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CONSENT GRANTED AND DENIED

With the encouragement of many phone calls and letters, some from this parish, the Standing Committee of the diocese of Georgia graciously reconsidered its earlier decision to withhold consent to the election of Mark Lawrence as bishop of South Carolina.. Nevertheless, despite their subsequent decision to grant consent, announced at the eleventh hour, South Carolina did not obtain the necessary number to confirm his election (fifty-six), falling short by one, and the presiding bishop pronounced the election null and void. (Some consents were disqualified on technical grounds.) The Standing Committee of South Carolina meets shortly to consider its next step.

No elected candidate to the episcopacy has failed to obtain consent in over a century. As recently as 2003, the election of a man to the office of bishop was confirmed, even though he was living openly in a state of life contrary to the recently-affirmed teaching of the Church. (In that case, the election was confirmed by the General Convention rather than diocesan standing committees.) The failure to obtain consent in Fr. Lawrence's case followed upon a well-coordinated campaign against his election by a liberal pressure group in the Episcopal Church, which objected to his articulate conservative stance, and successfully played on the insecurities of a fragmenting institution. (Some highly liberal dioceses, such as Atlanta, did confirm his election.)

What seems to have raised hackles were such statements as this one made by Fr. Lawrence: "I shall commit myself to work at least as hard at keeping the Diocese of South Carolina in the Episcopal Church, as my sister and brother bishops work at keeping The Episcopal Church in covenanted relationship with the worldwide Anglican Communion." "The communion flows both ways" in "mutual accountability." In a healthy Episcopal Church – one that knew its own constitutional obligations to the Anglican Communion and accepted them – such a statement would be unexceptionable. In an Episcopal Church that was on the road to recovery mapped by the Windsor Report, such remarks would also be unexceptionable. That they should arouse such controversy, is yet another sign of the crisis of identity and faith in the Episcopal Church. As Fr. Lawrence said to the Episcopal News Service, "if I have to explain it [his statement about communion], then there's a breakdown in facing [the principle] that communion flows both ways." I think Fr. Lawrence's diagnosis is correct. In that portion of the

Episcopal Church's leadership found in its diocesan standing committees – the bishops, to their credit, did muster enough votes among themselves to confirm his election – his failure to gain consent looks very much like an embattled company mentality, a state of mind that has still not faced the nature of the crisis, or accepted the means provided for recovery, and is trying to hold the institution together by the use of extreme means likely only to deepen the division it fears.

Last month the Primates of the Communion met in Tanzania, and issued a communiqué in which four recommendations stood out. First, they gave the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church a deadline, September 30th, to clarify the ambiguities of its response to the Windsor Report in the matter of same-sex blessings (now openly performed in some dioceses with tacit approval of the diocesan bishops) and the consecration to the episcopate of persons living in same-sex relationships. Secondly, they called for a ceasefire in litigation over property, without prejudice to the legal claims of the parties involved. Thirdly, they accepted Madame Schori's offer of a "primatial vicar" for conservative dissenters (dioceses, parishes and individuals), to whom the functions of presiding bishop would be delegated. The primatial vicar would report not to the presiding bishop, but to a pastoral council composed of two bishops chosen by the primates, two by the presiding bishop, and its chairman, chosen by the Archbishop of Canterbury. This arrangement – a virtual church within a church, a haven for conservative Episcopalians within the Communion - would endure until such time as a new Anglican Covenant was ratified, a process expected to take at least a few years. Presumably at that point the conservative church within a church would either be reunited with a covenanting Episcopal Church as a constituent member of the Anglican Communion (an unlikely prospect) or be acknowledged by itself as a constituent member. Fourthly, a draft of the Covenant was circulated, which thankfully included a reference to the historic "formularies" – the 1662 Prayer Book and Articles of Religion (of which the 1928 Prayer Book and Articles of Religion are the American adaptation).

These are all fine recommendations, which take the proposals of the Windsor Report for a truly interdependent, mutually accountable, historically- and biblically-grounded global communion one step further to realization. Much depends, of course, on how they are "parsed" – some American liberals have very subtle minds – and realized. A storm of protest and defiance greeted the recommendations in certain quarters of the establishment, and the Presiding Bishop's chancellor refused to cease litigation against the parishes in Virginia. So nothing has changed, yet. There is a deadline to be met, however, and the House of Bishops is due to meet this month, and again in September. After the meeting of the primates, Bishop Robert Duncan, the moderator of the Anglican Communion Network, had confessed to a "cautious optimism" about the future of the Episcopal Church in the Communion. Given the arrogance manifest in some quarters, and the embattled company mentality manifest in others, caution is clearly to be maintained in full strength.

At this juncture in history, there is everything to be lost by arrogance and a retreat into embattled institutionalism, and much to be won, by a certain greatness of vision, and generous humility of spirit. Bishops and standing committees, and those who pray for the church, take note.

The Rev'd. Gavin G. Dunbar

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