



MY JOURNEY:

“Why I Am An Anglican and Believe I Shall Remain So”

I was received at St. George’s Episcopal Church in Nashville, TN on May 11, 2008 and became a member of the worldwide Anglican Communion. This mini-book was submitted as an entry in an essay contest sponsored by the St. Boniface Trust of England in December 2011.

It is the story of my journey to become a Christ Imitator.

Blessings,

Agatha Nolen, Ph.D.

Notes: The Anglican Communion is the gathering of Anglican and Episcopal churches from around the world and comprises more than 80 million members in 44 regional and national member churches in more than 160 countries. The Episcopal Church is part of the Anglican Communion, and is comprised of 110 dioceses in 16 nations including the United States. At the head of the Anglican Communion is the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.

December 28, 2011

Dear Trustees of the St. Boniface Trust,

I am privileged to write to you on the topic, "Why I am an Anglican and believe I shall remain so." I start with a prayer in humble thanksgiving:

"Dear Lord, I give thanks for the Anglican Communion. It is through this body that I have found you as a personal friend and confidante, knowing my purpose in life to help in restoring your kingdom. I pray that my witness through the Anglican Communion will encourage others to find you and commit their lives to you as well. Amen."

I come before you today as a lay Anglican with no formal theological training. I have been a faithful church-goer since an early age having been raised as a Roman Catholic, spent 11 years in a Southern Baptist Church, and then re-connected with the Roman Catholic Church in the 1990's during a second marriage. During a pending divorce, I was invited to visit my local church, St. George's Episcopal Church in Nashville, TN where I now am an active and faithful member after reception into the Anglican Communion in 2008. I have never failed to find God present at my church and have come with God's help and other faithful Anglicans to not just know "about" Christ, but to really know Christ.

Over 57 years I have been a member of numerous Roman Catholic parishes and two Southern Baptist Churches as well as visiting countless churches and synagogues with friends and family members. I speak from the experience of being a Christian but not knowing God until I came to

WHY I AM AN ANGLICAN

the Anglican Communion. It is with a heavy heart that I have chosen to reject the Roman Catholic Church not once but twice in my life. Early in life, it could have been written off as the youthful rejection of all things known, wanting to do things differently from my parents, to blaze a new trail, even to God. But the second time was less of a turning away from the Roman Catholic Church as it was a turning towards the Anglican Communion, which I believe eclipses the goodness of Roman Catholicism. I speak not from a full understanding of theological differences between the two, but instead from being a child of God, and finding my way there through the Anglican Communion.

My essay today is in the style of St. Mark the Evangelist, straightforward with everything happening “immediately”. After 53 years of wondering, it feels like everything has happened “immediately” in my faith in the past 4 years. I start first with the tangible, visible attributes that I found as a visitor in the community, and then move to a more global and theological view of the uniqueness of the Anglican Communion. This is my journey in the four years that I have been an Anglican, and I am confident that I will “remain so.”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OF TANGIBLE AND VISIBLE ATTRIBUTES 6

 ONE MISSION TRIP: ANGLICAN HUMILITY AND PURPOSE..... 6

 THE PRAYER BOOK..... 8

 WORSHIP..... 9

 HOLY EUCHARIST: GRACE AND MERCY..... 11

 SCRIPTURE..... 12

 WOMEN PRIESTS..... 13

 ON THE CELIBACY OF PRIESTS..... 14

 EMBRACING DIVERSITY AND UNITY: A CHURCH OF BOTH/AND..... 15

 HEALING PRAYER..... 16

A GLOBAL AND THEOLOGICAL VIEW 18

 MISSION AND PURPOSE: EVANGELISM 18

 THE COMPREHENSIVENESS OF THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION 20

