

An Address to a Gathering of the Coalition for Realignment

Given by The Rev. Jonathan Millard - Church of the Ascension, Pittsburgh - May 10, 2008

Introduction:

Thank you all for coming. By way of introduction I want to say a brief word about what has brought us to this point. The Coalition began as an *ad hoc* group of concerned Clergy and Lay leaders and arose partly in response to the publication in the press of the decision of 12 clergy who made a stand against realignment. A number of us received inquiries from concerned folks asking what is happening with the proposed realignment. It also became increasingly clear to us that some in the diocese were actively working to seek the derailment of the realignment. We felt the need to offer ourselves to work *for* realignment. One of the ways that the Steering Committee is trying to do that is by providing resources and encouragement to those in the diocese who are feeling fearful or uncertain about the way ahead.

So far we have been gathering feedback from all the parishes that we believe are supportive of Bishop Duncan and the overwhelming majority of deputies in last years convention to press ahead with the constitutional and canonical changes needed to enable us to realign. It would appear that the clergy remain very strongly in favor of realignment and that there continues to be a majority in favor among lay deputies. That said, in the light of the actions taken publically and privately against our bishop, and in the light of wider actions that threaten the direction we believe God is calling us to go, we believe that we cannot and should not take the passing of the second reading of Resolution One for granted. Taking our Lord's injunction to "be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves," (*Matthew 10:16*) we need to be intentional about how we get from here to that vote in the Fall.

I see the next 5 or 6 months as being the next leg in a relay race. Those of us who support the bishop, and believe that God is indeed calling us to align ourselves with a faithful Province in the Anglican Church – need to take up the baton that is now in our hands as we run towards Convention in the Fall. When it comes to that vote there will not be a host of nuanced options and ways forward. There will be one question and one choice. Are you with TEC – completely? Or, are you with The Diocese? My hope and prayer is that Resolution One passes: clearly, decisively, and with the largest possible majority.

Brothers and sisters the stakes are high. They rise way above our individual parishes. I believe that God has entrusted us in this Diocese, under Bishop Duncan's leadership, with a prophetic role to stand against the innovations of TEC and unashamedly and boldly to stand for the Gospel. If we fail to follow through with this God-given calling then we can expect to see the death of the vision of Sam Shoemaker that one day Pittsburgh be as famous for God as it is for steel; the death of the Anglican Communion Network; and the death of the Common Cause Partnership. If we fail to secure the realignment with our votes this Fall, then shame on us. Such a failure would be a betrayal of the trust that so many within and beyond our diocese have placed in us. Such a failure would be nothing short of a disgraceful loss of honor.

I expect that the vast majority of those present in this room today are strongly in favor of the direction we are heading – and I am delighted to see you here! I also know that there are some who are still undecided and a few who are opposed. I am mindful of the fact that there is a danger of presuming certain outcomes, or assuming that everyone fully understands why Realignment is so important. So this morning I want to address four areas that I believe are vital that we engage with:

- A) Concerns and questions that have come up since last convention;
- B) Present Realities that are now before us;
- C) The Urgency and Wisdom of Realignment;
- D) The Vision of a much brighter future ahead of us.

A. Concerns and Questions:

(You may have many more or very different concerns – and we hope to address those in the Q&A at the end of our time together this morning)

1) **This is a painful and difficult time**

Many people, myself included, wish that we were not facing the choice that is before us. There are days when I hate the details of all of this – the politics, the divisions, the name calling, the confusion, and perhaps more than anything the time that is focused on this. This is hard. Here at Ascension a recent parish survey showed that more than 90% are united in their commitment to stay together as a parish post realignment. Of those more than 70% are strongly in favor of realignment, with most of the rest expressing varying degrees of uncertainty and a few who would prefer that we not realign. So far 6 people have left Ascension over this issue and I'm aware of another 3 who are planning to leave. Of course, there may be more. But regardless of the super majority who are with us – it grieves me that any have left or will leave. Each one moves on with my love and prayers – but in each case there is real sadness. I know that this is a painful and difficult time right across the diocese.

