

A Split Queery

The Battle over Acceptance in the United States Anglican Community

“Accepting” has been widely used throughout society to define the sects and branches of Christian churches across the nation that choose to be queer-affirming. The battle over acceptance and affirmation has led many churches, including my own, to split and fracture due to the internal debate and turmoil over the theology of queer affirmation. Debate, which has a longstanding tradition of being positive within the Anglican faith community, became impossible for some, which saw the acceptance of all people in The Episcopal Church as a failure to include their voices. In the modern day, we now see two main Anglican sects within the United States, which continue on the Anglican tradition of dissension in an ever-changing modern era.

1. Growing Affirmation in One Church Divided

The Episcopal Church of the United States of America, often known merely as The Episcopal Church has had a long and turbulent history of differences, dissension, and friction. In 1974 just two years prior to the official approval of women into the priesthood by the General Convention,¹ 11 women were defiantly ordained in North Philadelphia. This disobedience to the

¹ Armentrout, Don, ed. n.d. “Ordination of Women – The Episcopal Church.” Translated by Robert Boak Slocum. The Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church. Accessed November 2021. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/ordination-of-women/>.
An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church

historical norms and rules of the institution of The Episcopal Church led many laypeople and priests to stand up during the ceremony and speak out against its occurrence. Rev. Canon Charles H. Osborn spoke out, proclaiming “The proceedings here enacted are unlawful and schismatical, constituting a grave injury to the peace of Christ's church.”² At this point in history discussion had only begun within the mainstream church surrounding the ethics and morality of homosexuality³, but the words of Rev. Osborn have echoed throughout the church up unto the modern era as the battle of acceptance continued within the church. Almost 30 years later, a parishioner within the Diocese of New Hampshire by the name of Meredith Harwood stood up and spoke out during the ordination of Gene Robinson, the first gay bishop in the church. She stated that the church “must not proceed with this terrible and unbiblical mistake, which will not only rupture the Anglican Communion; it will break God's heart.” In both moments in which tradition has been deeply “revolutionized” or “under assault” depending on which stance you believe in, the large differences and gaps in moral beliefs have set the stage for, as Reverend Osborn would say, “schismatic” changes.

These large moral differences were and for many still are a strength of Anglicanism. The Anglican church community, since its foundations, has been built on the idea that there can be discourse and differences while still gathering around “one large table” to worship and find faith

²Blau, Eleanor. 1974. “11 Women Ordained Episcopal Priests; Church Law Defied - The New York Times.” The New York Times. New York Times. July 30, 1974. <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/07/30/archives/11-women-ordained-episcopal-priests-church-law-defied-women-become.html>.

³D’Emilio, John, and Students of John D’Emilio. n.d. “The Episcopal Church and Homosexuality in the U.S.: Timeline · Religion and Homosexuality in the U.S.” OutHistory: It’s About Time. Accessed November 2021. https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/religion_homosex/episcopal.

in God and scripture.⁴ The church of Meredith Harwood who only 18 years ago spoke out at the ordination of Gene Robinson states on their website that “they are a healthy mix of progressive, creative, and more traditional theologians and thinkers, seasonal attendees and regular attendees, young and young at heart.”⁵ This “big tent” idea was now being challenged by many on the basis of who they believe should have been able to enter it. Many who felt that those who had the power to control who was entering the tent were being too radically accepting, and would rather leave The Episcopal Church than engage in the discourse that Anglicans are so well known for, citing that this discourse had already doomed the church. For one pastor within the church, he compared Anglicanism in the United States as a ship that was being captained by The Episcopal Church. He stated that those that reject The Episcopal Church’s inevitable path towards total acceptance needed “to mount a massive rescue campaign to abandon ship and save whosoever will.”⁶

2. Two Smaller Tents

⁴“Testing the Tent Poles of Anglicanism – Anglican Journal.” 2006. Anglican Journal. <https://www.facebook.com/anglicanjournal/>. April 1, 2006. <https://www.anglicanjournal.com/testing-the-tent-poles-of-anglicanism-6683/>.