 GOVERNANCE- CALLING ALL LAY MINISTERS TO SERVE 21

 TRADITION AND REASON: NO HUMAN IS INFALLIBLE 22

 DISCERNMENT..... 23

 THE ROLE OF SAINTS 25

 WORLD-WIDE COMMUNION..... 26

SUMMARY 27

Of Tangible and Visible Attributes

One Mission Trip: Anglican Humility and Purpose

My first taste of the Anglican Communion was by invitation to join an outreach trip to South Africa in October 2007. I had felt called to an international mission trip almost a year earlier, but had been unable to find the trip that God asked me to serve on. A work colleague suggested that I consider a trip to South Africa with St. George's Episcopal Church in Nashville, TN and coordinated by Naomi Tutu, daughter of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. I only knew one person prior to boarding the 19-hour flight, but I was amazed at the strength of the faith of my traveling companions and how they treated each other, and me. They are all successful in business: bankers, doctors, magazine editors, and college professors. For the first time in my exposure to a variety of Christians, I experienced the humility of my fellow travelers as they attributed all of their worldly success to God, taking no credit themselves. Previously, I had experienced two types of Christians: those of lower social economic level with only an emotional understanding of faith and those of high intellect and social standing who felt that they were successful because God had chosen them to be so. On this mission trip I met Archbishop Desmond Tutu and, for the first time, I understood forgiveness. In South Africa, my understanding of God became clear; a God of forgiveness, grace, and mercy and one who has made me in His image and wants the best for me. In return, I give all the glory to Him. My good works are the outpouring of that love that God has for me. I have

Nolen, Agatha, Ph.D.

a personal relationship with God and have found this combination of humility and purpose in restoring God's kingdom on Earth unique to the Anglican Communion.

The Prayer Book

Uniquely Anglican, I was curious when I first picked up a Book of Common Prayer, both from the Episcopal Church of 1979 and then subsequently from the Church of South Africa. As a lover of words, I was curious about the need for another “book”; isn’t the Bible enough? Instead I find an enhancement of Scripture through the BCP, providing inspiration through daily collects, the daily office and a complete recitation of the Psalms. It encourages me when my spontaneous prayers have become dry and inspires when I am called to new work for God, not as a replacement for the Bible, but instead as a lamp that illuminates the Scriptures and points the way to a deeper faith. I am always bolstered to know that so many saints have gone before me praying the same prayers from the same prayer book, and having those prayers answered even centuries ago.

Worship

My first worship experience in the Anglican Communion was a commissioning ceremony in 2007 for the South Africa trip at St. George's Episcopal Church in Nashville and then three worship services at St. Thomas in Kagiso¹, South Africa and St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town the following week. I was struck because of the similarities in the service and realized immediately that the Anglican Communion reached around the globe. This was comforting to me that unlike Southern Baptist or non-denominational churches to which I had visited, the Anglican Communion is united worldwide by their common liturgy and Scripture readings. I was no longer on an outreach trip from a church with 700 families; instead I was part of a community with 80 million members. The worship that I experience in the United States and in South Africa is a response to God's beauty and love, engaging all of our human senses in the Christian experience of God as mystery. Worship responds to our basic human need to be loved, rejoicing in our joys and responding to our deepest fears. In the Book of Revelation we learn of a vision of heaven in which there are "flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a violent earthquake" (16:18) yet also a vision of a new Jerusalem in which God will dwell and will "wipe away every tear from human eyes" (21:3-4). We come together in corporate worship as a body in Christ, knowing ourselves as common sinners, and rejoicing together that we are all forgiven. The beauty of the liturgy transcends the worship style, bringing us to Christ whether priests are fully vested, or the choir dances in the aisles as when I am in South Africa. I am glad that worship defines our church. It is through worship that we see a commitment to justice for all people, a mission to

WHY I AM AN ANGLICAN

those who don't yet know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and also gives guidance as to how we should lead our lives in this complex world. Through worship, we gain a sacramental understanding of God's relationship with the world and that God can and does work through material things to change human lives. Our worship liturgy is a language and experience of those who are used to speaking **with** God rather than **about** God. Each service has common roots and follows a specific order. When I worship at St. Thomas in Kagiso1, South Africa, St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, or St. George's Episcopal Church in Nashville, I am transported and united to all other Anglicans through our common worship experience and our Book of Common Prayer. It is comforting to me that there are so many saints that have gone before us in the same sequence of talking with God.

