

Statement for the Covenant Design Committee

I am Mark Hollingsworth, Bishop of the Diocese of Ohio in the Province of The Episcopal Church.

Every election year, the State of Ohio becomes what is known as a “battleground state.” Because of its great political diversity, it is very much up for grabs for political candidates, especially presidential nominees. The Diocese of Ohio reflects the same broad diversity of political conviction in the breadth of theology and ecclesiology held by its congregations and communicants. In this way we are very much a microcosm of the larger Church. Yet, in the midst of our great differences and differentness, the vast majority of our members are finding ways to live together as one Church. One congregation receives Designated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight from a neighboring bishop, and remains an active part of the ministry and mission of the diocese. Many parishes serve together in common mission projects as a way to learn how to make room for one another. Together we are finding a unity by accommodation, rather than by assimilation.

At the same time, there are some who have chosen to leave the Diocese and affiliate with other provinces of the Communion. In large part that is a direct result of the interference and many incursions of bishops and archbishops from foreign jurisdictions which have driven deep wedges in our community of faith. The damage to Christ’s body that this constitutes is immeasurable.

The vast majority of us, however, have come to the shared conviction that we are each members of the Diocese of Ohio and The Episcopal Church at God’s invitation. It is an invitation that may have been delivered by a friend, a family member, a neighbor, or a co-worker, but it was without question God’s invitation. Each of us, regardless of her perspective or conviction on any of the issues that challenge us, is there as legitimately as the next. And we are subsequently becoming aware that, given what an odd lot we are, it is not *agreement* that God is offering us. If our agreeing with one another were the divine intention, God would doubtless have started with a more likely group. Rather it is a unity in diversity that God has called us together to explore, a unity more challenging than any we have yet achieved, one we are coming to imagine may resemble the very heart of God.

So why is God offering us this deep and difficult unity? We live in a world that is spinning into ever-increasing polarization, desperate to learn how to live with great differences. If, as the Churches of the Anglican Communion, we cannot learn how to live with the differences God has called together in the body of Christ, then we have no witness to make, nothing to offer the world that yearns for direction and help.

During the months that preceded this conference, I met with groups of lay and ordained leaders across our diocese to discuss with them the St. Andrew’s Draft Covenant. These included members of the Standing Committee, the Diocesan Council, the Episcopal Church Women, the Deputies to the General Convention, and others. Each group reflected the broad diversity of theology and ecclesiology that we have come to recognize as that which God has brought together in us as a diocese. And each group asked me to express to you a similar message, that a

covenant which protects the rich diversity that constitutes the Anglican Communion and humbly offers to the world a model for how people can live together with great differences is something they would embrace.

They believe, however, that the St. Andrew's Draft Covenant will serve only to institutionalize our *inability* to live with one another and with the very differences God has brought together among and through us. It is, to their eye and mine, a pre-modern solution to a post-modern situation, an *either/or* proposition when a *both/and* is needed, designed not to help us make room for one another, but to distance us from each other and refuse the very gifts of differentness God is giving us in bringing us together as Anglicans. In this way, and especially through the proposed processes for consultation articulated in Section 3.2.5.a-e and in the Appendix, Sections 3 through 8, the St. Andrew's Draft takes on the substance and effect of an anti-covenant, defining not how we become one but how we become separate.

Likewise does the Windsor Continuation Group's proposal to ban the blessing of same-sex relationships and the ordination of homosexuals in committed relationships seek to legislate a restrictive solution that will, by definition, excise a considerable number of Christians whose place in the Diocese of Ohio and The Episcopal Church has proved to be an essential blessing to God's mission and our ministry. The consequence will surely be that our diocese and the General Convention of The Episcopal Church will find it impossible to accede to that demand of communion.

We in the Anglican Communion may indeed have irreconcilable differences. But irreconcilable differences are nothing to be afraid of; irreconcilable is generally what differences are. God calls *people* to be reconciled, not their differences. God calls us to be reconciled precisely in spite of and because of our differences.

Let us have a covenant, but let it be a covenant, like those in Holy Scripture, that will show the world not how people separate themselves from one another, but how people with great differences come together in communion with God and each other. Let it be a covenant that will show the world how a diverse people can find a holy unity, and by that unity with God and one another grow into godliness, into the full stature of Christ, in whom all are reconciled and redeemed. This is an opportunity and a responsibility we dare not drop.

Submitted in the name of Christ on July 28, 2008