

Reflections on the September 2008 House of Bishops Meeting

Dear brothers and sisters,

The House of Bishops recently completed a special meeting in Salt Lake City on September 17-19. We spent a good deal of time, of course, reflecting on this summer's Lambeth Conference. We also considered other important matters: theological education, for example, and the challenges facing the church as we prepare the next generation of priests and deacons; and the church's response to the devastation wrought by Hurricanes Gustav and Ike.

But our primary business focused on the deposition of Bishop Bob Duncan of Pittsburgh. Bishop Duncan had been charged under Canon IV.9 with abandoning the communion of the church. The convention of the Diocese of Pittsburgh last fall passed the first reading of a constitutional change which, in effect, eliminated the "accession" clause from its constitution, essentially removing the diocese from the Episcopal Church. Since two readings are required to change the diocesan constitution, a second vote is scheduled for October 4. Should it pass, the separation will have been accomplished. The charge against Bishop Duncan said, in effect, that he has led the effort – not yet completed – to remove the diocese from the Episcopal Church, and thus is guilty of abandoning its communion.

It will probably be no surprise that I voted against deposing Bishop Duncan. Last spring, I voted against similar depositions and explained my vote in a letter to the diocese and in an article published in the June 29 edition of *The Living Church*. Nor will it be a surprise that I disagree profoundly with Bishop Duncan's actions. I believe that an attempt to remove a diocese from the church is inherently disordered. The issue at hand, however, is not whether I approve of actions in the Diocese of Pittsburgh – but rather, whether a strictly canonical solution should be sought in this extraordinary time in the church's life, and whether (if the canons *are* invoked) they are being used in a way that protects the rights of the accused bishop. As a matter of principle, we should bend over backwards – in an issue as weighty as removing a bishop from office – to obey both the letter and the spirit of the canons.

Thus the proceeding against Bishop Duncan is a most troubling development. He was deposed not so much for what he had done, but for what the House believed that he *intended* to do. While I clearly have doubts about the adequacy of the canons to deal with ecclesiastical conflict, this specific application of the canons is particularly chilling. Many of my colleagues were equally troubled. Unlike last spring – when the vote against Bishops Schofield and Cox was overwhelming (and my own "No" represented a tiny minority) – this vote was 88 to 35, with four abstentions. I was encouraged that such a large number of bishops from across the theological spectrum were concerned that we were acting precipitously, in essence failing to provide "due process" for an accused colleague. I am committed to continue seeking – and speaking for – *another way* of

dealing with ecclesiastical conflict, and urging my episcopal colleagues to join in this effort.

Two additional canonical issues were raised on the floor of the House. The first had to do with the number of votes required by the canon for a bishop's deposition. The "plain sense" of the canon seems to say that a majority of all bishops eligible to vote (rather than simply a majority of bishops present at the meeting) must consent to the deposition. The second issue involved the canonical requirement (again, in a "plain sense" reading of the canon's text) that the three senior bishops of the church must "inhibit" the accused bishop before the House can vote on his deposition – and two of the three senior bishops had in fact declined to do so in Bishop Duncan's case. Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Shori's ruling from the chair was that the canons did not demand a majority of eligible bishops for deposition, and that the requirement for inhibition was optional rather than mandatory. Her ruling was challenged, but was upheld in a voice vote (again, I voted with the minority); and the deposition proceedings went forward to their conclusion.

The Prayer for the Unity of the Church (BCP, p. 818) seems particularly appropriate. While the prayer (with roots going back to 1714) was composed with the division among Christian denominations in mind, it has special pertinence as we pray for our own branch of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church:

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Indeed, in all of this there is good news: Jesus is our hope. He is the head of the church (Ephesians 1:22-23), he fills the church with his Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17); and he prays for the unity of the church (John 17:20-22). May his Spirit now lead us together into all truth (John 16:13).

Yours in Christ,

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