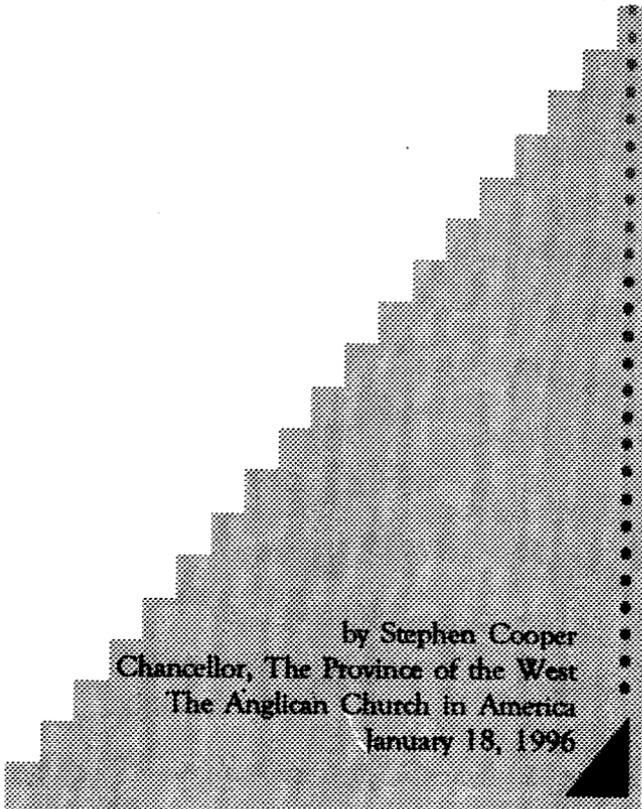


RECLAIMING OUR HERITAGE

A CALL TO RETURN
TO THE ORIGINAL MISSION
OF THE CONTINUING CHURCH



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The Continuing Church took form in the 1960s and 1970s because of the departures of the Episcopal Church from its spiritual mission. A break with the visible Church organization became necessary in order to return to the original mission of the Church. The faithful in the Continuing Church at that time started nothing new, but continued to be what they already were—faithful Episcopalians.

The Continuing Church itself is subject to the same scrutiny by its members, to determine whether it is faithfully serving its original mission, i.e., the mission of the pre-apostate Episcopal Church. If it is not, its departures from that mission either will be corrected from within or will eventually lead to a voluntary or involuntary separation among its members, as a portion of the membership seeks to maintain or return to the original purpose of the Continuing Church.

Cause of Divisions

Judging from the number of breaks and splits within the Continuing Church, one might conclude that the Church has strayed many times from the original purpose of the movement. In a number of cases that judgment would be accurate. Many of the splits, however, are attributable to personal disputes among Church leaders, or to other faults or weaknesses of human nature.

Our constantly recurring strife stems primarily from the convergence of these two factors: 1. The old human impulse to engage in struggles for power and supremacy; and 2. Fundamental disagreement as to the character and purpose of the Continuing Church, especially in the area of church polity, i.e., the manner in which the Church should be governed.

There is no denying that there are struggles for power and supremacy in our little movement. Such things may occur anywhere, without respect to time or place. They are older in origin than the disputes among Our Lord's twelve dis-

ciples as to "which of them should be accounted the greatest"—an issue they fought over repeatedly, even in the Upper Room at the very institution of the Blessed Sacrament (see Luke 22:24). Ask the Twelve whether such struggles are impossible in a small movement like ours.

In the Continuing Church these struggles have been rife in the areas of "churchmanship," ritual, "catholicity," exclusiveness versus inclusiveness, apostolic pedigree, and many more. They have acquired peculiar force in the area of church polity, both because any issue will serve the purpose in a supremacy struggle and because this issue directly concerns authority and how it is to be distributed in the Church.

Polity is the last remaining unsettled issue of any substance for the Continuing Church. Because it is disputed, polity is involved either directly or as the facilitator in most of our life-threatening strife. By the same token this issue, once it is settled, holds more than ordinary potential for bringing peace. Once a common understanding is reached as to the fundamental character of the Church, there will be far less reason to expect traumatic realignments in order to conform to that understanding, and far less occasion for the old sinful impulses to generate strife.

Why, then, was this issue not settled in the beginning? The answer is, it **was** settled, and put into writing. The critical question is whether we are inwardly, in heart and mind, committed to the solemnly professed original purposes of this Continuing Church movement. The Affirmation of St. Louis spoke clearly on this matter in 1977. Some, however, have quietly or openly disagreed with the Affirmation's statements on the "continuing" nature of this Church, and are committed to a different course. As long as these contrary commitments exist alongside the original purpose within the same movement and at the same time, strife is inevitable. And it will continue until all are committed to one purpose.

