

Spiritual Renewal through Anglicanism?

By Rev. Dr. Dustin Resch

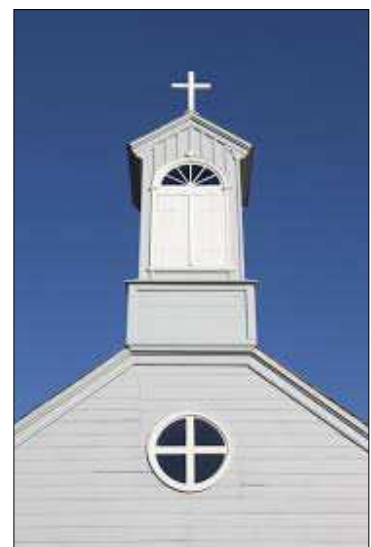
Anglicans for Renewal Canada, Summer 2015

It is probably not as strange as it once was to hear stories of evangelicals with charismatic sensibilities who have found renewal on the Canterbury Trail. Social media seems to be erupting with such stories. Nevertheless, it is a story that I have come to narrate as my own. If I could put a point on it, the reason why I would describe my journey to the Anglicanism as “a Holy Spirit led renewal” is because on that journey I discovered the visible church as an indispensable feature of Christian life. That is to say, I discovered an “ecclesial spirituality.” Here is what I mean.

I was raised on the Canadian prairies in a family with loose evangelical roots. Early on, I encountered a faith that took the Bible seriously, made warm devotion to Christ a central feature, and used the language of “personal relationship with God” and “the voice of the Holy Spirit” to describe the life of Christian piety. I continue to value that heritage very deeply. However one describes it in theological terms, my life of faith was one that was essentially personal. I won’t go so far as to say it was “individualistic,” because that would not quite be true – for I knew that my Christian life needed other Christians in order to thrive.

The appeal of Anglicanism, however, came first through a discovery of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, particularly the notion that God promised to work personally through these visible actions done by visible people. Attention to the nature of that work and how it could be that God might bind himself to the actions of other (fallen!) human beings drew me deeper into what I now take to be a missing dimension of my earlier faith. That missing dimension is a commitment to the essential unity of the invisible church and the visible church. What I mean is this: if God would bind the inward work of the Holy Spirit to the outward actions of the visible church, then the outward and institutional church could be no accident or appendix to my spiritual life. It must be a central feature of it.

Anglicanism provided several tangible places where I might explore how the visible church is essential to the personal relationship with God that I was trying to cultivate. For example, think of the Prayer Book. It seems counter-intuitive to a spirituality of personal relationship to imagine that a book of prayers written by other people might be important to renewal. But for me, at least, using the words of the church in my own life of prayer, and in the company of the Communion of the Saints, became like a set of training wheels to guide my life of devotion. Praying the Prayer Book’s words meant that I was praying words the Holy Spirit had used over the course of centuries, and that I was praying those words with other Christians throughout the world. I would say that the spiritual fruit of God’s peace emerged as I used the Prayer Book’s words. I was no longer forced to come up with it all myself (though there was room for that too!). Without the prayers of the church, my life of prayer was regularly in danger of narcissism and



being crushed under the weight of all that is at stake in prayer. Leaning on the words of the Prayer Book, I came to a deeper appreciation that the Holy Spirit is also the Spirit of the church. God does, after all, call a people, and not just a person.

Another example of how Anglicanism helped to cultivate renewal was in the way that it forced me to interact with a broader theological cross-section of the church than I had before. Being in the physical company of those with whom I disagreed over doctrinal and ethical matters has helped me to understand the complexity of things I once naively thought were obvious. Furthermore, in the diverse company of the visible church, I have been forced to (begin to) hold my convictions in a way that opens dialogue, seeks to understand others, and refuses to write others off. In other words, I think that my journey down the Canterbury Trail has contributed to the growth of the spiritual fruit of love in my life. One might think that my theological convictions would become shallow or that I might waiver in my beliefs. On the contrary, I think that the work of maintaining fellowship with other Christians has actually helped to deepen my convictions about the things that are most central to Christian faith. It has developed much more nuance both to how I understand those doctrine and ethics at the center and on the periphery.

Perhaps my experience of renewal could have taken place in another denomination or tradition besides the Anglican Church of Canada. I certainly admit that possibility. However, in my case (and the case of many others with similar backgrounds as me), it was being welcomed and immersed in the history, tradition, and embodied fellowship of the Anglican Church of Canada that drew me into a time of renewal. For that, I can only say, “Thanks be to God.”

The Rev. Dr. Dustin Resch is rector of St. Barnabas Anglican Church in Medicine Hat, AB.