

THE ARCHBISHOP'S 2023 ANNUAL SUMMER ESSAY CONTEST

First Place Winner

Laity

An Anglican Walks Into Elevation Church

By Todd L. Milton

*"I am a companion of all those who fear you
and keep your commandments."*

~Psalm 119.63 (The New Coverdale Psalter)

*"John answered, 'Master we saw someone casting out demons in your name,
and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.' But Jesus said
to him, 'Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.'"*

~Luke 9.49-50

*"It is possible for religious people, and Christians in particular, to follow
Jesus into the kingdom of God and come to know Christ in the modern world.
All that is necessary is that they come to realize that they have not 'arrived' by
means of their particular identification as 'Christians' or otherwise, and that
they be willing to make knowing the kingdom their first priority...Their pride
in orthodoxy (left or right) or in the form of religion they are practicing is their
greatest danger, but it too can be overcome by paying attention to Jesus
himself."*

~Dallas Willard, Knowing Christ Today.

Thick in this weedy, muggy, and buggy summer of 2023, our Archbishop has invited Anglicans in North America, both clergy and laypersons, to contribute essays on the topic, "How can we as a congregation participate in the wider movement of Global Anglicanism?" and, a more obvious question: "What is Global Anglicanism?"

This seemed initially to me like a remote and random topic. In the invitation, references were made to GAFCON and the Kigali Commitment¹. While I initially wondered if we were at a new level of nuclear threat, I soon discovered that GAFCON stands for the Global Anglican Future Conference and that they (over one thousand Anglicans from all over the world) met in Kigali, Rwanda, in April of this year. The statement and remarks that the Conference created were assembled into what is being referred to as the Kigali Commitment.

For those of you who are as green to Anglicanism as I am, I offer the following in grateful response to the Archbishop's invitation.²

While I do not have any statistics to support this hunch, based on our own congregation at Church of the Good Shepherd in Lynchburg, Virginia, the Anglican Church in North America seems to be full of disciples of Jesus who have wandered into the Anglican church from many different sorts of churches. I especially seem to meet a lot of Baptists, non-denominationalists, and charismatics. I fit well into those categories myself. Something has drawn many of us into the Anglican church. I would like to suggest that the spirit and trajectory maintained in Kigali will keep us there. I hope these brief personal reflections will illustrate some important marks of Global Anglicanism and how our congregation can be in step with our brothers and sisters around the world.

At least three significant values define what it means to be a Global Anglican today.

The first value is, for lack of a more appealing word, **orthodoxy**.

A few preliminary, though not insignificant observations are, that the GAFCON gathering was guided by a corporate study of the book of Colossians. Not only, that, but let us not overlook the striking fact that our brothers and sisters in the Third World nations of Africa are acting as apostles and missionaries to us Western Christians in preserving and keeping our faith. One should seriously ponder what that alone says to us and our culture. And praise God for them!

At Kigali, the clearly acknowledged elephant in the room was the recent approval by the Archbishop of Canterbury to allow Anglican priests to offer prayers of blessing for same-sex

weddings. I gather that they are still not allowed to perform a wedding ceremony, but just offer a blessing. Our Southern Baptist brother, Albert Mohler responded with “you bless it, you bought it!” and it seems that our GAFCON leaders agree.³ The firm statement of Kigali is that the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury is not godly and in accordance with the teachings of Scripture; his “leadership role in the Anglican Communion is entirely indefensible.”

These are tough words, and they take a lot of courage to state in the world we find ourselves living in, especially in our slippery Western culture. Personally, I find myself wanting to be softer than this. For over the last twenty years, wherever our family has lived we have had close neighbors who were same-sex couples. One of these couples were two older men, who wore wedding rings years before gay marriage was the law of the land. They were not “in-your-face”, they waved no flags and had no “pride”. They were just good neighbors. In fact, they were much better neighbors than many of church-going neighbors we have had. The “yes man” in me wants to ask: who are they hurting? What is wrong with their living a quiet life in this way? I can relate to the incredible pressure that the Archbishop of Canterbury must be under, along with so many other church leaders who have preceded him down this path of acquiescence.

And yet I find myself, even with these questions and sentiments, thankful that our faith does not rest on anyone’s opinions and feelings. The statement of Kigali is bold and strong while remaining kind and loving.

In our world, where feeling and desire rule the day, it is most assuring that our leaders have stood firm on saying that feeling and desire are not trustworthy foundations. They have stood firm on the biblical definition of marriage and family and gender and offer a true “safe place” among much confusion. I would rather have this comfortable assurance than be at the whim of my own, or yours, or everyone else’s fancy. Let us be most thankful to God that our brothers and sisters (again, in the Third World!) have helped us hold onto our immovable anchor of the Word of God. I have the image of a strong tree, with deep roots, withstanding all types of weather, in season and out of season. This orthodoxy, of which Kigali is only a small example⁴, gives us confidence to face our world with kindness and love.

