

2 Epiphany, January 14 St. John's

Two weeks ago the Episcopal Church was seen throughout the world as people watched the funeral services for President Gerald Ford. The dignified liturgy, the glorious music, the message of resurrection and the hope for all of God's children. The liturgy spoke for itself because it seemed that no news commentator wanted to mention it.

Unlike the couple of weeks before Christmas when the Episcopal Church was given front and center stage with the news that some churches in Virginia were leaving the Episcopal Church.

The truth to that is, and I want to be very clear, that some people, not churches, are leaving the Episcopal Church. People leave the church. Churches do not leave. People leave and join other churches or form other churches.

And in among all the talk of people leaving the Episcopal Church, the truth is that the Episcopal church is also showing positive signs of growth—that people are joining the Episcopal church.

What I want us to be very clear about is that, throughout church history, people have left and people have joined other churches and people have formed other churches.

We rejoice when people join, but you know what we fail to understand is that it is OK for people to leave.

The Episcopal Church has never been a church that has asked people to sign their life away. There is not a lifetime commitment form that you sign. What is asked by the Episcopal Church is a commitment to a way of life. The way of Christ. The way of the gospel as we understand it.

When, for various reasons, that way of life, that way of Christ, that way of the gospel as we understand it, is not what people want, then it is OK for them to leave.

It is OK for people to choose to leave.

This is nothing new. In the history of Christianity there have been people who have left denominations and started new ones based on interpretations of the gospel and differences in doctrines of religion.

Our Episcopal church was organized after the war of independence when we were freed of British Rule and no longer came under the authority of the Church of England. The Church of England became the Church of England after 300 years of arise of nationalism, that slowly took away the authority of the pope. It was sunder the reign of Henry 8th that the church in England became the church if England but it was

sunder the reign of Elizabeth 1st that the Church of England was officially excommunicated from Rome. Methodist got their beginnings in the Church of England with John and Charles Wesley who devised a method of worship and study for people who were not included in the Church of England outreach.

Even in the gospels we have an incident where people disagreed with Jesus and left him. The same happened to his apostles and this has happened in the church throughout the ages. So people leaving the church is nothing new.

What is unique about some of the people leaving the Episcopal Church is that they are forming congregations who are placing themselves under the authority of a foreign Anglican Church bishop.

For the first time in Anglican history we now have more than one church in a community with an Anglican identity. Here in Versailles we have St. John's under the authority of an American bishop and St. Andrews under the authority of the Bishop of Uganda. St. John's reflects the doctrine of the Episcopal Church and St. Andrews reflects the doctrine of the church of Uganda.

We are living in an historical time in the life of the Anglican Church because for the first time some Anglican provinces now disregard the boundaries, the doctrines, and the autonomy of other Anglican provinces.

There is much fuss about this because it has changed the historical nature of Anglicanism.

Yet here in the United States we need to be thankful that we live in a country where there is freedom of worship and, if there is freedom to worship, then there must also be freedom of where to worship, how to worship and whose authority we place ourselves under.

What is not right is when we criticize somebody else for doing something or not doing something that is different from us.

Throughout the ages people have had a different interpretation, a different focus, on different parts of the gospel. When people do not agree it is OK to leave.

This Thursday is the feast of the confession of St Peter. On Jan 25th it is the feast of the conversion of St. Paul. Throughout Anglicanism and other mainline denominations the week between the feasts of Peter and Paul has been called the week of prayer for Christian unity.

It is not a week that we pray for one mega church where we all affirm the same doctrines because I do not believe that that will ever happen. What I believe we are called to in this week of prayer is to affirm our common beliefs, and acknowledge in love that there are differences in doctrine.

We are called not to be judges of others, but to be fellow travelers on a spiritual journey for our time in God's world.

Paul understood this very clearly as he wrote to the church in Corinth; "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit. There are varieties of service but the same Lord. There are varieties of working but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good."

It is this spirit of the common good that the week of prayer of Christian unity calls us to. It is the building of the common good, not the destruction of one another, to which we are called.

Denominations of Christian faith have been a part of the Christian tradition since Jesus called his twelve apostles. Did they agree on everything, on how the gospel was to be preached, who would be included in God's kingdom and who would be left out, who would be welcomed and who would not, who was considered superior and who inferior? Absolutely not. Did Jesus commission all of them to preach the gospel? Absolutely.

The Anglican Church as we know it will never be the same. We are now moving into a time when there will be numerous churches with an Anglican identity in one community.

Yet for all denominations our prayers are asked for the building of the common good. The common good news that Jesus, the son of God, died to draw the whole world to himself. The good news is, that the church, the whole church, has an incredible message of salvation for all people. An incredible message of forgiveness to all people. An incredible message of hope to the world. An incredible call to show, by example, that there is a way of peace, there is a power of love, and there is a walk with each other that can unify and not tear apart.

This is our call. This is the call to all who call themselves Christians. In the week of prayer for Christian unity may we all pray that we answer the call for the common good.

Amen.