



Thinking Outside the Box (While Loving the Box) July 18, 2022

Last week, I shared a bit about Episcopal governance and the role of bishops and promised to share how that was part of what attracted me to the liturgical tradition. I was ordained in May 1965 at College Place Baptist Church in Monroe, Louisiana at the ripe old age of 20. Seven clergy questioned me for two hours on a Saturday evening and recommended to the church in a called congregational meeting the next day that they proceed with my ordination. The congregation voted “yes.” the ordination proceeded, and the clergy laid hands on me and ordained me. No bishop was involved, no background check, no psychological examination (all of which took place in my Episcopal journey).

A complaint against me for immoral or dishonest behavior would have had to be lodged with the local congregation. They would have had to dig through the minutes to locate the record of the meeting and someone would have had to move that the congregation vote to rescind my ordination, requiring a congregational vote. That now would be impossible, since College Place closed its doors several years ago. Hence, were I still a Baptist, there would be no formal mechanism for holding me accountable, only informal networking seeking to isolate me.

Though retired, with a pension protected by law, I remain under the oversight of the bishop in the diocese to which I belong (which is Georgia). An incomplete list of possible offenses could include: performing marriages of divorced persons without the bishop’s permission, abusing my discretionary fund, being abusive of staff and laity, sexual misconduct, or other conduct unbecoming of clergy (the language of our canons). The bishop would hold me accountable. Discipline could range from a private pastoral admonition (which goes into my file) to a public pastoral admonition (a letter to all clergy of the diocese and all parishes I have served) to being inhibited (not allowed to perform sacramental ministry for a set period) to being defrocked (my ordination revoked).

Also, if I were to become spiritually, psychologically, or relationally impaired in my current parish, the bishop could mandate therapy, require that I take a sabbatical, or that I change parishes. The intent would be the well being of cleric and parish. (And, please know that in homily or in writing specific examples never come from the parish I am serving.)

The bishop exercises this kind of oversight in consultation with the disciplinary board and/or the standing committee, both bodies elected by the diocese in annual counsel. In my experience and observation, bishops intend to be redemptive, not punitive. They seek to give oversight in ways that afford clerics the opportunity to continue and improve their ministries and that guard the well being of the cleric and the parish. I celebrate and give thanks for that oversight, which has been a gift of grace over 25 years Episcopal ministry.

God’s peace,

David W. Perkins, + Interim Rector