

A Message of Hope to the Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin

Dear Friends in Christ:

These are indeed extraordinary times for us in the Episcopal Church.

Some of our brothers and sisters are so motivated by passionate convictions that they desire to separate from us. While their faith may be genuine and strong, it is my opinion that they may be blinded to the full truth of the Gospel. Bishop Schofield is leading many members of this diocese toward schism. One of the root causes of this likely schism is a mistaken attitude that if we disagree then we cannot remain together. This belief presumes that the Church cannot tolerate diversity of opinion.

Throughout the history of the Church orthodox Christians—not just heretics—have differed in their understanding of elements of the creeds. While the core doctrine of our faith, summarized in the Nicene Creed, is that the divinity of Jesus is not negotiable, even within this essential of the faith there is room for variations in understanding of these doctrinal elements. Whether it is Calvin's teaching on double predestination (that some are destined before birth for hell) or Karl Rahner's concept of the anonymous Christian (that some can accept Christ without knowing him by name) we are going to find Christians with whom we disagree. However, we do not have to assume that they have abandoned Christ and the Bible, nor that Christ has rejected them.

Social issues, such as marriage and divorce; just war or pacifism; abortion in special circumstances or never; homosexual couples entering a life-long, monogamous relationship or remaining celibate, are often legitimately understood differently by people of faith. I recently encountered one very sincere Christian in our diocese who warned fellow members of his congregation that if they remained in the Episcopal Church their mortal souls were in danger. Such an attitude does not reflect the Anglican and therefore Episcopal way, nor, in my opinion, does it reflect the gracious love of Jesus Christ.

Especially as we apply our faith to social issues, I advocate the toleration of differences of opinion. For example, I strongly believe that it is most consistent with the Gospel for women to be ordained as priests and bishops. Despite my own conviction, I serve in a diocese where this is not permitted. I tolerate this circumstance because I believe that loving each other in the midst of such diversity is not a reason to divide the Church. I also believe that it is my responsibility to work toward the day in which women will be ordained in this Diocese; I can most effectively work for that change from within the Episcopal Church. It is precisely by loving each other, worshipping together and challenging one another within our diversity that we truly fulfill the meaning of being the Christian Church.

As you are well aware, at our December diocesan convention the first of two steps necessary to effect separation was taken. We can expect the second step that completes the intended schism to occur sometime in 2007. It is my opinion and the opinion of many others that neither Bishop Schofield nor the diocesan convention can legally remove the Diocese of San Joaquin from the Episcopal Church any more than a citizen can disaffiliate himself or herself from her state of residence while retaining citizenship in the United States of America. Anyone can choose to leave a church organization, even a bishop, but each leaves as an individual. However, the number of parishes, clergy and members may actually be fewer than Bishop Schofield expects.

Regardless of how many leave, we will face the sad prospect of saying goodbye to our bishop and to other members of the diocese.

We face the prospect that Bishop Schofield expects to remove the property and assets of the diocese from the Episcopal Church. Whether our bishop and his followers succeed in this endeavor is an open question. Remain Episcopal believes that in making this attempt they are breaking both church and civil law. This means that those parishes wishing to remain part of the Episcopal Church of the USA will need to protect our own property, as well as that of the diocese.

While our current situation has been painful (our Presiding Bishop called it “Spiritual Violence”), we are now confronted with the exciting challenge of gathering remnants from congregations, providing for their spiritual needs and rebuilding our diocese. We face the prospect of welcoming back those who left hastily or through the negative influence of a priest or bishop, and who subsequently choose to return home. Many of us in parishes that have announced that they will not leave the Episcopal Church are already experiencing remarkable growth. We will be called to start new congregations based on an inclusive and Christ-centered message of love and salvation, rather than a judgmental attitude that demands schism. We face the prospect of new leadership in the form of a new bishop. Finally, we will experience the joy of reconnecting with the national church in a spirit of mutual respect, and the prospect of a renewed mission for Jesus Christ as experienced in and through the Episcopal Church.

To keep you informed on the changes within our diocese and beyond we will meet occasionally with those remaining loyal to the Episcopal Church, beginning in February. Planning is underway for our first celebration meeting on Saturday, February 10, at St. John’s Episcopal Church in Lodi. At this diocesan-wide celebration we will be welcoming Mrs. Bonnie Anderson, the president of the House of Deputies and vice president of the Executive Council, who will greet us on behalf of the Episcopal Church. This event is a celebration and proclamation of the gracious love of Jesus Christ as experienced in and through the Episcopal Church. There will be time to share occasions when this love is manifest, both in the Episcopal Church at large and in our diocese. We will begin with a Eucharistic celebration, at which Bonnie will preach. There will also be a meal provided and time for questions and answers. On Sunday, February 11, Mrs. Anderson will visit Holy Family Episcopal Church in Fresno, where she will be the guest preacher. We are understandably very excited about this opportunity.

We have already received many messages of support, from national leaders and others. As you know, various vestries, as well as Remain Episcopal, have been taking measures to protect our property and to make a smooth transition to a new bishop. Although these are and have been difficult times, we share with you a message of hope as we continue the Diocese of San Joaquin in these most extraordinary times. Praise God!

In Christ, ***Rick+***

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