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Interview with Caro Hall

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Caroline Hall

INTERVIEW WITH CARO HALL

St. Benedict's Episcopal Church

The Rev. Caroline Hall is Priest-in-Charge of St. Benedict's Episcopal Church in Los Osos. She is currently completing Ph. D. research into the current controversies within the Anglican Church worldwide. Caro has of late been a reporter on the meeting among the head bishops, etc., of the Anglican Communion in Tanzania.

Moebius: Where were you born and raised?

CH: I was born and raised in Woking, in Surrey, which is about 28 miles from London on the main railroad track between London to Southampton. You could get up to the center of London in half an hour.

Moebius: Were you born an Anglican?

CH: Yes, I was born an Anglican.

Moebius: What influenced you to become ordained as an Episcopal priest? Can you say something about your spiritual journey before coming to St. Benedict's Church in Los Osos?

CH: I probably would have been ordained much earlier, if it had been possible. From being quite a small child, I felt a pull to what I thought was a call to be a missionary. Part of that was instigated by the fact that my brother was a missionary priest, and my mother was very proud of that. I was very envious of how proud she was. I thought that if I was a missionary, too, then she would like me as much. But having said that, I honestly think that there was a sense of calling, but it didn't happen in the way I had expected it would because in my early twenties I came to the conclusion that I was gay, and at that point it didn't seem that there was any possibility of being in any established church and being gay. Fifteen to sixteen years ago, when I was living in Lexington, Virginia, I made a habit of going to church Christmas and Easter at the Episcopal church there. There was a woman priest, and I was really blown away by that. The gospel in a woman's voice sounds so very different.

A year or so later I had expected to move to Philadelphia, but that fell through at the last minute. Because I had expected to move, I had sold my house and given up my job. By this time I had a green card, and I could essentially live anywhere in Europe or the United States. I had no particular reason to be anywhere or do anything. So, I was driving

along a street thinking, “Okay, if everything I’ve done up to now in life were preparing me for something, what would it be?” The answer came very clearly to become a parish priest. It’s not like that was the first time I thought of it. It really just consolidated it for me. It was clear that whatever I did next, I needed to see whether that was a calling. My family has been very religious. My generation of my family is very religious. My brother is a priest, my sister-in-law is a priest, and my other sister is a lay reader in the Church of England, which you have to be licensed and trained for, and she would have become a priest if it were not for other situations in her life. I needed to work out whether in fact I had a calling, or whether it was just a sort of family deal. In any event, I moved to San Luis Obispo County. I looked in the Yellow Pages to find that the only Episcopal Church in the area with a female priest was St. Benedict’s. The first thing you have to do, if you’re going to be considered for the priesthood, is to be a member of a church for two years. So I moved to Los Osos and joined St. Benedict’s.

Moebius: What do you think about the Rt. Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori’s election as the first woman presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church and her support of gay clergy? It’s an exciting time, but I understand that many fear Schori will further divide the orthodox and the progressive members of the church.

CH: The so-called “orthodox” are determined to be divided away from the progressive side of the church, and I don’t think any presiding bishop we would have chosen would have made much of a difference. They have for thirty years been increasingly unhappy with the direction the Episcopal Church has taken to the extent of feeling that the Episcopal Church is essentially heretical. They have been looking for at least the past fifteen years for a way to have a separate diocese within the Episcopal Church, or separate from the Episcopal Church, but connected to the world-wide Anglican community. I don’t think that there was a single candidate who met their criteria. I talk as though they are monolithic, but there are many shades of opinion within that group.

I don’t think that Bishop Katherine is going to increase the division. She is an incredibly gifted woman, and I’m thrilled to have her. I think that she has—more than any of the others—actually a chance of reducing the amount of division. The fact that she is a woman means that there are three dioceses which have difficulty even accepting her. For those three dioceses, gender is a real stumbling block. For the other dissident dioceses, it’s because she is a liberal and supportive of the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people. She’s seen as another example of how heretical the church has become. But she has tremendous gifts of being able to draw people together and a really clear intellect. She’s not afraid of taking risks. I’m excited.