The specific issue is whether the Continuing Church will "continue" with the ecclesiastical structure and system of the pre-apostate Episcopal Church, or will discontinue it and adopt an alternative which was unknown in the Anglican or Episcopal provinces out of which the Continuing Church came.

The Affirmation of St. Louis

The Affirmation of St. Louis answered this question. It holds:

That the traditional and tested features of the Canadian and American ecclesiastical systems be retained and used in the administration of the continuing Church.

It provides that the Church's canon law should give due consideration "to ancient Custom and the General Canon Law, and to the former law of our provinces." And it concludes by stating:

[W]e continue to be what we are. We do nothing new. We form no new body, but continue as Anglicans [in Canada] and Episcopalians [in the United States].

Belatedly in 1991, the newly formed Anglican Church in America (ACA) reaffirmed this commitment by adopting a constitution and canons taken almost entirely from the 1964 Episcopal Church canons. The American Episcopal Diocese of the West had made this commitment a year earlier with the adoption of its 1990 diocesan canons based on earlier Episcopal canons. This, in part, is what the laymen believed they meant by the term "Continuing Church" when they organized and led the St. Louis Congress in 1977. Most, but not all, of the clergy evidently believed the same.

Departures from the Affirmation

The existence of that latent element of dissent from the Affirmation of St. Louis led to the strife which marked the first Synod of the Anglican Church in North America (then to be renamed the Anglican Catholic Church) at Dallas in 1978. The young Church's first four bishops split four ways. In large measure they had disagreed over church polity, with special focus on the authority and supremacy of bishops.

Only a year and a half after St. Louis, the Rev. Robert C. Harvey, then President of the Foundation for Christian Theology, was already calling for a "return to the Affir-

mation of St. Louis” and reported that ACC bishops were “unable to live with one another. We are engaging in jurisdictional disputes and fratricidal strife¹....” No one could have openly disagreed with this call. Yet it was unheeded. Recent events in both the ACC and the ACA indicate that we have made little or no progress in the last 18 years in dealing with this foundational fault within the Church.

Apart from the ACA’s ostensible commitment to the 1964 polity of the Episcopal Church, there is considerable movement in the opposite direction—away from customary Episcopal Church polity, toward a monarchical style of episcopate. Under this system, the many functions of church government and administration including those of individual bishops, dioceses, courts, synods, standing committees, officers, clergy, parishes and members—all contained in traditional Episcopal and ACA canons—are diminished and gravitate toward one central personage or body.

ACA

Current events demonstrate this fact. In a 1995 action, the ACA House of Bishops asserted extraordinary authority over an ACA diocese, and in the process assumed the canonical and constitutional powers of a general synod, a diocesan synod, a standing committee, and an ecclesiastical court. To explain these partially acknowledged departures from canon law, the bishops appealed to certain ancient canons which were said to supersede the ACA Constitution and Canons. From this it became clear that the adoption of canon laws and a constitution in open General Synod provides no assurance of the effectiveness of the laws so adopted, and no guarantee against their erosion and extinguishment by a central power which is not committed to honoring the agreed and established polity of the Church. The predictable and inevitable result was yet another split in which one portion of the ACA, at least, was able to maintain its commitment to the Episcopal Church polity prescribed by the Affirmation of St. Louis and by ACA canon law.

¹ *The Christian Challenge*, Vol. XVIII, No. 5, May 1979, p. 1.

As did the Church leaders in most of the previous splits, the ACA leadership in this case demonstrated that in spite of the words they used they were treating this not as a spiritual or pastoral matter but only as a continuation of the old political supremacy struggle. Instead of the image of the Good Shepherd leaving the flock and risking His life to seek out the lost sheep, they presented the spectacle of the shepherd standing at the door of the sheepfold, declaring that the sheep were no longer part of the flock and bidding them begone.

The same process goes on apace at the diocesan level, as well, where the aggregation of power in one office in derogation of the authority of the other offices of Church government is being institutionalized. As an example, at least one ACA diocese, that of the Missouri Valley, now operates under a canon law (Canon 13.3) that makes all the acts of its synod of no effect unless and until approved by the bishop—who is also called “Chief Executive Officer.” A proposal for a similar canon is now under consideration in the ACA Diocese of the West. Instead of aligning their ecclesial polity with the ACA’s commitment to “return to the Affirmation of St. Louis,” dioceses in this position are committed to a course which conflicts with the Affirmation and with the ACA, and which must eventually lead to another crisis in order to reaffirm the Church’s original commitment. Probably their people are unaware of that fact, or of the threat it poses to Church unity and to the continuation of the Anglican tradition, its principles and customs.

