

Reflections on the Primates' Meeting
The Rt. Rev. Edward S. Little II
Bishop of Northern Indiana

Dear brothers and sisters,

The Primates of the Anglican Communion recently completed a six-day gathering in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. It was a time of fellowship and encouragement, of course; the concluding communiqué notes that the meeting “convened in an atmosphere of mutual graciousness as the Primates sought together to seek the will of God for the future life of the Communion” (para. 1); but it was a time as well to engage the difficult matters that have caused tension within the Communion in recent years. During the course of their meeting, the Primates looked at the first draft of a proposed Anglican Covenant. They also reviewed The Episcopal Church’s response to the invitations of the Windsor Report, and at the end issued a communiqué which summarized their long and difficult conversations. I encourage you to read these documents, and to read too the letter from Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori as she reflected on the Primates’ Meeting.

The notion of an Anglican Covenant arises directly from the Windsor Report. In many ways the crisis that followed the 2003 General Convention was ecclesiological in nature. What is the Church, and how do its various branches relate to one another? The Windsor Report proposes that the Communion embrace a Covenant that will help us to answer these questions. A Covenant Design Group, meeting officially for the first time last month, has been working for some time, and brought the fruit of their work to the Primates in Dar es Salaam. This initial proposal contains a doctrinal section – essentially a restatement of Anglican essentials – and material on how we can live together in an interdependent worldwide Church. The draft recognizes that each Province of the Communion “orders and regulates its own affairs through its own system of government and law and is therefore described as autonomous” (para. 5), but at the same time submits itself to the wider Body through the four Instruments of Communion (the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Primates’ Meeting, and the Anglican Consultative Council). The final section, entitled “Unity of the Communion,” lays out a series of six commitments which bind the member churches to one another through mutual accountability. The section concludes with some difficult words. “We acknowledge that in the most extreme circumstances, where member churches choose not to fulfill the substance of the covenant as understood by the Councils of the Instruments of Communion, we will consider that such churches will have relinquished for themselves the force and meaning of the covenant’s purpose, and a process of restoration and renewal will be required to re-establish their covenant relationship with other member churches” (para. 6). Thus the initial draft of the Covenant includes both a gracious invitation and a word of caution.

This is a draft rather than a finished product. The Covenant as initially proposed will go through stages of modification, and finally be presented to the Lambeth Conference (a once-every-ten-years gathering of Anglican bishops) in 2008. After it has been approved by the Conference, each Province (including our own Episcopal Church) will need to

employ its own governing structures to affirm or deny the Covenant. In our case, that would mean the General Convention which will meet in the summer of 2009. I pray that The Episcopal Church will accept the invitation that the Covenant process offers, and that in the end we commit ourselves to the interdependent life of a worldwide Communion.

As I survey the Primates' communiqué, I should begin by saying that my reflections highlight certain aspects of the document, but cannot touch on the whole. The communiqué is nine pages long, and amazingly complex. So I will be focusing on sections that, I believe, have generated the most discussion. It is a wide-ranging document, carefully nuanced. The Primates affirm the Millennium Development Goals, and note the fact that their Sunday Eucharist was celebrated at Christ Church Cathedral on the island of Zanzibar, built on the site of an old slave market. The bulk of the communiqué, however, is devoted to The Episcopal Church and to issues connected with a Communion-wide controversy centering on human sexuality.

The Primates commend the Listening Process, to which the Communion first committed itself in the 1998 Lambeth Resolution I.10. While that resolution (which the Primates reaffirm) upholds the traditional Christian teaching that God's intention for sexual intimacy is that it be exercised in the context of lifelong, monogamous marriage – and thus that it is inappropriate to bless same-sex unions or to ordain persons living contrary to traditional teaching – the resolution goes on to say that we should “listen to the experience of homosexual persons.” The resolution asks “all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals.” And so the Anglican Communion has embarked on a formal process of listening, under the direction of Canon Philip Groves. It is important for us to remember this broader context as we look at the specific requests in the Primates' communiqué. In this diocese, *all* are welcome and all are valued, and among them are our gay and lesbian members; and the Primates join in that affirmation.

The communiqué reflects on The Episcopal Church's response to the Windsor Report at the last General Convention. The Primates believe that “The Episcopal Church has taken seriously the recommendations of the Windsor Report” (para. 20); but they go on to say that “there remains a lack of clarity about the stance of The Episcopal church, especially its position on the authorization of Rites of Blessing for persons living in same-sex unions” (para. 21), particularly given the teaching of Lambeth Resolution I.10. Reading the communiqué, it seems that the Primates give us a “mixed report card” on our response to Windsor. At the same time, they “believe that it would be a tragedy if The Episcopal Church was to fracture, and we are committed to doing what we can to preserve and uphold its life” (para. 28). (The Primates note with some concern that – also contrary to the Windsor Report – bishops and primates from overseas have exercised oversight within the borders of our church. These interventions, they say, have “exacerbated this situation,” though some Primates who have undertaken them are not willing at this point to cease the practice [para. 26; see also para. 32]). In light of this “mixed report card,” the Primates believe that “an interim response is required in the period until the Covenant is secured. For there to be healing in the life of the Communion in the interim, it seems that the recommendations of the Windsor Report, as

interpreted by the Primates' Statement at Dromantine [the last Primates' meeting, in 2005], are the most clear and comprehensive principles on which our common life may be re-established" (para. 30).

