

Welcoming to “The Widening Circle”

The Rev. Rae Fletcher – Conference Chair

Good Morning! I want on behalf of all those who have worked to bring this gathering about, to welcome you to “The Widening Circle” and say that it is my prayer that the Holy Spirit will have hold of us for the next two days and that our time here will be the beginning of a valuable contribution to the life of our Church.

This gathering came about partly as the result of a variety of reactions to the events of General Synod last June, and primarily out of a growing awareness that for some time the progressive voice of the church has not only struggled to be heard, but has also been victim to very effective use of language that has discredited what is generally called liberal thought.

People are told that liberals don’t study scripture, they don’t engage in serious theological reflection, their actions are based on some emotional response that is out of step with traditional teaching, they are motivated by a vague concept of justice. We know that this is not true.

- We have done and do biblical research
- We have done and do reflect theologically
- We do not act simply out of an emotional pastoral response, while acknowledging human emotion has a place in the theology and pastoral life of the church.
- We do not act simply out of a righteous anger at injustice, while acknowledging that righteous anger has a place in the theology and pastoral life of the church and that God’s Justice is the focus of our work.
- We seek to act out of what we believe to be a Christ-centred, Spirit-led and Gift driven theology founded on biblical understanding, enlightened by reason and which is experienced in the tradition of the church so that we might learn from it and grow with it.

Personally, I finally grew tired of being told I was neither orthodox nor faithful, and that because I am a liberal I can’t possibly hold a valid belief in the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus or the resurrection and that if I do it’s probably not an orthodox one.

It was in coming to the awareness of what the language used to describe liberals has done to discredit liberal thinking and theology, that I became convinced that we have been embroiled in a contentious debate about “sex” as a smoke screen diverting us from something much larger – namely a struggle over the character and identity of Anglicanism itself.

That is not to say that we should not be engaging in the conversations around human sexuality and more specifically around celebrating and blessing loving committed, faithful same sex relationships. That is important and cannot be overlooked in favour of convenience or “peace in the house”. But it is to say that we should not be so deeply into that conversation that we miss the fact that things are happening around biblical authority, church governance and ecclesiology, the place of women in the church, the episcopacy and many other areas where *our traditional Anglican experience* is being questioned, attacked and replaced, often by a neo-puritanism incompatible with the broad theological spectrum that is a hallmark of Anglicanism.

I am a bible-centred Anglican who believes what the bible says when Paul writes that “all scripture is “inspired” by God and who understands that inspiration comes in the context of human experience and is expressed through human experience and reason, with all its social, political, religious and historical contexts.

I accept that “The scriptures contain all things necessary for salvation”, (Article #6 – Articles of Religion) but I am not one who thinks that “all things in scripture are necessary for salvation”.

I am a “progressive” not a “restrictive” Anglican – terms I prefer to liberal and conservative because they come with less baggage and express a somewhat different viewpoint. As a progressive, I find myself in line with what in the 1970’s I discovered as “The Pioneer Church”. This church gets up each morning and looks to the horizon of a new day and the adventure of the journey in that direction to see what God has waiting over the horizon for it.

In Canada we have known the excitement and joy of that pioneer spirit, that progressive mind, ever seeking the God who is the same and yet ever different in the human experience. Anglicanism has had an inspired and adventurous history from Hooker to Ted Scott and Desmond Tutu, from the BCP of Cranmer to the rites of the Church of New Zealand; from the voices of Latimer and Ridley to the voices of Florence Li Tim-Oi, Gene Robinson, and Katherine Jefferts-Shori. The progressive character of Canadian Anglicanism has gifted us with liturgical renewal, a pastoral embracing of divorced persons, women’s ordination, and the recent resolutions of General Synod on human sexuality.

But, the 1970’s also identified the other side of the coin - the Settler Church, This church, having found what it assumes is earthly perfection in the institution, builds a house, fences it in and spends its time on regulating who can and cannot pass through its gates.