Moebius: According to The New York Times, nationwide ten Episcopal dioceses in Connecticut, Arkansas, Delaware, Long Island, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Caro-

lina, Vermont and Washington, D.C., and California have enacted policies allowing the blessing of same-sex couples. Is the Diocese of El Camino Real one of them? What effect does this have on St. Benedict's in Los Osos?

CH: Our former bishop, Bishop Shimpfky, had a policy of allowing same-sex blessings. A few years ago the Diocesan Convention passed a resolution supporting the blessings of same-sex unions. However, I've not yet contacted the secretary of the diocese to get a copy of it to work out exactly what it says. In some people's memory, it was with the agreement of the bishop. If that's the case, then our policy would be changing—possibly even right now—because we have an assisting bishop, Sylvester Romero, who is definitely more ambivalent about the matter, and also because the national church's position has changed. So, I don't think we have a clear policy at this point. I think it needs discussion, and I think it depends on who comes in.

However, we don't have a policy not to do them. The bishop was happy that his priests should bless anything that they felt should be blessed, and he did not want his priests blessing anything they felt should not be blessed, which included heterosexual marriages they felt were not appropriate. As I see it, the clergy of the diocese have the authority to bless same-sex unions when they feel that they are with God.

There are, of course, pastoral issues. I could be in a congregation that was very conservative, who felt very strongly that they were wrong, and in that situation I might choose not to do it because I respected the sensitivities of the congregation. We will be calling a new bishop in June. As far as I'm aware, the majority of people here at St. Benedict's are supportive of same-gender unions.

Moebius: Does anyone in the Episcopal Church have the authority to marry same-sex partners?

CH: Marriage is such a difficult word because it has a legal, and it has a civic and a church connotation. Strictly speaking, it's the state that marries people, and the church blesses the marriage. Since we don't actually have same-sex marriage per se anywhere in the country, nobody has the authority to marry same-sex partners. Having said that, there are some states that have far more of a definite civil partnership situation than we do here in California. We do have a civil partnership registry, but we don't have any kind of civil ceremony; we just send papers to the Secretary of State. So, in those states where they have or are expecting to have a civil situation which is very akin to marriage, the Episcopal Church is preparing, or has prepared to bless those, but the word "marriage" is just so loaded.

Moebius: Would you feel comfortable commenting on your own sexual orientation and your experience as a woman priest in the ongoing struggle between the progressive and orthodox movements of the church? Have you endured hardships or censure?

CH: I have not had a particularly difficult time either as a woman or as a lesbian woman because I am in a diocese which has been and continues to be blessed by the ministry of many gay and lesbian people, and has become both useful and welcoming. There are people in the deanery who are not happy with my ministry, and there have been people who have left churches where I have been involved—not so far as I know of at St. Benedict’s—choosing to go somewhere else rather than be supportive of my ministry. And that’s okay.

Moebius: When viewing politics and religion in the media—everything happening simultaneously—there seems a general shift among churches from concerns about school prayer, stem cell research, abortion and same-sex marriages to more global concerns like solving the problems of AIDS, starvation and disease, especially among children. I have read Michael Gerson’s special report in Newsweek about evangelicals “chafing at the narrowness of the religious right,” and have seen Bono on his anti-poverty tour on TV. Is it all media hype, or do you think there has been a shift? I know this is a terrible question.

CH: There are several different things happening. Coming out of the 1960s, what we call the mainline Protestant churches in this country—Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, and some Baptist—became far more politically “activist” with the whole civil rights movement, and then continued to see working for social justice as a very important part of Christian commitment. At the same time, the evangelical movement emphasized the personal relationship with Jesus, and personal holiness was gaining strength and developing. By the 1980s, there was quite a divide developing between the mainstream churches, who had moved toward the left, if you like. These are shorthand terms because we’re talking about having more awareness of social justice issues and seeing that as being integral to one’s response to Christ.

