In John Irving’s bestseller *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the crux of the book takes on the issue of faith, the Episcopal and Anglican Church, and the U.S. and Canada. The book centers around the friendship between Meany and his friend John Wheelwright growing up in a small New Hampshire town. Wheelwright, the narrator, in later life abandons the U.S. for Canada, where he teaches at an Anglican school and reflects on his faith, much of it learned from scrawny Owen Meany, a sort of Jesus figure.

While many see the contrast between a Canadian Anglican and Episcopalian as a classic distinction without a difference, Irving uses the subtle dissimilarities in that 1989 book to drive the narrative and the conflicted thoughts of Wheelwright, whose observations on the Episcopal Church reflect deeper political differences between the U.S. and Canada.

“Being an Anglican is a lot like being an Episcopalian, so much so that being an Anglican occasionally impresses upon me the suspicion that I have simply become an Episcopalian again,” says Wheelwright, a.k.a. John Irving. “Anyway, I left the Congregationalists and the Episcopalians – and my country once and for all.”

The Canadians who come to Florida each year, by contrast, have not left Canada once and for all. Our beloved snowbirds venture in from northern territories as
reliably as whooping cranes, white pelicans and Canada geese. One of the joys of being a part of an Episcopal church in Southwest Florida is the migratory mix of visitors each Sunday. Multi-generational families, drop-in visitors from the Anglican community, and seasonal regulars from all over the U.S. and points beyond adorn the pews on any given week. On an average Sunday, there are approximately 12,000 who attend our parishes. In that mix, dozens of countries are represented, but among the most taken for granted are our Canadians. Across the Diocese of Southwest Florida, Canadians are a considerable presence and are one of the things which make our diocese unique within the Episcopal Church as a whole. Not only are there Canadians in every parish, the diocese is blessed with a number of Canadian priests and at least three parishes that Canadians in every parish, the diocese is blessed with a number of Canadian priests and at least three parishes that have a visible Canadian presence, including St. Anne of Grace, Seminole; St. Mary’s, Bonita Springs and St. Alban’s, St. Pete Beach.

“I would like to kidnap them all, and have them stay forever,” said the Rev. Georige “Gigi” Conner, the priest-in-charge at St. Alban’s, St. Pete Beach. Conner says that the Canadians in her parish are essential. Conner says that no matter how involved they are up in Canada, they step up. “As soon as they come down here they are involved,” said Conner. “They are wonderful.”

A highlight of the year at St. Anne of Grace, Seminole, is Canada Sunday, where Canadians in the congregation serve as ushers and chalice bearers, and they honor each province with a flag. The Royal Canadian Legion is part of the celebration. Although they hail from a variety of provinces, the Canadians at St. Anne of Grace have a distinctly Newfoundland-ish flair. Nearby St. Alban’s, St. Pete Beach also has a large group of Canadians that enrich the parish in many ways, not only with their financial support, but their willingness to serve and immediately become enmeshed in the parish.

Canada is one piece of the worldwide Anglican Communion, of which the Diocese of Southwest Florida and Episcopal Church are a part. The churches of the Anglican Communion are well represented in the diocese. The former countries of the British Empire, loosely connected as the Commonwealth, provide many wider connections to the worldwide Anglican Communion.

The British Bureau of Florida has tried to count the number of U.K. expats in Florida, and believes there are about 400,000 in the whole state. Patricia Kawaja of the British Bureau says that the greatest clusters of British citizens in Southwest Florida are in Sarasota and Naples. Perhaps not coincidentally, Church of the Redeemer Parish Administrator John Walsworth and St. Mary’s Bonita Springs’s Office Administrator Ian Mitchell are both British-born. Within the laity, the connections are often complex. One of the oldest members of an Episcopal parish in Southwest Florida was Dora Riverol, who was born in London under Edward VII and grew up in Belize, British Honduras. A national tennis champion of Belize, she retired to Florida at age 90, and worked in the Redeemer Thrift Store well after she turned 100. She died at age 106.

It is common for priests to move around in the Anglican Communion. England native The Rev. Mike Branscombe served at Church of the Ascension in Clearwater until 2015, when he returned to England and Birmingham. The Rev. Benjamin Twinamaani of Grace Church, Tampa, hails from the former colony of Uganda. The Rev. Canon Richard Norman, our diocesan canon for mission and ministry, served in the Diocese of London; his wife Adrienne is a native of New Zealand.

