

The Windsor Event  
Diocesan Centre  
9 April 2005

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I am happy to represent the Primate's Theological Commission this morning and to outline its role in the urgent discussions taking place in the Anglican Communion.

It was in response to a request of General Synod 1995 that the Most Reverend Michael Peers, then Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, established "a Theological Commission composed of ten Anglicans of appropriate expertise and representative of the diversity of theological opinion in the Church..." In its request to the then Primate, the General Synod of the day honoured the concerns of the Book of Alternative Services Evaluation Commission that theological reflection was "crucial and essential to the health of our church and fundamental to a renewal of the church in the gospel."<sup>1</sup> That BAS Evaluation Commission also intended that such a Theological Commission be a place for "serious thought and generous discussion, pointing out that too often in the church theological debate was hurried and less than fully informed because it was dominated by the urgency of the 'hot-button issues' of the day. The Theological Commission was proposed in order to make time for thoughtful discussion and debate in an atmosphere that would allow for genuine listening. Of course the work of the Commission was also meant to benefit the wider church in debating crucial current issues by providing the tools and resources to enable the church to engage in foundational theological questions that underlie those issues. The fruit of the labours of that first Commission was presented to the church in the form of three theological workbooks under the overall title, "Wrestling with God".<sup>2</sup> These workbooks are entitled, *Longing for God: Anglicans talk about Revelation, Nature, Culture, and Authority*; *Turning to God: Anglicans talk about sin, grace and the Christian life*; and *Meeting God: Anglicans Talk about Creation, the Trinity, and the Church*. They describe the way Canadian Anglicans can begin to reflect faithfully and theologically about current issues, including same-sex unions.

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<sup>1</sup> *Longing for God: Anglicans talk about Revelation, Nature, Culture, and Authority*. Toronto, 2001, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Wrestling with God, Book 1: Longing for God. Wrestling with God, Book 2, Turning to God: Anglicans talk about sin, grace and the Christian life*. Toronto, 2002. *Wrestling with God, Book 3, Meeting God: Anglicans Talk about Creation, the Trinity, and the Church*. Toronto, 2004.

Just as the current Commission had begun a promising discussion about religious pluralism it was given a task from General Synod 2004 which has since occupied our time. The task is outlined in the Windsor Report itself, para. 139 as follows:

In the Canadian church, a process of discernment is underway to ascertain to what extent the blessing of same sex unions is a doctrinal matter, thus requiring, constitutionally, decisions at least at the national level. At its meeting in June 2004, the Canadian General Synod referred the question of whether or not the matter of same sex blessings is a matter of doctrine to the Canadian Primate's Theological Commission, whose report will be considered throughout the church before the question returns to the General Synod meeting of 2007. The Canadian General Synod in June also adopted as part of a larger resolution that it affirmed "the integrity and sanctity of committed same sex relationships". While this statement has been viewed by some as a change of teaching on the part of the Anglican Church of Canada, the reference to the Theological Commission includes a review of the theology behind this statement and thus the main thrust of action by the General Synod is to defer decisions until 2007 until due consultation can take place.

Appendix Three of the Windsor Report includes the text of Resolution A134 *The Blessing of Same Sex Unions*, carried at the 2004 General Synod, as well as the Motion to Defer section 2 of the original motion which read "That this General Synod affirm the authority and jurisdiction of any diocesan synod, with the concurrence of its bishop, to authorize the blessing of committed same sex unions." The motion to defer this section until General Synod 2007 included the following amendment:

Request that the Primate ask the Primate's Theological Commission to review, consider and report to the Council of General Synod, by its spring 2006 meeting, whether the blessing of committed same sex unions is a matter of doctrine; That on receipt of such a report, the Council of General Synod distribute it to each province, diocese and the House of Bishops for consideration.

The Primate's Theological Commission hopes to report to the Council of General Synod next month with its opinion, and then, regardless of the opinion expressed, to continue its work to provide resources to the Canadian Church so it can seriously engage the whole range of theological issues implicated in these blessings.

Of course many will say that there already has been far too much "discussion", at least of a certain type. It is the quality, not the quantity, of the discussion, that is our concern. As one commissioner has said in our deliberations:

In place of the common spectacle of two sides attempting to score rhetorical points, and to gain influence for a position they have already decided is right, we are calling for a discussion involving a common exploring of the wide-ranging theological implications of what we are doing as a church, a careful and prayerful listening to one another, and to the various voices and perspectives in our church.

A climate of humility and solidarity, where the other side is truly listening, is desperately needed, if we are to reach as broad a consensus as possible on the relationship of sexuality to our full humanity in Christ.

Indeed, the commitment of the Commission is that the resolution of the urgent questions threatening to break apart our Communion depends upon Anglicans around the world coming to a common way of understanding Scripture and doing theology. The emphasis of the Windsor Report on process, polity, and the political means of decision-making (i.e. the four ‘instruments of unity’) will not be sufficient to keep us together. On all sides of these questions now there is clearly a greater commitment to remaining true to the Gospel and to doing justice than to maintain a unity at the expense of that truth and justice. In particular, the *Windsor Report’s* understanding of the value of the doctrine of ‘reception’ should please no one, and least of all those who understand the imperative of theological thinking for the Christian. One of the refreshing aspects of the Primate’s Theological Commission is that it has resisted attempts to turn it into an instrument to advance the political agenda of the Church. It has insisted that its attention “be primarily directed to the importance of theology, and not to polity.”<sup>3</sup> The truth of a matter is not determined by the (however lengthy) process of going through proper legislative procedures, but rather by the profound standards of the ongoing Biblically inspired Christian Tradition in which the mind of God the Son is revealed through the activity of God the Holy Spirit.

