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GENERAL CONVENTION 2006 (II)

In assessing the actions of this past General Convention in Columbus, Ohio, it is necessary to know what task was set before it. After the last General Convention in 2003, the Primates of the Anglican Communion, in an emergency meeting convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, warned that if the Episcopal Church proceeded with the consecration of the bishop of New Hamp-shire, that action would "tear the fabric of the communion at its deepest level". Yet the con-secration went ahead – with Frank Griswold, who had consented to the Primates' warning, as chief consecrator. The task before the Convention was to repair the fabric it had torn.

After the Lambeth meeting and Robinson's consecration, Archbishop Williams appointed the Lambeth Commission, whose report on the Communion, entitled the Windsor Report, was published in the fall of 2004. Among other things, it was a sharp critique of the actions of the Episcopal Church (and of the Canadian diocese of New Westminster) for breaching the "bonds of affection" by which the Communion is united, and denying the "Communion principle" of interdependence. In matters which affect the whole Communion - because they touch on what is held in common, the central core of the Christian faith - matters which should not be decided apart from the consensus of the Communion as a whole, no province has the right to act unilaterally.

Along with this sharp criticism, the Windsor Report also mapped out a process for the repair of the Communion's unity. It called for a number of specific actions on the part of the Episcopal Church, and these were in turn endorsed by the Primates' Meeting in Dromantine, Northern Ireland, in February 2005. These were threefold: (1) a rather specific statement of "regret that the proper constraints of the bonds of affection were breached" by the election and consecration of the bishop of New Hampshire; which statement would be regarded as evidence of a desire to remain in the communion; (2) a moratorium on further elections and consecrations of persons in same-sex unions as bishops; (3) a moratorium on the blessing of same-sex unions and the withdrawal of bishops who had authorized such blessings from "representative functions" in the Anglican Communion. These were the matters under consideration by the General Convention 2006.

In response to the first recommendation, the statement of regret, the General Convention passed a resolution (A-160) which differs in wording from that used in the Windsor Report. Regret "that the proper constraints of the bonds of affection were breached" was changed to

“regret for straining the bonds of affection” – which sounds similar but means something rather different. Missing is any explicit acknowledgement that there are “proper constraints” imposed by the “bonds of affection” (objective limits to autonomy), nor does it accept the assessment of the wider Communion that those constraints were breached by the 2003 General Convention and the consecration of Gene Robinson.

On the second recommendation, the moratorium on bishops in same-sex unions, the Convention first voted down a resolution (A161) on this subject on its second to the last day. Then, on the last day, the rules of procedure were suspended, and at the urging of the presiding bishop, and with minimal debate, the Convention passed a resolution (B033): “that this Convention...call upon standing committees and bishops with jurisdiction to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion”. Once again, the wording is rather different from that recommended by the Windsor Report, notably by the absence of any reference to the election of such bishops. Perhaps that was just an oversight due to haste (or maybe not: the diocese of New Jersey has just announced the nomination for bishop of a person in a same-sex union). But, given that Convention had rejected a similar resolution just twenty-four hours earlier, and that it reversed itself under some duress, it raises questions about whether it really represents the mind of General Convention. The resolution, moreover, is apparently non-binding; and a group of liberal bishops immediately issued a statement of conscience refusing to be bound by it.

On the third recommendation, the blessing of same-sex unions and the withdrawal of bishops who had authorized them from “representative functions” in the Communion, General Convention 2006 passed no resolution on this subject. It did find time to pass a resolution (A095: Gay and Lesbian Affirmation [Civil rights]) that went a long way towards affirming same-sex civil marriage as a civil right. Moreover, it elected as Presiding Bishop a person, K. J. Schori, who had herself authorized such blessings in the diocese of Nevada; and on that basis presumably fell within the category of those unfit for the “representative functions” in the Anglican Communion – the very functions which the office of presiding bishop entails.

What to make of these actions? Some Episcopalians, no doubt eager to get beyond the controversy, are claiming that the Convention has substantially complied with the recommendations of the Windsor Report. Other responses, however, have been less enthusiastic. The Archbishop of Canterbury, for one, was notably reserved in his response. On the 27th June, he wrote that the Convention’s actions “have not produced a complete response to the challenges of the Windsor Report”, and he spoke of the need for “careful assessment” of the Episcopal Church’s response. In a letter written on behalf of the African Primates, Bishop Akinola said, “We are...saddened that the reports to date of your elections and actions suggest that you are unable to embrace the essential recommendations of the Windsor Report and the 2005 Primates Communiqué necessary for the healing of our divisions. At the same time, we welcome the various expressions of affection for the life and work of the Anglican Communion.” The African Primates will be studying the actions and statements of the Convention more fully before the meeting of the

Global South Primates in September, at which, he said "we shall present our concerted pastoral and structural response."

As Bishop Akinola has perceived, the General Convention sent conflicting signals. On the one hand, it repeatedly expressed its full commitment to a same-sex agenda, in defiance of the Windsor Report and the Instruments of Unity; on the other, it claimed a desire to remain within the Communion, through compliance with the Windsor Report. These cross-signals point to the deep confusion of the Episcopal Church, and its refusal to think clearly about the choices before it. It also looks like a church that is fudging the issue – a tactic long and successfully practiced by ECUSA. The question is whether the Communion will let them continue to get away with it much longer.

(To be continued.)

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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