

The Rev'd Gordon R. Maitland
“The Parting of Friends”

Abstract

The central thesis of this paper is that the best way for the proponents and opponents of the blessing of same-sex unions to live together is to live apart. The starting point for this proposal is a suggestion by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, that there be a “two-track” Anglican Communion. Unlike the Archbishop’s proposal, this paper does not argue for a complete separation between those who want the Church to bless same-sex unions and those who don’t. Nor does this paper pre-judge the rightness or wrongness of either side of the issue before us. It is to suggest a way in which the two sides can continue to live in *communion* with each other. The model expounded for this new ecclesial relationship would be the kind of relationship between the Latin and Eastern Rite churches in the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, the Anglican Church of Canada would have two autonomous but interrelated overlapping jurisdictions grounded in the conviction that *communion* cannot exist without trust and the assurance that strongly held convictions will be respected. Perhaps such structures could also allow for a future reconciliation and a deeper unity.

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The Parting of Friends

By the Rev'd Gordon R. Maitland

I

To live together as individuals in a community is no easy matter, especially in the face of strongly held convictions. This observation is certainly true of the Anglican Communion in general, and the Anglican Church of Canada in particular, at the present time. Those who favour the blessing and acceptance of same sex couples as a normative part of the Church’s life are in conflict with those for whom the blessing and acceptance of same gender relationships is apostasy from the Christian Faith as it has been traditionally understood. Living together when we disagree is the problem because we are way past the point of one side of the issue trying to convince the other side of the truth of their convictions.

For those who are proponents of the celebration and acceptance of same-sex unions it is for them a matter of ordering the Church’s life in accordance with the principles of divine justice as they are revealed in the scriptures, a matter of clearly articulating God’s will as (for example) we

hear from the prophet Amos: "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." (*Amos 5.24 NRSV*) God's love for all creation demands that no one, including those who are members of sexual minorities, be excluded from God's embrace. We must be open to the ongoing and dynamic revelation of God's will under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

For those who are opponents of the acceptance of same-sex relationships it is for them a matter of faithfulness and fidelity to the moral law as revealed by God in the sacred scriptures. In the Bible we have the normative and definitive revelation of God, the "faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." (*Jude 3 NRSV*) God's love for humanity cannot be separated from God's judgement against sinful behaviour, and inclusion in the Church must be predicated upon one's repentance of any actions which are condemned by God.

I hope that this is a fair, though by no means exhaustive, presentation of what is at stake for the two sides on this issue. There is no place or space in this paper to defend or deny one opinion or the other on the question of the legitimacy of same-sex relationships. However, to move away from merely dismissing one's opponents as simply wrong thinking people to taking seriously their arguments and convictions is surely the first step in any sort of dialogue. The point being made here is that the Church, both nationally and internationally, has moved on from commending or denying the legitimacy of homosexuality to asking how we can live together given the strongly held convictions which are evident for all to see.

II

The central thesis of this paper is that the best way for the proponents and opponents of the blessing of same-sex unions to live together is to live apart. One side or the other is simply not going to disappear or go away any time in the near future. Nor can a resolution of some sort to this question be postponed forever because the anxiety and discord being created by this issue is rapidly becoming debilitating. The starting point for this proposal is a suggestion by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, that there be a "two-track" Anglican Communion both between the provinces of the Communion and within the provinces as well. In Dr. Williams' proposal there would be one "Communion" for those who sign on to an Anglican Covenant and another "Communion" (with "observer status") for those who do not wish to sign on. Unlike the Archbishop's proposal, this paper does not argue for a complete separation between those who want the Church to bless same-sex unions and those who don't. Again, this paper does not prejudge the rightness or wrongness of either side of the issue before us. It is instead trying to

suggest a way in which the two sides can continue to live in *communio* with each other.

A priest of this Diocese of Huron once suggested to me that having a "two-track" Anglican Communion was just another name for "Local Option". Suppose we turn that around though and ask: is Local Option just another form of "two-track" communion? The underlying reason for making this assertion is that when we look at the practical working out of any Local Option scenario we can see that the problems that arise tend towards a bifurcation of the existing diocesan structures. One of the problems is that Local Option proposals appear to assume a stable or static universe in which parishes, clergy, and bishops remain unchanged from the moment Local Option becomes a reality in any given diocese until the end of time. In order to understand more fully what is at stake here it would be best to outline some hypothetical situations:

a) A congregation votes (according to whatever procedures the diocese puts in place to do this) to allow the blessing of same-sex unions to take place in their church. A few years later the incumbent of that congregation moves on. The congregation will now want a new incumbent who will carry on the same policy. How does the congregation ensure that their next priest is sympathetic to their convictions? The congregation could be up front and advertise, in their parish profile and on their web site, that they are "gay friendly" and that they expect their rector to be a person of similar convictions. Presumably, a similar course of action would be taken by every congregation in the diocese, for or against, and the diocese would soon have a list of those parishes and congregations which want to bless same-sex unions and those who don't. Clergy would then have to decide which "stream" of congregations they wish to apply for (this is, by the way, the kind of procedure which is done in the United Church of Canada).

