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The Real Story Behind Our Split with The Episcopal Church

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Much has been written about the Diocese of South Carolina's separation from The Episcopal Church (TEC) – and most of it has been wrong.

Virtually all the articles suggest our diocese left because TEC ordained a gay bishop. That's just not true. The diocese separated last year, nine years after TEC elected its first, noncelibate, gay bishop – and only after the denomination tried to strip all authority from our bishop, the Rt. Rev. Mark Lawrence.

Though media insist our motive for leaving is our difference with TEC's policies on the ordination of gay bishops and same-sex marriage, the real issues are rooted in the 1970s, well before Gene Robinson became the first openly gay Episcopal bishop in 2003.

It's About God, Not Gays

To understand the situation in South Carolina, you need to understand the history of the Episcopal Church, which is an American expression of the Anglican Communion. We have a unique view of the denomination since the Diocese of South Carolina was one of the nine pre-existing dioceses that founded TEC in 1789. The denomination has been redefining itself since the 1970s effectively evolving into two churches under one roof – a traditional one that embraced historic Anglican doctrines and a modernist one. By the 1990s, the modernist faction was gaining dominance within the denomination. For example, TEC's then-President Bishop, the Most Rev. Frank Griswold, proclaimed that "truth," is "pluriform." This meant the church recognized no single truth, no single theology, no single pathway to salvation.

He effectively said that one person's truth is as good as another's. And many of us found that to contradict everything we believe as Anglicans.

It's true that we live in a nuanced, multicultural world, but traditional Anglicans believe in the authority of Scripture. For us, a belief in Christ is fundamental to the faith, not one of several optional paths to salvation. It is why we are Anglicans, rather than Unitarians or Buddhists or Hindus or something else.

In a 2006 interview with Time magazine, the Presiding Bishop, the Rt. Rev. Katharine Jefferts-Schori, a strong pluriform proponent claimed that to believe, as Jesus said, that He is "the way the truth and the life no one comes to the Father but through Him," was to put God in an "awfully small box." That denial of Jesus' essential role clearly displayed the difference between traditional and modernist or pluriform Anglicans/Episcopalians.

Many Leave TEC.

The denomination's embrace of relativism has increased under Jefferts-Schori's leadership. As the newly elected presiding bishop, Jefferts-Schori presided over the General Convention in 2006 that failed to honor the requests made by the Anglican Communion. In response, seven dioceses – including the dioceses of South Carolina, San Joaquin, Calif.; Pittsburgh, Fort Worth, Springfield, Ill., Dallas and Central Florida – asked the Archbishop of Canterbury to grant them oversight by someone other than TEC's presiding bishop.

When no action took place, an exodus began. San Joaquin left TEC in 2007. The Diocese of Quincy, Ill., voted to leave in 2008. Pittsburgh and Fort Worth left in 2009. Between 2000 and 2010, TEC church attendance dropped by 23 percent – and some dioceses lost up to 80 percent of their attendees at Sunday services. Beyond the four dioceses, more than 100 individual parishes left the denomination.

But the Diocese of South Carolina stayed, trying to work with TEC. We took the steps necessary in good conscience to differentiate ourselves from the positions and actions of the TEC leadership while still remaining in the denomination. It's true that our people were torn about TEC's shift away from historic Anglican beliefs, but we remained part of the denomination, until last year, when it ruled that Bishop Lawrence had "abandoned" the church and took steps to remove him from the leadership role to which members of the diocese had elected him.

Strong Support to Leave

The denomination's Disciplinary Board for Bishops claimed that Bishop Lawrence abandoned the Episcopal Church "by an open renunciation of the discipline of the church." We believe the decision stemmed from the bishop's consistent efforts to protect traditional voices and beliefs. The charges laid against him were for actions taken by our Diocesan Convention and its duly-elected leaders.

The Diocese's Standing Committee announced that the action of TEC's Disciplinary Board triggered two pre-existing corporate resolutions that simultaneously disaffiliated us from the Episcopal Church and called a special convention of the diocese.

The disaffiliation was affirmed by the vast majority of members who attended the special convention in November 2012. It has since been confirmed again in votes by congregations

within the diocese. In all, 49 parishes representing 80 percent of the diocese's 30,000 members voted to leave TEC, exercising our right to freedom of association.

Anglican leaders from around the world have sent messages of support for the diocese. Many members of the global Anglican Communion feel as we do that TEC has departed from historic Anglican beliefs. Most agree TEC has embraced a radical fringe scriptural interpretation that makes following Christ's teachings optional for salvation.

The diocese has also been visited by numerous Anglican bishops to demonstrate their support. Easily a dozen from around the globe have been our guests since our departure with more each month. There are vastly more Anglicans in Communion with the Diocese of South Carolina right now than with TEC.

Preventive Lawsuit

In January, we filed suit in South Carolina Circuit Court, asking for legal protection of the diocese's property and identity from takeover by TEC. Critics suggest that our suit was unusual. Some even say that the litigation was unprecedented – and “un-Christian.” To be clear, however, the only thing unusual about the lawsuit was that we managed to file before TEC.

The little-reported fact is that TEC has filed more than 80 lawsuits seeking to seize the property of individual parishes and dioceses that left the denomination. TEC itself has admitted to spending more than \$22 million on its legal action. These efforts have largely succeeded when TEC attempts to seize the property of individual parishes. Parishes across the country have been evicted from their churches.

TEC's policy is simple and punitive: No one who leaves TEC may buy the seized church buildings. In several cases where TEC has succeeded in seizing a church, it has evicted the congregation and shuttered the building. In some cases, the church has been handed over to remnant groups that remained loyal to TEC. In other cases, the church has been sold to another religious group.

However, TEC has had less success with the lawsuits it has filed against dioceses. Recently, an Illinois Circuit Court judge decided that TEC had no grounds to seize the endowment funds of the Diocese of Quincy. The Texas Supreme Court overturned a lower court decision supporting TEC over the separated Diocese of Fort Worth. And in South Carolina, a federal district court judge decided that the Circuit Court of South Carolina is the proper court to decide the fate of our property, upsetting TEC's efforts to get the case heard by the federal judiciary.

It's About Religious Freedom

We are not thrilled about turning to the courts for help but believe we had no other recourse for our protection. Much like St. Paul's appeal to Rome (Acts 25), we feel confident the courts will give us a fair hearing. While TEC attempts to portray us as bigots, the real issue is religious freedom.

Members of the diocese who voted to leave TEC feel the denomination has moved away

from the authority of Scripture and their historic Anglican beliefs. They left us. You may agree with us about this, or you may find that TEC's revisions are appropriate. But whatever you believe, those personal opinions should not prevent us – or others – from practicing our faith.

And, since that religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed in the United States, we believe that the people who built and paid for the disassociated parishes and dioceses have a right to their property. Obviously, TEC wants to keep those millions of dollars in property – an attractive prize for a denomination that is losing members and closing churches.

Irony of Reconciliation

Local media have devoted significant attention to the claims of TEC's representatives that they hope for reconciliation between the denomination and the diocese.

It is difficult to imagine what form that reconciliation might take. After all, Bishop Lawrence spent years trying to keep us within TEC – only to be found guilty of abandonment while in the very midst of attempting negotiation. We were effectively fired upon under a flag of truce. Individual parishes that separated from TEC around the country have been spurned when they attempted to buy their church buildings from the denomination. In one case, a church was actually sold to an Islamic community group at a price significantly lower than the congregation had offered.

That said, we do not wish malice against anyone who wishes to embrace TEC's vision of faith. But neither will we allow them to impose their vision on us.