

I want to respond to Phil's wonderfully clear and compelling set of questions regarding Alternative Oversight.

I. Do we want to stay Anglicans and/or Episcopalians?

The question of AO makes sense only if we wish to remain within the Episcopal Church and/or the Anglican Communion. Let us be clear on that. And let us each answer that for ourselves. The "alternative" part makes sense only within a functioning structure of "given" bishops under whom we now live and work. If we want to throw over or leave this structure, then we have no need of "alternatives".

Of course, answering this question is not as easy as it might seem; nor is it certainly a "once and for all" decision, at least in personal terms. I, for one, am raising the question within myself over and over. I think I have made up my mind, only to discover the next day (or hour) that I have not.

Intellectually, however, I can say that I am still committed to being an Episcopalian Anglican. (The Episcopalian part will be discussed a little below.) There are all kinds of reasons – as Phil observes – why becoming a Roman Catholic doesn't make sense, at least to me. Curiously, I felt more called to the Roman Catholic church *before* the present crisis than I do now; perhaps simply because the concrete challenges of the present and the decisions they demand have made more concrete as well the lay of the ecclesial land in which Roman Catholicism exists as well. Despite claims to the contrary, many of the issues that fueled the Reformation remain unresolved: ecclesial corruption, moral hypocrisy of a destructive kind, failure to be honest before man and God, cultural blindness, pride and power, and – because these elements have not been faced in many ways, but have been upheld through the structures of the church – a constricted and in some cases even a deformed doctrinal framework. In addition, it is clear from every indicator that the American Roman Catholic church is filled with people who think exactly like those in ECUSA – laity and priests together.

I remain convinced – intellectually! – that the conversion of the Church is a deeply complicated matter, that must demand far more than where I hang my hat. And that in this case the cost of this conversion cannot circumvent the facing of the present in each of our divided churches.

And if not the Roman Catholic church, why any other?

Phil's sense that Anglicanism has at its root the basis of its own impossibility and instability is, of course, correct. But there is no other sturdier root within the Gentile churches we represent; the true "root", by definition, lies outside of ourselves and structures, and we live and die in relation to it, rather than identified with it – a long theological reflection, incapable of being pursued here, and tied in part to Romans 11.

I concur with the Windsor Report's foundational claim that the Anglican Communion's calling lies "before the eyes of the world" at this stage. We are witnesses to them, first of

all, and not to our own sense of belonging to this or that group. The right witness to the world may well lead to the dissolution of this Communion in the long run; but in the short it lies in the commitment to its healing – not in the healing itself, but in our engagement with such a vocational vision.

In this sense, the “functioning structures” of the Communion remain the context for my ministry. And so, from my point of view for now: Alternative Oversight is a possibility to be considered, since I am still committed to living as an Anglican Christian.

II. Why would we need Alternative Oversight?

The only reason we would need them is because, somehow, the “given” bishops of our structures are not functioning faithfully. What “faithfully” means is well-outlined by Phil, using the creedal marks of the Church.

It must be said, furthermore, that the “structures” of our Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion apparently include within them the provision of AO in certain cases. This needs to be emphasized: AO is not a contradiction of the structures themselves, but a way, under certain circumstances, of living within them. (On how AO “fits” in these structures – and in response to some of Phil’s reflections -- see below.)

There is an important question to raise here. Phil outlines his application of the “marks of the Church” in terms of “provincial” integrity: does ECUSA *as a whole* (he seems to ask) represent these marks? And his posing the question of AO is tied to an answer to this provincial evaluation. Thus, he appears to be saying, “if ECUSA has failed to embody these marks, then AO is necessary, and, by implication, AO that is *extra-provincial*”. That appears to be the direction leading to his citations on behalf of episcopal boundary-crossers in the early Church.

So, an important issue is laid out here in our reflections: are we to analyze our church’s failures that might lead to the need for AO primarily on a provincial or on a diocesan basis?

The answer to this question may not be as clear as we would like. The Windsor Report, for instance, is responding to a crisis in communion that has its basis in ostensibly provincial actions – General Convention especially in our case. And much of the discussions on “autonomy” and “adiaphora” and “subsidiarity” and even “instruments of unity” hinge upon this political reality.