ACC

The leadership of the ACC, on the other hand, has officially and consistently disagreed with the church polity provisions of the Affirmation of St. Louis since the ACC’s beginnings, while at the same time claiming that it was in full compliance with that document. In addition to a long record of strife and divisions, the most significant consequence of this policy was the ACC’s parting with the leader who more than any other person was the light and the conscience of the entire Continuing Church movement. Perry Laukhuff, co-drafter of the Affirmation of St. Louis, President of the

1977 St. Louis Congress, and President of the Fellowship of Concerned Churchmen which organized and led the Congress, was effectively driven from the ACC in 1983 by the opposition of ACC's leadership to the St. Louis vision and purpose. The focus of the trouble was the ACC's massive Constitution and Canons, and the underlying policy of which those canons were a part.

No more reliable indicator of the conscience and purpose of the Continuing Church can be found than in the deeply troubled response to those events by the movement's true leader. In prophetic words which apply with equal force today, Perry Laukhuff stated in 1982 that the ACC

has attempted to legitimize the polity devised in the [ACC's] Constitution and Canons by saying it is in strict accordance with the Affirmation of St. Louis. This is a sheer perversion of that document....

This, then, is the crux of our problem. Are we seeking to teach the faith and to be comprehensively Anglican, or are we seeking to wrench the continuing Anglican movement out of its matrix and context and to return to the pre-Reformation Church as it existed in England before 1534, with all its errors and abuses?...

...I demand that the government of the Church be restored **to** the Church, to the **whole** Church, which is the Bishops, the other Clergy and the Laity, in Synod....

...I cannot regard myself as in any way bound by the Canons of the Anglican Catholic Church, which I regard as a perversion of the spirit in which this continuing Anglican Church found form at St. Louis.²

² *A Declaration of Conscience*, Perry Laukhuff, June 18, 1982, pp. 3, 5.

Again, the call was unheeded. The “crux of the problem” is the same today as it was in 1982 and before, and the ACC leadership and others continue their erroneous claim of solidarity with the Affirmation of St. Louis.

Invalid Theories

All other efforts to sever the Church’s ties with the Affirmation move in the same direction as the ACC’s efforts in that regard. The only difference is that the ACC bishops now offer a theory to explain their commitment to that process.³ The theory holds that the traditional Anglican polity of the last 450 years must be discontinued and replaced with a centralized authoritarian Church structure. It offers two principal reasons: first, that post-Reformation Anglican polity which has lacked a strong central authority (the ACC Bishops call this a “crisis of authority”) accounts for the gradual “liberalization” of faith and doctrine during the last 400 years, as well as the disintegration of Anglican unity; and second, that post-Reformation Anglican polity is contrary to the nature of the Church which Christ instituted along authoritarian lines, as a Greek-style “aristocracy” governed by bishops.

These theories were either actually or by implication rejected in 1977 by the St. Louis Congress, when its Affirmation called for a continuation of traditional Episcopal Church polity. Most likely, the ACC’s present theories had not yet fully evolved at that time. To put forth these theories in the 1990s does not explain all the assertions of episcopal authority and the resulting jurisdictional disputes of the past. Those troubles sprang from something different, and more basic. They reveal a disturbing pattern marked by formal decrees and ultimatums, ecclesiastical trials and threats of civil suit, the absence of pastoral concern or any genuine efforts to make peace, and finally, anathemas and other

³ In its misnamed Statement on Church Unity (*The Christian Challenge*, May 1995) the ACC links this theory with other claims as to the original ACC’s uniqueness and its sole legitimacy as the continuing Church. Others have skillfully pointed out the obvious spiritual, theological, historical and logical errors of these claims. Ironically, while building a wall of partition between itself and other Anglicans, the ACC has brought forth an unprecedented unity in the Continuing Church, most observers concurring that in one way or another the Statement departs from the facts, the faith, and the Anglican tradition.

condemnatory pronouncements—the earmarks of an ungodly struggle for supremacy.