⁵“St. Mark’s Episcopal Church.” n.d. St. Mark’s Episcopal Church - Ashland, New Hampshire. <https://www.facebook.com/WordPresscom>. Accessed November 2021. <https://stmarksashland.wordpress.com/>.

⁶Atwood, Bill. 2006. “‘Why I Am Leaving the Episcopal Church’ - by Canon Dr. Bill Atwood | VirtueOnline – The Voice for Global Orthodox Anglicanism.” VirtueOnline – The Voice for Global Orthodox Anglicanism. July 31, 2006. <https://virtueonline.org/%E2%80%9Cwhy-i-am-leaving-episcopal-church%E2%80%9D-canon-dr-bill-atwood>.

In late October of 2007, a consecration ceremony was held in the All Saints Cathedral of Nairobi, Kenya. The new bishop that was appointed was not on a mission to preach an Anglican message of God to Kenyans, but to return to his home to preach the Word to Texans⁷. Bishop Dr. Bill Atwood of the Church of Kenya, who only a year prior told Episcopalians to “jump ship” with him, began a new journey of “theological offshoring”, in which he found a place within the worldwide Anglican community that better fit his basis for what Anglicanism should look like, and used them as a home base for his own faith mission.⁸ He found this home base in the Church of Kenya, with other priests finding home bases to launch their missions in the US in Uganda and other parts of Africa that have hardline Anglican anti-gay and non-accepting churches.

In 2009, Anglican fundamentalists from around the United States that had left The Episcopal Church, including the entire dioceses of Pittsburgh, Quincy, Fort Worth, San Joaquin, as well as many breakaway parishes within the US and in Canada came together to form the Anglican Church in North America, also known as ACNA. Since its creation, many churches from the Rochester area and around New York State have joined the sect. All Saints Anglican Church of Rochester, Bread of Life based in Ithaca, St. Bartholomew’s Anglican Church near Buffalo, and the Church of the Holy Trinity in Syracuse are only some of the growing number of ACNA churches in our area.

⁷Elliot, Debbie. 2007. “Clerics Who Opposed Gay Bishop Return to U.S.” NPR. NPR. September 2, 2007. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14130083>.

⁸Higgins, Andrew. 2007. “Episcopal Church Dissidents Seek Authority Overseas.” The Wall Street Journal. September 20, 2007. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB119023295621032668>.

The Episcopal Church, although still much larger with over 1.5 million members⁹ versus the nearly 100,000 members of ACNA¹⁰ now had a direct alternative. Whereas the Anglican Church in North America affirmed in their constitution and bylaws that marriage can only be “a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman”¹¹, The Episcopal Church revised their canon and bylaws to affirm that anyone of any gender can marry anyone else shortly following the decision of Obergefell v. Hodges in 2015.¹² The Episcopal Church welcomes queer people into the church, whereas parishoners of a church within ACNA must meet the codes of sexual ethics set forth in their constitution stating that gay peoples’ marriages will not be recognized, and that it is immoral and unethical to have sex outside of recognized marriage or with someone of the same sex.¹³ The “big tent” mentality of the Anglican faith has now become two smaller tents within the United States environment, but this does not mean that there is still the discourse and dissension that the Anglican Church is known for within these two faith communities. The

⁹Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Episcopal Church in the United States of America." Encyclopedia Britannica, August 30, 2019.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Episcopal-Church-in-the-United-States-of-America>.

¹⁰ Pike, W.. "Anglican Church in North America." Encyclopedia Britannica, December 5, 2018.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Anglican-Church-in-North-America>.

¹¹ *Anglican Church in North America (ACNA)*. 2019. “Anglican Church in North America Constitution and Canons,” June 2019.
<https://anglicanchurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ACNA-Constitution-and-Canons-June-2019.pdf>.
Title II, Canon 7: Section I

¹²“History – The Episcopal Church.” n.d. The Episcopal Church. Accessed November 2021.
<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/who-we-are/lgbtq/history/>.