Holy Eucharist: Grace and Mercy

Many denominations of Christianity merely dabble in Eucharist, celebrating only on “special occasions”. In my life, as a survivor of breast cancer, each day is a special occasion and I enjoy celebrating and giving thanks with Jesus through Eucharist each day that I am alive and asked to serve in his kingdom. Our modern day worship in the Anglican Communion appropriately celebrates my excitement of life by taking on two parts; the first is the reading of God’s word and instruction, with origins from the Jewish synagogue service of Jesus’ day. The second part is centered around the bread and the wine at the altar. When we receive the bread and wine, Christ truly comes into our life. For me, partaking in Eucharist evokes a particular vision. As I approach the altar to receive communion, my hands are first folded in prayer. However as I kneel down, or stand as is the church custom, I must first open my hands and release the sins from my life. It is only when I have accepted forgiveness for my sins that my hands become empty and there is room to receive Christ’s body represented by the host and Christ’s blood by the wine. If my hands are still full of sins, I am not fully engaged in receiving the mercy and grace from Christ. So each day as I approach the altar I am fully reminded that Christ died for my sins and by giving them up, I am redeemed. As I consume the bread and wine, I am then fortified and commanded “to do the work you have given me to do, to love and serve you as a faithful witness of Christ our Lord.” (BCP, Episcopal Church, page 366).

Scripture

Raised in the Catholic Church, my knowledge of Scripture was limited, gained only through printed service bulletins. My family did not own a Bible. I was exposed to Scripture first through my time in Baptist Churches but my interest waned when I rejoined the Catholic Church. It has only been through my Anglican community that I have come to love Scripture, delighted with the volume of the Sunday and daily readings. I attend Eucharist daily and consume the intensive readings and sermons. The Scriptures are of extreme importance in understanding God; then we can gather for a simple meal as we know Jesus' presence. Word and sacrament are the means with which God works in our lives to enlighten us and be present with us. I have found this combination of emphasis on Scripture always coupled with Eucharist to be uniquely Anglican, and I find it in all the Anglican churches to which I have traveled in the United States, South Africa and the Holy Land. The Anglican Communion is most firmly rooted in Scripture.

Women Priests

It was always difficult for me to accept that only men could be called to honor God through the priesthood. Raised as a Roman Catholic woman, there were certain holy tasks that were available to women including holy orders as a nun, but I always felt as a second-class citizen because of my gender. As I became a teenager, it became impossible to seek counsel from my local parish priests for the struggles of youth turning into adulthood, particularly on the topics of sexuality and purity. I longed for a female member of the clergy who could provide wise counsel and understand the struggles that women face. When I was first invited to visit my local Episcopalian church, my friend who also was raised Roman Catholic, said, “We have women priests, in fact, they are a wonderful addition to our clergy staff.” When I first began to feel that God was calling me to join the Anglican Communion, I scheduled an appointment to talk with our female priest. Since that initial encounter we have become close friends and confidantes, participating in the same Ladies’ Bible Study. I am encouraged to use my spiritual gifts to God’s glory and am allowed to serve in all capacities in the Anglican Communion even as a woman. This was instrumental in my decision to join the Anglican Communion.

On the Celibacy of Priests

Finding no basis in Scripture, the Anglican Communion does not require priests and bishops to remain celibate. Celibacy distances priests from the experience of life as a married person and parent, making it difficult to counsel others who experience pastoral difficulties in these areas.

Embracing Diversity and Unity: A Church of Both/And

In many denominations, I have found a pendulum of judgment ranging from the acceptance of all regardless of creed or behavior, to the acceptance of only a few who meet human characteristics such as social status or intellectual prowess. In the Anglican Communion I have found a good medium, or a “via media”. A former Bishop from the Diocese of Tennessee in the United States would say, “We welcome everyone to our church, but we also expect everyone to change. In embracing “metanoia”, the church is here to encourage and demand the transformation, the “turning away” from our past life, before we knew God to a new life with a sovereign God.” It is this attitude to which I am most grateful. I came to my Anglican church with the heaviness and brokenness of past sins, knowing that I was shackled by the guilt of my humanity and unable to serve God in the ways that he had asked. With two failed marriages I was not embraced in the Roman Catholic tradition. But my Anglican church embraced me in my brokenness just as Jesus did with the Samaritan woman at the well, not judging her for her lifestyle and condemning her forever, but instead inviting her to join him in a new life with living waters. It is impossible for us to ever compensate God for our sins, and the Anglican Communion embraces the concept that we must look to a new life in God, leaving our old life behind through mercy and grace.

