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The Lambeth Commission

At the end of September, the commission appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury will issue their formal report. We do not know what the commission may propose, although the London Times claims to have learned what some of the proposals will be. I will address that below. First, it is helpful to recall a certain series of events that led up to this.

In 1998 the Lambeth Conference, which convenes every ten years, and is made up of the bishops from the Anglican Communion throughout the world, resolved that the practice of homosexuality and hence same-sex unions and the ordination of those who live such a lifestyle, is contrary to the teaching of Holy Scripture. Subsequent meetings of the Primates of the Anglican Communion affirmed this teaching, even when the Theological Committee of the Episcopal Church reported that its own deliberation could not discern a definitive answer to this moral issue.

In the spring of 2002, at their annual convention, the Canadian Diocese of New Westminster approved the blessing of same-sex unions. In protest, nine parishes walked out of the convention. In the summer of 2003, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church confirmed the election of a practicing homosexual who lives with his male partner as Bishop of New Hampshire.

In light of the Lambeth Resolution of 1998 and subsequent affirmations of it in the meetings of the Primates, and in response to the events of New Westminster and ECUSA's General Convention, the Archbishop of Canterbury called an emergency assembly of the Primates in October of 2003.

In accordance with the unanimous vote of the Primates, which included the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Primates warned the Episcopal Church not to proceed with the consecration of the bishop elect of New Hampshire. If they should, their action would "tear the fabric of the communion at its deepest level." After that meeting, the Archbishop of Canterbury appointed a commission to evaluate the impact of the decisions made by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of New Westminster on the communion of the worldwide Anglican Church.

Then, after the emergency meeting of Lambeth and the appointment of the commission in October, the Diocese of New Hampshire, with the Presiding Bishop of ECUSA's support and leadership, proceeded with

the ceremony.

The report of the commission is due out at the end of September 2004. Much has happened in the meantime. On the negative side, the House of Bishops of ECUSA has met and has defended the actions of the General Convention and the Diocese of New Hampshire. They continue to reject the godly counsel and fellowship of the worldwide communion, claiming their own canonical autonomy.

On the positive side has been the formation of the Anglican Communion Network which is an association within the Episcopal Church which seeks to adhere to the supremacy of the Scriptures, and to maintain communion with the worldwide Anglican Church. Twenty-one primates of the Anglican Communion have declared that they are in impaired or broken communion with ECUSA. Fourteen of these have declared that while they are not in communion with ECUSA, they are in communion with the Network Parishes and Dioceses. In the Diocese of Georgia, both St. John's, Savannah, and Christ Church, Savannah have joined the Network.

There have also been heart-rending decisions made by the faithful in the Episcopal Church. A number of parishes have decided that they must pursue their Anglican unity with the worldwide communion outside of their own diocese. Three recently in the Diocese of Los Angeles have come under the pastoral care of a Bishop of Uganda. Two parishes of friends of ours in Atlanta have sought the pastoral oversight of the Bishop of Bolivia. There are others scattered all over the United States.

In addition to these, some parishes have sought bishops outside of their diocese to administer Confirmation. Five parishes in Ohio did this with the participation of several retired bishops of ECUSA and the Bishop of Bolivia. This month, eleven parishes in the Diocese of Virginia will have the last Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, administer Confirmation at Truro Episcopal Church in Fairfax.

Outside of the U.S., there has been an enormous and remarkable convergence of Primates of the Anglican Communion, mainly from the Global South. These include Bishops from South America, the West Indies, Southeast Asia, and Africa. They represent three quarters of the membership of the Anglican Church. They are determined to advance the orthodox Christian faith in its Anglican form. And inside North America, churches which maintain Anglican orders, worship, and spiritual life, but are disconnected officially from the Anglican Communion are seeking union with one another and with Primates throughout the Anglican Church. Out of great hardship God is renewing his Church.

Now to the latest news. The London Times has reported in advance on the results of the Lambeth Commission. It will propose that the Episcopal Church be banned from the collegial gatherings and general administrative functions of the Anglican Communion, until the Bishop of New Hampshire resigns, retires, or dies. Then the Episcopal Church would be restored to the fellowship unless the Episcopal Church ratifies by Canon Law the blessing of same-sex unions, in which case the ban would be permanent.

This is only a partial summary of what may be the content of the

commission's proposal. And we should remember that it is only a proposal. The Archbishop of Canterbury will have an enormous amount of influence on whether or not the proposal will be implemented as a whole or in part.

Having recalled the outline of events leading up to our present state, if the leak in the London Times is correct, what do we make of it?

To begin with, the notion that an international body of churchmen, the Anglican Communion, would act to discipline the Episcopal Church of the United States is a most profound and glorious thing. It means that the Church Catholic takes its doctrinal and moral life – which is the essence of the Gospel – seriously. And such discipline is not easy. This is most evident in Africa, where provinces there have refused to receive money from the Episcopal Church, because they believe they should not have anything to do with a church which is endangering the souls of its members.

I agree with Dr. Peter Toon and others who regret that this discipline comes on this moral issue alone and did not come earlier with the general dissolution of orthodoxy in ECUSA and elsewhere over the years. However, the history of the church shows that problems which provoke purging and reform never come all at once, or in neatly organized moments. We should be grateful that the most recent issue of the practice of homosexuality has made us look again at the entire spectrum of moral life and doctrinal truth. On this we have only begun, but it is a beginning. It is time for us all to work together in repentance and hope that we can recover the essence of Christian orthodoxy in its Anglican form.

But beyond this great symbol of discipline, and the great sacrifice of the African faithful, I am afraid that the Episcopal Church will respond to the Lambeth Commission with indifference. Some Bishops have already said as much. They do not need the rest of the Anglican Communion, they claim. Moreover, there are at least six dioceses in the Episcopal Church who have officially sanctioned same-sex blessings. In the view of orthodox Anglicans they are leading their faithful into spiritual peril and perdition. It is this point on which the African Bishops are so strong. They realize that sin destroys lives. How many souls will be led into destruction by the arrogant independence of ECUSA bishops? Is the mere withdrawal of an invitation to collegial meetings and administrative functions adequate to deal with the pastoral malpractice of ECUSA? I do not think so. One hopes there is more in store from the Commission than that. The truth is, the realignment has begun, it is the purging, purifying, healing work of the Spirit, and now it must continue with missionary fervor.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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