

# THE BAPTISMAL COMMUNITY AND FORMATION AS EPISCOPALIANS: AN INVITATION TO THE CHURCH

*by Robert J. Brooks*

*“Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble.”* (BCP p.298)

This statement, which introduces the rite of Holy Baptism in the *1979 Book of Common Prayer*, speaks with striking clarity. It holds forth a vision of the baptized as those organically joined to Christ’s Body in baptism. It is God who establishes a bond that is indissoluble. We are fully initiated by God’s own act. As the Catechism says, at the time of our baptism, we enter the ministry of the Church and live out that ministry, representing Christ and the Church throughout our lives, according to our gifts. The baptized “take their place in the life, worship, and ***governance*** of the Church” (emphasis added) (BCP p.855).

However, in seeming contradiction to these statements from the *Book of Common Prayer* (Article X, Constitution of The Episcopal Church), there has been a case of “canon-creep” in recent years. The 2003 General Convention most recently passed amendments to canons that set up obstacles to the baptized exercising their ministry as given by God in their baptism, especially in taking their place in the Church’s governance and worship. These changes require that persons be Confirmed before taking their place in the Church’s governance and worship, in contradiction of what is stated clearly in the *Book of Common Prayer*, undermining the Prayer Book’s vision of baptismal community. Indeed, they misuse the pastoral rite of Confirmation as a hurdle to the baptized taking their place in the governance (e.g. a Vestry) and worship (e.g. as a Lay Reader) of the Church.

The observation that recent canonical changes on qualification for offices in the Church were undermining the baptismal theology of the Prayer Book was brought to the attention of the Council of *Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission* (APLM). The affirmation of the ministry of baptism and the dignity of the baptized has been a core principle historically for APLM. At its 2005 meeting in Estes Park, Colorado, the Council initiated a project to alert the Church to the conflict between the canons and the Constitution, and to propose an approach that affirms the baptismal community.

Council members in the Dioceses of Connecticut and California and supporters in the Diocese of Northern Michigan proposed identical resolutions to their respective diocesan conventions in October, 2005. In each instance, the resolution passed

unanimously. The resolution, submitted to the 2006 General Convention, directs the *Standing Commission on Constitution and Canons* to review the canons as part of its agenda for the next Triennium, to determine which of them might conflict with the baptismal theology of the Prayer Book by requiring Confirmation as a requirement for office in the Church, thereby adding an additional condition for a ministry already given by God in baptism. Since the canons must conform to the Constitution, any canons that conflict would be proposed for repeal to the 2009 General Convention. Without prejudging which canons may be involved, the three dioceses have asked the Church's canon lawyers to review this matter over the next Triennium. Three dioceses, in three different regions of the country, have brought to the attention of the whole Church their concern that some canons may be undermining the baptismal theology of the Prayer Book. The resolutions submitted are General Convention Resolutions C020, C031, and C044\*, "Baptism is Full Initiation."

In January, 2006, APLM built upon the action by the three dioceses when several Council members brought the issue before an annual meeting of Anglican liturgical scholars, the Anglican Colloquium of the *North American Academy of Liturgy* (NAAL). The Colloquium spent its entire meeting discussing the papers on Confirmation prepared for the *House of Bishops' Committee on Theology* and on Resolution C020. As a result of that discussion, an "Open Letter to the House of Bishops" was sent in February, 2006, signed by the North American Anglican liturgists, raising certain concerns with some of the Theology Committee's papers. The members of the Colloquium felt that some erroneous notions of Confirmation in those papers might be driving the recent canonical changes.

The "Open Letter" identified the real issue as being formation of Anglican identity. After reviewing briefly the history of Confirmation and the pastoral rite that is in the 1979 Prayer Book, the liturgists noted that the rite itself is primarily about *Christian* identity, and also about the pastoral role of the bishop in the "on-going formation of the baptized as *Christians*, not merely as Anglicans." In no place in the pastoral rite of Confirmation does it claim to be "a rite that signifies Anglican identity, still less an act of fealty to the local bishop." That does not mean that the issue of Anglican identity should not be addressed. It simply advocates an approach that does not distort Confirmation or undermine the fundamental dignity of baptism. These liturgists and APLM advocate no changes to the rites of Baptism and Confirmation, but rather that they be implemented as the Church envisioned in adopting them for the 1979 Prayer Book.

