

Chapter 1

Introduction: Everyone Is Someone's Schismatic

In saying farewell to his apostles at the Last Supper, the Lord Jesus called upon them to love one another, so that the world would see that they were his disciples.¹ This command does not necessarily imply that the Lord expected a monolithic *organizational* unity of his Church (as the Church of Rome, for example, has claimed). Schisms and sectarianism are, however, signs of Christians' failure to fulfill their Lord's command. As the 21st century approaches, Anglicanism in the United States is among the parties guilty of this disunity.

This was not always the case. For almost two hundred years previously, with only a few exceptions,² there had been but one "Episcopal Church" in the United States, the body known formally as the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Called "Protestant" because it was not Roman Catholic, called "Episcopal" because it was governed by bishops, as opposed to presbyteries, etc., this church maintained its unity even as the other American Protestant denominations suffered split after split. In the 19th century, the breach between Northern and Southern dioceses caused by the Civil War was soon mended, and the 1873 split which created a body known as the Reformed Episcopal Church³ did not cause irreparable organizational damage.

In the 20th century, the Church generally maintained its unity in the face of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy which split the Presbyterians and the Baptists. The creation of the African Orthodox Church in the 1920s, was not about questions of modernism but happened rather due to the action of African-American Episcopalians who felt disenfranchised by white control.⁴ Theological and social liberalism was indeed the cause behind the creation of the Anglican Orthodox Church (1963), the American Episcopal Church (1968-1970), and the

¹ John 13:34-35 (RSV).

² See Louis E. Traycik, "The Continuing Church Today," *The Christian Challenge*, December 1982, 8. The offshoots have included the Reformed Episcopal Church (1873), the African Orthodox Church (1920's), Anglican Orthodox Church (1963), the American Episcopal Church (1968-1970), and the Anglican Episcopal Church of North America (1972).

³ Bishop George David Cummins, the assistant Protestant Episcopal Bishop of Kentucky, founded the REC in 1873 in response to what he saw as the overwhelming danger of Anglo-Catholicism. See Frank S. Mead and Samuel S. Hill, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 10th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 136-137. See also Allen C. Guelzo, "The Reformed Episcopalians: Restoring Some Old Paths," *Churchman* 104 (no. 3, 1990): 250.

⁴ Traycik, "The Continuing Church Today," *The Christian Challenge*, December 1982, 8.

Anglican Episcopal Church of North America (1972); but none of these groups ever posed a major challenge to the Episcopal Church in terms of members or influence.

In spite of theological differences with other Christian traditions, the Episcopal Church has found some success in its efforts for church unity; in the 1980's and 1990's, it has worked diligently to forge organic bonds with various Lutheran bodies. Despite the failure of a 1997 merger attempt with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church continues to work with the ELCA toward "full communion"—a full recognition of each other's sacraments and ordained ministry.⁵

Yet despite this proud history, and despite the promise of future mergers, it also appears as though the Church's historic unity is crumbling almost as quickly as it can be built up. From the glory of the 1950's and early 1960's, when it stood at the peak of its social influence, the Church has come to a place where its members seem almost literally at each other's throats. The same stresses which affected all mainstream American Protestant churches in the 1960's and 1970's did their work on ECUSA as well. Many traditionalists felt disenfranchised by revisions to the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer*, and by the unorthodox statements of bishops such as James A. Pike, who publicly denied such basic Christian doctrines as the Trinity and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.⁶ The ordination of women, as well as disputes over abortion, remarriage of divorced persons, and sexual morality, were all issues that divided the Church.⁷

The battle lines were not clearly defined, however, between "traditionalists" and "liberals," for one could find many Anglo-Catholic "traditionalists" who supported women's ordination, for example, as well as those who opposed it.

Yet though the traditionalists ranged from the most sacramental of Anglo-Catholics to the most "Low Church" of evangelical Protestants, they all sought to retain Anglican faith and practice as they existed prior to the liberal-modernist

⁵ At its 1997 national convention, the ELCA voted down a proposal for "full communion" with the Episcopal Church. The vote failed because of some delegates' concern over the Episcopal Church's insistence that Lutheran clergy receive ordination at the hands of Episcopal bishops. Despite this failed vote, however, the two churches are working together far more closely than in the past.