This all sounds reasonable until one begins to ask the hard questions. What if some congregations and clergy do not want to be defined by this issue and do not want to take a public stand one way or another? What if some clergy are afraid to reveal their true convictions to the bishop because they perceive (rightly or wrongly) that the bishop will "punish" them in subtle ways for not being "on side" with the bishop's agenda. Can the bishop be trusted to match the right person to a congregation?

b) An ordinand who is in favour of blessing same-sex unions is finished school and is ready for ordination but the only congregations which happen to be open that Spring do not want an incumbent who is sympathetic to such blessings. Does the person defer his ordination on principle, or lie about his true convictions because he is desperate for a job? How will a bishop know what an ordinand's convictions are unless the ordinand is asked to declare where he or she

stands? Is it legal under Canadian law for the bishop to ask that kind of question? Will a person be denied ordination based on whether or not he or she is in favour of the blessing of same-sex unions? If the bishop refuses to ordain any one who is not in favour of blessing same-sex unions, what does this mean for those congregations that want an incumbent who is not in favour of such blessings. Would such an attitude mean, over time, that all congregations would be forced to fall into line?

c) A congregation is not in favour of blessing same-sex unions and neither is their priest. One day the priest finds out that his daughter is a lesbian and wants to get married and this forces the priest to look anew at the whole question of the place of gay and lesbian people in the church. The priest changes his mind about homosexuality and now desires to perform his daughter's wedding. Can the parish now demand that such a priest resign his charge because they do not like his new found convictions? If the result of this change of heart leads to a nasty conflict between parish and priest, will the bishop side with the incumbent or with the congregation?

d) A certain bishop allows Local Option to take place in the diocese and a minority of congregations opt to do so. When that bishop retires the majority of parishes decide to elect a bishop who is not in favour of Local Option. The clergy and congregations which were blessing same-sex unions are now told to stop doing so. What will this mean for those congregations? Will the new bishop force incumbents who will not bless same-sex unions onto those congregations which formerly wanted to bless same-sex unions?

Although other situations could no doubt be sketched out, enough has been said to suggest that Local Option is not an easy option, and that bishops who opt for Local Option will undoubtedly face endless sleepless nights over clergy placement and the choice of fit persons for ordination, not to mention elevated conflict in the congregations of the diocese. It should also be clear from the examples given above that Local Option will inevitably, over time, lead to a *de facto* “two-track” church in which clergy and congregations in favour of the full acceptance of homosexuality in the church live in an uneasy relationship with those who are not in favour of such acceptance.

What is at the bottom of these hypothetical situations is fear and a lack of trust, faith, hope, and love. *Communio* cannot exist without trust and the assurance that strongly held convictions will be respected. John, in his first epistle, writes; “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear ...” (1 John 4.18 NRSV). Thus, while there is fear of the other, the one who differs from

self, and fear of the future, there can not be the love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (*I Corinthians 13.7 NRSV*) Church unity will never be built with constant and heartfelt exhortations to everyone to stay together and just get along. Empty platitudes and vacuous pieties will not be enough to resolve the problems before us. Therefore, it is one of the assertions of this essay that we need ecclesiastical structures which will allow trust to be built and fear diminished. If Local Option will lead to a *de facto* "two-track" church, why not intentionally prepare for such an eventuality.

III

To live together we must live apart. Does this mean a total separation? For those extremists who can only see darkness in those with whom they disagree total separation may be the only way for them to carry on with integrity. However, for those willing to tolerate the other in a looser structure or federation, then there may be some hope. It is worth noting here that many clergy are far more comfortable talking and socializing with clergy from a different denomination than they are with the clerical peers in their own denomination. This is perhaps due to the fact that the clergy within a person's own church are a direct threat when it comes to discerning future directions for the diocese or articulating competing visions of the church's mission, whereas clergy from a different denomination have no such say in the running of one's church. Thus, by extension from this example, there may be less sense of threat when clergy with whom you disagree are no longer competing with you over future goals and the formation of diocesan policy.