Why the attempt to reform our polity and political structures will not resolve our present crisis is illustrated, I think, by the following description of what the church would be saying if it allowed the blessing of same sex unions. These are words of a former member of the Commission, and I will not tell you his name nor what side of the debate she vigorously represented. The usefulness of this description is that both sides can say, ‘yes, this is precisely at issue, and this is why we utterly affirm, or utterly reject, the

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<sup>3</sup> Victoria Matthews in the Preface, *Turning to God*.

notion of same-sex blessings'. These words suggest the weight and importance of what we are talking about. She writes:

What would be meant by the blessing of "same-sex unions" which include erotic relations? For the Church to bless these would be for the Church to give thanks to God for them – to declare that in themselves these are pictures or icons of God's love, that they display in a certain mode the salvation story, and that they are glorified or taken up into God's own actions and being. It would be to declare that they have a significant and fruitful part in creation, and that they are symbols of the in-breaking and coming rule of God, in which the Church now shares and in which we will eventually participate fully. It would be to "speak a good word" (Greek, *eulogein*, "bless," or literally, "speak well") about this sort of relationship, declaring it to be a condition in which the way of the cross and the way of new life come together. It would thus claim that the relationship is conducive of repentance, healing, growth and glorification for the two men or the two women involved. Precisely here, the Church would be saying, you can see the love of God in human form, and the glory of humanity. Here would be a sacrament, or at least something like the Roman "sacramental" ("sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments . . . [and in which] various occasions in life are rendered holy") – an occasion where God meets us.

It is precisely because the blessing of same sex unions implies all this that there are those in our communion who feel bound by the Gospel to promote such unions. There are others who believe equally strongly that for the church to imply these things would make it apostate, calling what is evil good, since such unions bear the nature of sin and are forbidden by the Gospel. Very little true and open dialogue or conversation has been possible.

Up to this point in time the theological dialogue about same-sex unions has failed because Anglicans no longer share a common understanding of either Scripture or Christian Tradition. The very unfortunate and rapid growth of Christian fundamentalism has created the primary divide, largely polarizing Anglicans into two groups. On the one side there are the Biblical literalists, and on the other side there are those who use the secular language of individual rights, personal autonomy and freedom as a private act. Neither position can contribute to the conversation urgently required today. On the one hand, the twentieth century notion of Biblical literalism (fundamentalism) is not an authentic part of the historic Christian tradition and, on the other hand, the use of secular value laden language in itself is inadequate to justify behaviour as holy and Godly. To the extent that current western secular notions of the human personality and freedom are understood to be consistent with Gospel values, they must be shown to be such.

Second, a radical and deep skepticism has arisen about the possibility of any fruitful conversation which takes seriously the notion that in the Anglican Communion there are recognizable standards of Christian truth. The appeal to historic and foundational standards of truth and charity revealed to humankind in Christ, by which the Church must test every challenge to previously held faith, doctrine and morals, is seen to be a stick used by one side (the conservative) in the debate. Appeal to the ‘Christian Tradition’ is seen to be as politically driven and as narrow-minded as Biblical literalism – and used largely by the same people to put an end to real conversation even before it begins. Unfortunately, because the Christian Tradition is not understood to be the living and compassionate Body of Christ which is positively and urgently being led by the Holy Spirit “into all Truth”, it no longer is seen to be the context in which the Church has listened obediently in the past, and listens obediently today, to the Gospel as the measure of Christian doctrine, belief, worship and holy living. The consequence of abandoning trust in the Christian Tradition as our corporate memory of what it is to be the Body of Christ, is that it often seems to be the case that there are no shared assumptions or principles upon which a common Christian conversation can be based. As the Archbishop of Canterbury said during the debate at the Primates’ gathering in February,

People are no longer confident that we are speaking the same language, appealing to the same criteria in our theological debates. And the deep lost-ness and confusion that arises from that and the anger that arises from that, is something that does not in any sense help the long-term health of the body or our search for truth together in the Body.<sup>4</sup>

The Primate’s Theological Commission desires to help the Canadian Church recover that common language which allows the Gospel to be shared once again. As the Windsor Report says, the problem is not that there has been too much attention to Scripture, but too little.

Finally, I want to conclude by pointing out that General Synod 2004 defeated an amendment that would have asked the Primate to establish a ‘special task force’ to consider whether the blessing of same-sex unions is a matter of doctrine. Such a task force no doubt would have been made up of recognized theologians in the Anglican Church of Canada and would have attempted to include a balance of persons on all sides of the debate. This would have meant the politicization of the process from the beginning. I take heart that this task was rather given to a previously established group of persons committed to think theologically,

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<sup>4</sup> Speech in debate on the Windsor Report, Thursday, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2005

and to lead the entire church, corporately and individually, into such thinking. Until we all learn, as disciples of Jesus Christ, to “put on this mind which was also in Christ Jesus” to think humbly and obediently with the mind of Christ, the conversation will not begin.

The End