

**“Ongoing Reformation”**

**Psalm 46**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 25 October 2009**

I opened the *Denver Post* on Wednesday morning and saw a headline: “Angling for More Anglicans,”<sup>1</sup> which immediately caught my interest...and not just because I’m angler myself. The story is about a controversial move by Cardinal William Levada, head of the Vatican’ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (which was formerly known as The Inquisition). Cardinal Levada is trying to make it easier for schismatic Anglican congregations to affiliate with the Roman Catholic Church...basically coming back to the denomination the Church of England left way back in 1534.

The truly strange synchronicity is that I’ve been planning to preach today – Reformation Sunday – on the English Reformation, which got a mighty shove in 1534 when Henry VIII declared himself to be the head of the Church of England and broke with Rome.

I also must say that as I read this article about Cardinal Levada’s overtures, it seemed to me as though he was like an amorous male suitor who knew that an old flame’s marriage was in trouble, and then decided to make a pass at the vulnerable woman and attempt to seduce her.

According to the article, “Levada said that Tuesday’s announcement was in response to many requests that have come to the Vatican over the years from Anglicans disillusioned by the progressive bent of the Anglican Communion.” The reporter went on to describe it “as a surprise move designed to entice traditionalists opposed to women priests, gay clergy, and the blessing of same-sex unions.” (*Boy, it’s a good thing there are no gay clergy in the Roman Catholic Church!*)

Cardinal Levada and the current Pope represent the traditionalist stream of Roman Catholicism, and there are many American Catholics who find the conservatism of the church to be nothing less than tragic, as they see the reforms of Vatican II turned back. Yet, Levada is not the only voice of Roman Catholicism. You’ve seen what Sister Mary Alice Murphy has done for the poor here in Fort Collins, and you also may know about Sisters Ardath Platte and Carol Gilbert, who were arrested for their protests at missile silos here in northern Colorado. (Hold that thought, if you will, about women in ministry.)

Cardinal Levada was archbishop of San Francisco and led a march of approximately 1,000 people through San Francisco in 2005 to protest same-sex marriage. He was also one of the leaders responsible for reworking the Catechism of the Catholic Church in 1993, removing much of the inclusive language of the prior edition. And he was man who described all non-Roman churches as being only “ecclesial communities,” and not proper churches, *per se*, because we don’t have the same sense of apostolic succession that the Roman church does. Cardinal Levada’s views may not be characteristic of American Catholics, but he does typify the rush to the conservatism in the Vatican, and this is sad for a lot of progressive American Catholics.

I said that was going to talk about the English Reformation, so I want to draw a contrast between Cardinal Levada and Dr. Katharine Jefferts Schori, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the U.S. Dr. Schori earned her BS in biology from Stanford and then a PhD in oceanography from Oregon State (where she also became acquainted with a faculty member in the philosophy department named Marcus Borg and his wife, Marianne, who is an Episcopal priest.) Dr. Schori brings a background as a scientist to her pastoral and

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<sup>1</sup> “Angling for More Anglicans” in *The Denver Post*, October 21, 2009.

episcopal role, and she is not only the first presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, but the first woman to head any branch of the Anglican Communion.

When *Time* magazine asked about her views of so-called “intelligent design,” Dr. Schori replied, “I firmly believe evolution ought to be taught in the schools as the best witness of what modern science has taught us. To try and read the Bible literalistically about such issues disinvites us from using the best of recent scholarship.”<sup>2</sup> The reporter asked, “Is belief in Jesus the only way to get to heaven?” to which the bishop replied, “We who practice the Christian tradition understand him as our vehicle to the divine. But for us to assume that God could not act in other ways is, I think, to put God in an awfully small box.” She said, “Our focus needs to be on feeding people who go to bed hungry, on providing primary education to girls and boys, on healing people with AIDS, on addressing tuberculosis and malaria, [and] on sustainable development.”

It would be difficult to think of two leading clergy who differ more than Cardinal Levada and Dr. Schori. And if you think that the English Reformation doesn’t really matter very much, think again.