What do the Primates propose as action steps during this interim period? (The quotations that follow come from a concluding note to the communiqué; the paragraphs, unfortunately, are unnumbered.) First, the Primates recommend the establishment of a Pastoral Council, which will act on behalf of the Primates and in consultation with The Episcopal Church. The Council is to consist of five members (two nominated by the Primates, two by our Presiding Bishop, and one by the Archbishop of Canterbury). The Council's portfolio is extensive. It is to assist with establishing structures for the pastoral care of dissenting members of The Episcopal Church; "facilitate and encourage healing and reconciliation within The Episcopal Church, between The Episcopal Church and congregations alienated from it, and between The Episcopal Church and the rest of the Anglican Communion"; monitor our church's ongoing response to the Windsor Report; and make other recommendations as necessary. The Primates intend that the Pastoral Council will in turn implement a pastoral scheme ("scheme" being the British word, for which Americans would probably substitute "plan"!) that will address the current state of division within The Episcopal Church and between our church and the wider Communion. The scheme would include the ministry of a "Primatial Vicar" for dioceses which have requested some version of alternative primatial oversight (Northern Indiana is not among them). At the same time, the Primates' communiqué proposes that bishops who affirmed the Windsor Report at a meeting at Camp Allen, Texas, be invited "to participate in the pastoral scheme," though the particular shape of that participation is not specified.

The Primates make specific requests of The Episcopal Church, and in particular its House of Bishops. They invite the bishops to "1. make an unequivocal common covenant that that the bishops will not authorize any Rite of Blessing for same-sex unions in their dioceses or through General Convention (cf Windsor Report para. 143; 144); and 2. confirm that the passing of Resolution B033 of the 75th General Convention means that a candidate for episcopal orders living in a same-sex union shall not receive the necessary consent (cf Windsor Report, para. 134); *unless* some new consensus on these matters emerges across the Communion (cf Windsor Report, para. 134)" (italics in the text of the communiqué). The Primates ask that our response be communicated to the Primates by the Presiding Bishop by September 30, 2007. As at the conclusion of the Covenant document, there is a stern final word: "If the reassurances requested of the House of Bishops cannot in good conscience be given, the relationship between The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion as a whole remains damaged at best, and this has consequences for the full participation of the Church in the life of the Communion."

I believe that the House of Bishops has the authority to respond to these requests. It is within the ministry of episcopal oversight that liturgies are authorized and candidates for the office of bishop receive consent for ordination; and thus the bishops, acting as a House, can respond positively to what the Primates have asked of us. I pray that the House of Bishops does so unequivocally and wholeheartedly, and I will do all that I can

to urge this course of action. The Diocese of Northern Indiana is committed both to The Episcopal Church and to the Anglican Communion, and the Primates' requests offer us a gracious and helpful way forward. It offers too a structure in which healing and reconciliation may be most powerfully effected.

Finally, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori has offered reflections on the Primates' meeting that are especially helpful. She acknowledges the depth of our conflict, with Christians of good will on both sides. "While those who seek full inclusion for gay and lesbian Christians, and the equal valuing of their gifts for ministry, do so out of an undeniable passion for justice, others seek a fidelity to the tradition that cannot understand or countenance the violation of what that tradition says about sexual ethics." And then, in apparent reference to the Primates' communiqué and its requests, she adds, "Each is being asked to forbear for a season," a kind of fast in which we all refrain from precipitous and church-dividing action. Bishop Katharine comes to that conclusion after pondering a conflict in the early church, reported in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and his letter to the Romans (she here follows the lead of the Windsor Report, paras. 92-93). The conflict: are Christians permitted to eat meat? Some said yes, we're free to do as we please; some no, because the meat had first been offered to idols in a pagan temple. Paul counseled that those who felt the freedom to eat meat should refrain from doing so for the sake of those who do not. For the sake of Jesus and the unity of the Body of Christ, Bishop Katharine implies, we should forgo actions that would harm a brother or sister.

I am encouraged by the Presiding Bishop's courage and generosity of spirit, and I understand her letter to mean that, for the sake of the unity of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, we all have to stretch ourselves in extraordinary ways. Please join me in praying for Bishop Katharine, for the House of Bishops as it meets in March, for the Episcopal Church, and for the Anglican Communion and its Primates.

St. Paul's doxology is apt, because it reminds us that in the end it is God's power – and not ours – that will accomplish miracles: "Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation, in the Church, and in Christ Jesus, for ever and ever" (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Yours in Christ,

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Links:

Windsor Report: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004>

Draft Covenant: http://www.aco.org/commission/d_covenant/docs/covenant.pdf

Communiqué: http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3577_82571_/ENG_HTM.htm

Presiding Bishop's letter: http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3577_82669_ENG_HTM.htm