I cannot be a settler. I am not called to ignore the sun rising over the horizon each morning, and the challenge of camping with God in a new pasture each

night having discovered more of the God who is the same but ever different. It is the nature of being a progressive.

I chose in the 70's to live in a Pioneer Church, putting justice, mercy, love, compassion high on the list of things I pack in my wagon every day. But that wagon is not devoid of scripture and theology. The other things are wrapped in them.

I imagine, like many of you, that I find myself living a pioneer Christianity among many who wanted and want the church to be a Settler. Forget what, or more important who, is over the next horizon to which God points, and be concerned about maintaining the fence and boarding up the windows of the house against visitors and strangers, is the message of the settler church. It is not my message because I do not see that as the message of the Gospel, nor the message of the ONE who is THE WORD, whose gospel I preach.

The current spotlighted conversation about "sex" smoke-screens the bigger struggle between the Pioneer and the Settler Church. It is a conversation that has enormous value in reminding us of what it means to be of a progressive mind.

Marilyn McCord Adams [Regius Professor of Divinity](#) at [Oxford University](#) preached in Christ Church, Oxford recently a sermon titled Sinning Against The Holy Spirit.

This is the conclusion of that sermon and brings home one of the great concerns we must have in the push and pull between Pioneer and Settler church thinking. She is commenting on the statement of The House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church at their recent meeting in New Orleans, but the message is one of import for the whole church.

*"Two weeks ago, the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church (TEC) replayed the scenario, to its—at any rate, to my—shame. Evidently, their conversations with the Archbishop (of Canterbury) began by celebrating the uniqueness of the '79 prayer book's baptismal covenant in which, besides renouncing Satan and turning to Christ, besides pledging faithfulness in common prayer and Christian service, we promise to **"strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being."** The Presiding Bishop reports that while the majority interpret this to mean that gays and lesbians are deserving of "the fullest regard of the church," the House of Bishops showed itself "willing to pause" in "its consideration of full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the life and ministries of the Episcopal Church." Bishops reaffirmed 2006 General Convention resolution to exercise restraint by withholding consents to episcopal elections of persons whose lifestyle would pose a serious problem for other*

members of the Anglican communion. Bishops went further by promising not to authorize rites for the blessing of same sex partnerships until the communion is of a different mind or a future General Convention decides otherwise. (The American House of Bishops has no authority to bind future General Conventions.)

For some bishops, these resolutions were a matter of conscience. It's no secret that I disagree with them, but that is not my point right now. My focus is instead on the spiritual danger of "going along to get along," of willingly sacrificing what one believes to be the dignity and well-being of real and present persons on the altar of institutional objectives. The lust for institutional harmony and stability is strong. It repeatedly seduces us, whether the issue is race, gender, sexual orientation, fair trade and wages, immigration and asylum, or something else. But Jesus Christ did not show Himself "willing to pause":

Happily, the bible's God does not observe pop-psychological parenting rules not to threaten without following through. Repeatedly, the bible's God prophesies doom and ruin to wake people up and win repentance. In the midst of present church controversies, one thing is certain: Jesus' pronouncement should shock us out of our complacency, chasten our behavior, and keep us on our knees!" (ed. "Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven!").

"The Widening Circle" is not an academic conference, in the sense that it is intended to present position papers for reflection. This is a "working" conference. We are grateful to those who have agreed to come and share some thoughts with us as seed for our conversation. But where the conversation goes is up to us.

My personal hope is that "The Widening Circle" can in some way speak as a "progressive" voice to the Canadian Church, responding to the House of Bishops who

".. call upon every member of the Anglican Church of Canada to continue in their faithful discipleship and the work of theological and scriptural reflection and dialogue."

I hope that we can speak to the Proposed Anglican Covenant as the bishops approach Lambeth in 2008.

I hope that we can speak with a solid progressive theology that upholds the catholicity of the church and strengthens the episcopacy without abandoning our Anglican tradition and heritage.

That depends on what we do in the next two days. So welcome to “The Widening Circle”. May the church be blessed by our time together.