



# St. Stephen's Anglican Church

**Article by Sharon Baldacci**

Five days before Christmas my son and I went to two different meetings with two different bishops. One was with Bishop Peter Lee, head of the Virginia Diocese, meeting with the those from St. Stephen's Church who wanted to remain Episcopalians, following a vote where the majority approved leaving.

The other was a meeting with Bishop Martyn Minns, former rector of Truro Episcopal Church in Northern Virginia. Their 3,000 plus majority had also voted to sever ties with the Episcopal Church. He is a bishop of the Convocation of the Anglicans of North America (CANA) which is temporarily under the auspices of a Nigerian bishop.

The two meetings could not have been more different.

After the majority vote was made, the sign in front of the church was changed to read, St. Stephen's Church (Anglican).

The 35 or so remaining Episcopalians at this meeting with Bishop Lee were livid.

People got up and vented their anger, openly hostile to the majority trying to steal their church and property. One stood up and wondered if the locks to the church had been changed, she just didn't know, had anyone checked?

In a brief moment of welcome humor, my son Patrick Smith noted the obvious: "What does it matter, everyone knows where the keys are."

The chuckles were brief. Someone else wondered if the bank accounts had been changed over, what had happened to the trusts, and all the money? "I called the bank and they wouldn't tell me."

Nothing was ever said about the fact that the leaders in the Episcopal Church precipitated this break by their actions over the last 30 years.

The meeting was over with the Bishop advising his communicants to elect their own vestry that could go and talk to the Anglican vestry to discuss all these issues. Both the Episcopalians and Anglicans had earlier agreed they would not enter into any litigation over property rights for 30 days.

Since researching this article I have discovered there were parishes long before there were dioceses put in place to manage them. Interesting note.

This meeting was barely over before a woman who had been coming to the church for only a year or so, came over to give me a hug. "I wasn't sure which way you had voted," she started saying with a smile. When I told her I was there merely to observe and that when I had joined St. Stephen's years ago it was because of the people, not because it was Episcopal, she walked away before I finished talking.

Two days later at a party on Christmas Eve, another woman came up to me, saying she was glad I had been at the meeting with Bishop Lee. When I told her I had gone to both meetings, the immediate look of reproach spoke volumes and our conversation was over.

Bishop Lee spoke of property rights and bank accounts.

Bishop Minns spoke more than once of how gracious Bishop Lee had been to the large churches in Northern Virginia that have left the diocese. There was also sadness about why this split has come about.

There was great hope for the future and all the possibilities that God has in store for the future.

The division is not about the election of a gay bishop in New Hampshire. I have been waiting for three years for a simple explanation of how leaders of faith can reconcile this with the bible. I have also wondered how a person leading a faithful life can dismiss biblical authority and be completely at ease for causing a schism for other people of faith. Is it arrogance, is it ordained by God, or is it an agenda by leaders who want to be all things to all people? Where is God in all this?  
No one's talking.

Here is the problem I have with all this (and I am not judgmental, homophobic - what an ugly word - or ignorant.) I merely ask questions that haven't been answered.

In one encyclopedia (obviously an old one) the Episcopal Church is described as maintaining the Holy Scriptures as the ultimate rule of law.

But on the Episcopal Home page this is how the Rev. George Anne Boyle describes it:

In the wake of the New Age and the ever growing love affair that our culture has with all things spiritual, a new mantra has emerged I'm spiritual, not religious... It's not about having answers as much as it is about engaging a story...Is it possible to practice and grow your spirituality within an organized church? Yes! The Episcopal Church holds many possibilities open for those on the spiritual path looking for a diverse community of believers...The beauty of the Episcopal Church tradition is that it is open to questions and new possibilities as well as ancient teachings. Imagine a spiritual practice that is both grounded in tradition and open to new possibilities.

This is far too fluid for me. God and I have come to an understanding about things I'm uncomfortable with and I am confident He is in control and I trust His outcomes in all things. But I don't trust man's.

The new Presiding Bishop Kathryn Jefferts-Schori has been quoted as saying:

"We're meant to keep on learning and growing, and not stay fixed and stuck in one particular understanding. To leave aside the discoveries of recent science is to ignore part of our God-given gift. To insist that we can only read the bible in one particular way is to ignore the multitude of ways God speaks to us.

I know God speaks to us each where we are, just as I know that the Bible is a living, breathing document that is constantly speaking to individual hearts.

What is hard to understand is why leaders of our specific Christian denomination would seek to minimize our faith, and marginalize our beliefs? It is not only a disservice to all faithful people, it's indefensible to seek to include every other religion into your core.

It doesn't seem to matter that people who disagree with you don't like it that you are hijacking their beliefs. We are simply the faithful Christians adhering and loving all that is written in the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, trusting and living our lives as God wants us to do.

Not the Diocese.  
Not a presiding Bishop.

But God.

I'm confident that as the hurt and anger subsides in all directions, this congregation that has loved each other for years will be sheltered by God's peace that passes all understanding.

Sharon Baldacci