

February 6, 2004

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Dear Robin:

Rather than respond to the questionnaire I thought it would be more helpful were I to send to you to share with members of the Commission a description of some of the workings of the Episcopal Church, pertinent to your deliberations, and also to try to give some sense of how we have come to a point in our life where we find ourselves having given consent to the election and consecration of a man who shares his life with a member of the same sex.

For at least 35 years the Episcopal Church has been engaged in a process of discernment about the question of homosexuality in the life of the church. This discernment began quite naturally on a local level as congregations began to be aware that certain faithful members of their worshipping communities were homosexual. In some instances these persons shared their lives with a partner of the same sex. It also became obvious that the quality of such relationships on occasion matched the mutual care and self-giving that we associate with marriage.

It is important to realize here that in many areas of our church, particularly urban areas, homosexuality is a very ordinary reality. The whole question of homosexuality is widely and openly discussed. And homosexual persons are quite public in areas of politics, sports and entertainment. I realize this is not the case around our Communion but this fact of our culture must be taken into account given that none of us do our theology in a vacuum.

In the gospel Jesus speaks about knowing a tree by the fruit it bears. In congregations where persons known to be homosexual became a part of congregational life, it became obvious that they possessed the fruit of the Spirit: generosity, kindness, and many of the other characteristics that we associate with Christian virtue. I think here of the experience of the church in Acts, having to deal with the fruit of the Spirit working in the lives of those outside the recognized community, in this case the Gentiles. The fact that in many instances good fruit appeared on trees that were condemned by the church obliged many clergy and others to ponder the scriptures afresh in the light of this reality. If the fruit of the Spirit is discerned in the lives of homosexual men and women is that not in some way an indication by God that these people are to be treated and seen as full members of the community and to be entrusted with ministry on behalf of the

community? So, based on the reality around us of men and women who were part of our lives, we continued our discernment.

Over these years homosexual persons, lay and ordained, have gradually become a vital part of our church. And, as a logical development, congregations have extended a pastoral ministry to their gay and lesbian members. In some congregations there has been acknowledgment of same sex commitments.

Then, as a logical consequence of the acceptance of gay and lesbian persons in the life of congregations and dioceses, the church as a whole has been engaging the question of homosexuality, including in the formal legislative context of the General Convention. At the General Convention in 1976 a resolution was passed stating: "...that homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church." Ten years ago at the General Convention in 1994 a resolution was passed amending the canons such that "no one shall be denied access to the selection process for ordination in this Church because of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, disabilities or age..."

Our engagement as a church with questions of homosexuality has led to a series of studies and dialogues which have been broadly undertaken and involved persons of a full range of opinion. These conversations, which have been both very structured and unstructured, from settings such as parish halls to the floors of formal gatherings, have been concerned with the authority and interpretation of scripture, human sexuality as God's gift, the place of homosexual Christians within the life of the church and the theological aspects of committed relationships of same sex couples.

As part of this work, in 1993 the House of Bishops commissioned from theologians representing diverse points of view a series of papers dealing with authority of scripture. The papers reflected different ways in which scripture may legitimately be approached within the context of the community of faith. I realize that some provinces of our Communion have a dominant tradition for interpreting scripture. I would note here that it is part of the reality of the Episcopal Church that we live with divergent points of view regarding the interpretation of scripture and understandings of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Though we believe "the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation," as it is stated in our ordination liturgy, there is no neutral reading of scripture, and we interpret various passages differently while seeking to be faithful to the mind of Christ. It is therefore important to recognize that people of genuine faith can and do differ in their understandings of what we agree is the "Word of God."

None of our work and prayerful discernment has produced a common mind, and we have managed to live with the tension of diverse opinions on these matters, agreeing to disagree. We were living in a very Anglican way with divergent views until the circumstances of our life, and the canons of our church, forced us into making an *either/or* decision in a very public way with the election of the bishop coadjutor of New Hampshire, and the canonical necessity for giving or withholding of consent. This *either/or* decision did not allow for the middle ground, which the report of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops (which was submitted to the primates prior to our meeting in Brazil) had sought to establish.

The consent to the New Hampshire election has been a presenting issue in our present strains within the Communion. Therefore I think it is important to acknowledge that there is a diversity of practice in appointing or electing bishops around the Communion and to say something here about the nature of our election and consent process, which is open, democratic, and participatory – flowing out of the life of the community.

The manner in which bishops are chosen in the Episcopal Church involves a protracted search process undertaken by the diocese, lasting usually a year or longer, in which a profile is developed by the people and clergy of the diocese. Names are put forward and a search committee composed of lay and clergy members reviews the names, checks backgrounds, addresses questions to potential nominees and then puts forward a list of names to be considered. The diocese then has an opportunity to meet and ask questions of all the nominees. This was the process followed in the Diocese of New Hampshire, and at the end of that process the diocesan convention elected the Rev. Canon Gene Robinson, someone who had ministered among them for 17 years.

Once a person has been elected, the election must be consented to by a majority of Standing Committees of dioceses and a majority of bishops holding jurisdiction. When an election occurs within 120 days of the General Convention, the consent process takes place within the context of the General Convention, which is precisely what happened in the case of Gene Robinson and nine other bishops-elect.

I think it is very important to be clear about this process. When we met at Lambeth the primates asked me if I couldn't have intervened and stopped the consecration. I made it clear that I could not because of the canonical realities by which I am bound, and that it is my responsibility to uphold the decisions formally made by the church.

