

Pastoral Letter to the Congregation of the Church of Saint John the Evangelist

April 11, 2010

I am saddened to report to you that the Episcopal Church USA and its local affiliates will soon be filing litigation against our parish in an effort to shut down St. John's and to seize all of our property and our operating funds. Despite our best efforts to reach out to them and to find a resolution, our efforts have been rebuffed and we have been informed that they have no interest in anything other than shutting down our parish, seizing our church property, and confiscating our operating funds. They have refused to even speak with us about settling our differences, despite two attempts on our part to invite them to meet with us. They intend to use the virtually unlimited resources of the national Episcopal Church to ensure that we are overwhelmed and extinguished into submission. The reason for this action is apparent: We are being punished for remaining faithful to orthodox, Biblical Christianity and traditional Anglicanism.

Some history is essential for you to understand what has occurred and what will likely occur as we move forward. In 2007, our parish and our Diocese, after lengthy and extensive consultation with canonical experts and civil attorneys, with an overwhelming majority withdrew our affiliation with The Episcopal Church USA and realigned ourselves with the Anglican Province of the Southern Cone, one of the world's 38 recognized provinces in the Anglican Communion. We did so in full compliance both with the diocesan canons and the laws of the State of California, which govern religious corporations like the Diocese of San Joaquin and St. John's. Since that time, although we remain affiliated with the Province of the Southern Cone, our Diocese and our parish have also affiliated with the newly-constituted Anglican Church in North America, which is currently in the process of becoming the world's 39th Anglican province.

The Episcopal Church, which has abandoned Biblical Christianity and has morphed into an unrecognizable entity bearing little resemblance to a traditional Anglican church, has committed itself nationally to the destruction of orthodox Anglican dioceses and parishes. It has co-opted its vast charitable and religious resources and dedicated their use to funding lawsuits across the United States, aimed at seizing the property of parishes and dioceses that can no longer, in good conscience, affiliate themselves with The Episcopal Church's brand of post-Christian, secular progressive "religion." Unfortunately, as far as The Episcopal Church USA is concerned, the price of faithfulness to the Gospel and traditional Anglicanism is destruction, seizure of the charitable assets of the faithful, and the financial ruin of clergy. In these new suits against incorporated parishes in the Anglican Diocese of San Joaquin, even vestry members are being named in the filings.

St. John's was independently established more than 160 years ago. Captain Charles Weber, the founder of the City of Stockton, granted the very first residents of Stockton this very parcel of land for the purposes of establishing an Anglican parish church. St. John's existed long before the Diocese of San Joaquin or, for that matter, any Episcopal Bishop in California. When Bishop William Ingraham Kip, the first missionary bishop of the Episcopal Church, first visited our congregation, he found a worshipping congregation of 300 souls, producing prayerbooks from their pockets and meeting in a courtroom. Our parish was built, funded, and operated by generations of Stockton families committed to preserving the unique Anglican tradition in our community. We have never, ever received so much as a single penny of support from The Episcopal Church USA—though they cannot make the same claim in the other direction. No, our parish was built and has always been supported by the people of Stockton, many of whom are themselves interred in the columbarium beneath our sanctuary. Yet, now a group of hostile progressives based in New York and Washington, D.C. are committed to destroying our parish, seizing our property, and shuttering this ancient and venerable Stockton institution—all because they find our commitment to remain faithful to the ancient Biblical tradition an anathema to their fashionable brand of religion. It is all so very, very sad.

The Episcopal Church USA, ignoring altogether California's corporations law and the validly enacted canons of both The Episcopal Church and the Diocese of San Joaquin, "installed" their own bishop in the newly formed "Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin." That bishop, Jerry Lamb, is nothing more than a puppet administrator controlled by his handlers in New York, tasked with destroying the Anglican Diocese and its constituent parishes. Funded by The Episcopal Church, he has sued the Bishop of San Joaquin, Bishop John-David Schofield, in Fresno Superior Court, frozen the financial assets of the Anglican Diocese, and engaged in a "scorched earth" litigation campaign against the Anglican Diocese and its parishes. It is almost impossible to fathom that a Christian clergyman, who fashions himself a shepherd ministering in the name of Jesus Christ, could engage in such malicious behavior, so clearly contrary to the Gospel injunction against Christians suing each other in the civil courts. Further, the hypocrisy of The Episcopal Church USA, which so publicly touts its "inclusiveness," "tolerance," and "diversity," in using its resources to destroy fellow Christians is clearly manifest in their actions.

