



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF EASTERN OREGON
The Right Reverend William O. Gregg, Ph.D.
Bishop

**Preliminary Reflections
After the Primates' Meeting
In Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania**

March 5, 2007

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

INTRODUCTION

First, these are *preliminary* reflections. The post-Tanzania documents to be “read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested” are relatively brief, but complex. It will not serve any of us at any level to react too quickly to the meeting and its implications.

We need to be mindful of two things. First: there is encouraging and good substance that came from the Primates' Meeting, such as the affirmation of the Millennium Development Goals and the work on hermeneutics (the “art” of interpretation) and theological education. That everyone stayed at the meeting and only half of the previous number who refused to participate in the Eucharist before, did so this time, are encouraging. From all reports, +Katharine, our Presiding Bishop and Primate, was present and participated in her usual calm, clear, firm, and faithful way. And it is clear this made a significant difference. I would encourage all to read carefully the Presiding Bishop's reflections and listen to her remarks to the staff at the Church Center (“815”). Second: Nonetheless, there are seriously troublesome parts of the Communiqué, schedule, and subsequent comments from some Primates as well as the Archbishop of Canterbury. So we may have real, albeit qualified, hope.

The matters that face us The Episcopal Church (TEC) and the Anglican Communion are multi-leveled and complex. There are matters of justice and of morality – how we are to be a Church who welcomes, embraces, and affirms all of God's beloved children redeemed through Jesus – gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, heterosexual, male and female, African, European, North or South American, Asian... “all sorts and conditions of [human beings]”. There are matters of politics, power and privilege. There are matters of polity – process, procedures, and appropriate structures for our life as Anglicans. There are matters of understandings, interpretations, and applications of Scripture, doctrine, discipline, and worship -- serious and fundamental matters of theology and Scripture that under gird our life together in mission and ministry.

THE PRESENTING ISSUES

Many have grounded their responses in the Baptismal Covenant of our Prayer Book. We need to remember, however, that the form of our Baptismal Covenant is not universal in the Anglican Communion. Yet, sacramentally, and thus in prayer, the Baptismal Covenant is where we, as TEC, have most articulated what it means for us to be persons of Christian belief in community and who live and serve in the world. Our responses to the Primates' Meeting communiqué, *et al.* do need to be grounded in these vows and in the larger context of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason.

Therefore, I stand with those Bishops, Priests, Deacons, and Lay Persons of this church who affirm that we cannot step back from our commitment to inclusion of all God's children as full participants in all aspects and levels of our life and work. This commitment means that we cannot target a portion of God's beloved children to bear an unjust burden created by human brokenness manifested in fear, anxiety, lack of understanding, and closedness of heart, mind, and soul. I think that what is theologically and pastorally reasonable, when considered in the whole context of Scriptures (Hebrew and Christian) and the Tradition, is for us to see and respond to any person, regardless of any particular characteristic or essential quality, *e.g.*, their sexual realities, identities, or orientation, as who they are: a beloved child of God, fully human, and bearing the Image and Likeness of God redeemed through Jesus, and indwelt by the Spirit.

In light of Christian Tradition taken as a whole, we see that our relationship with God is dynamic, developmental, and open-ended. God has always called us into a living relationship, not a static one. God has always acted with God's people in ways that were effective for the sake of relationship, connectedness, and communication with the people in the particular times, circumstances, and conditions of each age. God's adaptive responsiveness is always without any compromise to the Godness and integrity of God. God calls people to ministries, ordained and lay, and by grace through the Spirit, equips us all for those ministries. History is quite clear that our brothers and sisters who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered, have always been a substantive, rich part of our life as Church in all aspects of our life and work.

In this context, I would say three things about the presenting issues of ordination of GLBT persons and blessing of same gender partnerships: First, sexual orientation is not, *prima facie*, an impediment to any ordained Office. Secondly, sexual orientation is not, *prima facie* a reason to bless or a reason not to bless relationships. Third, healthy, appropriate, responsible relationships and their sexual expressions by human beings are not, *prima facie* either impediments to any ordained Office or sufficient reasons to bless or not bless a relationship.

