

A submission to the diocese in preparation for the meeting about the Windsor Report

Peter Armstrong, 30 March 2005.

As the Anglican communion struggles to come to terms with the blessing of same-sex unions, one of the key features of our life together has been the telling of stories – especially stories of gay and lesbian people who long for intimacy, and who have experienced rejection and condemnation by "the Church"...

But there are other stories which need to be told too. Gathering together as God's people requires not only listening to the voices of those around us. It also means listening to human voices far away. It also means listening for the "still, small voice" of God.

The key issue which is raised within the Windsor Report concerns the nature of "communion" within Anglicanism. To what extent are we independent of one another, and to what extent are we to be inter-dependent? The Windsor Report's authors argue that on matters which affect us all, all "instruments of unity" should be consulted. Further, they argue that these bodies within Anglicanism need to be strengthened.

As Anglicans, what does it mean to belong in communion? What does it mean to claim that we belong, as the Creed says, to God's "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church"?

A life without God tends toward self-centredness and self-interest. Living out the Christian life means being re-oriented toward Christ, and toward our neighbors in a radical way. Part of our new orientation means having a sensitivity toward those who suffer and struggle, including gay and lesbian people. But part of our orientation toward our neighbour which we are called to express also means listening, engaging, and participating in the worldwide fellowship to which we belong. This is part of what it means to be an Anglican, and the Windsor Report addresses this directly.

Canadian Anglicans have understood that it is an essential part of who we are that we belong to a worldwide, historical fellowship. (See the Constitution of General Synod, declaration or principles; and the 1893 Bishops' Solemn Declaration.)

Of course there have been times when our fellowship has been strained, and it has been tempting for some of us who feel passionately about a principle to walk away from the table. Consider, for example, the Presbyterian movement in the 1600's, or the splits over the ordination of women in the twentieth century. Like a marriage or any other human relationship, to stick together requires effort and struggle; both parties may feel aggrieved and their point of view is misunderstood, or that the other party is flat-out wrong. But the Church has always been richer when there has been the commitment to listen together. (Even the withdrawal of the Anglican Church of Canada and the Episcopal Church from the Anglican Consultative Council, if this takes place, is understood to be within a context of listening to the theological points in favor of the blessing of same-sex unions.) A genuine commitment to remaining, listening, and not acting rashly can hold us together for the short term.

But this commitment alone may not sustain us for the long term. Proponents of the blessing of same-sex unions often feel strongly that they have waited long enough, and are impatient to act. Opponents of the blessing of same-sex unions seem unlikely to be persuaded that the revelation of scripture can give blessing to same-sex unions.

In the long term, an internal change is required for us to maintain the communion to which we are committed to belong. This is tentatively laid out in the Windsor Report, in which the liberal and conservative parties, for different reasons, are invited to express "regret" for their actions.

Intentionally or unintentionally, this phrase has caused confusion as different provinces have interpreted "regret" in different ways.

U.S. Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold and Canadian Primate Andrew Hutchinson, almost immediately upon the public release of the Windsor Report, expressed regret for the hurt which had sometimes been experienced as a result of the blessing of same-sex unions. The Bishops of Kaduna and Durham who contributed to the report clearly understood "regret" to be more – a sensitive, English way of expressing repentance before God and the Church; a radical leaving behind of former practices, and being re-oriented toward truth as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Undoubtedly there are differences of opinion on who is wrong, and to whom repentance needs to be expressed, but it is true that an expression of regret for hurt does not go nearly far enough, either to address the pain of gay and lesbian people on the one hand, or to turn from sinful convictions and lifestyles on the other.

A debate over bishops crossing diocesan boundaries deals with some of the ecclesastical issues, but in the end it is only secondary. This issue flows from the prior, deeper, passionate convictions on both sides about what it means to be faithful to Jesus Christ and his Body.

This is a plea, then, for us to speak less, and listen more; to take the time to be sure we seek the mind of Christ, not casually assuming that "God is on our side". Our hearts need to be broken at the foot of the cross. Where the other side has truly failed to discern God's will, we need to be prepared to forgive them. Where we ourselves have been blind to revelation, we need to seek individual and corporate forgiveness and renewal. It is a miserable place to be, but when we are there, that is when God's grace is most visible, and his Church is truly revitalized and renewed in its mission and service, in the service of one another and those in pain and struggle, and for the healing of this hurting world.

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