

**Reflections offered to the Primates of the Anglican Communion  
by the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission  
at the Invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury**

The Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, which has been charged to consider the ways in which communion may be protected and nourished, submits the following theological reflections to the Primates in response to the exceptional circumstances with which the Anglican Communion is now confronted, as part of the fruit of our ongoing studies.

1. 'In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us' (II Cor. 5.19). Everything in the life of the Church depends upon this unique gift. It is the good news of grace to which the Church has been sent to bear witness.
2. The Scriptures are the unique source for this Gospel, and the Church lives in the light of and in dependence upon that testimony.
3. In all its words and deeds the Church is called to give a two-fold account of itself: to speak the words of life to the world, giving an account of the faith by which it lives, and at the same time each part of the Church is called to submit an account of its stewardship of the Gospel to other Christians.
4. Christian history reveals a plurality and diversity of accounts of the faith, though there is but one Gospel. Divergences of interpretation give rise to different traditions. Moreover, because human words are used and specific human situations are addressed, these accounts of the faith reflect the differing contexts of the proclamation.
5. Furthermore, because of human sin, ignorance and frailty, it is to be anticipated that omissions, mistakes or distortions may occur in any account given of the faith.
6. As a result it becomes vital that the account each part of the Church gives to other Christians of its stewardship of the Gospel contains the possibility of openness to correction. Communion in the Church requires this mutual accountability. By it, faithfulness in the truth is encouraged, partial understandings are enriched, errors are challenged and unity (which is the priceless gift of the Spirit) is enhanced.
7. In this document, we concentrate on one aspect of mutual accountability, namely *paraklesis* – a New Testament word with a range of meanings from “comfort” and “encourage” to “appeal” to “admonition” and “direction”. Paul charged members of the Church to “admonish one another” in Christ (I Thess 4.18, 5.11). It is evident from the letters of Paul that he was often obliged to offer a critical assessment of the faithfulness of one of his congregations (see, for example, Gal 1:6) himself. Moreover he exercised this form of over-sight in relation to congregations which he had not personally founded (Romans 12.1ff) and in relation to those congregations in which some no longer recognised his apostleship (II Corinthians).
8. In II Corinthians, Paul hammered out a fresh statement of his apostolic authority, in great personal pain, under the imminent threat of a total breakdown of relations with the Church in Corinth. He saw this authority as grounded in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ, and thus as characterised by the power which is perfected in weakness.
9. Living life worthy of the calling with which we have been called involves humility, gentleness, patience, speaking the truth in love, putting away bitterness, wrath and anger, and being kind, tender-hearted and forgiving one another (Ephesians 4). We are in this way to ‘make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Ephesians 3). Mutual admonitions may involve discernment and the exercise of judgment; but encouragement in faith and thus building up the body in love, is the primary motivation. The virtues involved go beyond mere civility.
10. Bishops are as open to admonition in respect of their conduct as other Christians. Gregory the Great regarded it as a compliment to a leader’s humility, if those over whom he ruled felt able to rebuke him (Pastoral Rule II, 8). This has implications for the life of bishops, as the Pastoral

Epistles (which were a major source for the 16<sup>th</sup> century revision of the Anglican Ordinal) make clear. 'Timothy' is instructed to 'set believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity' (1 Tim 4:12). If, for example, a bishop's lifestyle becomes a stumbling block that bishop should hardly be immune from or expect to avoid constant challenge. This constant challenge is bound to affect adversely that bishop's *episcopate*.

