

‘What is the Good of the Church?’: A Series of Reflections on Ecclesiology for Advent 2021

Session III: ‘Contemporary Ecclesiological Crises and Questions: How Should we Re-Imagine the Episcopal Church Within the Anglican Communion Today?’

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Some key *Questions* for discussion arising from video III:

1. What are the dangers of *reactive* anxiety in the face of loss of Episcopal church membership? Are numbers, funding and buildings the core issues, or is something deeper and theological at stake in our thinking about the Church?
 2. What is the core, Anglican/Episcopal, vision of how the Church holds together even in the context of disagreement? Is this something to be (re)-celebrated and reflected upon in the American political atmosphere of today?
 3. Is ‘online’ Church something to be welcomed or to be wary of? Why and why so?
 4. What is the importance of the theological virtue of ‘hope’, and the sense of a not-yet-attained future, for thinking about the Church today?
- A. The Context of Episcopal Ecclesiology Today - Some Major Challenges:
1. Numerical Losses, nationally: see <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/research-and-statistics/>, and <https://www.generalconvention.org/parochialreportresults>
Question: Is numerical loss of membership a necessary sign of failure, or perhaps of a need to re-think what ‘church’ is *for*? Panic and anxiety, accompanied by an obsessive focus on managerial strategies, are almost never good partners of *theological* mission: consider Luke 12. 32 (‘Fear not, little flock, for your Father is giving you the kingdom’). Note the wider sociological tendencies to individualism and withdrawal from community projects (see Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*).
 2. The Global Perspective and the Anglican Communion: The notoriously divisive disputes on sexuality and gender within the Anglican Communion today press to attention an underlying *theological* question about ecclesiology – How is ‘relationality’ in the Church to go forward (relations with i. God; ii, each other; iii. Our own fractured selves; iv. the whole of creation)? The Windsor Report of 2004 (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windsor_Report) tried to exchange classic Anglican ecclesiology for an *institutional* understanding of negotiated ‘covenant’ between individual provinces – this failed. ‘Communion, Conflict and Hope’ of 2008 (<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/107653/Communion-Conflict-and-Hope-the-Kuala-Lumpur-Report.pdf>) struck a different note, and one arguably more consonant with classic Anglican sensibility; so too the Indaba groups (<http://www.wvdiocese.org/pages/pdfs/LambertIndabaGroups.pdf>) of the 2008 Lambeth Conference.
 3. Historic American Racism and the Episcopal Church: to be discussed further in video 4 in this series - see John 15 and Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s call to ‘becoming Beloved Community’ (<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/beloved-community/>). Note that ‘unity in Christ’ in the Johannine vision (John 17.21-24) may be interestingly compared with Paul’s vision of *differentiated* unity in the ‘body of Christ’ (1 Cor 12).

4. The Pandemic and its Impact – What is the Future of ‘Online’ Ecclesiology? (Br James Koester, SSJE on the impact of online monastic worship during the pandemic: see <https://www.ssje.org/>). Can eucharistic reception be done vicariously, as Br James suggests? How does online worship expand our sense of ‘the blessed company of all faithful people’?

B. Sources for a Contemporary Episcopal Ecclesiology:

1. The Ecumenical Movement and the Impact of Vatican II (1962-65): ‘Communion’ Ecclesiology (John 17) and its Pros and Cons. *Lumen Gentium* (<https://catholicmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Lumen-Gentium.pdf>) emphasized the importance of lay ministry as the ‘people of God’ (cf. 1 Peter 2. 9-10); see also the Baptismal rites of the 1979 Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* (299-314). Cardinal Avery Dulles: six ‘models’ for the Church that are mutually complementary: institution; community/communion; sacrament; herald of the gospel; servant; school of discipleship. Arguably all need to be held in tension. And the vision of Johannine unity has to be tempered by the acknowledgement of its current incompleteness: the ‘already/not yet’ element in Jesus’s teaching about the kingdom (see again video 1). See also the vision of the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1910_World_Missionary_Conference): mission and ecumenism go hand in hand.
2. The Heritage from Classical ‘Anglican’ Ecclesiology: What Remains of Significance for Contemporary Concerns and Challenges? The historic ‘Elizabethan settlement’ symbolizes a willingness for ongoing debate and discernment with those with whom one disagrees – this is a core part of Richard Hooker’s understanding of ‘reason’ in action (see video 2). There is a distinctive, historic, ‘Anglican’ ecclesiology in which the primacy of Scriptural authority is integrally connected with reason, tradition and episcopal authority: see *The 39 Articles* and the *Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral* (1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, 867-878).
3. How is Anglican/Episcopal Ecclesiology to be Re-Animated Today? The importance of the NT witness and Jesus’s ‘tensive’ ‘Kingdom’ teaching; the significance of the distinctive ‘Anglican’ heritage of Scripture, reason and tradition and the *discernment* of ‘hope’ amidst differing perspectives. A future-oriented ecclesiology that is engaged in practices of transformation and prayerful negotiation of change.

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Select Bibliography:

- Putnam, Robert D., *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*
 Dulles, Avery, *Models of the Church* (2nd edition)
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 Avis, Paul, ‘Anglican Ecclesiology’, in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, eds. Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge, 202-216
 _____, *The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology*
 Chapman, Mark, ‘The Church’, in *The Vocation of Anglican Theology*, ed. Ralph McMichael, 153-9