Back in the 16th century, there were English theologians (primarily at Cambridge University) who were convinced that the reforms of Henry VIII’s Church of England hadn’t gone nearly far enough. Drawing on the thought and experience of continental reformers like Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, English radicals began to attract the attention of the Church of England in a not-so-positive way.

In 1581, Robert Browne, who had been on “the left wing of the numerous puritans at the University of Cambridge gathered a separated congregation in Norwich.”<sup>3</sup> This was not smiled upon by the Church of England, who tried to retain control of the ecclesiastical structure, theology, and practice. English Separatists objected to things they considered unreformed, such as kneeling to receive communion, parsons wearing a surplice (a white over-garment), and not having the liberty to select and dismiss their clergy. In fact their reforms went to the very heart of defining what a church is. According to Browne, a church is “a company of Christians or believers, who by a willing covenant made with their God, are under the government of God ad Christ.”

Most of you probably recognize much of Separatist theology and governance as part of our Congregational and UCC heritage, and know that our lineage includes the Separatist Pilgrims of Plymouth, which explains the naming of this church.

But, what in that storied legacy of the English Reformation connects us to the present day, when the church universal is populated by both Cardinal Levada and Presiding Bishop Schori?

Part of the answer lies in the genius of Congregationalism and the local autonomy that underlies it. Part of it is in being the denomination that gets there first, pushing the envelope, expanding the boundaries, and being more of a movement than an establishment.

Earlier in the sermon, I asked you to hold a thought when I was talking about Catholic religious sisters. Their ministry and their witness is the kind of leadership that we in our tradition benefit from in our ordained clergy. Back in 1852, the Congregational Church in South Butler, New York, took a step that would change the face of American Christianity; they ordained Antoinette Brown Blackwell. In doing so, they took a bold – a radical – step that changed the lives of women and the church as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup> “Ten Questions for Katharine Jefferts Schori” in *Time*, July 10, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation*. (London: Penguin, 1990 ed.), p. 205.

It was more than 100 years later, in 1956, when the successor body of the Presbyterian Church USA ordained its first woman minister. In the 1970s, the ELCA Lutherans ordained their first female pastor (the Missouri Synod still does not ordain women.) And in 1976, eleven women were first ordained in the Episcopal Church (though the Church of England didn't ordain them until 1992).

If you think the English Reformation doesn't matter; think again.



My strong assumption is that fundamental change will not occur in the Roman Catholic Church until women are ordained and in positions of authority. Sexism is a sin. Moreover, we cannot neglect the leadership of 51 percent of the people on the planet and expect to thrive. I give thanks for women in ordained ministry, for the gifts they bring to the church, for the perspective they share, and for the leadership they exhibit.

Sometimes, change happens and we aren't fully aware of what it means or what the overall shape of the change looks like. That's where historians come in. My hunch is that 100 years from now, church historians will remark about the shift in the church in the first part of the new millennium as a time of realignment of progressive Christians and conservative Christians. If we look not only at the departure of traditionalist Anglicans (which happened to St. Andrew's Episcopal Church here in Fort Collins), but also to the Southern Baptist Convention ceasing the ordination of women, we will see part of that realignment. But some of the disaffected Southern Baptist congregations have become part of the Alliance of Baptists, a new denomination that is in conversation about a cooperative relationship with the UCC.

It may not be an era of mergers, like the era in which many of our current mainline denominations were formed – UCC, PCUSA, ELCA. but it may be a time when progressive churches – those who see themselves as continuing to reform the church – come together in new ways. Maybe you can't image a United Church of Christ with Presbyterians and Methodists, but our sister church, The United Church of Canada, is composed of Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterians and has been since 1925.

One of the great myths is that “the church will always be there.” I don't know if that's true. Unless the church can engage ongoing reformation, we will die. We must be the *movement* and not the *establishment* if we are to be vital. Plymouth is bucking the trend, growing in a period of decline. We at Plymouth must pay attention to where God is calling us and what kind of future we can help create. It will take all of our strength to work for our faith, just as our ancestors did in Plymouth. So, let us recommit ourselves to our faith and to being the progressive church God calls us to form. Amen.