I think it is problematic that some view the bishops who participated in the ordination and consecration of Gene Robinson as having performed some unfaithful act. This is to overlook the fact that it was a formal decision made by a majority of bishops with jurisdiction and majority of clergy and laypeople representing the 100 domestic dioceses.

I might say that the very public and open nature of our actions is a factor here. This is both healthy and problematic. Not long ago I was at a meeting in Spain which included Christians from a number of ecclesial communities, one of which had made strongly critical statements about the New Hampshire consecration. I had a long conversation with the bishop representing that church, who castigated me for having allowed the ordination of Gene Robinson to occur. Once he had delivered himself of his anger he surprised me by saying that there were indeed homosexual clergy and bishops in his church, but that it was looked upon as "human weakness" and a private matter between themselves and their spiritual fathers. Only if their homosexuality became public was the church obliged to intervene. I said to him that though I could appreciate capitulation to "human weakness" I was concerned that he was describing a climate of secrecy, and a practice that was tolerated that stood at variance with the public position of the church. Was that not a dishonest stance? Would it not be far more helpful and truthful, albeit difficult, to deal openly with the reality which heretofore has remained hidden? Is not secrecy the Devil's playground? It has been extremely difficult for the Episcopal Church to deal honestly with this

issue, but that is the course we have taken and, as I said, the decision of which course to take – openness or secrecy – was one that was forced upon us.

I believe that part of the strain within the Communion, and the reaction to a decision taken within the Episcopal Church is the disproportionate influence that the United States has in other parts of the world, leading to the fear that whatever happens in the United States will be imposed in some way on other parts of the world. I am well aware of the negative effects of globalization. I need to make plain that because something may appear to be an unfolding of the Spirit in the life of the Episcopal Church that does not mean that it should or ought to become normative elsewhere. Never would our church wish to impose patterns that may be appropriate within the life of the Episcopal Church on other provinces of the Anglican Communion.

I remember vividly when I visited the Church in Nigeria and was asked if I was coming to tell them they must ordain women. I told them I firmly believed that is a decision they will have to make within the reality of their own context. There is not one right way. Immediately, there was relief on the part of the bishops.

This raises the very important notion of context, to which I alluded earlier. We must ask: are our understandings and applications of the gospel conditioned by the historical and cultural circumstances in which we live our lives and seek to articulate our faithful discipleship? I believe the answer is yes. As one primate expressed it “the Holy Spirit can do different things in different places.”

When I think of a way forward, the first thing I think of is the need to be respectful of one another’s contexts, to trust one another, and to honor the fact that we are each trying to be faithful in very different circumstances. I pray we can acknowledge to one another that we are each trying, with God’s help, to articulate and live the gospel within the givenness of our own context.

There are several other dynamics at work in creating the strains we feel within our beloved Communion which I will briefly mention. One is electronic communication. Events in one part of the world are instantly transmitted across the globe. Our contexts invade one another without explanation. Because our world has become very small we need to remember that our day to day realities are vastly different.

As well, the speed of communication can oblige us to react to situations and events in other parts of our Communion without the benefit of knowing how brother and sister Anglicans were led to a particular decision. I vividly recall being in Uganda driving through a very remote area and having the primate called on his cell phone by a reporter in Canada for his reaction to an event in the Church of Canada.

Electronic communication also makes it easy for misinformation to be spread abroad and take on a life of its own. This is all the more reason for us to deal directly with one another when there are serious questions or concerns, and not rely on interpretations or reports that may be untrue or biased.

Another dynamic is the role members of my own church with a particular point of view have played in shaping opinions, shall we say, since before the last Lambeth Conference. We must openly acknowledge the fact that part of the reason issues of homosexuality have so overtaken the Anglican Communion is because a number of the members of the Episcopal Church – along with individuals and groups motivated by political ideologies rather than theological convictions – have, by virtue of their connections and resources, been able to garner the consciousness of bishops around the world. Their unstinting efforts have made this issue more central to our life than the spreading of the gospel and the living of the Good News of Jesus Christ. We must ask ourselves if this preoccupation with sexuality is truly of God.

I was particularly struck at the conclusion of our meeting in October when one of the primates plaintively said his concerns were not about sexuality but about poverty and disease and civil unrest in his part of the world, at which point several other primates nodded in agreement. It is a great sadness to me, broadly felt throughout our church, that the Episcopal Church in the simple living of our life has added to the burdens that so many primates and bishops bear in other parts of the Communion. It is my hope that in finding a way forward we can simply agree that for any number of reasons we are not in agreement about concerns of homosexuality, and indeed human sexuality more broadly.

A closing thought: Communion, as Archbishop Rowan has made clear, exists on many levels; it is not simply a formal, ecclesial relationship. Therefore, I ask myself and the members of my own church in the midst of this profound and straining disagreement if there is not some invitation or opportunity to live the mystery of communion at a deeper level, as difficult and costly as it may be. Are we not being invited in a more profound way to make room for one another's realities and one another's contexts both at home and abroad? Do we not have things to learn from one another? Do we not all possess, woven into the fabric of our lives in virtue of our baptism into Christ's risen body, dimensions of the truth as in Jesus, who is himself the truth? Are we not being given the opportunity to experience in the depths of the communion we share, which is our participation in the very life of God, the fullness of God in Christ which exceeds all that we can ask or imagine?

I thank you, and the members of the Commission, for your patience in attending to my reflections. Please know of my prayers for all of you as you go about this important work on behalf of the Communion which means so much to us all.

Yours ever in Christ,

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Presiding Bishop and Primate  
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cc: The Anglican Communion Office