11. The cost of genuine dialogue between Christians of different convictions is considerable, even given the kindness of speech and conduct mentioned above. If conservative voices are not to be driven out, it must be possible for an admonition about recent issues to do with homosexuality to be delivered, clearly argued from biblical sources. Not all such arguments are well expressed or would be supported by scholarly writing; but it is a mistake to dismiss all of them, as if their sole basis were literalism or naïve fundamentalism.
12. On the other hand, if progressive voices are not to be ignored, new knowledge has honestly to be confronted. Though there is still much uncertainty, it is evident that the existence in some people of homosexual inclinations has to be understood in a way not available to biblical writers. It has to be recognised as a cost of the engagement of the Gospel with the world, that Christians remain open to changing ideas with their attendant uncertainties and controversies.
13. Not all features of the life of the Church are equally close to the "truth of the Gospel". Although what the Church is, speaks and does ought never to contradict the Gospel, aspects of its life may be relatively immaterial to the substance of the Gospel. Thus, W R Huntingdon assures his fellow Americans that 'a flutter of surplises' would not be thought to belong to the unity of the Church (see *The Church Idea*); A M Ramsey, on the other hand, argues that episcopacy is related to the content of the Gospel (*The Gospel and the Catholic Church*)
14. It would be convenient if there existed a permanently valid and unchallengeable list of fundamentals of the faith, and a corresponding list of secondary questions or *adiaphora*. But the continuing fact of controversies between and within the denominations shows at least that there is no universal agreement among Christians. Frequently moreover, though there is agreement at a general level on some doctrine or practice (for example Holy Communion), interpretations in detail tend to be diverse or even contradictory. It was the considered judgment of the nineteenth century Anglican theologian William Palmer, for example, that the doctrine of fundamentals was not an infallible guide when it came to the resolution of controversial questions.
15. Yet it is equally true that the Church, for good reasons, consistently renews its understanding of the substance of the faith, by which it lives and prays for the coming kingdom. As it does this, it has to wrestle with the fact that not all features of the life of the Church are of equal importance; some lie closer to the heart of the Gospel than others.
16. The questions which now confront the Anglican Communion concern the blessing of same-sex unions, the ordination of non-abstinent homosexual persons to the diaconate and priesthood, the appointment of such a person to the office of Bishop and related issues of Church order. How is the Church to make right judgments in relation to such matters? What weight ought to be given to such innovations? How significant for Christian faith and practice is ECUSA's decision to appoint a non-abstinent homosexual person to the office of Bishop within the Anglican Communion?
17. In the present situation the Primates are called to determine first what weight should be given to the above decisions. How central to Christian faith and practice, for example, is the decision of ECUSA? Finding an answer to this question is not easy, though in the light of the controversy surrounding the Episcopal appointment and the decision of the diocese of New Westminster, Canada, there is a strong indication that the matter is neither light nor a matter indifferent (*adiaphoron*).
18. In making such judgments the usual distinctions between matters of faith and morals begin to collapse, in much the same way as distinctions between doctrine and ethics, while useful, often give way to an appreciation of the interwovenness of matters of faith and life. This reality is at

odds with the mistaken view that ‘core doctrine’ does not involve deep connection with Christian teachings about moral behaviour (as apparently the Righter Judgement [1996]<sup>1</sup> holds).

19. If the Primates decide that the matter is of great weight with respect to the nature of Christian faith and its practice then it would seem that an innovation of such significance requires the broadest consideration and endorsement by the rest of the Anglican Communion.
20. Some matters are judged not to touch or significantly impact upon Christian faith and practice. They are judged either non-fundamental or *adiaphora* – neither commanded nor forbidden. If the Primates decided that the matter before them belonged at this end of the spectrum, this suggests that responsibility and freedom for determining the matter would occur at an appropriate ‘lower’ level of decision making in the Anglican Communion (e.g. a province or national church). However, it should also be noted that in Anglicanism if a proposed change is considered amongst the *adiaphora* and is also known to be a matter of significant dispute, there has been a reluctance to proceed. This compares with the Pauline principle (1 Cor 8-10; Rom 14) about not proceeding with actions, even if *adiaphora*, if they cause another to stumble.
21. A problem arises over innovations about which there are different views in the Church concerning the relative weight or significance to be accorded to a matter. Such are the matters in question. How ought the Church to proceed in such situations? A principle here might be that if the dispute is:
  - intense** (eg. generates high degree of sustained and unresolved debate that threatens the unity of the Anglican Communion; or that requires urgent attention)
  - extensive** (eg. not confined to one section or region of the Church; has significant implications for mission and ecumenical relations; has a wider social impact) and
  - substantial** (concerning an actual issue, and not for example, simply being generated by the media)then the matter cannot remain simply for the local Church (e.g. the diocese) to handle.
22. A word of caution here. It is not envisaged that the first ‘port of call’ for disputed matters in the Communion would necessarily be the Primates. Rather, historically Anglicans have dealt with their conflicts in consonance with the principle of subsidiarity<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, Anglicanism has a natural inbuilt reticence to ‘stealing’ from lower levels the decision making responsibilities that are properly theirs. So it is not the case that strong action from above in a particular case would become the Anglican norm for settling disputes. But if a matter arises of crucial importance to faith and life, or if a matter generates such dispute that it threatens the bonds of the Anglican Communion, the Communion as a whole, through its highest levels of authority, has a responsibility to be properly involved in the handling of the dispute. A process which involves mutual accountability and receives wisdom from the whole of the Communion commends itself in such circumstances.
23. While the processes and structures for dispute settlement in our Church may yet require further development this ought not override the very great moral authority and responsibility of those charged by the church to exercise a ‘care for all the churches’ in the Anglican Communion (cf. II Cor 11.28). In 1989, for example, Primates endorsed the guidelines set out in the Report of the Eames Commission, and adopted them for the life of the Communion.
24. At this exceptional juncture in our history many are looking to the Primates to hear the call of the churches for the leadership (*paraklesis*) that befits those who hold such a high office. We pray with the Primates that, as they listen for the voice of the Spirit, and are nourished by the Word,