A second value, while not expressly stated in Kigali, but nonetheless clearly distilled, is that of **freedom**. In attendance at Kigali were disciples and church leaders from several

continents. While all are Anglican and follow a similar liturgical structure, there must be an enormous diversity in the congregations represented. I suggest that our structure as Anglicans creates a great freedom in Christ to grow, flourish, and perform ministry to others both in the church and without.

Many evangelicals⁵ will look on the liturgy and view it as restricting, as rote and religion. But in my experience, it is just the opposite. As an avid gardener, I know that structures creates freedom for growth. Having the structure for the services of the church in place leaves us with the mental room to focus on how to make disciples and serve one another in love. This is not an insignificant point, and I would argue that, while our liturgy appears to be rigid with its sayings, crossings, bowings, and bobbings, in the long run there exists more flexibility in an Anglican church than in almost any other Protestant church – even the Latest-Thing-Since Sliced-Bread Community Church⁶. Any church congregation with any style of service (including especially Anglicans!) needs to carefully guard against confusing the vessel for the treasure. However, I find Anglicanism to be very adaptable to almost any circumstance, any nation, any people.

Our anchor of orthodoxy combined with our ancient structure gives us a great amount of confidence, flexibility, and freedom.

Finally, I want to suggest that, in the spirit of Kigali, we need to understand that this solid footing and stability that has been handed down to us is not for our own benefit. **Global Anglicanism is not for Anglicans only.** It is for the Church – for the benefit of the entire body of Christ all over the world – for the common good.

One of the many personal transformations I have experienced since migrating into Anglicanism is a bigger, broader, and better view of this “one holy catholic and apostolic Church”.

When I was beginning this most unusual and unpredicted migration, I was initially very excited to share what I was learning about the liturgy, the creeds, the ancient church with my close evangelical friends.⁷ They were not the least bit interested. This was, at first, rather disappointing to me. After a few years into this new church family, while I continue to discover the treasure contained in our Anglican tradition, my zeal for converting all Christians to our way

has mellowed and I find myself with almost no desire to proselytize the Anglican way on other disciples nor to encourage them to come to our church.

Around the same time that my wife, daughter, and I were making this transition, our two older sons were clearly not interested in the Anglican style, and we tried not to push. It is not everyone's cup of tea. At that same time, our oldest son began to become very involved with Elevation Church⁸ and found a great outlet for his musical gifts and interests. From time to time, while also visiting different Anglican churches, we would also, on occasion, visit Elevation. Talk about a well-balanced diet!

Upon first walking into Elevation, it took a while for my nose to level and to recover from a bit of snobbishness. We were busy scrutinizing the song lyrics for doctrinal correctness and soon learned of an entire cohort of cynics who were wholeheartedly devoted to disdaining Elevation and especially their pastor. Along these lines, I have noticed (and been rather repulsed by) the spirit of criticism that exists in "evangelical" Christianity towards other churches, music groups, pastors, etc. I call them the "church police". On occasion there may exist legitimate warnings, but overall, they strike me as quarrelsome, unhelpful, and simply puffing out an abundance of hot air into the balloon world of Podcastia⁹. As we have already been reminded, Kigali is most assuredly an instance of the Church taking a firm standing against ungodly leadership in the church. But much of this criticism I'm referring to seems to be in a much different spirit and smells more like a Christian version of a tabloid than anything else.

One of the things that I have picked up on from Anglicans is this willingness to cooperate with all believers as much as possible. Unfortunately, this seems somewhat unique in the body of Christ. However, I have it on good authority that this preservation of unity is a most effective church-growth strategy¹⁰. We should be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4.3). Simply because a particular church is not a part of the "Anglican Way", I gather that our creeds instruct us toward this unity in recognizing the very diverse and worldwide body of Christ. We have much to learn in our fellowship with our brothers and sisters around the world – Anglican or not. For example, when I attend Elevation on occasion, I rejoice at the energy in the church. Emotional expression is challenging for me, which is probably one of the reasons I feel at home in the Anglican living-room of the Mere Christianity house.¹¹ I realize that I need help with this, and I pray, along with all Anglicans:

O Lord, open our lips;
And our mouth shall proclaim your praise.¹²

Surely, my mind is also analyzing their “liturgy” at Elevation and dreaming about a room with windows and light and a procession with a cross – wishing to mix the energetic worship with the liturgy of the church. Yet I’m almost convinced that my attending Elevation Church is a spiritual discipline to teach me submission and that the Church is much bigger than my preferences and analytical criticisms.

