

Synods may not decide on matters of doctrine

BY THE REV. DR. ROSS HEBB

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As our beloved Anglican Church approaches the events of General Synod 2007 the anxieties and concerns of Anglicans in New Brunswick, Canada and indeed the world, increase. The root of these concerns is the fear that General Synod may, by its actions, separate the Canadian Church from the rest of the Anglican Communion. Whether everyone present realizes it or not, decisions affecting matters of doctrine may be made which most of our brothers and sister in Christ throughout the world regard as ill advised, unnecessarily hasty and doctrinally suspect. These few words of reflection are offered at this critical time in a spirit of prayer and humility.

Is there anything in our past which can shed light on our present confusions and difficulties? One possible avenue is to attempt to 'think outside the box'. To step back and examine the assumptions under which we have been operating. One place to look is to our governance structures, that is to say, our synods. Are they suitable places to decide doctrine? Were they established in order to decide what the church would believe?

It is commonplace to hear that our Canadian synod system of diocesan and General synod is modeled off the earlier American example. This is in many aspects true. When looking for examples of Church self-government in the mid-nineteenth century Canadian Anglicans, including Bishop Medley, looked to the already existing American system.

The American system came about of necessity after the American War of Independence. The Anglicans remaining in the former 13 colonies, those who did not move north to British North America, were left scattered, disoriented and separated from the 'Mother' Church in England. Candidates for ordination could no longer travel to England for ordination. The English missionary society known as the SPG, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, could no longer pay the missionaries and most crippling of all there was no Anglican Bishop in North America.

Samuel Seabury, a Loyalist Anglican clergyman was secretly elected by a dozen clergymen in Connecticut and sent to England to seek ordination as a bishop. Due to constitutional obstacles of British law, not due to unwillingness or any unsuitability on Seabury's behalf, the English bishops could not ordain him. Seabury was ordained by bishops of the Scottish Episcopal church and returned to Connecticut by way of Halifax and Saint John. The American church had its first Anglican bishop!

Sadly, Seabury's return did not secure the future of the church in the US. Some disliked the fact that he had been consecrated in Scotland while others disapproved of his Loyalist history during the Revolution. Over a year after Seabury's return, two other men did secure consecration as bishops at the hands of the English. The English Parliament had changed their laws so that Provoost of New York and White of Philadelphia were ordained as bishops for the American church.

Now it was simply a matter of these three bishops, along with the clergy and laity, getting together and forming a government structure. But what would that structure be? What would be the relation of the church in each state to the central authority? What would be the role of the

bishops, priests and laity at each states' meeting and at the general gathering? What matters would each level of church government decide? Would each state or the General meeting alter the Prayer Book beyond the obvious need to substitute prayers for the King with prayers for the President? Did a new church in America, as a branch of the 'mother' church, have to possess new beliefs? Was not the Faith given in Scripture and stated in the three creeds and 39 Articles sufficient? If any thought new beliefs were in order, who would decide what beliefs remained the same and what was to change? What would be the authority that would be appealed to in making such decisions?

In the midst of this debate Bishop Seabury wrote a letter to Bishop White, stating his understanding of the nature of the Christian church. He wrote; "the rights of the Christian Church arise not from nature or compact, but from the institution of Christ; and we ought not to alter them, but to receive and retain them as the holy apostles left them. The government (by bishops aided by priests), sacraments, faith and doctrines of the Church are fixed and settled. We have a right to examine *what they are*, but we must take them *as they are*. If we new model (design anew) the government, why not the sacraments, creeds and doctrines of the Church? But then it would not be Christ's Church, but *our* Church; and would remain so, call it by what name we would." (Seabury to White, Aug., 15 1785.)

In another letter, Seabury, again writing to Bishop White, reminded him of the position of bishops within the Church. With specific regard to the role of bishops at the upcoming General Convention, Seabury wrote, " For Gods sake, my dear sir, let us remember that it is the particular business of the Bishops of Christ's Church to preserve it pure and undefiled, in faith and practice, according to the model left by apostolic practice." Seabury wanted to be crystal clear as to what he held church governance structures were **not** qualified to do. In reference to the upcoming General Convention Seabury wrote, " I doubt not (that) everything might be settled to mutual satisfaction, without the preposterous method of ascertaining doctrines, etc., etc., by a majority of votes." (Seabury to White, 29 June 1789).

The applicability of Bishop Seabury's words to our present situation in Canada is clear. Although it is historically true that our system of synods is partially modeled off the American example it is also true, though not generally known, that we have strayed far from the originally stated limitations envisioned for such bodies. We have not simply developed with the passage of time but we have come to the precise point such meetings were never supposed to reach. We now think it proper, and in line with the tradition of synods,(mistakenly) to decide matters of doctrine - matters explicitly ruled beyond the competence of synods by the originators of the institution. Will we heed these words of caution from the past and draw back or will we forge ahead and precipitate the need to pick a new name for '*our church*'?

About the Author:

Dr Hebb is Rector of St Peter's Fredericton. His continuing interest in Church history includes an article on *Bishop Samuel Seabury and Bishop Charles Inglis: High Churchmanship in Varying New World Contexts*, that is forthcoming in the *Journal Anglican and Episcopal History*, Spring 2007. His book, *The Church of England in Loyalist New Brunswick, 1783-1825*, was published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press in 2004.