

## The Sanctions

If you ever saw the movie, "Ant Man" (one of those Marvel super hero flicks where a regular Joe gets turned into a crime fighter), there is a climactic scene where the ant-sized hero has to fight another tiny super villain called "The Yellow Jacket."

They end up having their big fight in a child's bedroom with a Thomas the Tank Engine play set. When the camera pans in close to the fighters, the noise is deafeningly loud. The engine bears down on one of the tiny combatants, and it looks epic when they collide. Then the camera pans out, and you see a quiet scene in which one of the toy trains gently falls over.

That's what my world feels like these days. Chaos and loud shouts in our tiny little ecosystem, but on the outside, all is quiet.

Here's what I mean. Last week, the leaders of the Anglican Communion (archbishops and presiding bishops collectively called "primates") met with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the symbolic head of the entire communion. At the meeting, primates of the global south (mostly Africa, South America, and parts of Asia) voted to sanction the Episcopal Church of the United States because of our decision last year to allow same sex marriage.

They had already threatened "punishment" against us in past years because we ordain women, called a female Presiding Bishop, and ordained gays. Now, though, approving same sex marriage was the last straw. They could not, so they claimed, let this go without "consequences" as the Archbishop of Canterbury called them.

Maybe you read something about this - it was certainly in some secular media. But if that's where you got your information, it was probably wrong. First, it said that we were suspended from the "Anglican Church". Not true. For one thing, there is no Anglican Church. We are not a church at all but a communion of independent, autonomous churches. For another, we were suspended from serving on certain committees and voting on international votes. As one colleague put it, "If our punishment is to not have to go to more meetings, we ought to get in trouble more often."

But, you may ask, if the churches are independent and autonomous, why were they sanctioning the Episcopal Church in the first place, and what does it mean? Does that even matter to me in the larger sense, or is it just a toy train gently falling over in silence?

The global south churches live in a dangerous world where Christianity in general is often persecuted. We get that. They live in a part of the world where homosexuality is largely illegal, punishable by life in prison or even death. The president of Ghana once noted that he had the goal of killing every homosexual in the country.

So, they are sensitive about being identified with "Western values" like civil rights for women or gays. Their argument is that the Episcopal Church's decisions (which affect only our church) negatively affect how people see their church, and they suffer the consequences.

While I am sensitive to their very real struggles, there are a couple of issues which make me say, "Now wait a minute." First of all, that tiny train falling which you didn't hear is because we are not a big powerful church. I find it difficult to believe that people in Nigeria or Kenya or Ghana, outside the Anglican context, even notice what the Episcopal Church does. That is, unless the Anglican churches of those countries make a big stink about it. So the argument that our sneeze is causing their pneumonia doesn't pass the stink test.

Secondly, it is not because our actions affect them that they themselves encourage such draconian punishments against gays in their own countries. They genuinely feel homosexuality is wicked and want to make them pay for their wickedness. That's why some bishops there have said they encourage long prison terms for gays and their supporters, and even the death penalty for gays.

Which is to say that they don't only want to refrain from marrying or ordaining gays, many of them want to root out, punish, eliminate all gays. A statement from the primates meeting assured the world that they wanted to minister to gays, but their calls for harsh measures tell another story.

And that is why their calls to punish the Episcopal Church do not sound to me to be very credible. Their stance is that we are unrepentant sinners who must be made to see the error of our ways or, after a period of three years in modest exile, possibly excommunicated.

There are a whole lot of things that go into being an Anglican. One of them is that there is no central authority. Yet, these primates have taken it upon themselves to become a central authority in order to make us conform to their standards.

Within our communion, this is a big deal. I've been listening to and reading comments from clergy and other interested Anglicans from around the world. They declare this to be the end of the communion, the beginning of schism, or possibly justice being served on a recalcitrant group of rich westerners who want to force everyone to do things their way.

For the record, the Episcopal Church embraces the notion of autonomous churches within the communion, so we only make rules for ourselves and would not presume to tell others how to be the church in their own contexts. That's between God and them.

I suspect, however, that in time other churches will also approve same sex marriage. Canada is set to do so this summer. So is the Scottish Episcopal Church. New Zealand is looking at it, and even the Church of England, the mother church, is taking a second look. In time, global south churches will have to decide if they want to be part of a communion where several member churches choose non-discrimination against gays. Unlike them, who are willing to eject those with whom they disagree on matters of doctrine, our church has no such desire. We will continue to walk the path with them as long as they are willing.

Not that you would ever notice any of this. After all, Anglicans are not a big part of the American religious or cultural scene. But just know that the sound you don't hear from the outside is mighty loud amongst the church ants.