However, the Windsor Report also defines the actual religious working of the church, not in provincial or national terms at all, but in terms of “bishops” themselves, and of their individual character and ministry as it unites in “communion” around the larger trans-provincial/national church (paragraphs 63-66). A careful theological reading of these sections, in relationship to the other more structurally-oriented (and longer) sections of the Report would seem to me to imply that the Communion’s provincial/national organization is really quite secondary to the primary character of the church as

“episcopally ordered”, and that “unity” is primarily located in the “synodality” of bishops around the world, however expressed in terms of political gatherings.

This, in fact, is one of the reasons why Gene Robinson’s election is so problematic and destructive: as a single bishop, lifted up of course by a national church, he has single-handedly acted as a source of disunity, and the national church that has promoted this dynamic is in fact guilty *through his disintegrating ministry* which it has embraced.

But what if our “local” bishop were, in fact, witnessing faithfully to the “unity” of the Communion – in faith, holiness, and common life? Would there be a need for AO, simply because the national church as a whole, had violated the life of the Communion? The Windsor Report, in any case, seems to think not. At least its discussion of AO focuses solely on the direct relationship of bishop to diocese/parish/congregation (par. 147-155, esp. 148-149).

I tend to agree: the bishop is the primary ministerial focus of the church’s authoritative structures; and therefore, in our case, we need to focus our reflections on our relationship with *this* bishop – Robert O’Neill – and not with the General Convention or the House of Bishops as such, except insofar as our bishop’s ministry is embodied for us in a relationship between himself and these other bodies.

In this light, then, I would suggest trying to discern our own bishop’s ministry in relations to Phil’s outline:

I. The Church is first One. *Unity is its prime characteristic. Whatever else the Church may be, it is one -- visibly one, unmistakably one, incontrovertibly one, in communion. In what sense does our [Province] **Bishop** demonstrate this understanding?*

My response: our bishop has tried to side-step this calling, and the more he does so, the less he appears to be engaging it. He has made commitments to “communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury”. This is clearly not enough; certainly not within the theological framework of the Windsor Report nor (I would argue) of our own Constitution: “communion” has to do with the “body”, not simply with a titular representative of it, and only with the latter insofar as he truly does represent the former.

II. The Church is Holy. *Holiness is of the essence of the Church. The Church, therefore, cannot cease to be holy without ceasing to exist. As the unity of the Church implies its indivisibility, so the sanctity of the Church implies its incorruptibility. In what sense does the [ECUSA] **our bishop and his ordering of diocesan life** retain marks of Holiness?*

This is a bit muddy, I suppose. On the matters of the Church’s/Communion’s teaching of sexuality and marriage, he has fudged and certainly not led. He has also been inconsistent and perhaps misleading.

III. The Church is Catholic. *No one can rightly apprehend the universality of the Anglican Communion who does not first understand the nature of the Church's unity. Unitas Catholica, quae toto orbe diffusa est (The Catholic unity which is spread throughout the whole world), is the canon to which St. Augustine holds the Donatists. How does the [ECUSA] **bishop** continue to participate in that unity?*

This is hard to evaluate. A simple question would be whether he is welcome or not at, say, CAPA meetings or individual CAPA dioceses. Could he demonstrate that he is? What about his relationships with ecumenical partners? Where is he in terms of his relationships with the RC Archbishop? Orthodox?

IV. The Church is Apostolic. *There can be no "faith once delivered to the saints" without constant instruments of unity by which important aspects of faith and order may be determined. There can be no true universality without agreement, and no agreement without some standard of uniformity. There can be no apostolic order without an apostolic instrument serving "as a head over the members." Does the simple fact that the [ECUSA] **bishop** has **valid** orders make it ipso facto a portion of the Church Apostolic?*

Here is where our bishop seems to me to stumble grievously: he refuses to "teach" the faith of the Communion as it has been delivered. And in this, he breaches "unity" and "catholicity" most clearly.

What seems clear is the Bp. O'Neill has not made an open and embodied commitment, in a time of uncertainty and confusion, to the Church for which he was ordained a bishop – not simply "locally" but for the "church universal" (WR par. 64: "It has always been maintained within Anglicanism that a bishop is more than simply the local chief pastor. Bishops represent the universal Church to the local and *vice versa*" – something affirmed in the American BCP within the service of episcopal consecration etc.).

It seems to me that AO will be necessary for many if he does not make such a commitment soon. It may be necessary even now – that is matter for much personal discernment. However, in the context of the process within which the Windsor Report has done its work and stated its claims, it would appear that there may be window of decision-making to be expected for our bishop. I cannot believe, however, that it can last much beyond the February Primates Meeting. He must demonstrate his willingness to be a bishop in the Communion soon, or lose his credibility as a representative of the Church Catholic (however confused that may be in these confusing times).