The evangelical churches that moved more to what we call the right of the political spectrum—not all evangelicals are right wing, but many are—those are the people who have developed the political agenda which includes a lot of politics around personal sexuality; it’s anti-abortion, it’s anti-gay, and very concerned about bringing a puritan Christianity back into the public square. You’ve got two different strands going in very different directions. And then, as people have become less and less happy with the divide, the middle has become more vocal.

I think churches and synagogues are seeing social justice as something we can all focus on and get behind without having to spend hours in theological wrangling. There is far more focus on God’s work and our mission to do that and not so much arguing about the details which we may never ever agree on.

The Episcopal Church, for example, has agreed to focus on the Millennium Development Goals as a very high priority. It’s something that churches in other countries in the

Anglican community have been campaigning for. Bishop Katherine is certainly hoping that by focusing on that area, which would essentially be ending hunger, bringing clean water, etc. to people who need it, we can find a way to work together without so much difficulty about our different understandings of God.

Moebius: In California, the dynamic Rt. Rev. Jon Bruno, bishop of the Los Angeles Diocese of the Episcopal Church, has taken legal action against conservative Episcopal parishes in the Central Valley who have seceded from the Episcopal Church, some of them aligning themselves with the province of Uganda in Central Africa. What do you feel the outcome of all of this will be?

CH: Uganda has taken in three churches in the Los Angeles diocese. Part of it has to do with property, which seems so worldly, so silly. Let's say that St. Benedict's has this land and has this building, and legally speaking they belong to the Diocese of El Camino Real. Now, if seventy-five percent of this congregation decided that they wanted to leave the Diocese of El Camino Real and become part of, let's say, Lesotho in Africa. Would the seventy-five percent of those who wanted to do so be the ones who kept the building and the land, or would the building and the land actually belong to the twenty-five percent who intended to stay within the Diocese of El Camino Real? The Episcopal Church would argue that the twenty-five percent who wanted to stay are the ones who should keep the building and land, and the ones who want to leave the diocese should find their own building and land.

However, there is no way of really enforcing that within church law, so in order for it to be really argued it has to go to the secular courts. State law differs. For example, Maryland had state law regarding the Episcopal Church early on because the settlers thought that the Anglican Church was going to be like the state church. There, this wouldn't be an issue; it would be very clear that the buildings, etc. would remain with the diocese, but here in California state law actually favors the congregation.

In some places it has been possible for a congregation that has chosen to leave to do so in an amicable way and buy the building or whatever from the diocese. My understanding is that none of these churches in the Diocese of Los Angeles chose or offered to do that; they just announced that they were no longer a part of the diocese. It isn't simply a question of a valuable building being taken, but more a question of the people who want to stay faithful to the Episcopal Church. Where are they going to worship? I support Bishop Bruno's action because those who chose to separate themselves went against church canons and constitutions, and they didn't negotiate any type of amicable separation, but I'm not terribly hopeful because of California state law being as it is.

Moebius: I feel that you, more than anyone I know, must have insight regarding the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Will he, as the head of the Church of

England, the Anglican mother church, be able to hold the worldwide communion together? What is his stance?

CH: He doesn't have any structural authority. The only recourse he has is persuasive, and / or moral. He is in a very unenviable position of having been ascribed by the Church as one of the so-called Instruments of Unity. There are four Instruments of Unity and he is personally one of them, and I think that it puts him in a hugely difficult position because he has to try and unify everybody, which means that he cannot take a stance that would be significantly objectionable to any party. I think that he has been working very, very hard behind the scenes. He is a very thoughtful academic theologian, so in many ways he is dealing on a far more abstract level. He will make an abstract statement, or a theoretical statement, and then people will seize on his every word and turn it into a literal statement, and say the Archbishop of Canterbury said "this," and yes, maybe he did say "that," but it wasn't meant at that level. He has stated several times himself, "I don't think that it's going to be possible for the Anglican Communion to continue in the way that it has continued." And I suspect that there will be a period when there is a separation between different parts of it, exactly which bits will separate from which bits, I wouldn't like to prophesize at this point. At the same time, I don't think that it's going to last for more than a generation. I see it as being a temporary thing.