The Anglican Communion embodies the love of Christ: to be clear in the essentials of faith and to promote freedom in the non-essentials.

Healing Prayer

Anointing and praying for the sick was a vital part of Jesus' ministry and of the early church. (Acts 5:15-16) and (James 5:14). In the Anglican Communion, I have found the tremendous power of people blessed with the spiritual gift of healing. From the forgiveness of the people of South Africa post-apartheid, to the political turmoil of the Holy Land and then in my church in the Southeast corner of the United States. We have a healing prayer service at 10AM on Wednesdays and have recently added an evening healing prayer service once per month. It is a beacon of light to the Nashville community and there are amazing accounts of healing. I was most amazed by the compassion and concern of our rector while I was only a visitor to the church. In 2008, I was undergoing breast cancer treatment and developed lymphedema in my left arm, where the lymph fluid accumulated and swelled my arm. I was in considerable pain, bandaged from fingertips to shoulder and undergoing physical therapy visits 3 times per week. I arose one Sunday morning and was overwhelmed by the pain and my aloneness, but I got dressed and went to the Anglican church that I had visited only a handful of times. I wore a long-sleeved coat hoping that no one would see the bandage and ask any questions. I slipped into a pew as the procession began and was thankful that I was in church with a praying community. As I approached the communion rail, I felt warmed by being with other Christians and I knelt down to receive communion in my outstretched hands. Our rector, the Rev. R. Leigh Spruill, who I had briefly met only once before, stopped after he placed the host in my hands, and laid his hands on my shoulder, stopping communion so that he could pray outloud for me and for a recovery for my bandaged arm. I

had not requested his prayers, and in all my years in Roman Catholic Churches I have never seen communion halted to pray for an individual. I arose from kneeling with tears on my face in awe that another human being cared enough about me, a stranger, to call upon his personal relationship with Christ and ask for my healing. It would make a better story if my arm was miraculously healed, but I still underwent 4 additional weeks of physical therapy. Although my physical ailment took a more human course of recovery, I was emotionally and spiritually healed that day at the altar rail. This gesture, praying outloud for another, has come to symbolize for me everything good about the Anglican Communion: to develop as faithful individuals so that we can know Christ and then share his love and healing power with others. I called the church office the next day to ask about joining the church.

A Global and Theological View

Mission and Purpose: Evangelism

The Anglican Communion has the beauty of simplicity for me. Rather than issuing edicts and dictating worship styles as other denominations, the commonality of the Book of Common Prayer unites us all, but leaves allowances for styles of worship that fit the community. It is because of this inerrancy in matters of Scripture, but leniency in matters of style that makes the Anglican Communion a wonderful, embracing community where I feel comfortable inviting others. I was always distressed at the thought of leaving my non-Catholic friends in the pews when attending a Roman Catholic service. I never would invite friends or co-workers to visit when now I invite them constantly to enjoy the beauty of worshipping God in a corporate setting. I often invite people to my church; it is hard to not want to share the goodness of the Anglican Communion with everyone I meet. I am often asked if I also was such an “evangelist” when I was a member of the Roman Catholic Church. I must answer “No, I never invited anyone to join me at a Roman Catholic Church in 30 years of attendance at 8 different parishes.” The answer was clear. The first time I attended an Anglican Church the friend that invited me circled a note in the service bulletin, “All baptized Christians are invited to participate in joining us in Holy Communion.” What an incredible relief that was! To be invited to leave my sins at the altar, embracing the grace and mercy of Christ, without having to even join the church. What an incredible message to demonstrate Christ’s love in a simple gesture of common sinfulness! It is the openness of the arms of the church that makes all

sinners feel welcome. Along with that hospitality also clearly comes responsibility that we are to be transformed as disciples of Christ, learning more each day about our purpose in restoring God's kingdom. The Anglican Communion doesn't measure success by how many new churches are planted or babies baptized, but instead members feel a personal responsibility to "show up each day" with the grace of the Lord and to serve and help others to know Christ.

