

Three Great Opportunities

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I appreciate this opportunity to speak to you as one from the Anglican laity. Bishop Thakore has spoken glowingly and enthusiastically about ACIC since your founding. It is an honor for me to be here before you today. On behalf of my fellow non-clergy Anglicans I thank you all for making this time available to me. I also thank you for your commitment of time, personal talents and resources you give in support of ACIC and its mission.

I believe there are things in life that we cannot appreciate unless we earn them. The many amenities of childhood from our caring parents are good examples. If your life was anything like mine, you were pleased to receive a parental largesse, but you might not have fully grasped its cash value.

But later in life, when you began providing for your own family, and the money came from your pocket instead of theirs, you might have gained a new and refined appreciation for the value of those amenities.

“Earning it” changes everything.

I was not born an Anglican. *I earned it.*

Perhaps because of that, I have a deeper appreciation for Anglicanism -- and a shallower understanding of it. I came to Anglicanism long after my Anglican peers who were born into Anglican families did, and so I missed much of the instruction that most likely shaped their perceptions.

For me, Anglicanism is a tactile Faith. It excites my senses. It appeals to my vision, my sense of color and graphic beauty. I find it pleasing to my ears. Anglican music expresses dignity commensurate with a committed spirit of worship – the tone I experience when I enter an Anglican church.

I appreciate the elegance and direct simplicity vested in the language of traditional Anglicanism. Although I might not be able to translate “meet” correctly, as in “It is meet and right so to do” I am completely convinced it is meet and right to use this phrase to acknowledge my priest’s admonition to lift up my heart and give thanks.

So, you might find what I am about to say a bit intense in experiential comment and somewhat lacking where it comes to the splitting of the fine theological hairs. I will understand if you do.

But I hope what I have to say, as a somewhat typical Anglican parishioner, can be of some good use to you who serve in the leadership roles of the Traditional Church. If I inadvertently step over the edge, it is not my intent. I carry a sense of deep disappointment over the erosion and “reinvention” of the Anglican Faith I joined during the early nineteen-sixties, and at times that influences how I communicate about what remains.

As I mentioned, I was not born into Anglicanism. I came here via Methodism.

I grew up in a Methodist family. I attended church in my large hometown Methodist church when Methodists were Methodists, and not “United Methodists.” I encountered Anglicanism via an ambitious minister, eager to sign up a gullible young teenager to be a future Methodist preacher.

Anglicanism came a few years later as an eighteen year-old college student. I was a freshman, enrolled in a pre-seminary program for students planning to enter the Methodist ministry. I had confided to my minister, when I was only fifteen or sixteen years old, that I thought I might want to be involved in future church work in some way. He insisted this was a “call,” and the next thing I knew I was standing before a microphone announcing my “decision” to the known world. It all happened in a matter of days. The next I knew I was a freshman in a dorm room at college enrolled in a pre-seminary program.

Later, I became a “serious disappointment” to that minister when I changed my major and changed my denomination. But every cloud has a silver lining, and the silver lining of that one was my encounter with Anglicanism. For that, I have been ever grateful.

My introduction came during one of those late-night, deep-topic discussions college students had before cell phones and internet dating. One member of our group was filled with stories about the Episcopal Church. I’m not sure how he knew them – I always believed he, too, was a Methodist.

But he did. Some of them were quite good.

Even better, he was a dramatic storyteller. We liked to hear him talk, and he liked nothing better than an audience! He told tales of little blue-haired matriarchs ruling altar guilds with iron fists. I didn't know what an altar guild was then, but whatever it was; it seemed in character with his stories. There were tales of imposing bishops with thundering voices, huge crosses and strong opinions. I recall one about a bishop's ring that left marks in the oak conference table where the gruff old bishop slammed an open hand down to make his point to a drowsy vestry. "Those marks are *still there today*," he would add, for effect.

Some of his stories described Anglican rituals -- the vestments, the colors, and the language of the Book of Common Prayer. He described how Episcopalians actually knelt during prayer; and how they sat in silent meditation before services instead of catching up on small talk with friends.

I was fascinated. Eventually, I decided I had to see it for myself. After all, I was studying for seminary. I should learn something about other churches...

So I attended my first Episcopal service at a large, old beautiful and dignified downtown church. That was my first venture outside Methodism. It happened in 1962.

By then, I had earned a license to preach in the Methodist church. That included extensive study of John Wesley, the Anglican founder of Methodism. After my first visit to an Episcopal church I was astounded to find myself in such awe of the beauty and poetry there. I had read about Wesley's ventures, but I had no idea this was what he left behind!