This paper proposes that the Anglican Church of Canada have overlapping dioceses within itself in order to accommodate different understandings of the place of gays and lesbians in the life of the church. One model for this could be the overlapping dioceses the Roman Catholic church tolerates in order to accommodate Eastern and Latin Rite churches in the same geographical area. The city of Toronto, for example, has three overlapping dioceses with three different bishops representing Latin Rite Catholics, Slovakian Byzantine Rite Catholics and Ukrainian Byzantine Rite Catholics. These overlapping dioceses have different liturgical traditions, different sets of canon law and different disciplinary procedures, and yet they consider themselves to be all part of the same Roman Catholic Church.

Many Anglicans do not like the idea of "overlapping jurisdictions" and want to remind us that the Patristic Church took a very dim view of having more than one diocesan bishop in any one city or geographical territory. While one bishop in one area remains an ideal, it is impossible to see how this can be carried out in practice under modern conditions. The fact that the Roman Church,

which does not sit lightly to the traditions of the past, should find it necessary to tolerate overlapping jurisdictions is an indication of this. The Anglican Communion already affords examples of dioceses which overlap with one another in Europe and New Zealand. In Europe and North America we also find examples of Lutherans and Anglicans in full sacramental communion with one another, and yet having separate, overlapping ecclesiastical structures. There are Lutheran and Anglican bishops exercising their ministry in the same geographical location. Thus, while one bishop and one church in any one location remains the theoretical ideal, it is impossible to ignore the reality of various denominations, with different episcopates, operating in the same area.

The proposal being offered here suggests that each of the four internal ecclesiastical provinces within the Anglican Church of Canada be reorganized to have at least one overlapping diocese to accommodate those who dissent from the majority view in regards to the blessing of same-sex unions. In some places the minority view will be against such blessings and in other places the minority view will be in favour of such blessings. How each ecclesiastical province is reorganized would have to be left with a task force in each province. What Anglicans in Canada would share would be a common Primate, common liturgical resources (the *Book of Common Prayer*, the *Book of Alternative Services*, Hymn Books, etc.), and common national institutional structures (e.g., the pension fund, the continuing education plan, the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund, the national archives, etc.). Anglicans in Canada could also share the existing network of seminaries for the training of clergy. How each congregation would decide which diocese to be a part of could be done by following procedures similar to that proposed in the Canadian Bishops' existing guidelines for Alternative Episcopal Oversight (AEO) which were developed by a committee under the direction of Bishop Victoria Matthews. Under these guidelines each congregation would have to decide its affiliation after a majority vote of two thirds from those eligible to vote for Vestry. There could be provisions to allow for congregations to later change their mind as to which diocese they are a part of, although over time such a possibility would probably decline as people migrated and sought out a congregation which shared their views.

It is to be admitted that the proposal sketched out in broad outlines above would have to be carefully fleshed out in detail, but this paper is concerned to make a general proposal rather than tackle all the fine points of such an agreement. Although the implementation of such a plan would be messy to start with and might generate some initial hard feelings and lead to the parting of former friends, in the long run it might well give people and clergy the space to concentrate on the work of the gospel rather than be paralyzed by fear of the unknown. Those seeking ordination could go through the process knowing their convictions are respected while congregation seeking

an incumbent could be certain that the bishop is sympathetic to their situation and will send them a compatible cleric.

IV

Does this proposed plan offer any possibility for reconciliation, or will the parting of friends become permanent? At this point it is impossible to say. The patriarchs Jacob and Esau, having been separated from each other for more than fourteen years, were then able to be reconciled enough to bury their father Isaac together when he died. Perhaps time and circumstances will prove one side of the current issue to be right and the other wrong. In the mean time it cannot be denied that all of this is a great tragedy for the church. We cannot turn the clock back and pretend that nothing has happened to alter our ecclesiastical existence.

We must also consider that the Gamaliel Principle, named after the advice given by the respected rabbi Gamaliel to the Sanhedrin in the Book of Acts (*Acts 5.33-39*) when dealing with the new found Church, may very well be in operation. Gamaliel's advice was this:

Ò...if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them ...Ó (*Acts 5.38-39 NRSV*)

Perhaps the day will come when a new consensus will emerge and the two sides can be reconciled. Maybe the Anglican Church of Canada can at some point in the future be whole again. Nothing is impossible for God.