¹³*Anglican Church in North America (ACNA)*. n.d. “Anglican Church in North America Constitution and Canons.” Accessed November 2021.
<https://anglicanchurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ACNA-Constitution-and-Canons-June-2019.pdf>.
Title II, Canon 8: Section 2

ACNA, while firm on its stance of the refutation of queer clergy and laity, has different stances whether someone can be inherently gay. They also have varying different opinions on the truthfulness of psychology and science as a basis for the fact that gay people can be born the way that they are. A major debate within the church is how they should go about trying to help gay people in either “changing” or avoiding their “sin”. Just this year, in January of 2021 The College of Bishops, which include all the bishops that make up the ACNA, released a statement on sexuality and identity.¹⁴ This statement covered all the debated stances within the church surrounding sexuality. The views that were presented in the statement, which were stated in rather vague manner as to not make bold statements that go against the ideas of debate, caused a great stir in the church. One of the most bold views presented in the statement was what the church should call someone who is an Anglican and has same-sex attraction. Whether it be “gay christian” or “same-sex attracted christian”, the statement said that they should merely just be called “christians” who are fighting a sin that the church should fight with them. Reaction was very strong to this stance. The Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Nigeria, one of the places that many conservative anglicans found a home in prior to the formation of ACNA denounced this stance in great detail, stating that there is no such thing as a “gay Anglican”. He feared that ACNA was starting to follow the same path as The Episcopal Church for the hospitality that the bishops were seemingly presenting to the issue.¹⁵

¹⁴“Sexuality and Identity: A Pastoral Statement from the College of Bishops - The Anglican Church in North America.” 2021. The Anglican Church in North America. January 19, 2021. <https://anglicanchurch.net/sexuality-and-identity-a-pastoral-statement-from-the-college-of-bishops/>.

¹⁵Chilton, John. 2021. “Nigeria’s Archbishop to ACNA: No Such Thing as ‘Gay Christian.’” Episcopal Cafe. February 8, 2021. <https://www.episcopalcafe.com/nigerias-archbishop-to-acna-no-such-thing-as-gay-christian/>.

Although many people from the fundamentalist wing of The Episcopal Church left to form ACNA, this did not end the friction within the church. While some churches now proudly wave pride flags outside of their parishes to show their openness, other churches sit in the background of the fight for queer inclusion. Many people who disagree with the current path of The Episcopal Church still see themselves not willing to give up on the “big tent” view, believing they can create change from the inside. As the church welcomes more different and marginalized groups of people into the conversation and debate of the church, more fundamentalists are feeling left behind. Just earlier this year in March of 2021, Former Diocese of Albany Bishop William Love left The Episcopal Church to join the ACNA.¹⁶ He did this after resigning as Bishop of Albany in 2020¹⁷ after being found of breaking church ordinance and canon in 2018 by banning same-sex marriages within his diocese.¹⁸

As both churches are moving further down separate paths, each church is developing independent traditional or progressive stances on sexuality and queerness as a whole. These positions and beliefs are rooted in traditional scripture, deepening queer theology, and a reflection on what they see as an endgoal for the church.

¹⁶Millard, Egan. 2021. “Former Albany Bishop William Love Leaves The Episcopal Church to Join ACNA – Episcopal News Service.” Episcopal News Service. March 30, 2021. <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2021/03/30/former-albany-bishop-william-love-leaves-the-episcopal-church-to-join-acna/>.

¹⁷“Bishop Love Ends Lonely Fight on Same-Sex Marriage.” 2020. The Living Church. The Living Church. October 24, 2020. <https://livingchurch.org/2020/10/24/bishop-love-ends-lonely-fight-on-same-sex-marriage/>.

¹⁸Millard, Egan. 2020. “Disciplinary Panel Finds Albany Bishop William Love Broke Church Law in Banning Same-Sex Marriages – Episcopal News Service.” Episcopal News Service. October 5, 2020. <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2020/10/05/disciplinary-panel-finds-albany-bishop-william-love-broke-church-law-in-banning-same-sex-marriages/>.