The experience left me with the notion that, perhaps, there was more "out there" that I needed to see. So, I did.

Before this, during my eighteen years of life I naturally assumed attending church was something one did because one's mother demanded it. Sadly, I never got much from it. And I will confess I am guilty of occasionally smuggling a comic book into church to "hide" and read from inside an open hymnal during those pulpit-pounding Methodist sermons.

But I never actually felt *moved* by being there. I went under duress. I was always happy to be out of there. I lived in the South. Often, my family would stop off for a barbecue lunch on the way home. In the South, we love our barbecue, so somehow that made it all worthwhile in my mind.

But the Episcopal service was *very* different. I began to feel as though I had *actually worshipped*. I felt closer to my Creator. I experienced *religion*, probably for the first time in my life.

So, my explorations began. If there was something even better than this, I was determined to find it. I visited a different church every Sunday. Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Episcopal – the list grew with whatever I could find in town.

Then one day I realized I always found my way back to the 7:00 AM Litany at the Episcopal Church on Wednesday mornings. I didn't know why. It just *felt right* I suppose. In time I knew – in my heart -- I was – and had always been -- an Anglican. It was one of the most comfortable and natural realizations of my life. It was very easy to accept!

It took eighteen years and what seemed like centuries of Methodist sermons to discover it, but Anglicanism *was* the missing link for me – the Rosetta stone of my spiritual life. It became synonymous with Christianity. Anglicanism permitted me to experience Worship for the first time. It became commitment. It was genuine. It was the *real thing*.

Within a year I opted for confirmation. Since then, I have *never* looked back.

I share this story with you today not because I believe my journey to Anglicanism was sufficiently noteworthy to be of any special interest. But because I want you to know I am not here because it was the path of least resistance. I am not here because my parents raised me this way and I simply accepted it without question.

I am here – in Anglicanism – because *I have chosen it from among many alternatives*. I am here because I have *earned a right* to be here as an Anglican. I am very proud of that.

In 1976 churchmen, motivated by what they must have believed to be noble objectives, imposed their personal views of a very different Church. They imposed it on me and on you and on many other Anglicans who, here in the United States, were then dedicated Episcopalians.

I won't comment on the frustration, disappointment, sorrow and loss I have personally experienced as a result of their "leadership" since 1976. You know what that is like. But I will comment on

what I sincerely hope you will include in your own campaign to preserve the remnants of the great Church each of us once took for granted.

Specifically, as a member of the Anglican laity, I would like to offer a look at the view seen through my own layman's eyes – the eyes of *a consumer* of the clergy's product. I do not profess to speak for all in the Anglican laity – only for myself. However, I believe there are others who share some of my frustrations and opinions. It might be worth a structured effort to learn more about what Anglicans of the Traditional Church think about the opportunities and hazards facing the Church today. If any of you are experienced pollsters, perhaps this would be worth the effort to learn.

But today I want to talk about something more familiar to me – something I am compelled to offer for your consideration – something I see from the sidelines.

At the risk of approaching too near the domain of platitudes, I would like to talk about *opportunities*.

I believe there are **three great opportunities** facing today's Church leaders. Or, if I may be more direct, I believe there are **three great opportunities** facing you, *the College of Bishops of the Anglican Church International Communion*.

These are opportunities of profound potential to elevate traditional Anglicanism – and the ACIC -- to an energetic vitality, widespread acceptance and growth! However, like most opportunities, these three great opportunities also have their dark sides. Sadly, those dark sides are entirely capable of plunging ACIC into a quagmire.

The three great Opportunities I see are what I call the **Opportunity of Mission**, the **Opportunity of Mutual Support** and the **Opportunity of Organization**. Together, I believe they embody an agenda that can elevate the ACIC to a distinguished leadership position among the many, sometimes “splinter” organizations of the Traditional Church.

I will begin with the **Opportunity of Mission**. I have more to say about this opportunity, and some of it is not altogether positive.

Specifically, I believe the Opportunity of Mission is a function of HOW you collectively reach out from within the College of Bishops to the sheep in each of your flocks.

The Principles of the ACIC state:

“WE DECLARE that the Church of today must be a church on mission, reaching out to believers and non-believers with the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

“...reaching out to believers and non-believers...”

As I read it, this has everything to do with your flock. Your flock is your marketplace. Successful businesses take care of their markets and their customers. Otherwise, “customers” will find other “businesses” that will.

This is all about “reaching out” and bringing folks into the fold.