⁶ Pike, the retired bishop of California, had had a presentment brought against him by a number of other bishops, on charges of teaching heresy. For the full text of the presentment and related correspondence, see Appendix II in William Stringfellow and Anthony Towne, *The Bishop Pike Affair* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), 201-209.

The creation of the American Episcopal Church in 1968-1970 was due directly to the PECUSA House of Bishops' lack of disciplinary action against Pike. Traycik, "The Continuing Church Today." *The Christian Challenge*, December 1982, 8.

⁷ Earl H. Brill, "The Episcopal Church: Conflict and Cohesion," *The Christian Century*, 18 January 1978, 41.

revolution of the 1960's. Some of the traditionalists formed organizations to move the church away from political and social activism, and back toward a theological center.⁸ These organizations included the Evangelical Catholic Mission, formed in 1976 by Bishops Stanley Atkins and Charles Gaskell.⁹ Others felt they could not, in good conscience, remain in ECUSA.

In September, 1977, a "Congress of Concerned Churchmen" met in St. Louis, Missouri, to rally the traditionalists following the changes made at the 1976 ECUSA General Convention. The 1976 convention had proved particularly dismaying to many of the traditionalists, for it had approved the ordination of women and had accepted (on first reading) a new liturgy. At the 1977 "Congress of St. Louis," the traditionalists finally stated that they would take no more, and declared their intention to separate from the Episcopal Church. No church body was created at this time, but the congress' manifesto, the "Affirmation of St. Louis," provided the blueprint to create such a structure. The blueprint came into use several months later, in January, 1978, when the separatists held a convention in Denver, Colorado; at this meeting, they gave formal shape to their dissension by founding the "Anglican Church in North America,"¹⁰ later formally constituted as the "Anglican Catholic Church." The hope was that conservatives would leave the mainstream Episcopal Church *en masse*, and return American Anglicanism to its historic roots (however those may have been interpreted).

Despite many hopes, twenty years after the Congress of St. Louis the "Continuing Church" movement has not lived up to its potential. What began as an united alternative to mainstream unorthodoxy has splintered into warring factions which often seemed surer of what they are *against*, than what they are *for*. It is even difficult to tell some of them apart, due to similarity of denominational names and even of theological positions. Even more confusing, congregations and bishops have had the habit of switching their affiliations with great frequency. Too often, personality disputes rather than doctrinal issues seem to be the force which causes the dissension. Regardless of the exact cause, by 1982 (only four years after the formation of the ACNA) there were by one count 23 Continuing Church bishops in nine different denominations¹¹—as of the late 1990's, there appear to be dozens. In conversing with Continuing Churchmen, or perusing traditionalist periodicals such as *The Christian Challenge*, one is quickly overwhelmed with a veritable "alphabet soup" of denominational acronyms

⁸ Robert W. Prichard, *A History of the Episcopal Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 265.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹⁰ Prichard, 265.

¹¹ *The Christian Challenge*, December 1982, 8-16, quoted in Prichard, 265. (This is Louis E. Traycik's article, though Prichard does not mention him as the author).

ranging from ACC (Anglican Catholic Church) to UECNA (United Episcopal Church of North America).

Reconciliation between the traditionalists and ECUSA has been complicated by disputes over the nature of ordained ministry (especially rancorous over the ordination of women), and questions about the legitimacy of each side's Holy Orders. The traditionalists claim that ECUSA is the schismatic body, for the crime of ordaining women and thus breaking the "Apostolic Succession of Bishops." For its part, ECUSA charges the traditionalists with schism, and that they have taken their episcopal orders from suspicious sources, specifically, from men known historically as "itinerant bishops," or *episcopi vagantes*.