2) **The closer we get to Convention the greater the fears**

In the face of pain, and the fears that are generated in certain quarters, the forces of inertia – to just do nothing, and stick with the status quo – are considerable. The journey we have embarked upon certainly stretches the comfort zones of most of us. The flesh pots of Egypt seemed so comforting to the people of Israel when they were feeling hungry in the desert and the Promised Land was not yet in sight. But guess what? God never guaranteed us comfort. On the contrary Jesus said if you want to follow me you must deny yourself and take up your cross. Anyone who follows Jesus can expect, at some point, opposition and persecution.

3) **Women's Ordination**

Questions surrounding the Ordination of Women have surfaced often. I just want to reiterate that the Diocese of Pittsburgh is unequivocally committed to the ordination of women and will continue to do so following realignment. The fact is if we don't realign, but stay in TEC, then the ordination of women who have an orthodox, biblical faith could be set back by a generation or more. It is vital that Pittsburgh fly the flag for the ordination of women among our orthodox brothers and sisters in the Anglican Church in the US and beyond. We can do that most effectively by not being compromised any longer by the unfaithfulness and heterodox teaching of a dying church.

4) **What about the small parishes**

There is a notion out there that somehow small parishes are safer and will fare better if they don't realign. I have to tell you that I don't believe that is true at all. Look around TEC - what are the diocesan assessments in other places? In many dioceses they are higher than in Pittsburgh. The fact is a small parish does not have to do anything to realign – no votes are forced. They will be realigned by the decision of convention. They will then be given a grace period to see if they like it. They can see what it feels like once the dust has settled. If they want to go back to TEC they can – assured that the realigned Diocese of Pittsburgh will treat them fairly and generously. Treatment that only a fool would expect from the National Church if they don't realign and subsequently want to join us.

B. Present Realities:

1) **TEC and Diocese of Pittsburgh are clearly on very different trajectories**

This is not the stuff of clever speeches – it is the cold stark reality. If you don't believe me... look at how the church is treating our bishop. Or go and read the Easter sermons for this year and last of the Presiding Bishop. TEC by its senior bishops, its legislative proposals, and its willful arrogance in rejecting the cry of the rest of the church worldwide not to ordain a non-celibate gay man as a bishop, demonstrates time and time again the clear direction it is going. A direction that it is willing pursue alone, if necessary, that daily takes it further and further away from the historic Christian Faith. Contrast that to the direction of the large majority of Anglicans in the Global South – where we see a vibrant, biblical church experiencing explosive growth. That is the trajectory the Diocese of Pittsburgh wants to be a part of.

2) **We have reached a point of irretrievable breakdown**

Schism is here. And it's not Bishop Duncan who is the cause of it. It is TEC that repeatedly by its actions is choosing to walk further and further apart from the rest of the Anglican Church and classical Christianity. Sadly dialogue is not going to help us. TEC has made its course ahead abundantly clear – the notion that we can win back TEC one parish at a time is, in my opinion, wishful thinking and flies in the face of all the evidence of the last 40 years. The Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, and the President of the House of Deputies, Bonnie Anderson, have made it very clear that there can be no negotiation over property. "People can leave, parishes cannot." While others and I fundamentally disagree with that and believe it to be wrong in law, wrong morally, and to be a mean-spirited, bullyboy tactic, it doesn't mean we won't keep trying to broker a deal – but it takes two to tango. We need now to pursue a different road. We need to realign together.

3) **If the vote fails – the diocese will fragment**

The diocese will split – that is now a given. I do not believe there is any way that we can stop that from happening. The only question is how it will split. If Realignment fails – then the diocese will fragment piecemeal with individual congregations aligning with different parts of the Anglican church or even going it alone. I am convinced that our work and witness will be much better served by us realigning TOGETHER.

4) **We are portrayed as being judgmental**

I hate that. If or when we are judgmental – we should repent of that. Certainly we have no business accusing or condemning others. Nevertheless, false charges of bigotry should not silence us from being faithful to the Scriptures. We need to be steadfast in our *prophetic role* as we preach God’s truth in love - in season and out of season. And alongside that we need always to embrace our *pastoral role*, declaring God’s grace, recognizing that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23)

C. The Wisdom of Realignment Now:

1) **The future of Biblical Anglicanism in North America is at stake**

If we do not make this stand for orthodoxy – but instead submit to TEC – we will effectively be giving up on the Anglican Church as an effective vehicle for sharing God’s grace, love and transforming power to countless people in the U.S. and beyond.