3. Open Doors, Two Hallways

As so many decisions have been made by the many clergy and laity of the Anglican community within the United States, I wanted to see how current church leaders feel about the path that their church has taken and what they see as the end goal of acceptance in their Anglican faith. I reached out to Rev. Canon Cathy Dempsey-Sims of the Western New York Diocese of The Episcopal Church, as well as Father Arthur Ward of St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church of the ACNA, which is the closest Anglican church to my home. After not hearing a response from Father Ward, I also reached out to Bishop Rt. Rev. Dr. Bill Atwood, a founding member of ACNA who originally left the church to become ordained in Kenya.¹⁹ He is also the bishop of the International Diocese of the Anglican Church in North America, the diocese in which St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church is a part of.²⁰ I did not receive a response from either of the ACNA clergy.

Although I was unable to speak to clergy within the Anglican Church in North America, their goals on sexuality are stated within The Pastoral Statement from the College of Bishops on Sexuality and Identity that was created in January of 2021.²¹ They believe that everyone should be accepted to learn the teachings of the Anglican church, which will lead people to see that although the nature of same-sex attraction is sin, they can overcome it to be a closer follower of Jesus. The statement does admit that some people may have an innate same-sex attraction, and attempts to deliver a kind and encouraging message that is presented in a welcoming manner.

¹⁹ See Footnote 8

²⁰“International Diocese of the Anglican Church of North America.” n.d. Accessed November 2021. <http://www.idio.net/>.

²¹ See Footnote 18

Their vision for the future of the church as it pertains to sexuality is one in which no matter who you are sexually attracted to, you do not act on sexual desires unless it is confined to marriage. Since the definition of “biblical marriage” in the view of ACNA is only that of a man and a woman, those that cannot change their sexuality over time should remain celibate. They see this as not an issue, as the Anglican Church of North America believes that humans were built to find pleasure in worshipping the Lord, and not in worldly activities such as sexual relations. This analysis is deeply absent of the idea of a loving and caring same-sex relationship, as ACNA believes that this is impossible from a religious perspective.²²

A long used slogan of The Episcopal Church is “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You”. The end goal of acceptance in the church for Cathy Dempsey-Sims is that when someone of any background or sexuality sees a sign with this slogan, they know it means them. She sees marginalized people and the ones on the fringes of the faith as the ones that can bring The Episcopal Church closer to the teachings of God. She spoke of the story of Jesus meeting the Syrophenician woman in the Gospel of Mark who is seen as a very “unique figure” to the gospels.²³ A foreigner to the Jewish people and a woman, she faced many struggles during this time, especially as a demon had possessed her daughter. When asked to rid the demon of her daughter, Jesus responded by saying, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” The most common interpretation of this statement is that because she is a non-Jew she should not be helped as Jesus was sent to save the Jews. The unique aspect of this story comes when the Syrophenician woman successfully refutes this

²² See Footnote 18

²³ Setzer, Claudia. n.d. “The Syrophenician Woman.” Bible Odyssey. Accessed November 2021. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/syrophenician-woman>.

statement. She responds “Sir, even the dogs eat the children’s crumbs.”²⁴ This story shows that Jesus, and in turn the church as a whole if it wants to live in the ways of Jesus, can learn the most from those that are unlike them and have faced the challenges of marginalization, which embodies the queer community. By welcoming the queer community into the church with open and accepting arms, Cathy Dempsey-Sims notes, we can find the truth of God’s love. The end goal of this total acceptance is in itself the ultimate goal of a church that is led by love in which there are no more fringes of society, and everyone is welcome to worship God in the way in which they were created to love.

The battle over acceptance in the Anglican community is fueled by the spirit of Anglicanism, but this does not mean that there are no casualties. Many queer people within both churches have faced hardships in their own journeys of acceptance. The Anglican faith communities that exist now are radically different from the United States Anglican environment that I was born into. From the ordination of Gay Bishops, to the schism of churches, to the affirmation of my future marriage, The Episcopal Church has taken bold strides in their mission towards total acceptance. From the rejection of the church path, to the theological offshoring of fundamentalist Anglican churches, to the foundation of a new North American Anglican sect, the Anglican Church in North America has risen up to defend the doorway of the national Anglican “big tent”. The “schismatic events” that have echoed through the recent history of the Anglican community has fostered a generation of change, in which we see that whoever you are, you have your own power to accept your voice in the conversation.

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²⁴*New International Version Bible*. n.d. Mark 7:24-30. Accessed November 2021.