

THE COMMUNION PARTNER VISION – A VIEW FROM THE TRENCHES

The question I repeatedly get from those who are interested in the Communion Partner Plan is, “What is it that the Plan will enable us to do?” This is a question of purpose, of vision and of strategy. Since our emphasis in Communion Partners has not been on developing alternative Episcopal structures and we have intentionally avoided defining ourselves over-and-against others, some have interpreted our approach as a passive waiting game. This misperception has only been exacerbated by our chosen strategy which is to be a witness to traditional Anglicanism and biblical Christianity within the Episcopal Church. Again, the idea of witness appears far too passive for many 21st century American Christians. We are a people of action and it is difficult for us to see the value in presenting an alternative way of being the Episcopal Church in the midst of the current church.

I think, when we approach the articulation of the vision of the Communion Partner Plan we really need to start with our understanding of the identity of the Church. One of the best and certainly most succinct descriptions of the Church I have read is that of the Gospel in Our Culture Network, which was developed under the influence of the Church of Scotland missionary, Lesslie Newbigin. From their missional perspective, the church is the community whose purpose is to announce and demonstrate the purpose and direction of God in the world through Jesus Christ. Thus the doing is built in. We witness by announcing and demonstrating the Gospel. Such actions cannot leave the world, or the church, unchanged. It is here that we might begin to see that the radical transformation we are seeking has more to do with spiritual renewal than institutional re-formation.

Once we have placed ourselves in the path of spiritual renewal we begin to perceive that humble obedience to God is our most important attribute. We start to become conscious once more of the fact that the Church is of God’s making and belongs to him. When it comes to conversion, all of us are aware that men’s hearts are only changed through the action of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, we believe that any group of human beings called a church cannot be forced into reformation or renewal by men. Again, renewal in the Church is a sovereign act of the Spirit. And yet, this understanding of renewal does not let us off the hook like passive spectators. Rather, as in evangelism, we are to create an environment within the church that will allow renewal to take place. In other words, our role is to prepare the soil for the work of the Spirit.

As Episcopalians we find the environment in which we have been placed to be Anglicanism. The authentic Anglican identity is one of diverse communities living in interdependent communion. As such, the communion is a manifestation of the biblical model of the Church as described in the writings of St. Paul. In the Apostle’s letter to the Ephesians, we read that our God-given diversity is to be exercised under the headship of Christ and the unifying power of the Holy Spirit in order that we attain the “full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13). Elsewhere he writes that we are completed through the uniting of our combined gifts (1 Corinthians 12:14-21). Therefore, we have two essential elements of communion, unity under Christ and interdependence among communities. However, we cannot live successfully in any relationship unless we have ears to hear. We must listen to God, who speaks through Scripture and the Spirit, and we must listen to one another as parishes, dioceses and provinces in communion.

At this point, we in the Episcopal Church have become very accomplished at listening to ourselves, but reasonably deaf to the voices of the other provinces of our communion and the theological minority within our own province. Furthermore, the voices of those the majority of the Episcopal Church chooses to hear have effectively deafened our province to the voice of Scripture. This is where the fellowship of the Communion Partners provides an alternative within the Episcopal Church. As Communion Partners, we seek to listen to the other provinces of the Anglican Communion and the Word of God as interpreted by the Church over the millennia because we are convicted that such listening is the only way we can fully experience communion and grow into the full stature of Christ. In addition, when we listen to others we also gain an understanding of how we are heard, gain a better perspective of what we are saying and are able to adjust our speech to the context of the recipient. Through such partnering and listening we envision that we can re-attain the role of the Episcopal Church as a fully functional member of the Anglican Communion. Within the Episcopal Church the Communion Partners offer a fellowship of individuals and communities that are dedicated to the restoration of our relationship with the Anglican Communion and the historic faith.

We are Episcopalians, and like Hosea of old, divorce is not an option for us. Rather, we are called to stay in relationship with the Episcopal Church in the hope that God will restore her and use her to glorify himself. Likewise, in all four Gospels Jesus calls us to follow him (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17; Luke 5:27; John 1:43). And where did Jesus go? Jesus remained a Jew and repeatedly went to the Jews and debated with them even though they were apostate, rejected him and even conspired with the Gentiles to kill him. Together as dioceses, parishes and individuals following Jesus, we, as Communion Partners, can stand firm for the faith within the Episcopal Church and perhaps be a light for those who wish to see.

In directly addressing the question of what we are to do, I am going to present five ways to participate in Communion Partners at the parish level, and then five tasks that partner parishes can cooperatively tackle.

First, I will list five specific ways we can participate in communion partnerships at the parish level:

- As the basis for healthy cooperative relationships within the Communion, we can support and firmly commit ourselves to the Windsor process and Anglican Covenant that provide a meaningful framework within which we can function theologically and missiologically.
- We can establish ministry relationships with dioceses in other provinces which will provide for the sharing of ideas and ministry opportunities. Such relationships should be initiated through the process of listening to our partners in order to better understand them and their particular needs, and be continued based on mutual agreement and accountability.

- We can facilitate access to quality theological education and practical parish experience for our partners, as well as ministry-expanding opportunities for our parishioners through contact with partner clergy and lay persons, both at home and abroad.
- Within The Episcopal Church, we can commit ourselves to supporting one another through prayer and fellowship, with a particular concern for those rectors and parishes that find themselves isolated geographically or theologically.
- Finally, we can aspire to provide a positive contribution to the life of this church by witnessing to the importance of an authentic Anglican identity not only within The Episcopal Church, (USA), but also the greater Communion, by a consistent loyalty to the mission and relationships that best define our connectedness as members of the Body of Christ and Jesus' presence in the Anglican Communion.

Second, here are five possible cooperative tasks for partner parishes:

- In view of the confusion about the church and its theology, a curriculum needs to be developed and offered that will inform our parishes about authentic Anglicanism and biblical Christianity. Work has already begun on such a curriculum.
- So that we can have opportunities to experience and listen to other Anglicans in other cultures, we need to provide mission trips for the members of our parishes to other Anglican Communion provinces.
- Partnerships for ministry and renewal need to be developed between isolated Communion Partner parishes and those in Communion Partner dioceses.
- Regular regional gatherings of Episcopalians interested in the Communion Partner vision should be offered for support, education and encouragement.
- A vehicle for communicating resources for mission and ministry opportunities offered by Communion Partner parishes and dioceses needs to be developed so that any interested parishes might have the opportunity to participate. Such a web site is on the verge of being unveiled.

In summary, the Communion Partner Plan is an action plan. Through it we can mobilize our dioceses and parishes for the spread of the Gospel in the church and the world. In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul gave us instruction for the battle when he listed our necessary equipment.

¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:13-17)

This is an exhortation to those who are called to actively stand their ground. If one is to passively fade into the environment and wait out the battle, he does not need the equipment that God has provided. St. Paul's call to us is not to be passive but to strike a defensive posture for the preservation and promulgation of the Gospel. And this is a defense that depends upon the wielding of the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

We who participate in the Communion Partner Plan have discerned a call to stay in the Episcopal Church and provide an example of the authentic Anglican identity. That being said, we continue to resist the temptation to sit back and let things happen. Our call is to announce and demonstrate the direction and purpose of God through our lives and the way in which we interact with others. To be a witness is to stand for something, so we are committed to being steadfast in seeking ways to represent the truth of Jesus Christ in the life and counsels of the church as a fellowship of witness.

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