 14.

Please note the oath I took at ordination.

**Bishop.** Will you reverently obey your Bishop, and other chief Ministers, who, according to the Canons of the Church, may have the charge and government over you; following with a glad mind and will their godly admonitions, and submitting yourselves to their godly judgments?

**Answer.** I will so do, the Lord being my helper.

The Bishop's admonition regarding my ministry and my worship could certainly be called godly. His attempt to withhold my constitutional rights is neither godly nor legal.

Letter 2. The Standing Committee of the Diocese of the Missouri Valley has certified to me that you have abandoned the Communion of the Anglican Church in America and as such the Traditional Anglican Communion. Therefore, you are now **inhibited** under Canon 59 of the Anglican Church in America. from the exercise of the ministry of a priest. This action will expire six (6) months from the date of this letter. During these six (6) months you have the opportunity to retract the actions you have taken to abandon the communion of this Church or to make declaration that the facts alleged in said certificate are false.

The facts alleged in said certificate are false

CANON 59 - Of the Abandonment of the Communion of this Church  
by a Presbyter or Deacon  
Section 59.1

If any Presbyter or Deacon shall, without availing himself of the provisions of Canon 57, abandon the communion of this Church by an open renunciation of the Doctrine, Discipline, or Worship of this Church, or by a formal admission into any religious body

not in communion with the same, or in any other way, it shall be the duty of the Standing Committee ...

I have not and never plan to renounce the Doctrine, Discipline, or Worship of the One , Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church as practiced by Anglicans throughout the centuries following the 1549 publication of the Book of Common Prayer. According to Bishop Strawn's letter to our Parish I continue to be under the discipline of the Anglican Church in America and I have made no renunciation of same. Surprisingly, this inhibition mirrors the inhibitions issued by the Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church whom most, if not all, Bishops of the Anglican Church in America, indeed all Continuing and many other orthodox Anglicans consider ontologically disqualified to be a Bishop.

It is my fervent hope that if I renounce my right to trial on these false inhibitions and also give up my right to presentment of the Bishop for his violations of the Constitution and Canons of the Anglican Church in America in regards to our Parish and my ministry, that a letter dimissory will be issued removing me permanently from the ministry of the Anglican Church in America. I realize that such letter may contain disciplinary comments that perhaps would have been expunged by a successful not guilty verdict at trial to which I am fully entitled. Instead I heed the warning of St. Paul: "Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another." 1Cor. 6:7

I wish to walk, though separately, with the Anglican Church in America, in love and charity with each other seeking to serve our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ in the ministry to which we are called. This is my prayer in which I hope you will join with me and bring an end to these unpleasant events and issues.