In any case, the arguments for authoritarian instead of Anglican polity are entirely without substance. The theory that the Anglican Communion's gradual drift toward apostasy stems from a lack of sufficient authority in the house of bishops ignores the spiritual dimension. Neither is it borne out by the historical record. This theory reflects an erroneous assessment of the nature of Christian belief, and of the reasons for unbelief. That orthodox Christian belief springs from, or needs support from, a strongly centralized church government is neither the true Gospel nor good history, but the resuscitation of a very old error. The most obvious refutation of that error is the Continuing Church itself. Not a strong episcopate or a church government of any kind, but a faithful laity brought forth and led the Continuing Church movement, thereby ensuring the continuation of orthodoxy in the face of apostasy.

The worst errors and abuses of the Roman Church occurred when papal authority was at its height, and with the full complicity of the Church's central government. Their correction required a reforming impulse which first came from **outside** the structure of Church authority. This was hardly a "crisis of authority," but a crisis of faith. The Spirit, moving in the whole Church, taught the faithful that orthodoxy of belief was less safe under the centralized authority of Rome than it had been in the Church of the Catacombs. The Roman Church had strong bishops. What it needed, however, was strong warriors for the faith. This lack could not be supplied by its authoritarian government.

To say that traditional Anglican polity is unacceptable because Christ instituted the Church as a Greek-style aristocracy to be governed by bishops, is an offensive notion which is alien to Christianity. The shortest and best answer to this was given by Christ Himself: there are no masters in the Church, "for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren" (Matt.23:8). Greek aristocrats knew nothing of this. They "exercised authority" over the people. "But it shall not be so among you" (Matt. 20:26). "For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? Is not he that sitteth at meat? But I am among you as he

that serveth" (Luke 22:27). "Aristocracy" in Greek means "rule by the best." Bishops, however, are not to rule. And if they are the "best" in the Church, it is not by virtue of their office. Nor is it shown by their extraordinary record of divisiveness in the Continuing Church. The effort to set up an authoritarian "aristocratic" episcopate offends the Spirit of Christ.

The Anglican Tradition

It also rejects a large segment of Church history. There was a time when the Bishop of Rome had not yet begun to lust after the power and glory of the Empire. The leadership of the Church of Rome was seen by St. Irenaeus in the 2nd Century as a leadership in upholding and protecting the faith, not as a jurisdictional supremacy. The early Church in the British Isles had the same understanding, which still holds a vital place in the Anglican tradition. Bishops in the Old British Church generally were not diocesans with jurisdiction in the Roman sense. Only later did the British Church accede to the judicial supremacy of the Pope. Yet the Church flourished in Britain for several centuries before Rome thought of sending missionaries there. The pre-Roman British Church successfully resisted heresies. It had a strong monastic tradition. It zealously carried out effective missionary work, both in Britain and on the Continent, particularly in Germany. The experience of the pre-Roman Church, the foundation stone of the Anglican tradition, is effectively abandoned by those who wish to emulate authoritarian Rome.

Rome's obsessive policy of judicial supremacy which has caused the Church untold grief was established and maintained for centuries by the most un-Christian methods and behavior, even including fraud and other criminal means. That policy is an aberration in the Church's history, an unhappy byway into which the Bishop of Rome was lured by his proximity to the seat of empire.

The Old British Church bears irrefutable testimony to that truth, and to the purity and effectiveness of a Christian witness entirely free of the shackles of Roman authoritarianism. That this tradition remained part of Anglicanism down to our century is the result of something much deeper and more spiritual than a quirk of

16th Century Reformation politics. Something far greater than a latter day compromise must be found in order to explain why the Anglican tradition still includes the vision of St. Irenaeus, and also that of St. Cyprian in the 3rd Century. While supporting the primacy of Rome, Cyprian held that the Roman Bishop is not more than the first among equals and that every bishop holds the episcopate in its entirety. Those inspirations bear not just a coincidental likeness, but rather a spiritual kinship with Anglicanism's collegial system of Church government. One bishop does not rule the others. All bishops, while they preside in councils, do not rule their people but share authority with all of them in synod and honor their authority in the various diocesan and church offices—thus bearing witness that all are vessels of the Holy Ghost, and that under Christ the King, "all are brethren." This is the work of Christ Himself. His humble and loving Spirit causes the Anglican tradition to bear these marks of a humble, trusting and mutually submissive Christian fellowship, rather than the heavy-handed attributes of imperial pride, prerogatives and power which historically have plagued the Roman system and have bedeviled our own Continuing Church.

With so rich a spiritual heritage in their hands, it behooves Anglicans to carry forward and continue to live within that heritage, not to cast about for some authoritarian substitute that offends the Spirit and Mind of Christ. That substitute can only doom us to relive the painful consequences of Rome's similar error, and to reinvent all the remedies which have been worked out in past centuries and are already built into traditional Episcopal Church polity.