THE LAYERS OF CONSIDERATION

Having said that, I would also say that the conversations that we need to have as TEC and as the Anglican Communion have barely begun. We have a moment in time in which, by grace, to be our best together, in Christ's Name. It seems to me that there are these levels of consideration that are essential components of the conversations:

1. **Issues of process, procedure, and structures.** Argument by assertion that there are "Instruments of Unity" or that "Anglicanism teaches" because "Lambeth has said, ..." or assumptions and assertion of authority and power *e.g.*, invasions of dioceses, have to be addressed. It seems to me that the force of assertion has been allowed to exert itself uncritically, resulting in conclusive and divisive lines being drawn in the sand for which some of the Primates are now maneuvering to create structures to support their conclusions and to impose them on everyone. Equally egregiously, tradition and custom, as well as aspects of the framework of the *Windsor Report*, are brushed aside with impunity and have now been given "permission" by assertion and by the Archbishop of Canterbury's statements. There is no lack, as many have pointed out, of power politics here. There is a reason that it looks, sounds, and feels like bullying. It is clear that the Communion has to figure out a new way to be Communion. The fundamental problem is that we have no structures, procedures, or processes for doing this work. We are plagued at this point by merely asserted conclusions, demands, and acts that seek to drive the Communion.
2. **Secondly there are issues of the actual content both of the "conclusions" that the Primates' Meeting asserts, the particular issues (presenting and real), and the unchecked behaviors of some of the Primates.** A fundamental thing that we as a Communion have not yet done is the hard, careful, time-consuming theological work. The Archbishop of Canterbury rightly pointed out this necessity to do the theological work in his address to the Synod of the Church of England on February 26, 2007. The theological implications, as well as the structural and canonical implications of this Primates' Meeting and communiqué are enormous and in many ways profoundly disturbing for our theology and practice of episcopacy, our ecclesiology, and our Anglican identity.

I think that we need very much to resist the current powerful urges and pressures to fix conclusions and implementations on political or pastoral bases. I support the invitation and call of +Katharine to a season of "fasting" not as a time of doing nothing, but as a creative, intentional time of theological, prayerful groundwork for solid, life-giving understanding to undergird us properly in our way through to a new, healthy, and vital Communion. The language of both the draft "covenant" and the communiqué is vague and ominous. What is asked of us (and latterly of the Archbishop of Canterbury) by September 30 will take more time than that to be done well and fully. It is work that cannot be done by a special

General Convention. In fact, to have a Special General Convention prematurely would, I think, be a grave mistake.

3. Third, only after we have done the theological work can we move into **the more practical concrete applications of polity, structure, procedures, and covenant**. This work should and can grow out of our conversation in an organic, healthy, generative way. The covenant can be a real covenant, not an ossified, juridical document that hangs like the sword of Damocles over everyone's head. Biblically, covenants are living documents that frame a dynamic relationship. As such, covenants need to be supple and adaptable so that they may best support our relationships and our work of service in the world.
4. **Finally, for the outcomes of the conversations God is calling us to have to be most creative and life-giving, they must be rooted in the mission and ministry that God gives us through Christ in the Spirit.** What we need are processes, procedures, and structures that support and free us to be most faithfully responsive to the world in which we live in love and service of the Lord. The MDGs can be especially helpful for us in sustaining this focus.

WHAT WE DO NOW: THE NECESSARY CONVERSATIONS

However, before we can address these important matters, we need to do the work of getting the cart and the horse back in proper order. By reaching conclusions and then seeking to impose them upon TEC or the Communion by assertion of their legitimacy and rightness, or the exercise of sheer power to create structures that support those conclusions is simply wrong. It is dangerous. It runs the risk of our being profoundly unfaithful and utterly derailed from the mission and ministry to which God is calling us. Nor can we in this church simply wrap ourselves in a blanket of "prophetic utterance". That is no less arrogant than the bullying experienced from some Primates or from illegal invasions of our dioceses.