The Comprehensiveness of the Anglican Communion

Many come to faith after a life racked with sin and guilt and find the evangelical approach of the Anglican Communion to be the channel that leads to God. Others are brought up in a Christian faith and take the track that God comes to us. Although it is difficult for an individual to embrace both ways of knowing, the Anglican Communion succeeds in balancing the two perspectives. The selections of lectionary readings as well as sermons embrace both perspectives on successive Sundays but occasionally in the same service! I enjoy the Anglican Communion as a place where I do not have to “check my intellect at the door” but rather both my intellectual embrace of a God of creation and my emotional need to have God as a loving Father are both nurtured in the Anglican Communion. Providing that delicate balance without skewing God’s message is a spiritual gift that I have found only given to the Anglican Communion, not to any Roman Catholic Church, main-line Protestant denomination nor non-denominational church which I have visited.

Governance- Calling All Lay Ministers To Serve

Unlike other denominations that are either governed solely by a Bishop, or a stand-alone congregation, Anglican churches combine the best of both worlds with governance by a combination of bishops, priests, and lay people. This blend of responsibilities provides for a shared allegiance to God where ordained ministers are not held in higher esteem than laypeople. Because of this allegiance, I am more encouraged as a lay person to act in a ministerial role for others, not because of my training or ordination but merely because I am a child of God and I am commanded to spread the good news to all the nations. Rather than watering down the episcopate, the Anglican Communion provides opportunities for lay people to grow in their faith through their local church, identifying and applying their individual spiritual gifts in relation to the greater body. In the Anglican Communion, even preaching and teaching are not relegated to an exclusive club of “clergy”; instead we all learn together through mutual preaching, teaching and healing for each other. All members of the Anglican Communion are called to be ministers.

Tradition and Reason: No Human Is Infallible

Anglicans have consistently relied on the witness and teaching of the undivided church while Rome has been willing to adopt new doctrines and require belief in them. Distinctive is the proclamation by the First Vatican Council of 1870 that declared the infallibility of the Pope and the 1950 declaration of the bodily reception into heaven of the Virgin Mary. Anglicans speak of using the early undivided church and continuing witness of Christians in every age as tradition in contradiction to the Roman Church where tradition includes papal teaching. Reason involves study and investigation and consultation as well as critical thinking and reflection, not a sudden feeling or individual impulse. Therefore, reason is a gift from God.

Discernment

I have had the privilege of serving on three Discernment Committees for clergy, deacon, and foreign ministry aspirants. I find this unique to the Anglican Communion where faithful clergy and laypeople are called upon to walk with the candidate through a “discernment” process, helping the aspirant to hear God’s voice in their life and to help them read signs of what God is asking them to do. This uniqueness of the Anglican Communion calls together not only many strengths but also uniqueness: a community of faithful willing to walk with an individual in faith, a process of a larger Anglican communion connecting us with Saints from the past, and a group of praying and accountability partners who help us in our walk. Many denominations swing one way or another, either relying on the individual to walk with God through the desert alone in private prayer, or to renounce their individualism and rely solely on the works of the corporate body to earn their rights to heaven. A joyous occasion recently occurred when an Anglican priest friend from South Africa came for a visit to America and baptized the son of one of our South African travelers. It was glorious to see the recognition and solidification of the world-wide church through the act of a South African priest baptizing a 9-year-old American boy into the Anglican Communion.