The Church's Vision

Continuing Anglicans need not and will not give up this sacred and noble Anglican heritage. But until we all agree on this matter, we will continue to experience the anguish and the heartache of yet further breaks in the Continuing Church over this issue. The people generally do not want these senseless divisions. They still share one vision, and they speak of one Continuing Church

movement. This vision continues without the help of, and in spite of, the authoritarian claims which are constantly being advanced, and which keep us divided. Continuing Anglicans are capable of a large degree of self-government, as traditional polity provides. They are no more in need of an authoritarian episcopate now than they were when they began this movement in the teeth of episcopal opposition. Bishops were not the movement's founders. They, like anyone else, may either help it or hinder it. Although bishops are needed, no specific bishops are indispensable, notwithstanding the faulty theories offered to try to make it seem that way. God is able, of the very stones, to raise up spiritually qualified bishops and other servants who will help, not hinder, the Continuing Church, and allow it to fulfill its original mission.

Even our disputes and divisions teach us the same lesson. A break counterbalances the unlawful or ungodly assertions of episcopal authority which are often at the root of the strife. Bishops exceed their traditional or canonical authority. Offended parties say, "No." This prevents the episcopal action from accomplishing its purpose. Thus, in a rough, jarring sort of way, we end up where traditional Anglican polity would have put us in the first place, except that it results in a break. It would be far wiser to accept this verdict and to return directly to the collegial Episcopal Church system and polity intended in the beginning, instead of approaching it indirectly through ever-recurring fights and division.

All who profess to accept the Affirmation of St. Louis should live by its requirements for church polity, as well as in all other respects. The 1960s constitutional and canon law of the Episcopal Church should not only be adopted but conscientiously upheld and applied at all levels, national, diocesan and local, with only those modifications needed to fit the special requirements of the Continuing Church, particularly the exclusive right of congregations to the control of their property. If this were done, it would eliminate the need for us to keep separating in order to achieve the proper level of freedom and collegiality in the internal relations of the Church.

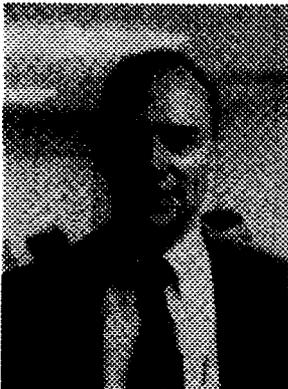
Any question about who or what jurisdiction is to be uppermost in this movement is unworthy of consideration by Christians. The theories offered in support of such disputings have proved to be factually and logically indefensible. Moreover, anyone who claims first place has forfeited the moral authority to occupy that position, both by the unenviable record of the past, and by Christ's law that "whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased" (Matt. 23:11). The true leadership will go to those who are of the greatest service in aligning themselves and others with the original purposes of the Church.

There are no remaining differences justifying the divisions within the Continuing Church. There are no differences of faith and doctrine that divide us. Validity of orders is not an issue. All orders are either valid or easily made so. This issue and all other insubstantial issues divide us artificially and unjustifiably into competing jurisdictions. The existence of separate jurisdictions encourages the competing groups to maintain artificial reasons for division, rather than addressing and resolving the real reasons, if any.

The future of Continuing Anglicanism lies in the hearts and the hopes of the members who have no such ax to grind, and who seek to overcome the causes of our unnecessary divisions. All who share the call and the commitment of this movement must constantly communicate and work together to determine what if anything divides us, to distinguish substantial differences from insubstantial ones, and thereby to enable our original unity of purpose to emerge. We may not leave it to clerical leaders to perform this task. Their prior commitment to maintain their own jurisdictions creates a conflict of interest. This has usually, although not invariably, prevented them from making the required judgments in the interests of the entire Church. All the membership generally must do the work, just as they did when this movement began. For this purpose, free and open communication by every possible means must be encouraged.

The movement will then be able to rid itself of the many errors and illusions which have entangled and frustrated it, and will see before it the real possibility of fulfilling the original inspired vision and purpose of the Continuing Church.

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Mr. Cooper has been actively engaged in the practice of law since 1966, principally handling civil and criminal trials and appeals, and has been admitted to practice in California and Alaska state and federal courts. He has been Assistant United States Attorney for Alaska since 1971, serving prior to that time as District Attorney for the Fourth and Second Judicial Districts of Alaska, as Assistant Attorney General for the State of Alaska, and as Deputy Attorney General for the State of California. He is a commercial pilot and flight instructor, and spent some time as a seasonal commercial fisherman in Alaska in the early '70s.

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