Episcopi vagantes! The word has an exotic and yet almost pejorative ring to it, especially to the ear of an English speaker, conjuring up images of "vagrants" and "vagabonds." In Latin, the term merely means wandering or itinerant bishops, i.e., those without fixed jurisdiction. In modern parlance, the term has come to mean bishops whose episcopal orders or jurisdiction are in question. In fact, the itinerants' credentials and manner of life have indeed not always been reputable.¹² But who are they, and what is their connection to the modern-day disputes of the Episcopal Church? The issue is one of more than merely historical interest, because their modern descendants are alive and well in the 20th century. The modern itinerants, though perhaps having a fixed residence, are suspect in the eyes of the Anglican Communion for their lack of settled episcopal jurisdiction. They are known for interfering in the dioceses of others, and some even lack any visible pastoral charge. The modern *vagantes* are, in some cases, knowing frauds who seek only their own profit; others are mentally

¹² The *vagantes* are such a heterogeneous group, that it can be difficult to characterize them collectively. A very common joint characteristic, however, is a certain "folie de grandeur of high-sounding titles and more than extravagant pretensions; these generally in inverse ratio to the number of their adherents and the size of the conventicles in which they worship and still worship, with elaborate ritual and ceremonial." The Rev. Henry St. John, O.P., forward to *Bishops at Large: Some Autocephalous Churches of the Past Hundred Years and their Founders*, by Peter F. Anson (New York: October House Inc., 1964), 16.

Other characteristics of the *vagantes* are the practice of giving elaborate names to their churches, and changing these names frequently; bearing patents of nobility, usually foreign; bearing university degrees from obscure sources; claiming to speak infallibly when speaking *ex cathedra*, despite their rejection of papal infallibility; and the habit of excommunicating those with whom they disagree, often on the smallest provocation. *Ibid.*, 28.

Although not organizationally associated with them, the Anglican "Continuing Churches" have links to the so-called "Independent Catholics," Christians who hold to many Roman Catholic doctrines and practices but do not submit to the jurisdiction of the pope, the bishop of Rome.

unbalanced, with delusions of grandeur; still others honestly believe “that they have a genuine vocation to guide, in isolation from the rest of Christendom, the small handful of people which acknowledges their claims.”¹³

Yet are the *vagantes* as disreputable as the ECUSA and the Anglican Communion claim? And, if so, does this affect the validity of episcopal orders in the Continuing Churches? The issue may seem at first like something out of comic opera; yet the issues involved cut to the heart of the Christian life, because they involve the question “What is the nature of Christian ministry?” and, by extension, “What is the purpose of the Christian life?”

As one who has spent years in both the mainstream Episcopal Church and the “Continuing Church” movement,¹⁴ and who desires to see Christians come together in truth and love, it is the author’s intent to consider the claims of the *episcopi vagantes* in light of the doctrine of the “Historic Episcopate.” The movement is significant partly because the doctrine of the “Historic Episcopate” has been such a stumbling block for Christian reunion.¹⁵ If Christians are to come together in love, one of the issues they must settle among themselves is the place which the ministry and church government plays in the Body of Christ. Until this is settled, Roman and Anglican will not agree, Orthodox and the “Reformed” will contend, and the Anglican Communion will not be able to settle matters with its own “separated brethren.” In a day when the Church (meaning all believers in Jesus Christ) faces so many enemies *outside* the faith, it is crucial that all the sects of Christendom seek to reconcile their differences. If this paper helps that cause in any degree, it will have done its job well.

¹³ H.R.T. Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes and the Anglican Church*, 2d ed., London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1961), 2.

¹⁴ The author’s baptism and confirmation took place in the Episcopal Church, at St. Anne’s Parish in Annapolis, Maryland. For some years after college, the author was a member of the traditionalist St. Charles’ Parish in Crownsville, Maryland and also served for a time there as a deacon. During his membership, the church was a member parish of first the United Episcopal Church of North America, and later of the Traditional Episcopal Church.

¹⁵ The Anglican Communion’s statement on the “Historic Episcopate” is found in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, two documents adopted in the 1880’s by PECUSA and the Anglican Communion, respectively. The first statement of the Quadrilateral was adopted by the PECUSA House of Bishops at its 1886 General Convention in Chicago, Illinois. (It was not, however, adopted by the church’s House of Deputies, but rather was made part of a general plan for study and action by the Joint Commission on Church Reunion). The second statement of the Quadrilateral is found in Resolution 11 of the Lambeth Conference of 1888. For the text of these documents, see “Historical Documents of the Church,” in *Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (United States: The Church Hymnal Corporation and the Seabury Press, 1979), 876-878.