



West Hamilton Parish and the wilderness

Why West Hamilton Parish stood against Motion 30, and life in the wilderness.

Rev. Michael Hewat

I can't recall when Bishop Tom Wright first described international Anglicanism as "a slow train-crash," but on 14 July 2009, when the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church (TEC) in the United States voted decisively to allow the appointment, to all orders of ministry, of persons in active same-sex relationships, he declared that it had "brought a large coach off the rails altogether."

He meant the coach TEC itself. But a more significant coach was derailed too: that which contained evangelical individuals, parishes and dioceses which could no longer stay within TEC. Many are now in coach ACNA (Anglican Church in North America), which has not been allowed to hitch to locomotive Canterbury, but is getting up a fair head of steam and powering along the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans' line. In effect, they jumped tracks and are now heading in the right direction – proclaiming the biblical Gospel and growing.

When a train is clearly on a collision course, at what point does one jump off? Or, mixing metaphors, do Anglican captains have no choice but to go down with their ship?

Early in the church struggle in Nazi Germany, when Bonhoeffer was urging Christians to stand against the Reichskirche, he too employed a train analogy: "If you board the wrong train it is no use running along the corridor in the opposite direction."

Initially Bonhoeffer had little success in persuading his evangelical colleagues to stand apart from the Reichskirche. The reasons why make salutary reading, especially given the reputation of those who espoused them. Karl Barth, for example, argued that they must not be the ones to leave, they must wait till they were thrown out. He also held that they must wait until there was a "clash over an even more central point" (than Aryanism). Martin Niemoller took a similar position. The German pastors naively believed they could change the church from within.¹

Tellingly, when in 1938 an ordinance demanded that every German pastor take an oath of

obedience to Hitler, the Confessing Church failed to stand against it. In Metaxas' words, "Many Confessing pastors were tired of fighting, and they thought that taking the oath was a mere formality, hardly worth losing one's career."² Bonhoeffer was deeply shocked.

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I see parallels here. The same arguments have been rehearsed, over many years:

- Why should we leave? Let the revisionists leave!
- We need to stay in and fight for the biblical integrity of our church.
- Sexuality is not a significant enough issue to divide the Church over.
- I'm not happy, but I'm tired of fighting.
- I have been asked to explain why West Hamilton Parish took the stand it has, and where we're at now.

Firstly, we did not leave, and I did not resign. Vestry and I first wrote to our two bishops on 25 May 2014 expressing five concerns about General Synod 2014. They were:

1. Eroded confidence in a General Synod which devoted three of its four business days to the issue of homosexuality. In the wake of census figures showing we'd lost 17% of our membership in the past seven years what was it thinking?
2. Evidently the Bible is no longer the supreme authority in this Province (our most serious concern).

3. The General Synod has acted unconstitutionally, in breach of the Fundamental Provisions which guard the doctrines of the Church.
4. Motion 30 is pastorally cruel to the LGBT community, effectively ruling out ministries of support and healing to those who wish to live a chaste lifestyle.
5. Motion 30 *does* change things. It allows “two integrities”, which is itself a theological nonsense. It also approves ‘recognition’ and commits to finding a way to bless same-sex relationships.

We said that until these concerns had been satisfactorily addressed we would not sign the required annual Declaration of Acknowledgement of the Authority of General Synod. We welcomed the possibility that:

1. They might be able to demonstrate to us that we had misunderstood Motion 30 and what had gone on at GS 2014, or
2. Failing that, we be allowed to continue God’s mission here apart from the authority of GS, at least until the next GS in 2016, praying that Motion 30’s third resolution “which respects... the option of change” allows for the possibility of repentance and a return to orthodoxy, or
3. If Motion 30 is quashed as the result of a legal challenge, and the doctrines of the Church as they stand are upheld, we would be willing to resubmit.

We made it quite clear that our earnest desire was “to remain a parish family, to continue with God’s mission here... and play our part within the diocesan family.”

Over the next two months we had a number of congregational meetings, prayer meetings, and meetings with the bishop. However, of the concerns we raised, only the fifth was addressed or engaged with in any serious way. The question of whether there could be some way of accommodating us until 2016 was never raised. It was made quite clear that we either signed the Adherence or “forfeited our licences”. In fact licences belong to the bishops: only they can issue, and only they can withdraw. Both mine and my wife Kimberley’s (as Diocesan Youth Facilitator) were withdrawn and we were given notice to vacate the church and vicarage. 95% of parishioners voted to go with us, and have done so.³

Should we have submitted and lived with Motion 30? Most Anglicans seem to be saying yes. Who knows? But will it be any easier to stand against

GS in 2016 if, or rather when, Motion 30 proceeds? Only if orthodox Anglicans stand together, stay in the same coach, and get themselves onto the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans’ line.

While leaving our buildings (and seeing them stand all but empty) has been a source of considerable grief and inconvenience, the past six months has also been a time of extraordinary enrichment, in all sorts of unexpected ways.

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The generosity of Christchurch folk has been particularly affecting, given that most have been through far worse than us. To our shame, we did not respond nearly so generously (as a congregation) after the earthquakes.

Having to relocate our offices to a leasehold industrial unit, and our services to a funeral chapel and then a school, has helped us refocus our mission as a church. We have had times of prayer and fasting, seeking God’s priorities for us. This has sharpened our missional focus.

The agenda for Vestry meetings has changed. There’s no maintenance to discuss. No filing of diocesan statistical and other returns. No longer do we feel as though we’re “running along the corridor (of the train) in the opposite direction.” Rather, the focus is on our mission as a parish.

We have been able to retain all staff and continue all but one of our mission activities (which was building-specific). Levels of commitment have risen, we are more united than ever, and there is a real buzz whenever we gather for worship, prayer or fellowship. We’re realistic about this, that it’s early days. But they are heady days nonetheless.

Doors for mission have opened in unforeseen ways. For example, the local school we now worship in on Sunday mornings is in a needy decile two area. Within a couple of weeks I had met with the Principal and now we have two of our young adults working in the school. We have been asked to supply a chaplain; a recently returned CMS partner will take up that role.

Being free of Anglican institutionalism is wonderfully liberating in many respects. So much of what we used to do was so bound up with maintaining the institution and keeping the Compass Rose flying high, regardless of how precarious the flagpole had become.

One of our harshest critics here, a former Diocesan Manager, opined in the Waikato Times that we have consigned ourselves to the religious wilderness. I can't help thinking that's not a bad place to be. Isn't the wilderness precisely where God is inclined to prepare his people to fulfil their mission?

The wilderness is not the place to stay long-term, however. We know we cannot be an independent church, and have no desire to be. For most of us our church family is the Anglican family, and we are exploring how we can reconnect through the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans. Not that being Anglican will ever be our first priority: that will always be serving our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory in the Church - always.

¹ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010 p.186.

² *Ibid.* p.308.

³ The full text of my letter to the bishops re why I couldn't sign the adherence to GS can be found at <http://westhamang.org.nz/gen/NOTICES-OTHER-NOTICES.html>



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