Although it is harsh to say it this way, this declaration from the Draft Principles is *NOT* about bishops or dioceses or expanding influence for the sake of expansion alone.

A common failure in churches I have left, beginning with the Methodist church of my childhood and including a very large Episcopal church in Atlanta I once attended, was what I perceived to be an inordinate focus on empire and political influence at the expense of a ministry to the people. In my view, “bigness” and the personal status and career growth of clergy over a ministry to the folks who warmed the pews each Sunday morning defined those organizations.

As you plan the growth and evolution of ACIC, I implore each of you to always remember that we “little people” attend church *for reasons that are personally very dear and important to us.*

We don’t structure our lives around microscopic theological differentials. We structure our lives around the day-to-day challenges each of us must confront in living, earning a livelihood, raising a family, caring for ageing parents, dealing with problems in our marriage, coping with problems at school or elsewhere with our children and so on.

We value those moments of quiet reflection that precede a worship service. We value the counseling resources available through our churches to help us get through. We value the opportunities to meet new friends who might have something in common with us.

We don't sit on committees of churchmen charged with reconciling historical minutia or subtle theological interpretations of practices established two thousand years ago. Nor are our careers enhanced by such things, although we acknowledge that, like my freshman dorm discussions in college, such is of legitimate interest to our clergy.

But when it comes right down to the day-to-day events of our lives, churches that "reach out" to us by obsessing about minor differences in ancient theology are those we leave in favor of others that don't. My hope is that each of you will always *take the time to remember the days when you attended church in street clothes and sat in the pews*. Chances are, whatever your reasons were then, are the same reasons many folks have for affiliating with a church today.

My point is, there's a much better chance of success in "reaching out to believers and non-believers" if you remember what "believers and non-believers" need and seek. Thus, the Opportunity of Mission, in my opinion, insists on keeping the target clearly in view. *Always remember why they come, and perhaps they will...*

Now, at the risk of going slightly negative, I'd like to comment on some things your "customers" really *do not want or need*.

I was heartened to read the prohibition in the Draft Bylaws against empire building at the expense of others. The Declaration did not state it quite so bluntly. Instead, it graciously admonishes that bishops "...shall not covet clergy or sheep of other bishops; nor shall they trample over the jurisdictions of other bishops."

Every one of us who has spent a single day in the business world knows what this is all about.

As a lay church member, I have personally witnessed an attempt by a bishop seeking to enhance his own realm of influence by some kind of administrative annexation of the diocese I was a member of

at the time, even though his home jurisdiction was hundreds of miles away and the likelihood of ever seeing him again was remote at best (or worst).

Clearly, there are situations where geographical isolation, sparse populations, the unavailability of clergy or other factors make long distance affiliations practical. However, for jurisdictions like most of ours here in the United States, in my personal opinion, such actions make little sense.

It is a profound disappointment to me when I discover that my spiritual leader is motivated by the vanities of expanding power over ministry to his flock. Putting it differently, it saddens me to have to realize that my spiritual model is little more than a power broker dressed in attire more colorful than Brooks Brothers pinstripes.

Another thing your “customers” *do not want* and do not need is extremism.

I am at a loss to explain or understand why our continuing traditional Anglican Church is such a magnet for those obsessed with something or other. But too many seem to find ways to establish domains here from which they issue all manner of undignified diatribes about matters of questionable, if not destructive, relevance.

It doesn't take many red socks to color an entire load of white linens in the wash. Likewise, even a single outspoken extremist – bearing the identity of ACIC -- will taint the public image of the entire Church.

As members of the College of Bishops, I believe you have a duty and a right to defend the good name of ACIC. Never allow your guard down. Be ever vigilant. Should it happen, deal swiftly and resolutely with it, and return to the Church's mission.

Opposite extremism, we find tolerance. I believe there is virtue in some tolerance.

I might not practice this as much as I should. But in my defense, a degree of intolerance is *expected* of me. This is one reason I and others need you – to help us cope with our own imperfections...

But for you, like it or not, *there is a very different standard*. We of the laity, as idealistic as it may seem, hold our clergy up as our *gold standard*. We expect you to be almost superhuman in this regard.

I happen to believe we are all the Children of God. That doesn't make me like everyone else. In fact, it makes me quite different from everyone else. God is quite talented. He is very capable at coming up with a diverse mix of folks to populate this planet. He also has a keen sense of humor. Taking these two traits together, we don't have a chance of outguessing Him. So, we should be very careful about judging harshly the absolutes of right and wrong on every emerging issue.