2) **A Clear Choice: Total loyalty to TEC or Realignment**

We have to choose. There is no neutral ground. Either you are with TEC and will have to be loyal to it – OR you can realign. The time for talking is over – it’s time for action. As clergy and lay leaders we need to maximize unity – while respecting those who will disagree from the majority. But, let there be no doubt about it, NOW is the time for us to choose. Not every diocese is in the same place as we are – but this is the reality in Pittsburgh. I believe that God has called the Diocese of Pittsburgh, and our bishop in particular, to lead.

3) **A Gospel Imperative:**

What is it that that will allow us either to stay loyal to TEC or to realign with those who uphold classical Christianity in the Anglican Way? It needs to be a Gospel imperative. I am convinced that Realignment will better enable us to reach lost people with the saving love of God. The choice is this: Trying to proclaim the Gospel within TEC constrained and distracted by its coercive canons, litigious leaders, a ‘Christ-less’ gospel, and a membership that is in almost free fall decline – Or seeking to proclaim the Gospel within a realigned diocese, that is unashamed of the Gospel and of the cross of Christ – which “is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved is the power of God.” (*1 Corinthians 1:18*). The realigned diocese will continue to reach out to the poor and marginalized through Shepherds Heart Fellowship, the Anglican Relief and Development Fund, etc. The realigned diocese will be one that will continue to uphold the authority of the Scriptures.

Learn from Moses & Joshua: I believe God is calling us out of the slavery of oppressive and coercive structures – to the dawning of a 21st Century Reformation. I believe there is a very bright future ahead of us. Will we set our hearts and minds towards that future – of belonging to a mission-minded, faithful, growing, dynamic, church planting, Anglican Church in North America – *or* will we be paralyzed by fear or apathy and opt for another 40 years in the wilderness until we die – never to enter that promised land?

Learn from Jonah: His problem was he tried to avoid God's call. Instead of going to Ninevah he ran away from God. His problem was not so much that he feared failure – but that he feared success. The bottom line was, though he was a Bible believing Prophet, he was not mission-minded. He didn't actually care about those who were perishing. He wasn't actually interested in people receiving God's grace and forgiveness. TEC is denying the Gospel to people who are perishing. Why would we choose to stay onboard such a ship? God prevailed despite Jonah. Will we allow God to use us or not? Do we want to be at the center of his will or not?

4) There will never be a better time:

There will never be a better time than this Convention in the Fall to keep the majority of the diocese together in a realignment. The status quo is much less desirable than any of the unknowns ahead of us. We do not have the luxury of waiting any longer. The second vote will take place. Indeed the canons require the second reading of Resolution One. And after that - win or lose - this diocese will split. Not to realign is by far the riskier choice when it comes to being able to live out our calling as Anglican Christians in Pittsburgh. TEC is already in broken or impaired communion with more than 50% of the world's Anglicans. If we want to stay a faithful part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church Realignment is the very best way for us to do that.

5) A Stewardship Issue:

We need to be good stewards of the resources entrusted to us. If we stay in TEC, our buildings and assets will potentially be compromised or lost forever. All exits will be closed after General Convention 2009.

6) A false hope is being offered:

The notion that there will be a “safe haven” within a continuing TEC diocese for those who agree with the bishop theologically but think he is mistaken in the realignment plan is, I believe, a seriously flawed position. All the evidence we have seen to date is that TEC will demand loyalty – even to the point of suing those who realign.

7) Where is the Vision in Staying? Where is the Hope?

Staying offers only an uncertain promise of preserving current assets and property while maintaining, at a subsistence level, a group of mismatched churches and theological perspectives, with no common vision or purpose. At the end of the day, staying means that you'll be siding with TEC to sue your brothers and sisters, to accept whatever innovations are next thrust upon you, until you are utterly worn down or you can, in conscience, stand it no longer.

Let's be honest. TEC has not provided a model and a framework for transformational churches shining the light of Christ's truth and love. The status quo has not been very good. Churches have struggled to survive, let alone grow. The wider denomination has for a very long time cast its shadow over our abilities to do ministry, make disciples and grow churches. The politics of the wider church only embarrass us with more front page headlines each time that General Convention convenes. This is hardly an environment conducive to growth and mission.