In an interview with Eugene Peterson¹³, the question was asked as to how he would advise someone to find a good church. His suggestion was to start with the one that was smallest and closest to your house and after trying that for six months or so, if it doesn’t work, then find another. I would suggest that while we may not need to literally follow that advice, especially as ACNA churches do not exist in every city or town, that we should at least *be seeking to become the kind of people who could easily worship with any sincere followers of Christ.*

As Anglicans, we should be very glad that there exists a church like Elevation to help us with needed energy and enthusiasm in our worship and prayers. And if I were a member of Elevation, or any other church, I would be very reassured that there was such a thing as Global Anglicanism. This anchor holds more than just ACNA churches – it is a solid and dependable place to stand for the entire Church.

A final and natural question is: how does our local congregation embody and participate in Global Anglicanism? A few suggestions for consideration are with awareness and reasonableness.

Awareness. If it were not for this essay contest, I would have no idea about GAFCON and Kigali. Somehow, we need to be made aware of these encouraging happenings in our larger body. This invitation for essays is a good idea along these lines. But more is needed. Perhaps a regular “Welcome to Anglicanism 101” class to open these topics in addition to the many other mysterious nuances of our ancient faith would be helpful. Happenings like GAFCON and Kigali are far too significant to be left to discovery by happenstance.

Reasonableness. “Let your reasonableness be known to all.”¹⁴ I encourage us to determine to be team players in the Body of Christ. Let us resist the temptation to unnecessarily be church police, to be quarrelsome.¹⁵ As is obviously clear from Kigali, there surely are times when we do have to speak up on matters and share hard truth. But it does not need to be the air we breathe and we don’t need to be online troublemakers. Let’s be real world peacemakers.

Let us as confident Anglicans, make sure that we are having fellowship with other non-Anglican disciples as the Lord brings them into our circles of influence. Let us share from the riches of our depository as is helpful, while at the same time having a desire to learn from them. As Jesus’ disciples, let us learn together how to obey his commands and live in his kingdom in the here and now of our uncertain culture. Let’s spread the good infection from person to person.

I suggest that, either metaphorically or even quite literally, Anglicans should walk into Elevation Church (or the Baptist church, or the Catholic church) and there find Him “more than able.”¹⁶

NOTES:

¹ See <https://www.gafcon.org/news/gafcon-iv-the-kigali-commitment>.

² The fact that we are in a church that rewards its members for thinking and writing itself speaks volumes.

³ See “You bless it, you bought it: The Church of England’s bishops descend into utter nonsense.” By R.Albert Mohler, Jr. at <https://albertmohler.com/2023/02/27/you-bless-it-you-bought-it-the-church-of-englands-bishops-descend-into-utter-nonsense>.

⁴ See, for example, the Documentary Foundations section of the 2019 BCP pp.766-802.

⁵ The term “evangelical” is certainly an odd one that can be used in many ways. I’m basically describing my own ilk of Christianity, that of the Baptist/non-denominational sort. For further insight see <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/evangelical-christian/418236/>.

⁶ This is not the name of a real church (I hope).

⁷ I eagerly copied a family prayer from the BCP to use for a prayer meeting and was told that I should share something that the Lord was actually teaching me instead. Also, I was asked to remove the word “catholic” from the Apostle’s Creed.

⁸ Many churches are familiar with Elevation from their excellent worship music. The particular congregation that we visit is in Roanoke, Va. See <https://elevationchurch.org/>. To be clear, I have chosen to pay attention in this essay to Elevation Church for a few reasons. First, they are a part of my own journey as I made my way into Anglicanism. And secondly, they seem to be a good example of a church who has received more than their fair share of criticism from other Christians. This creates a desire in me for unity in the church and a willingness to have fellowship and learning together with all sincere believers. I may have to eat crow for not being more critical of Elevation, but I will take my chances.

⁹ This is just a word I made up to describe this land that we can get lost in very easily.

¹⁰ John 17.21. “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

¹¹ See this excellent illustration in C.S.Lewis’ preface to his *Mere Christianity*.

¹² Daily Morning Prayer, p.13, 2019 BCP.

¹³ I seem to recall finding this on Renovare’s podcast, but cannot now place it.

¹⁴ Philippians 4.5; this is actually translated rather fittingly in the Message: “Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, *revel* in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you’re on

their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!”

¹⁵ 2 Timothy 2.20-26. “Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.”

¹⁶ A reference to Elevation's song, “More Than Able”, and, of course, to Ephesians 3.20-21. “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”