

**Grace Discussion Group: The Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston**, President and Dean, Episcopal Divinity School. This is a written account of the main points of Bishop Charleston's talk and responses to questions. "The vitality and vibrancy of the Anglican Tradition" September 24, 2006

He began by describing the roller coaster ride that the Episcopal Church had been on in the last 30 years. In this time span, the church has been in disagreement about a number of things. At each juncture, people had the same litany of complaint, "That's it. We're doomed! The church will never survive this. I'm leaving. These people aren't Christians!" And so on.

- Ø Prayer Book Revision
- Ø Women's Ordination
- Ø Barbara Harris, a woman and an African-American, consecrated bishop
- Ø Gene Robinson, a gay man in an "open" relationship, consecrated bishop

After all this turmoil, or even in the midst of it, people say: "When are we going to get back to "boring?" Remember "boring?"

Charleston went on: " Well, here's the Good News. *It's not going to stop!*" "People think to themselves, 'If I could only sit at the feet of Jesus, everything would make sense. People would know exactly what to believe and what to do!'" This is a false premise. He pointed back to the many bible passages describing Jesus' ministry and the turmoil with which he was often greeted. It turns out that the bible is filled with arguments. So if this is often the reality of vibrant religious traditions, what do we do when we don't agree? Breaking up into camps and flinging barbs at each other is destructive and counterproductive. We sound like five-year olds on the playground. When will we grow up? How do we stay together in the midst of these disagreements?

Here he said: "The Episcopal church – the Anglican tradition – has answers to the religious intolerance that plagues our times. We are open-minded, tolerant, facing questions of doubt, living with a faith that is not coerced. He, a Native American who did not resemble many of the Christians around him, described his own conversion to the Episcopal Church as a step into fresh air – "chaos as the air of the Holy Spirit." We choose a faith in the midst of the real world. If one thinks of families, they are not neatly bound together. However, in the fluctuations of daily life, there is trust.

Our tradition provides many signs of hope for this century:

- Ø Preaching and practicing a gospel-centered faith
- Ø Not afraid to ask questions
- Ø Involvement in the important struggles of our time
- Ø Dedicated to Jesus Christ
- Ø Finding strength in spite of ambivalence and murkiness
- Ø Practicing patience
- Ø Welcoming all into the faith
- Ø Witnessing against the fear of "the other"
- Ø Declaring that our church is a "Fear-free Zone"

In response to the question, “How do we stand up for tolerance in a way that doesn’t drift into intolerance?” Charleston opted for **reconciliation** rather than **resolution**. We do not work for some bland, mushy middle ground, but to reconcile ourselves to one another in the midst of these disagreements. We suspend judgment. We “try on an idea” that might be new to us. Labels often do not do justice to the complexity of the issues we are tackling. We practice “transparency” in what we do, making our congregations the strongest witness to our tradition.

In response to the question, “How do we pass this tradition on to our kids?” he spoke about the prayer book in a youth culture that is increasingly “non-bookish.” Use music that has some “swing” to it. “It don’t mean a thing if it don’t have that swing!” Look to resources that are considered “spiritual” rather than religious, the latter being identified with organized religion.

- ∨ Our next guest in this series on the Anglican tradition is Dr. Fredrica Thompsett, Mary Wolfe Professor of Historical Theology at Episcopal Divinity School, and Director, Board for Theological Education, will join us in the Grace Discussion Group and in worship on October 15th. The topic of the day is the Anglican Tradition, its core values in historical perspective.