The Rev. Kay Richardson, from St. Helen’s Anglican in Orleans, Ottawa, decided on Southwest Florida after looking at a number of places after her retirement from active ministry. After a search of locations, she and her husband decided on Naples. While here, she serves and preaches at St. Paul’s, Having the Canadians here is a great benefit, she says. “There is always cross fertilization when they come from a different place.”

There are some slight differences; alternative worship in Canada has a “Glory to you, Lord Jesus Christ” that the congregation says before the Gospel is read. In the past, the Canadian churches were more like English churches, but that has evolved over time.

“There are more differences between two parishes in the same country,” said Richardson. “It’s all getting blurred now.”

The Episcopal Diocese of Southwest Florida is a great place for Canadians to find a church home away from home. Southwest Florida can learn from the Canadian church, particularly the Diocese of Montreal, because it has had to be extremely creative. Anglican churches have suffered in recent decades due to a large amount of English speakers migrating away from Quebec. In Ottawa, Richardson at one time had five churches in two dioceses under her care; thanks to some innovative reorganization, her successor currently has three of those original five churches plus three more.

She calls St. Paul’s, Naples, a very welcoming place for all, both seasonal and year-round. However, not all Canadian Anglicans who attend regularly in Canada attend in Southwest Florida. Like many visitors, they crave a break from church in the same way as they crave it in their normal routines. To meet people where they are, parishes offer meals, activities and service opportunities, so that Canadians feel that they have a home here even if they crave a break from weekly services.
Compatible History, Culture

That the Anglican and Episcopal churches work well together both historically and present-day is by design. “I recognize in my serving on the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church that here is a liaison from the Anglican Church of Canada meetings that report back to us,” says Bishop Dabney Smith. “We therefore have, between our two churches, an ongoing, life-giving relationship that is both historical and contemporary.”

When Canadian families join our congregations during the season, Smith says that perhaps they are “among the strongest associate members because of our long-standing history with each other, and work within the Anglican Communion.”

Canadian presence often becomes a part of the yearly parish rhythm. For instance, the Rev. Roy Shepherd has served for decades as an assisting priest at St. Wilfred, Sarasota. This year marked the first year he was unable to be in Florida for the season, but in three decades, he has served nearly as many months here as in Canada. Many who know the longtime rector of St. Mary’s Bonita Springs, the Rev. Michael Rowe, do not know that he is a native of Canada.

The Rev. Pam Milhan, deacon at St. Anne of Grace, noted that there are small Canada touches in the service that no one notices. Milhan says that the Rev. Jack Hyde, a retired Canadian priest who has served in the diocese for decades and attends St. Anne of Grace, taught her to cross her fingers while her hands were together in prayer while she is at the altar. Instead of touching all fingers together, he told her to “Cross the thumbs to make the sign of the cross.”

Hyde has served a number of parishes in the diocese as an interim priest. He says that the differences between the Canadian and Anglican churches are no longer appreciable. “They’ve changed in both churches,” said Hyde, who came very close to leading the parish at St. Anne of Grace, but was instead sent to St. Mary’s, Bonita Springs. “There’s little or no difference, which accounts for a high number of Canadians.”

Whirlwind Back and Forth

Canadian priest the Ven. David Oliver spends about six weeks a year in Florida, going back and forth two times to his Bonita Beach sailboat (in Canada-ese it’s a “bowt”) named Whirlwind - a 34 foot Hunter with his wife Diana. While here he serves at St. Mary’s in Bonita Springs. The visits are not only an encouragement to him, but a blessing to his ministry to the wider Anglican Communion, as St. Mary’s supports his mission trips to Kowak Theological College, in the town of Kowak, Diocese of Rorya, Tanzania. Just this week, he was there preparing a talk on his rainwater project there.

“There are just enough differences to occasionally trip you up,” said Oliver, who served in the Diocese of Montreal as archdeacon missioner of Quebec. Oliver says that the Canadian interest in Florida goes in both directions; he served...
at St. Barnabas in North Hatley, Quebec, a parish that had a strong presence with wealthy Southerners who did not want to be in New England during the summer. At one time in history, he said, the parish was so American that it did not really welcome Canadians at all, and instead ministered to the domestic staff that the Americans brought along.

The welcome here, however, is unequivocal.

“I’m happy to be of service to the diocese,” said Oliver. “It gives me great joy, as well.”

In Canada, the Anglican Church is the third largest denomination, with over 545,000, or five percent of Canadians on parish rolls.