

Scottish Episcopal Church

The College of Bishops

REPORT OF A VISIT TO GRACE CHURCH CATHEDRAL, CHARLESTON AND ST ANNE'S, CONWAY.

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN SOUTH CAROLINA, USA

February 9th – 19th 2018

The Rt Revd Robert Gillies

Context

Early in Spring 2016 the Trustees of the Diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney agreed to donate a reprint of the 'wee bookie' communion rite, which Samuel Seabury took back to the USA with him following his consecration as bishop in Aberdeen in 1784, to Grace Church Cathedral, Charleston, South Carolina. Saltire and Lion Rampant flags accompanied the wee bookie as personal gifts.

Grace Church Cathedral is eager to establish its status within the Anglican Communion given the secession of the Bishop, a number of clergy and a number of churches from The Episcopal Church (TEC) in the autumn of 2012.

Currently known as TEC in South Carolina those churches that remained loyal to TEC reorganised themselves into a functioning Diocese.

Litigation began to regain the church property and capital assets that were lost to TEC in South Carolina, along with the Diocesan crest and the legal right to the title 'Diocese of South Carolina'.

A judgment in August 2017 from the Supreme Court in South Carolina went largely in favour of TEC in South Carolina. Though now an application to hear an appeal to this judgment has now been lodged with the US Supreme Court, TEC in South Carolina can move on the judgment in their favour given last August. If I understand things correctly further litigation is now in process to regain the Diocesan Crest and the right of the Bishop of the Diocese in communion with TEC to be called the Bishop of South Carolina.

I needn't dwell on the immense costs of all this though I understand that an insurance policy has covered the costs of the litigation brought by TEC in South Carolina.

Personal Involvement

+Charles vonRosenberg was formerly the Bishop of East Tennessee. He and his wife were guests of the Diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney prior to the 2008 Lambeth Conference.
+Charlie and Annie retired to Charleston in 2011 (?2012).

At about the same time as the secession of Bishop Mark Lawrence and more than half of the clergy and churches of the Diocese of South Carolina from TEC I was invited to preach at the 'Kirkin of the Tartan' in Grace Church, Charleston, by the Rector (Michael Wright) and +Charlie. This I did early in 2013.

A further invitation saw me preaching at the Diocesan Convention of TEC in South Carolina at Pawley's Island, SC, in November 2015 and engaging in activities at Holy Cross Faith Memorial Church, Pawley's Island.

Our hosts on each occasion, as also on this most recent visit, our respective hosts paid the travel costs of Liz and I and provided a week's self-catering accommodation. For this generosity our appreciation is manifold.

This Visit

Upon formation as a Diocese, TEC in South Carolina chose Grace Church, Charleston to be its new Cathedral and the Rector, Michael Wright to be its Dean. There are a further three clergy on the staff, one of whom serves as Diocesan Archdeacon.

At the gift of the wee bookie reprint the Dean invited me, personally, to Charleston to dedicate and consecrate the display of the wee bookie and the two flags. As I was the Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney at the time of this donation the Dean was insistent that I be the one to perform this task.

The date was set for 11th February 2018 and the occasion was chosen to coincide with this year's 'Kirkin of the Tartan'. Two services of Choral Matins (9am and 11am) were held for this celebration. The actual dedication and consecration took place at the later service. Otherwise the two were identical: strongly Scottish, with a military pipe band in highland dress and Scottish music throughout the service. The propers for the day were those for Samuel Seabury day. I preached at both services; a different sermon for each.

It is difficult to assess numbers at both services but at 9am there were over five hundred present and at 11am over seven hundred. The actual total could easily be one thousand.

Both services were stunningly brilliant pieces of liturgy with text book precision and demonstrated a congregation truly passionate about Christian faith.

Growth of the Grace Church Cathedral congregation in the last few years (numerous people said the church is now unrecognisable from what it was only five or six years previously) was also exemplified on Ash Wednesday when again I preached at two further different services. At the noon service attendance was perhaps one hundred and fifty; at the

5.30pm service perhaps three hundred. Both were fully vested communion liturgies with ashing. At this service a children's choir of about forty, a youth choir of about twenty, and the Cathedral's own volunteer choir of around thirty helped lead different aspects of the worship.

Inspiring it was to see two to three hundred at the weekly community meal in the Cathedral's hall after the service. This is fine outreach – made possible by committed volunteers who, I cannot deny, are blessed in their hard work by a state-of-the-art kitchen. It puts many of our church kitchens to shame.

In addition to what I found at Grace Church Cathedral I must also acknowledge the kindness of the current TEC Bishop, +Skip Adams, who, like +Charlie before him has moved from retirement to be Bishop of TEC in South Carolina. In my private conversation with him I saw generosity of spirit and warmth of heart to those congregations which had seceded and which will breathe through those necessary discussions as TEC in South Carolina moves on the Supreme Court judgment of August last year.

Through the week we were in Charleston we were treated very, very well. The self-catering accommodation in historic downtown Charleston was, like 2013, superb. We engaged in a number of vestry and congregational gatherings, personal home invitations, and also the Mardi Gras pancake party run by the Cathedral youth. Conviviality, generosity and warmth pervaded through the whole week.

Conway

For the final four days of our visit we moved to the north of the Diocese to St Anne's, Conway as the guests of the relatively newly ordained Rector, Rob Donehue and his wife Davis.

We first met Rob in 2013 at the Kirkin of the Tartan, then again at Convention in 2015. In between times I had also met him at Sewanee Theological Seminary when I was Bishop in Residence for nine days in 2014. After their marriage Rob and Davis visited Aberdeen in July 2016 as part of their honeymoon. Rob preached at St Margaret's, Aberdeen.

St Anne's, Conway, is a new congregation, barely four years old and is a product of the secession. It was formed by highly committed Episcopalians who desired to remain loyal to TEC. This commitment remains strong. With over seventy attending weekly worship they are outstripping the size of the chapel of Coastal Carolina University which currently they lease for worship. It is likely that a move to more versatile premises will happen soon. I preached at the morning eucharist. Refreshments after the service outside in the warm February air were most pleasing.

Once again, and throughout the weekend in Conway, we experienced hospitality, both with the Donehues and in the homes of several of this new congregation, of the very highest order and at a supreme level of generosity. For this, and for all the attention given

to us in hospitality, for gifts, for those who came and fetched us and took us places our appreciation is fulsome.

Reflection

To hear the pain of those personally affected by secession is heart-breaking. Yet to hear and to see new growth is truly heart-warming. Significant tribute must be paid to all those in TEC in South Carolina who have worked to help see this growth. It is not simply growth through church membership transfer but is also growth through recovery of those who are lapsed and with them growth through personal conversions.

At the end of it all I remain convinced by the dominical command of John 17 that the church must remain One and United. Secession is not a way forward however much disagreement there may be. Paul wrote to churches where there was dissention and urged the pathway of unity.

The Anglican Church worldwide, and its key leaders, must show unity in faithful command to this scriptural witness. Unity in the face of diversity, difference and – yes – disagreement.

+Robert Gillies

Ceres, Fife

28th February 2018