A final question is: to what end AO in such a case? The "end", it appears, is the healing of the Communion, not for the sake of the Communion's future, but for the sake of the world. As the WR states in its final paragraph, it is possible to "speculate" about a number of different outcomes; other than such healing, all such outcomes will prove destructive of some aspect of the Anglican Communion. It may well be the destruction of the entire ECUSA, for instance (in which case AO will have very little long-lasting good come of it within Colorado); or it may be the destruction of some portion of ECUSA (i.e. through a process of sifting or "realignment" or schism), in which case AO

in Colorado may prove one element in the clarifying of this shake-down. Or it may be the destruction of the entire Communion itself, through a range of international fragmentations. At that point, AO will have proved but a brief stepping stone to each of our individual choices as we are all “scattered” from our church in probably many different directions.

AO’s usefulness, then, lies within a future of communion healing; and we would embrace it properly only in such spirit. If this proves a false hope, so be it. And if the hope is not genuinely held, AO is not genuinely sought.

III. What kind of Alternative Oversight?

From things I have said above, it should be clear that I would favor seeking AO, if necessary, from within the functioning structures of the Communion as outlined in the Windsor Report. It must be said, however, that WR is merely “recommending” the engagement of these structures. It may well be that these recommendations, on a Communion-basis, are altered in the coming months.

However, if they are not, they clearly point to the following: AO is requested and offered within the format of mutual consultation and agreement with the (problematic) diocesan bishop; it is not sought and received outside such mutual agreement. The Windsor Report clearly rejects the AMiA procedures as “outside the bonds of communion”, and warns against continuing the practice of extra-diocesan or extra-provincial “intervention” without mutual acceptability. (It does not, however, forbid the use of extra-provincial AO, if this were agreed upon [cf. par. 152].)

Many people, as we know, have rejected this process – already outlined by ECUSA’s HoB – as unacceptable. On the other hand, it has hardly been tried with much energy. The WR asks that it be tried, and seeks to hold parties accountable for its usefulness. In this the Report is at least consistent with its principles, if perhaps naïve about Anglicans’ willingness to embrace them responsibly. In any case, the Report seems to designate ECUSA as the place wherein, at present, Anglicans in the United States are to be Anglicans “in communion”; and nowhere else at present.

I would suggest, therefore, that at the moment and if necessary, we attempt to maintain the request for AO within such a “communion framework”, not least because we have no reason as of yet to believe it will fail.

Phil’s examples of “boundary-crossing” from the past, as it were, are certainly relevant up to a point. But perhaps not as far (yet) as some have claimed. In the first place, the kind of actions mentioned from the early Church are not, strictly speaking, formal “precedents” to be emulated. That is important to note. Indeed, several of the incidents listed were condemned by later councils and “saints”. Second, I do not believe we can take ECUSA and the Anglican Communion simply as a “microcosm” of the early Church Catholic in the latter’s travails. There are, obviously, analogies and often essential ones.

But the divided and denominational church we live in, internationally and locally, is theologically and structurally, quite different from the early Church. We must gauge the cause of “unity in faith and discipline” quite differently than in the past. Thirdly, the Communion of which we are part has – thus far – called us to a different path. Perhaps that will change. But we live in a world and church of “prophets”, and I certainly do not bear that mantle.

IV. How go about it?

1. I believe we need to work as far as possible as a group of clergy/congregations; no lone rangers.
2. We should agree upon a clear framework, with a time-table, that would provide criteria for when and if we seek AO – e.g. our bishop or Standing Committee signs a formal “statement of regret” by such and such a time, or we go forward with AO.
3. We begin as a group of clergy by seeking AO for our “pastoral direction” as clergy only (not on behalf of the congregations themselves). I remain convinced that if we take the first step in terms of entire congregations, the process will degenerate into conflict before we get off the ground.
4. We propose several provincial and extra-provincial possibilities, with an eye to mutual acceptability.
5. We see this process through, according to a time-table we jointly propose, that is clearly brief and succinct (the HoB process appears lengthy; but it needn’t be so if pressed), and accountable.
6. Part of this accountability will involve public informing of Communion representatives around the world, with the agreed appointment of a single “advocate” on our behalf from outside ECUSA (preferably a Primate).
7. If this process is avoided or side-stepped, we will need to have in place plans for some response. My guess, however, is that events in the larger Communion will have overtaken matters by this point!