



E-pistle #3

Living stones being built up into Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:4-12)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

This is the third general newsletter to those who have expressed an interest in the Anglican Sojourner Fellowship (ASF). It has taken longer to prepare than I would have wished for some of the reasons outlined below, but there is progress to report and new challenges to discuss. The first report of progress is that the Anglican Sojourner Fellowship now has a page on the ANiC website. It provides a brief summary of the origins and aims of the Fellowship and includes a link to the two previous E-pistles as well (for those of you who have not received them). The page can be found at:

http://anglicannetwork.ca/sojourner_fellowship.htm

Hidden Pain

Over the past weeks, in stories from some of you, I have become increasingly aware of the deep undercurrent of pain borne by many who feel abandoned and estranged from their churches. Being an “orphan” is not just about the circumstances of isolation, but about disillusionment and loss of trust. As I have experienced it myself, it is very often a pain hidden even from the bearer. What is more serious is that loss of trust in the institutions of the church can so easily lead to estrangement from the Lord of the Church. In forming this Sojourner’s Fellowship, we must each be prepared to address this issue. We need to support one another in seeking healing and we must each be prepared to consider that a part of that healing will involve our own acts of repentance – and of an ongoing commitment of turning to Jesus Christ.

Prayer is the foundation for the development of this Fellowship, so I want to begin this newsletter with a prayer for all those who bear these burdens, knowing that I am one myself. I ask you to include the following in your prayers over the coming month.

Lord Jesus Christ, amid all the public shame and the physical pain of the cross, you also bore the ultimate agony of isolation from your beloved Father: the sense of having been abandoned by God. We come before you now, bearing our own wounds of rejection and isolation, knowing that you have been in that place before us. In your mercy, we ask that you will use this Sojourner Fellowship to help give each one of us the courage and the humility to face our pain as we turn to follow you. AMEN

The Website Challenge

As mentioned above, the ANiC Website now includes a Sojourner Fellowship page, but the Fellowship’s own website is still not available on the internet. Most of the delay has been due to the myriad of decisions required and to my own profound ignorance of the intricacies of website development. We

have a logo for the site (see above) and a mock up of the home page, but I am increasingly aware that Daniel, our web designer, and I cannot make all of the design and content decisions by ourselves. The reality is that if this site is going to serve your needs and those of others, it is going to require participation and input in the development of the site's content by those who will use it. For this reason, Daniel and I have agreed to post an initial draft version of the homepage on the internet shortly for you to look at. We will also provide an initial set of secondary pages that can be accessed through the home page. Parts of the site will show dummy text or an "under construction" sign. It will also allow visitors to post short comments. From this point on, we will need the feedback and the contributions of those who have expressed an interest in participating in the ASF.

Secondary Pages

We have identified an initial group of secondary areas with the following tentative headings:

- Front Steps
- Worship & Prayer
- Fellowship
- Meeting Rooms
- Church Office
- Resource Centre

Our current intention is that each of these areas, with the exception of the "Meeting Rooms" section, will include an ability for visitors to post short comments on the content. We will try to include some preliminary content and links to other "virtual church" websites to stimulate your thinking but we will also need active assistance in identifying and evaluating the possibilities that emerge.

Developing the Website

As mentioned in the past, I am prepared to assume a role as the initial "general" editor of the site to ensure that the pieces all fit together, but the time is at hand to recruit others who can actively participate in the website development process.

There are a number of issues that will need to be addressed. My hope would be that for each issue outlined below, individuals – perhaps 2 or 3 for each issue - would be prepared to take on the task of exploring and shaping that issue and of advising on how to implement it on the website.

Specific Issues

Please read this through with a view to identifying areas (including others that I have not identified) where you would be willing to help.

Top Priority

1. From my perspective the most urgent need of all at this time is for one or more individual to join me in taking training on how to **maintain and update the website**. (If you already have all these skills so much the better!)

High Priority

2. Establishing a **meeting place** - How do we get to know one another? How can we best use the

internet conventions of the forum or blog or chat room? What information should be shared among members and how?

3. What kinds of **news and information** should be included on the site? How do we gather this information and keep it current for members?
4. Do we just focus initially on **worship resources** (liturgy, prayers, sermons, etc.) that can be accessed and downloaded by individuals or should we also try to establish group worship on an interactive basis? (See some of the virtual church links at the bottom of this newsletter.)
5. How can we set up and manage an **intercessory prayer chain** or forum for the ASF?