If the goal of the "company" – of ACIC and its member jurisdictions – is to sell "product," then we need "customers." Offending large groups of them – especially the young, whose views of life are quite different from most of ours – seems to me to be *a questionable strategy*.

Now, I'd like to move on to what I see as a **Second Great Opportunity**. I promise to keep this shorter and cleaner:

I believe there is a profound opportunity in how you interact with and support each other every day. I call this the **Opportunity of Mutual Support**.

I have read some of your bios. Together, you collectively represent a *tremendous body of experience and expertise*. I believe that God's Vision in bringing this group together includes the efficient sharing of this abundant body of talents and experience.

It is almost as if God decided a job He wanted done required a certain mix of skills. So, to make it interesting, instead of equipping each of us with every talent we need, He spread it around among all of us, a little here and a little there. Then He brought us all together for us to sort it out while He watches.

It reminds me of a kind of heavenly version of the TV show where someone's house gets a complete remake by a group of designers and friends, some with design or construction experience

but most without. But to get the job done on time, they have to work together, learning from each other and helping on all the tasks, to make the deadline.

For ACIC, and the mission at hand, I believe you are being led to find ways to provide your special talents to your fellow bishops who need them, and *it's up to them* to reciprocate. I hope your sharing of talents goes even further:

Now that ACIC is a viable mechanism in the quest to defend and preserve the Traditional Christian Church, *I believe ACIC should set a major priority to formalize and develop viable mechanisms for bishops to share your special knowledge and expertise among yourselves.*

Most likely, some of you are adept *evangelists*, competent at reaching out and bringing in individuals to increase our numbers. Others are competent *fund raisers*, with the knowledge and techniques needed to legitimately fund parishes and church activities. Still others have special talents to *counsel* our parishioners and those suffering personal tribulations during difficult times in their lives. Some of you are good at *promoting or advertising* events and institutions. Others are strong *organizers and managers*. Growing parishes need each and every one of these skills, although few priests or bishops have them all.

Now you have the core organization to share them. ACIC can serve as the base for all manner of informal consulting programs, training/education programs, idea sharing, “how-to” publications and other means for helping each other – and ACIC – grow. It will take much work and commitment, but the possibilities are endless!

Finally, I believe the **Third Great Opportunity** available to you is the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution toward the *consolidation* of Christ’s continuing, traditional Church. I call this the **Opportunity of Organization**.

As a concept, independence is importance to all of us. However, there is a fine line between independence and divergence. Christ’s Holy Church will not be strengthened by the kind of independence that yields divergence and isolation.

I believe ACIC should work very hard during the coming year to codify its guiding tenets into a form understood and accepted by each of you – even if that means some compromise. Always remember, the objective is to reach out to “...*believers and non-believers...*” to bring each of them into the Church. It is not about theological minutia. Never forget that it is entirely possible to win battles while loosing wars.

This is about the *collective Church*. It is about how to make it stronger, broader in its outreach and more influential in its domain. It is about continuation, and that means *it is also about the flexibility needed to engage contemporary populations*. This will not be easy. A basic tenet of ACIC is the independence each bishop maintains with his affiliation.

Also, please do not misunderstand my intent. I certainly do not support an organization dominated by central authority, open to every breeze of change, responsible for every operational decision down to the assignment of, and terms of service for parish priests!

But I do support organization in a manner that enhances ACIC objectives to defend and embrace *survival, continuation and strengthening* of the Church. This demands a healthy influx of new parishioners, and they **MUST** come from a population other than disgruntled Episcopalians and Anglicans of my – and older – generations.

Let’s face it: the number of us who remember what it was like before 1976 in the United States and the rest of the world is declining. We remember how it used to be, and we long for it. We’d like nothing better than to bring back the Church of our youth.

But today’s 30 year-olds weren’t there! They never experienced it! They will never be drawn to the Continuing Church *because they want to return because they were never there in the first place!* If we want them, then we have to find ways to *appeal on their terms*.

When we do – when we find techniques that work, we have to find the ways to let our sister dioceses and fellow clergy know what those mechanisms are. Otherwise, with our innate drive for independence we could easily face continuing decline and eventual oblivion.

So, there you have it: three great opportunities – the Opportunity of Mission, the Opportunity of Mutual Support and the Opportunity of Organization AND your collective talents to get the job done. God’s infinite wisdom has laid out a wonderful and challenging project for the College of Bishops of ACIC. Apparently, He has equipped you well.

We all pray for, and look forward to, the many successes that are bound to come. Thank you very much.

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