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The Response of the Primates

This past week, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Primates of the thirty-eight provinces of the Anglican Communion met in London. The purpose of their meeting was to discuss the recent actions of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, as well as the crisis in New West-minster, Vancouver.

The two actions of the General Convention of ECUSA, which prompted the meeting of the Primates, were the confirmation of the election of a practicing homosexual as the Bishop of New Hampshire, and the per-mission for unsanctioned same-sex unions to continue under a resolution of liturgical study and evaluation. The crisis in New Westmin-ster began, a year and a half ago, when that diocese passed a resolution providing for same-sex unions, and nine orthodox parishes walked out of their convention.

The response of the Primates was strong and comprehensive. Their statement admin-istered spiritual and moral discipline. Given that no international body of canon law exists in Anglicanism whereby the Primates could intervene in the Episcopal Church, or in New Westminster, spiritual and moral discipline was the only form of discipline they could exercise. The Primates met the challenge with masterful wisdom and grace.

The Primates' response focused in three areas: the affirmation of Lambeth 1998, a warning that if these errors are implemented communion will be broken at the "deepest level," and a call to address issues that arise out of broken communion, both with respect to pastoral care and also concerning national church constitutions and potential realignment.

Affirmation of Lambeth 1998

First of all, the Bishops brought the heretical actions of the General Convention and New Westminster under the authority of Scripture. They had already done this, by resolution, when the entire representation of Anglican Bishops from around the world met at Lambeth in 1998. They stated, then, unequivocally and overwhelmingly, that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with the teaching of Scripture. Christian marriage is instituted of God to be a sacramental union of male and female. The Primates stated further that the actions of New Westminster and the General Conven-tion, "could be perceived to alter unilaterally the teaching of

the Anglican Communion on this issue," but that in reality, "they do not." Indeed, the Primates added that no province of the Anglican Communion has the authority to act unilaterally when it comes to the moral teaching of the faith.

A Warning of Schism

The Primates spoke, in the strongest terms, to say that if the General Convention and New Westminster proceed with their proposed actions, it will rupture the Communion. The reason for this rupture is that these actions actually contradict the mind and will of the Church. And it is in the mind and will, or to say this in other words, in truth and love, that Communion really exists. The mind and will, truth and love, are the spiritual realities that embrace the revelation of God in Christ and seek to do his pleasure. When Communion is broken, it is broken, at the beginning, in the mind. The heart follows after, quickly, instantaneously. The Primates declared that the pernicious actions of General Convention and New Westminster "do not express the mind of our Communion." Therefore, these actions will "jeopardize our sacramental fellowship with each other;" they will "tear the fabric of our Communion at its deepest level " (emphasis mine).

Orthodox Episcopalians have felt this rupture ever since the General Convention, and in Canada, since New Westminster. That is why pleadings for unity and communion from the ranks of those who supported these actions are blatantly hypocritical and spiritually vain.

Pastoral Provision and Constitutional Study

With a broken Communion on the horizon, the Primates also addressed the implications of pastoral provision and "potential realignment." First, as for pastoral provision, the Primates called on the provinces of the Communion, affected by the actions of General Convention and New Westminster, to "make adequate pastoral provision for episcopal oversight of dissenting minorities within their own area of pastoral care in consultation with the Archbishop of Canterbury on behalf of the Primates." This means that "dissenting minorities" are, in fact, in communion with the vast majority of Anglicans throughout the world, and that the Primates are acting to assure them of pastoral care. Second, because such pastoral provision can only be temporal, the Primates asked for a commission to include "urgent and deep theological and legal reflection on the way in which the dangers we have identified at this meeting will have to be addressed." At the same time, provinces are urged "to share in this process of reflection and to consider their own constitutional requirements as individual provinces face up to potential realignment." This means that the consequences of broken communion will have to be made explicit, both theologically and legally, and that provinces will have to clarify what their constitutional identity is and what it means in relation to an overall realignment of the Anglican Communion.

The statement of the Primates was strong and comprehensive. They affirmed the supremacy of Scripture and its teaching on human sexuality. They warned of impending schism. And they looked forward to theological and legal clarity, and a realignment of national churches along the lines of constitutional definition. All of these taken together reveal the only possible way for the Anglican Church to proceed. We are rethinking and further defining what it means to be the Anglican

Communion.

Such a process necessarily includes serious theological work, grounded in Scripture and true to tradition, as well as work on constitutional questions. It is the latter, the constitution of a church, which articulates the formative principles of that church. In the Constitution of the Episcopal Church we declare that we are a "constituent member of the Anglican Communion, a Fellowship within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, of those duly constituted Dioceses, Provinces, and regional Churches in communion with the See of Canterbury." There has never been a time when this defining mark has been more important.

How shall we then proceed? As we have been and are. We are the inheritance of the Episcopal Church. We pass on the Reformed Catholic faith of our Anglican forbears. Now it is time to reclaim our heritage.

Our task ahead as a national church will be to reaffirm our heritage, to reform the errors of the past decades, and to reincorporate those faithful churchmen who left the Episcopal Church for various reasons during this period. A profound theological memory and understanding are essential. But along with these, equally necessary, is love, "the very bond of peace and of all virtues," without which we are all counted dead before God.

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