While The Episcopal Church USA has met with considerable success in using the civil law courts to seize the assets of Anglican parishes that have withdrawn from Episcopal dioceses, the issue of entire dioceses withdrawing from The Episcopal Church USA presents an entirely new set of issues that have yet to be resolved. In our Anglican tradition, the diocese is an autonomous entity. The hierarchy ends with the diocesan bishop. We do not have a supreme curia or a pope to whom our bishops answer, as is the case in the Roman church. The Episcopal Church USA is little more than a confederation of dioceses, with a Presiding Bishop to preside over meetings of the House of Bishops. The idea that there is any such thing as a "national church" is the creation of the very same people who now retroactively and speciously claim ownership of our property. Any authority over parishes and dioceses the Presiding Bishop claims for herself is authority not stated in the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church. When our diocese voted to realign with another province of the Anglican Communion, it did so fully within its constitutional, canonical, and legal rights, and our parish did so with it.

So, where does all of this leave us? I wish that I could give you a definitive answer, but I cannot. I do not know. It is in God's hands and we must pray that he give us the strength, the courage, the resources, and the vision to remain faithful to him and to the Gospel entrusted to us by his beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We are being tested. Our faith is being tested. Our commitment to Biblical Christianity is being tested. Our commitment to orthodox Anglicanism is being tested. Our strength as a parish community and our commitment to one another is being tested. We must remember that with God, all things are possible. And, perhaps more aptly as Scripture reminds us, "if God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) I ask each of you to join me in praying daily for our parish, for our people, and, as difficult as it may seem, for The Episcopal Church USA and its collaborators. We will weather this storm only through the active grace of God, which can be obtained only through prayer, participation in the Eucharist, and faithful devotion to his Word.

With regard to the lawsuit itself, we must do everything possible to defend the case and ensure that we are not trampled by the forces aligned against us. This will be very, very expensive and the outcome is far from certain. But, we have no other realistic option at this point but to respond to this aggression. Each of us must consider making a sacrificial gift of our own resources to support this effort. We must also appeal to our fellow Christians and other people of goodwill in our Stockton community to assist us. St. John's is our parish. But it is also a Stockton institution that has been at the very center of this City since its founding. Our presence in the community, as well as our historic legacy, enriches our City and our larger community. We must appeal to all people of goodwill to assist us, but only after we have made our own sacrificial commitment to the effort.

We must also let the larger community here in Stockton know what The Episcopal Church USA is attempting to do to us. There is no dissenting Episcopal congregation to install in our church building. (Indeed, the existing Episcopal parish in Stockton is itself barely viable.) If The Episcopal Church USA were to succeed in its efforts to seize our church, it will likely sell it—assuming, of course, it can find a buyer in this market—as it has done so elsewhere in the United States. In upstate New York, for example, The Episcopal Church USA recently seized a 150 year-old Anglican church from its parishioners and sold it to an Islamic group, which converted that venerable old Christian house of worship to a mosque. Such will likely be the fate of our beloved old church building if we cannot succeed in defending ourselves. Although we will undoubtedly continue as a parish community (like the Anglicans in New York did), we will lose something very dear and meaningful to us all. Indeed, the fact that our adversaries would rather seize our church and sell it to a profane use, as opposed to even allowing us to negotiate with them, indicates what their true purpose is, despite their disingenuous and hypocritical rhetoric: They wish to punish us and to deprive us of the legacy that we, our families, and our ancestors have built here in Stockton over the past 160 years.

May the intercession and help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Michael the Archangel, and St. John the Evangelist give us the strength, courage, vision, and resources to stand firm in our faith and face our adversaries as it is God's will that we remain faithful to him and his Gospel.

Father Lee M. Nelson, SSC