Next Priority

6. How do we develop a library of **sermon materials** for members? How best can we work with existing ANiC parishes to access and perhaps to supplement some of the existing material that they carry on their own website? Can we look toward developing an integrated searchable data base of ANiC sermons – and perhaps other sermon resources as well?
7. What kind of **personal prayer resources** would be useful to include or to reference on the site? How do we gather and update this material?
8. Can we develop a **music resource** for members to access for worship?
9. What **rules** should we establish **for individual conduct on the site** and the way we work together?
10. What are the most important **links to other organizations** and how should we develop them?
11. In developing a **resource library**, how do we winnow through and select from the huge array of available information in order to identify and select material that will support and enhance the Christian lives of all those who use our site? How do we organize and showcase these resources so that they can be easily accessed by users (individually, in small groups, through ANiC parishes, etc.)

Membership

There is also one general issue where I would appreciate from as many people as possible. How many **categories of membership** do we require and what should be their roles? I have raised this issue before, but we need to make at least an initial decision to move forward. I suggest this decision should be guided by the following basic principles:

- Keeping categories as simple as possible
- Always making visitors welcome (as in a physical church setting)
- Providing as much flexibility as possible to allow the inclusion and belonging of individuals whose circumstances will vary greatly - and whose needs will also change over time
- Ensuring that there is a core group within the fellowship to provide direction and continuity
- Providing a safe place for individuals to reveal themselves within the Fellowship while protecting their privacy
- Protecting the site from misuse or malicious attack by outsiders.

Reflecting on these principles, it seems to me that the simplest membership structure to start with will be to have just two categories:

- **Guests** with access to the public activities of the Fellowship and an ability to interact on the basis of some form of self-identification

- **Members** who would have the ability to participate fully in the Fellowship and on the site. Membership would require self identification based on the completion and acceptance of a registration form, a commitment to the Fellowship's rules of behaviour, and an affirmation of the Jerusalem Declaration (http://fca.net/resources/the_jerusalem_declaration/). **Becoming a member would not require members to make the Fellowship their primary or exclusive church affiliation.**

I would invite your comments and input on this approach.

Overall Direction

In addition to the above issues, it is becoming increasingly important to identify a **small leadership group** who can identify issues and make decisions concerning the operation of the Fellowship. I am not here speaking about comprehensive or long-range planning. It is very clear that responsibility is in Our Lord's hands, but we must continue in prayer and discernment in order to be able to respond and to move ahead. I would deeply value some colleagues who would be prepared to join me in this enterprise. Please commit this request to prayer.

Becoming Involved

The Anglican Sojourner Fellowship is a journey in faith into the future that Our Lord has prepared for us. All of the areas listed above are going to take time and effort to develop. As Sojourners, we may not be able to assemble in one location, but the Internet provides an extra-ordinary opportunity for bottom-up participation and engagement in mission and outreach, for worship, for pastoral support, and for personal spiritual growth. Let me emphasize: participation does not require advanced technology skills or knowledge. We can each pick up what we need as we go along. Whatever your current church involvement or affiliation, if you are a confessing believer in the Gospel of Jesus Christ who sees potential for ministry in the virtual world, I encourage you to consider in prayer how you may be able to assist in this work. Please email me or telephone if you have any questions.

May our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, guide and keep you as you consider this invitation. AMEN

In His Name,
Mark

p.s. I will share the Internet address for the draft website with you as soon as it is tested and working.

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An Afterword: McLuhan Turned Upside Down

In the last E-pistle, I mentioned my intention to undertake some extended exploration of the world of Internet based church to try to improve my own understanding of other virtual church models and the options that they present for the ASF. It has been a time consuming and eye opening experience!

It has also confirmed my sense that we have a firm foundation on which to base an internet church fellowship. In particular, we have two important strengths:

1. a very specific focus on serving isolated Christians (not just Anglicans) as a place to start; and
2. a strong and complementary relationship with the physical church through our sponsor, the Anglican Network in Canada, with its zeal and its commitment to share and to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Together these strengths offer the hope of turning orphans into sojourners and of building our Fellowship of living stones into our Lord's Church.

The problem with most virtual church initiatives seems to be that they start from the Internet and look at how to adapt the Church and the Gospel to the technological requirements of that environment. This approach conforms to Marshall McLuhan's famous comment that "The medium is the message". Of course, as every missionary and bible translator knows, the medium does have an impact on how the Gospel is communicated, but our Lord Jesus Christ makes the profound claim to be the incarnation of the Word of God. If we truly believe that he himself is the message, then we must treat the medium – the technology - as his servant.

If you would like to see what others are doing about virtual church, I encourage you to explore online. It is a very mixed bag. Here are some places to start. Please let me know what you think, or if you find sites that look particularly relevant to our Fellowship .

<http://thechurchonline.com/>

<http://slangcath.wordpress.com/>

<http://www.i-church.org/gatehouse/>

<http://cyber-church.com/>

<http://www.londoninternetchurch.org.uk/Home>

<http://www.sacredspace.ie/>

<http://churchoffools.com/>

<http://www.alphachurch.org/>