



***Take Heart, But With Reservations***

*Thoughts on the Anglican Communion Primates' February 2005 Communiqué*

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The Anglican Communion Primates' Meeting Communiqué is a timely statement of the current state of the Anglican Communion, of things that Anglicans share in common, and of matters that threaten to divide us. As has long been the case, the world's needs, and God's many gifts to it, keep calling Anglicans to work together as effectively as we can to address them. To help with that process, the communiqué calls on Episcopalians to concentrate on those things that bring the church closer together, and to bear witness to the benefits that everyone who is ministry—lay and ordained—brings to our common life in Christ.

We can take heart from the communiqué, but with some reservations. Via Media USA strives to provide support for those who have become disenfranchised from the Episcopal Church by their dioceses or parishes, to protect the unity and integrity of the church, and to work for reconciliation and healing within it. We are grateful for the gifts of the Episcopal Church's democratic polity, and believe that the primates' deference to the processes of that polity, as well as to that of the Anglican Church of Canada, will provide time for acts of charity and grace to prevail against those who would have our diverse understandings become lasting divisions. As we react to the primates' communiqué, we also seek ways to strengthen our bonds of communion as well as fellowship and reconciliation in the church.

Of particular note from the communiqué are the following three things:

1. The primates commit themselves "neither to encourage nor to initiate cross-boundary interventions." This is vital to the health and integrity of the Anglican Communion and to each province and diocese within it. Violations of this commitment are unacceptable.
2. The primates, prophetically, reserve their strongest language to witness against the abuse of human rights. They say, "The victimisation or diminishment of human beings whose affections happen to be ordered towards people of the same sex is anathema to us. We assure homosexual people that they are children of God, loved and valued by him, and deserving of the best we can give of pastoral care and friendship." We hope and pray that this prophetic assurance and care may be carried swiftly to all parts of the Communion .
3. The primates have called on each church to protect those whose theology has caused them to exclude themselves from many of its gifts and ministries. This is important for the entire church, but particularly for those dioceses in which Via Media USA is active.

Primary to such protection should be finding ways to address the, at times, ill-informed understandings of Biblical theology, ethics, and pastoral care that tend to separate this group from the rest of their church. This is congruent with the primates' desire, as expressed in the communiqué, to improve Communion-wide understanding of Anglican "history, formularies, [and] spirituality," particularly through theological education" (§21). Only by reducing the opportunities for people of faith in the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Church of Canada to

draw away from these churches will we be able to focus effectively on the ministries to which we have been called in them.

It is in this context that we consider one of the most troubling elements of the communiqué, which is the one that has received most notice. This is the primates' request that the ECUSA and Anglican Church of Canada withdraw their representatives from the Anglican Consultative Council until Lambeth 2008. Voluntary and temporary as it might appear, compliance with this request runs the risk of laying the groundwork for it becoming possible to consider that these two provinces will have chosen to withdraw themselves from the Anglican Communion if they do not, via their "relevant constitutional bodies," commit themselves "to the inter-dependent life of the Anglican Communion [as] understood in the terms set out" in Sections A & B of the Windsor Report (§14, §8).

Another significant danger is that elements within the Anglican Communion will come to consider a willingness "to accept the same teaching on matters of sexual morality as is generally accepted elsewhere in the Communion" as a *sine qua non* of being a continuing part of the Communion (§12). This is troubling for at least five reasons:

1. As stated in §12, it concerns only the North American churches. For example, those African provinces and dioceses which tolerate polygamy in any form—a matter of sexual morality that is not generally accepted in the Communion—are not held to such a standard.
2. It appears to reduce the unity of sacrament that has historically bound the Communion not merely to a unity of doctrine, but to a unity of ethics—and a narrow one at that.
3. It does not invite consideration of something Anglicans have learned the world over, which is that ethical understandings need to develop over time as we live more fully into the love of God.
4. It appears to grant to the primates an authority that they do not have.
5. Perhaps most importantly, it cannot but encourage the "victimisation or diminishment of human beings whose affections happen to be ordered towards people of the same sex," which the primates say "is anathema to us" (§6).

At the very least, increased attention throughout the Communion to Anglicans' distinctive "history, formularies, and spirituality," particularly through adequate theological education, will be needed to prevent this troubling consideration from gaining further support.

To move forward, we encourage Episcopalians to look to the ministry of reconciliation currently being pioneered by the dioceses of Los Angeles and Western Massachusetts, and to the Episcopal Church's wealth of understanding about congregational and diocesan health and maturity, with hope for the future. These are just some of the resources in our church that will help us preserve and protect it as the American expression of Anglican tradition.

Lastly, we are also grateful for the pastoral care and leadership that our primate and presiding bishop, Frank Griswold, continues to show within our church and throughout the world. All Episcopalians should look with thanksgiving for his actions and faith, and attend carefully to what he has to say about these matters.