I fail to see any vision, any hope, any excitement among those who hold an orthodox biblical faith, yet who are advocating staying in TEC. This is very sad. On the surface staying in TEC may to some sound a bit safer, a bit less scary, a bit less radical, maybe at its highest, it may even sound noble – but it doesn't set my soul on fire. What is there in the anti-realignment camp that will inspire anyone to a deeper faith and a passion for the lost?

To stay in TEC is to sign up for more of the same: more talking and more political process as each biblically faithful congregation left in becomes more and more enmeshed and beholden to the national church, its political schemes and its biblical revisionism.

D. A Vision of the Future:

1) **The Dawning of a new day**

No matter how hard the choice is, no matter how real the grief is, no matter how much we could lose – there is a much better day ahead. The realignment is all about how we are going to build a missional church – cooperating with God's agenda, God's mandates in the Great Commission and the Great Commandment of our Lord.

Realignment is bursting with new possibilities, vision, and transforming leadership. Are politics involved? Of course they are. But if you want to see an end to the politics, the fighting and the revisionism of the Scriptures, realignment is by far the best way to achieve that. Sure, the trouble won't go away instantly. Indeed it could take years to come to a final conclusion. But it will come to an end – one way or another. Of that you can be certain. BUT if we stay with TEC – there is no end in sight. It will just be more of the same.

The reason to vote for realignment is that this is the best way to be faithful and fruitful in a church where its members put their faith in Christ first, and where a much better future is promised for us, our children and most especially those who do not yet know Jesus.

Like Israel, those who realign will have to steel ourselves for some short term uncertainty. We may not be able to avoid lawsuits or name calling, but the vision of realignment is one which holds out the hope and the prospect of entering into a much better place.

Belonging to a biblically faithful Province that is passionate more for Jesus than the Millennium Goals, that is unashamed of Jesus as the way the truth and the life - that's the kind of church I want to belong to. Brothers and sisters Realignment is worthwhile. It is clearly much better than staying in TEC. This call is worth sacrificing for.

2) **Unity in the Essentials.**

What a breath of fresh air it will be not to have to wonder just who you are talking to or who you can trust. Imagine what will emerge when we are able to speak a common biblical and theological language and actually mean the same thing. Imagine a new day where everyone is on the same page in terms of the essentials of the faith and the authority of the scriptures. Sure – it won't be perfect. I'll be there for a start! And yes, we will still have disagreements – but they won't be about the person and work of Jesus Christ. They won't be about whether or not the Bible is authoritative. They won't be about whether there are biblical moral standards.

3) **A Stop to the Losses.**

Not only have people been leaving Episcopal churches in droves as they discover the bankrupt theology and morality of the denomination to which they are connected, many folks never even consider coming in the first place. How many orthodox, charismatic or evangelical believers move into town and drive right by our churches because it says Episcopal on our signs? How many times have people looked at you from elsewhere and wondered if it was actually possible to be an Episcopalian and a Christian at the same time?

4) **Security for the Future.**

Yes there will be an in between time and perhaps even losses of tangible assets. But the vessel that emerges will be secure. People who give will be able to do so with peace of mind without wondering if their financial investments might eventually be lost, squandered or seized. We will be able to build and grow without needing to look over our shoulders.

5) **More Common Mission and Partnerships.**

What emerges in realignment will be a far more cohesive group of churches and clergy. Because they have more in common, and because they have each walked through a common experience, there will be more opportunities for mission partnerships and ministry.

6) **Movement from Church Battles to Kingdom Building.**

Perhaps the greatest benefit to realignment will be a return to mission. Far too much of our time, resources, and energy have been siphoned off over the past 20 years and spent in the battle for the heart and soul of the Episcopal church. Realignment means that we can refocus and retool our efforts to reaching out to those who do not know God, where the truly amazing love and grace of God can be lived and shared and extended to a lost and hurting world.

Let us not waiver at this point. The finishing line ahead of us in the Fall is the starting line for the race ahead of us. Hear these words of St. Paul as we press on to that starting line:

“I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me... Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.” *(from Philippians 3:12-14)* Amen.