

A Letter to the Episcopal Church in New Hampshire from your Bishop
March 21, 2007

I write to you on the last day of the week-long meeting of the House of Bishops, in Navasota, Texas. While an official “word to the church” will come from the House as a whole, at the conclusion of our meeting, news of actions taken yesterday at our business session will be appearing today. I want you to have my own reactions to go along with what you will read.

This has been an extraordinary meeting of the Bishops, characterized by respect, thoughtfulness and careful discernment, always done in the context of fervent prayer. There is a calm and peace about our meeting I have not experienced before, due in no small part to the non-anxious, but strong, leadership of our new Presiding Bishop.

As you no doubt know, the Primates of the Anglican Communion, at their recent meeting in Tanzania, issued a number of ultimatums to The Episcopal Church, with the demand that they be responded to by September 30. The Primates have made these demands of the Bishops of The Episcopal Church out of what seems to me to be either an ignorance of our polity (the structural ways by which we govern ourselves) or an unwillingness to accept that polity, which says that the governance of our Church is not undertaken by Bishops alone, but rather by a joint governance by bishops, clergy AND laity.

Part of those demands had to do with asking for an unequivocal moratorium on the consecration of partnered gay or lesbian people as bishops, and a moratorium on the blessing of same sex unions. Dire, although not articulated, consequences are threatened if such action is not taken. A process is being set in motion by our Presiding Bishop for us to talk with all the people of our church over the next several months in preparation for responding to these specific demands.

However, one action taken by the Primates has consumed much (but by no means all) of our time. This action was not asked of us, but rather was already set in motion to be imposed upon us by the Archbishop of Canterbury and Primates. That action, described as a “Pastoral/Primalial Scheme,” would create a Primalial Vicar, who would oversee those dioceses who feel they cannot function under the authority of our Presiding Bishop, either because they believe her to be “unorthodox” in her views (consenting to my election in 2003, and allowing same sex unions in her former diocese), or in the case of three of those dioceses, because she is a woman, and therefore unfit matter for ordination in the first place.

Our Presiding Bishop would, according to the plan, be “helped” in the appointment of this “Primalial Vicar” and the supervision of his/her work by a “Pastoral Council,” made up of people appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Primates, plus two appointed by our Presiding Bishop. This would be a Council in which our own Presiding Bishop and those appointed by her would not even constitute a majority. This process

was already under way before we arrived at our meeting in Texas, with the Archbishop of Canterbury closing the nomination process for this Council prior to our arrival.

I think it is fair to say that the vast majority of our bishops – progressive and conservative alike – see this as an unfair, illegal and wholly unprecedented assault on the polity and internal integrity of The Episcopal Church. Never before has any constituent member of the Anglican Communion been subjected to the authority of such an external body. Fears were expressed by most bishops that this would move us closer to a centralized authority in the Communion, and constituted an unwarranted and un-Anglican arrogation of authority to the Primates, unprecedented in the 500 years of our Anglican tradition and practice. It seemed to most of us that it was important to put a stop to this assault on our polity now, before it went any further.

Three resolutions were passed yesterday (you may find the full texts of these resolutions at http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3577_84148_ENG_HTM.htm, with considerable, and sometimes overwhelming, majorities:

The first resolution called upon the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church (the elected body of laity-clergy-bishops who act for our General Convention, between General Conventions) to decline to participate in such a Pastoral Scheme, and to seek OTHER ways of meeting the pastoral needs of those dioceses who are not happy with the actions of The Episcopal Church. (The Presiding Bishop and Executive Council have numerous options for doing so, without the interference of groups of Bishops/Archbishops external to our Church, and our Presiding Bishop has signaled that she is ready and willing to do so.)

Second, the Bishops in a unanimous vote expressed their common desire to find a way to live together in the Episcopal Church during these contentious times, and called upon the Archbishop of Canterbury to meet with our House of Bishops face to face – a request he has steadfastly refused as recently as the Primates Meeting in Tanzania, claiming his calendar is too full to meet with us this year. We have asked him to reconsider, believing that this is not too much to ask of the Archbishop of Canterbury, given the seriousness of the issues which face the Communion, and given his having NEVER met with us since assuming his office.

Third, we offered a message to the Church for study and education, outlining our attempts to meet, in good faith, the requests made of us by the larger Communion, and the consistent rebuffs we have received in response. We re-articulate our profound desire to remain a part of the Communion – a desire that is shared by us all. We go on to enumerate the reasons we cannot and will not participate in the proposed Pastoral Scheme. And finally, we state as clearly as we can, the nature of who we are as a Church and our belief that the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to a union in which ALL the children of God – including women and gay and lesbian people – are called to full participation in the life and ministry of our Church.

While we cannot know what the reaction will be to these statements throughout the Communion, we must be who we are – the Church struggling to live out faithfully the ministry God has given us in this place and time. Like many great reformers before us, “Here we must stand. We can do no other.”

I believe these actions are true to our polity and to our identity as a Church. No matter how the media might portray this as a “slap in the face” to the Communion/Primates, it was not! We calmly and thoughtfully have said “no” to this encroachment on our polity and authority as a Church. We have also pledged ourselves to meeting the pastoral needs of the minority within our Church who are upset by the directions we have taken and by the leadership we have elected. We will also take seriously the demands made of us by the Primates – in consultation with the lay and clerical leadership of this Church, as demanded by our polity. That is not a slap in the face, but rather a responsible and respectful response to the inappropriate demands made of us.

I think you would have been proud of us as your Bishops. The manner and tenor of our decision-making was kind, respectful and prayerful. This was not about politics, but about this part of the Body of Christ attempting to exercise its leadership in appropriate and lawful ways. It was about respecting ALL the orders of ministry in our Church. It was about protecting our Church from inappropriate encroachment on internal matters. It was in the best tradition of the Anglican Communion.

Thank you for your prayers during this time. I have felt your support and love throughout. I have appreciated your attention to these Church issues, WITHOUT losing sight of our real mission as a Church – to proclaim the Good News of Christ in our words and in our actions to a world which so desperately needs to hear it. We will continue as a Diocese to commit ourselves to the Millennium Development Goals as a way of expressing our desire to do our part to meet the needs of a hurting world. We will NOT let these issues distract us from God’s mission – to preach Good News to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to release those in captivity, to bring sight to the blind, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. May God bless us richly in that ministry.

Your bishop and brother,

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