It seems to me that the heart of the challenges we face as TEC and as a Communion have little, really, to do with the presenting issues. I have come to see that the current and presenting considerations are second or third level matters – important matters, but not first level. Again, we are plagued by the cart and horse being wrong way round. Part of what has caught us up short as TEC and as the Communion is the assumption that we all held the same things and were are like us, more or less. The truth is that the Communion does not really know itself as a Communion. Arguably, we have never had to know. But as we have created structures that brought us together more often in a world that is considerably "smaller" than the world of 1868 and the first Lambeth Conference, we have run into the truth that we do not know each other and we are in many substantive ways, quite different. We do not know each others' cultures, or worldviews, or experiences that shape how we understand ourselves and our world. We do not understand the contexts in which we know and love and serve the Lord. In

short, we have never had the primary conversation that begins with the question, “Tell me the story of who you are”.

WHAT TO DO NOW: A PROPOSAL

Before we do anything else, therefore, I would urge us to set aside unrealistic deadlines, crafting of covenants, and issuing statements, demands, and commentaries for a time. During that time, we would all agree that invasions of dioceses and other behaviors that divide and take our energies, focus, and efforts away from mission and ministry and from having the primary, essential conversations would cease. The current constitutional and canonical realities of TEC, including their ambiguities would maintain. The Primates can help us by engaging in these primary conversations with one another as well as among and within Provinces as prelude to Lambeth 2008. Lambeth 2008 should be a time and place for the primary conversations among the Bishops of the Communion who will commit to taking those conversations home and continuing them there. I would invite us to work as Bishops, Priests, Deacons, and Lay Persons to create opportunities for these primary conversations within our Provinces and among the Provinces of the Communion now, so that, knowing one another, we can take up our common work and build the relationships, structures, and procedures that effect faithful, creative, and generative mission and ministry in the Body of Christ known in its unity-in-diversity in the Name of Christ. This is the essential, foundational, first order process that we must do in order for us to become an authentic and faithful Communion.

These primary conversations are at their deepest level shared, ongoing prayer among God’s children in this Church and this Communion in which the Spirit is and must be a palpable conversant with us. They are prayer of exploration and discernment, of coming to understanding, of differences, hopes, dreams, conflicts and disagreements. They are prayer of tears and grief and sorrow. They are prayer of deep, intense silence and listening. They are prayer of vigorous, passionate expression. They are prayer of joy, delight, and laughter. They are prayer of diversity-in-unity that enfold all God’s children. They are prayer of forgiveness and reconciliation. They are prayer because at the end of the day we hold our coming together, our listening and our speaking, our seeking and finding, in the context of the reality of grace: God’s self-gift in steadfast love to us which is the bedrock upon which and in which “we live and move and have our being”.

THE HOPE OF THIS MOMENT

Some efforts are being made in this direction. I am working with two of my Canadian colleagues to invite a group of Anglicans from the Pacific Rim and Asia for a conversation in the next twelve months. I am aware of one other Bishop of TEC who is working on an effort to bring together TEC and African Bishops.

If we will remember that we are all beloved of God and that God's steadfast love is ultimately the container of our life and work together, if we will remember "to seek and serve Christ in all persons" and "respect the dignity of every human being," and if we will remember that we are all in the end trying as best as we can to be faithful, perhaps we can, by grace/"with God's help" do the hard work of learning to live together in Christ as TEC and as the Anglican Communion. If we are willing to have the primary conversations, and listen with the ears of our hearts, then we can work together in mission and ministry that achieves the Millennium Development Goals, gives to the world an embodied proclamation of the Good News in Jesus Christ, and develops processes, procedures, and covenants that are organic to who God has created and called us to be and which therefore nurture and support our love and service to the Lord.

I send you these thoughts now. I invite your own prayers and thoughts. I invite you to share them with one another and me. These conversations really do matter, on the ground, right here. These conversations are about who we are as Episcopalians, as Anglicans, as Christians in this place at this time.

May God bless as we seek to be faithful with the lively awareness of our Baptismal Covenant that it may serve as a way to open us up to the unfolding life and work that God is giving us, as individuals, as parishes, as Diocese, as The Episcopal Church, and as the Anglican Communion.

Peace and Blessings.

+William

The Rt. Rev'd William O. Gregg, Ph.D.
Bishop of Eastern Oregon