In the Anglican Communion I am encouraged to not just sit back and allow a priest or pope to dictate my beliefs or my purpose. Instead I am encouraged to determine, with God’s help, what my purpose is in restoring God’s kingdom here on Earth. Through the wonderful encouragement and discernment of my local church, I have identified my spiritual gifts of Healing, Exhortation, Evangelism, and

WHY I AM AN ANGLICAN

Wisdom. The Anglican Communion is broad enough and accepting enough to allow me to use these gifts through various ministries that demonstrate to others how much God loves us. Through God's help and those faithful in my local church, I have determined that my ministry to help restore God's kingdom is to help others to form Redemptive Relationships, renewing our relationship with God and with others. To this end, I am writing a book, publish an active blog on the internet and will be teaching a 6-week series in Spring 2012 for the Nashville community. In addition, my photography captures God's beauty in the world which I also share through my website (www.agathanolen.com). None of this would be acceptable in other denominations.

The Role of Saints

I am comforted when we honor those that have gone before us, even the simple people who are considered “saints” in the Episcopal Church. It was disturbing to hear of the rules of the Roman Catholic Church in venerating Saints only when there are proven “miracles”, constructed of human judgment. It is also important that Anglicans hold up our saints as examples of how we too are to live our lives in Christ rather than considering them as intercessors. It is far more enriching to know that even simple people like me can live a Godly life and be an example to others. It is also amazing that there are so many Anglicans that have contributed so much to the advancement of Christianity, through their writings, their speaking, and through their balance of intellectual and emotional pursuit of God. I have become a student of these “saints” because of their writings and their inspiration as well as how they teach us about important relationship attributes such as forgiveness. Ten of the Anglicans that come to mind include: St. Augustine, C. S Lewis, N.T. Wright, Rowan Williams, Desmond Tutu, Thomas Cranmer, J.I. Packer, Richard Hooker, John Stott and John Donne.

World-wide Communion

In the Anglican Communion we find the blending of our response to Jesus' two commands: "Do this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19) and "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20).

N.T. Wright has stated that there are three ways to break into the Circle of Holiness and once there, all three should be embraced, "to speak up for the oppressed, to confront our sins, and to show others God's beauty." In the Anglican Communion I find the balance between all three that allows individuals, like me, to break into the Circle of Holiness.

Unlike other denominations, the Anglican Communion does not pretend to have the final or absolute answers to the conflicts that we find within ourselves or controversies we find as members of society. However, the Anglican Communion does reinforce that as a community grounded in Scripture, worship, and prayer, we are seeking to know God's will, and with God's grace and mercy we will be confident contributors to restoring God's kingdom. With 80 million members, we comprise the third largest Christian communion in the world and with member activism, we can change this world and indeed help to restore God's kingdom.

Summary

In closing, I have found unique things about the Anglican Communion which allow me to fulfill God's purpose in my life in restoring God's kingdom:

1. It is a via media church, not wavering on Scriptural truths but instead listening to, and providing the compromise for those who use faith to judge others
2. It is a now/not yet church recognizing the glory of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection, but also looking forward, with hope, to the second coming of Jesus and allowing laypeople to participate in preparing the path for the kingdom
3. It allows females to participate fully in what God' has asked them to do, including serving as clergy
4. It is the most Scripturally based of any denomination I have visited with significant readings of the Bible through Sunday worship and the daily office
5. It is a worship based church with the celebration of the Holy Eucharist as a principle activity
6. It is a church which embraces all sinners, but through study and love, expects us all to change
7. It is a church which thoughtfully influences the culture around us through community activities, political and social activism, and beauty in the arts
8. It is a church which welcomes intellectual discourse and is a body of listeners, not shouters, where discussion does not dissuade us from the truths of the Bible but instead allows us to learn of the

WHY I AM AN ANGLICAN

divergence of opinions to better serve Christ in our contemporary world

9. It is a church of healing
10. It is a world-wide communion that supports individuals in their faith.

I have spoken of the visible, tangible aspects of my Anglican faith and also from a more global, theological view, but the most pressing question remains, “Why Do I Believe that I will continue to be an Anglican?”

The answer is short but complex: *“The Anglican Communion allows me to know God.”*

There is nothing more that can be said.

With peace and grace,

Your servant,

Agatha Nolen, Ph.D.