Moebius: In 2005, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed a bill passed by the California legislature authorizing same-sex partners the right to marry. Is his support of "domestic partnerships," but denial of same-sex marriage any different than those in the Episcopal Church who would support the "blessings" of same-sex couples, but would discourage going any farther.

CH: We're dealing with two separate issues. Partnerships in California do not provide domestic partners with all of the rights that are provided by marriage, and that is a serious issue. A domestic partnership which provided all the rights of heterosexual marriage would in my view be perfectly adequate as a civil thing, and that's really all that a civil marriage is, a contract between two people which entitles them to certain responsibilities. It doesn't matter whether we call it marriage or we call it a domestic partnership.

When we get to the church, it gets far more complex because there is a historic theology of the sacrament of marriage, which is certainly very strong with the Catholic Church, and since the Episcopal Church is essentially a reformed Catholic Church, we can't ignore the whole sacramental question, and so then you get a question: Is it the same sacrament if it's between two people of the same gender? For example, it's partly considered a sacrament because there are biblical allusions to marriage being like the relationship between Christ and the Church, and in that, Christ is seen as the male and the Church is seen as the female. So, if you start talking about the sacrament of marriage and start applying it to two people of the same sex, then you are essentially queering either

Christ or the Church because the imagery is heterosexual.

If I was a conservative theologian, I might tell you that in marriage you have a symbol in this life of the relationship of the Holy Trinity; the relationship of God to God's self. With that, because we are made in the image of God and we're made male and female, therefore you need male and female coming together in the correct order to be truly symbolic of who God is. If you do that differently, like putting two men together, or two women together, you are essentially insulting God because it's a disorder of a symbol which is meant to be a symbol of God's unity. These are big issues. I think the question of civil partnerships and the question of marriage within the church are different.

Moebius: Bishop Andrew D. Smith, the leader of the Episcopal diocese of Connecticut, in November authorized priests to give blessings to same-sex unions during religious ceremonies. The state of Connecticut approved civil unions last year. Do you feel that the state of California will eventually do the same?

CH: I imagine that the state of California will approve civil unions, and I imagine that at some point, the Episcopal dioceses in California, certainly not all at the same time, will make it possible for these things to happen in church. But, whether it's going to be sooner or later, I have no idea. I do think that the pendulum has swung as far right as it's going to swing, and it's coming back, but this doesn't mean we're going to get all of the way there before it swings back again.

Moebius: Do you fear that there will be a schism in the Episcopal Church? What does "walking apart" mean?

CH: "Walking apart" is a schism, I guess. It depends on how you define a schism. If you have a hundred churches, and one leaves, that's another schism. If you have one hundred churches and fifty leave, that's a schism. I don't know how many churches will choose to "walk apart." There are churches, both parishes and dioceses, who will choose a different structure from the Episcopal Church; there are people determined to make that happen. If it will be big enough to be called a schism, I have no idea. I don't fear it. It's a part of what's happening in the world right now. I don't think that it will last forever. It will be resolved after a while, probably not in our lifetimes.

Moebius: If there is a schism, how will it affect St. Benedict's?

CH: Not directly. It will affect people who move from here to somewhere else. If someone from here moved into the San Joaquin Diocese even now, they might find it difficult to find somewhere they are comfortable worshipping. A person moving here from the Valley might not feel at home. I don't imagine that it's going to affect us particularly.

We do on occasion get visitors from the San Joaquin Diocese who come here expecting to find it similar to home, and it isn't home for them. And I imagine that will get stronger. On the other hand, it might even be easier having the Episcopal Church and the

Anglican Church of America, or something like that. You would know what to expect. I don't imagine that it's going to affect us particularly, except in so far as we do understand ourselves as being part of the body of Christ, and the folks in San Joaquin, Pittsburg, and the other dioceses are also part of the same body. Any kind of amputation is painful. Even a scratch is painful. 

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