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\* As we went to press, it was unknown which of these would be selected for debate. For clarity, this article assumes that C020 will be selected.

In the “Open Letter” the liturgists offered to join an “on-going conversation about formation, Christian initiation, and pastoral rites of reaffirmation...” Such a conversation, involving bishops, liturgists, Christian educators, justice advocates, and canon lawyers, could develop valuable resources for formation in Anglican identity and for leadership positions in this Church.

The three Resolutions on “Baptism is Full Initiation” provide a framework for this conversation during the next Triennium, as the *Standing Commission on Constitution and Canons* works to conform the canons to the Constitution. It can sponsor a consultation and draw on the expertise of the various groups mentioned. The Anglican Colloquium of NAAL unanimously endorsed the Resolution, later notifying the Presiding Officers of the General Convention and the relevant committees of that decision.

The representatives of the Council of APLM to the *Consultation Steering Committee*, the coalition of justice organizations in the Church, also raised with that group the issue of canons undermining the Prayer Book’s baptismal theology. The Consultation immediately understood this as a justice issue, basing its platform for General Convention upon baptismal ministry and the dignity of the baptized. The theological preamble explicitly reaffirms the Baptismal Covenant. The first platform item, on which all others are founded, is “Continue the radical reformation of the Church (by) remov(ing) all canonical obstacles to exercising the full baptismal ministry in the whole life of the Church (and) conform(ing) the canons to the baptismal theology of *The Book of Common Prayer*.”

The Consultation endorsed Resolution C020. Reaffirming the Prayer Book’s Catechism, the preamble to the Consultation Platform states “We believe that all the baptized are called to share in the governance and mission of the Church at all levels.” In addition, APLM’s representatives wrote a question on support for baptismal ministry, which will be one of the questions requiring a written response from those candidates for national Church offices at General Convention seeking the endorsement of the Consultation. The Consultation Platform was released on Holy Saturday, 2006.

Thanks to a bishop supportive of the Resolution, the *Standing Commission for Ministry Development* endorsed it this spring. Members of the Commission will join with APLM in our efforts at General Convention.

Part of the purpose of the Resolution is to foster education about the vision of baptismal community and the role of the pastoral rite of Confirmation as intended by the Prayer Book. To facilitate this discussion, APLM has arranged for two days of public hearings at General Convention during the legislative lunch breaks on the

first Wednesday and Thursday of Convention. Some who helped write the baptismal liturgy of the Prayer Book and Christian educators who developed resources to faithfully implement the rites will be on hand. APLM is grateful to Lee Mitchell, Louis Weil, Marion Hatchett, and John and Caroline Westerhoff for traveling to Columbus to act as panelists for the public hearings jointly sponsored by APLM and the *Standing Commission on Ministry Development*. The panel will also testify before the General Convention cognate committees (on Prayer Book, Liturgy, and Music and on Canons) when they consider the Resolutions. Many members of the APLM Council are volunteering their time to go to Columbus to help with our efforts on behalf of the Resolution, and to have a highly visible presence for APLM as part of the Consultation's booth in the Exhibit Hall.

The question of canonical obstacles to exercising the ministry fully given by God in baptism has re-energized and recreated the classic witness of APLM in the Church, in this our sixtieth anniversary year. The pattern of that witness over all these decades has been to identify core principles of liturgical reform and then advocate for them. The pattern of this advocacy is that APLM Council members are well networked throughout the Church, enabling them to discern challenges. Those challenges are brought to Council for an action strategy. Then a broad array of networks is invited into that strategy in order to legislate successfully at General Convention.

As you will have noted from my discussion of the issue, APLM has followed its classic pattern on the Resolutions. In our 60<sup>th</sup> year, we have returned to our basic milieu and lived out of it. The Church is feeling our vibrant presence.

Our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary gift to the Church, via this Resolution, is an invitation to a Church-wide conversation (involving liturgists, bishops, Christian educators, justice advocates, and canonists) to reclaim, embody, and re-emphasize the Prayer Book's vision of baptismal community. Through this dialogue we can celebrate our identity as Anglican Christians, generate resources nurturing formation in that identity and equip baptized persons for leadership in The Episcopal Church.

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