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<sup>1</sup> The judgement of the Court for the Trial of a Bishop in ECUSA in the case of Stanton (Bishop of Dallas) and Others v. Righter (1996), was explicitly based on an understanding of the “core doctrine” of ECUSA limiting it to “the story of God’s relationship to God’s people”. The court found that “there was no Core Doctrine prohibiting the ordination of a non-celibate homosexual person living in a faithful and committed sexual relationship with a person of the same sex.”

<sup>2</sup> “Subsidiarity” is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “the principle that a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level.”

they may be emboldened to find new and fresh ways to exercise the charism of their office (*episcopate*) for the common good and peace of the churches.

### **Three questions for reflection**

**1. How crucial to Christian faith and communion are the blessing of same-sex unions, the ordination of non-abstinent homosexual persons to the diaconate and priesthood and the appointment of such a person to the office of Bishop?**

If these matters are deemed of crucial import to the communion of the churches then they ought to be dealt with beyond the local level of the Communion's dispute settling processes by those who have responsibility for the 'care of the churches' of the Communion.

If the matters are deemed not essential a second question arises:

**2. How significant is the nature of the disputes regarding these matters?**

If the Primates decide that the dispute is not that significant in respect to its intensity, extent and substance then the matter has to be handled differently under the operation of the principle of subsidiarity, and decided at the appropriate lower level.

If the Primates decide that the nature of the dispute is of such significance - with reference to its intensity, extent and substance - that it makes for the disunity of the Church then the matter needs to be addressed at the higher levels of the Communion.

If the Primates decide that the matters ought to be responsibly dealt with as part of their calling and authority as leaders of the Communion then the question arises:

**3. What processes of accountability, admonition and healing are appropriate in the Communion?**

It needs to be recognised that in making a judgment as to whether the matter under consideration is of such significance that it is of crucial import for the communion of the churches, or not, the primates, whatever they decide, are already exercising an apostolic authority on behalf of the whole Communion. The making explicit of such an authority may indeed be a significant development in the life of the Communion, but it is evident from the history of the Church that new developments in the exercise of wider authority take place at times of crisis and challenge.

The Commission have for two years been engaged on a study of communion in a fruitful dialogue with members of the Anglican Communion throughout the world, and is continuing to seek to understand more deeply what are the appropriate processes of accountability, admonition and healing in a rapidly changing situation. The urgent need for effective ways to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace so that the Gospel may be preached and God be worshipped in spirit and in truth has at this time given a sharp focus to the wider reflection of the Commission on Communion. In response to the Archbishop of Canterbury's invitation, we offer our theological reflections in a spirit of dialogue under the *paraklesis* of the Spirit, hoping that they will aid the Primates in making their judgement on the demands of communion in Christ at the present time.