

Submission for The Windsor Report Workshop, 9 April 2005. From: Executive, N.S. Essentials

The Essentials Nova Scotia group has been meeting as a group to pray, to seek to understand what is happening in the worldwide Anglican communion, and to seek to contribute positively, as we are able, to the ministry of the Church. (For further information about us, please see the April 2005 clergy mailing.)

We deeply appreciate this initiative by our bishops to seek input and opinion from the community. Overall, we commend the members of the Lambeth Commission for the thoughtful manner in which they have presented their Report. In the main, we endorse their findings, and their recommendations as they have done their best to keep the Anglican Communion together, following the deep divisions, which have arisen over the blessing of same-sex unions.

The Windsor Report says, "We continue unreservedly to be committed to the pastoral support and care of homosexual people" (paragraph 6). We endorse this statement, as it seeks to fulfil the Scripture "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). We recognize that there are wide differences of opinion within the Anglican Communion about what constitutes adequate "pastoral support and care." We hope that those who seek the blessing of same-sex unions recognize that Anglicans who are opposed to same-sex blessings genuinely want to be faithful to Christ and to minister sensitively to members of our community who struggle in various ways with sexual temptation. We believe that at its best, the exercise of pastoral care within the tradition of the Church has provided comfort, encouragement, hope, and challenge to those of us who struggle with sexual temptation.

We appreciate the call within the Windsor Report for proponents of the blessing of committed same-sex unions, and the ordination of an openly-gay bishop, to provide a more thorough theological rationale, which seriously engages with scripture. We would have preferred this invitation within the Windsor Report to be somewhat more specific: Following the ordinal, we understand scripture to be "God's Word" for his Church – not merely a historical library, but a living message through whom Jesus Christ is revealed, whom we are called to serve and obey. We believe that engaging with the theological points of sin, redemption, the cross, sanctification, and the discipline of the Church, as well as themes of justice and freedom (in the modern sense), both in the Bible's general message and in specific passages, are some of the key themes which need to be explored.

In this limited space, we hope that the diocese might reconsider strategies which the Anglican Communion has used in other times of theological disagreement to discern God's will, and respectfully we want to offer this to our sisters and brothers in the diocese for consideration. In the past, when members of the Anglican Communion, world-wide, faced decisions of great importance, they followed "The Anglican Way" of resolving problems, and making decisions, namely, (1) Seeking the Truth of Scripture, (2) Studying the Historic Tradition of the Church, (3) Appealing to Reason.

Some Anglicans have suggested that we ought to add "experience" as the Methodist Church does. (Indeed, the English Anglican bishops, while addressing the blessing of same-sex unions, have written about "reasoned reflection on experience.") For most of the Anglican Church's history, there would be great reluctance to view "experience" as a means of understanding God's will, as human experience has been understood to be corrupted through sin. Experience and reason are clearly tools for our teachers and students, and are best coupled with an appreciation of Biblical foundations and principles. We understand that "experience," insofar as it points us to God, is part of human reason.

We believe there is general agreement that "the historic tradition of the Church" is not supportive of the proposal for the blessing of same-sex unions. There are genuine differences of opinion about the message of scripture – whether or not it is silent to contemporary consensual adult same-sex relations or not, and if it is not silent, what it says. We believe it tends to be true, however, that people who value the message of scripture more highly tend to believe that it speaks clearly that sexual intimacy outside of Christian marriage is contrary to God's will.

Those who wish to appeal to "reason" – particularly appealing to the experiences and desires of those who have same-sex attraction – tend to place greater value on the voice of "reason." This raises an important question about the priority of different ways of discerning God's truth. If appealing to "tradition" or "reason" bring us to different conclusions, to which should we appeal, and is there a way of resolving this tension?

The first Anglican we know who articulated this three-fold test of doctrine was Richard Hooker (Laws, Bk. V, 8: 2 – although Hooker wrote of the "voice of the Church," – that is, its apostolic, catholic and present-day witness; not literally "tradition"). Sometimes an analogy has been made with a three-legged stool; each "leg" is needed for stability. The inference, then, is that each "leg" is equally valuable, and no "leg" has priority. This is not what Hooker argued, though: Richard Hooker understood that scripture has priority among the three. The authors of the Windsor Report, like most other Anglicans yesterday and today, also understand that scripture within the Church has priority for the discernment of God's general revelation.

While this diocese and many others try to come to terms with the nature of our communion and the issue of same-sex unions, we hope that as well as engaging with the political dynamics within the Church, we may see this as an opportunity to engage deeply, humbly and confidently with the message of scripture. In this context, we would also suggest that we commit ourselves, individually and corporately, to prayer; we would recommend a diocesan-wide prayer initiative, including such points as "discernment" and "Church unity."

While we understand the haste which many people feel is needed, we observe that God's revelation to his Church has generally taken time to be discerned. It also requires a degree of humility that we may be in need of profound correction about God's will in these matters, which we believe has frequently been missing in both the conservative and liberal sides of the debate.

There has been considerable discussion about the proposal within the Windsor Report for a common Anglican covenant. Space does not allow us to address this proposal in this paper, but we believe this is worthy of consideration. It needs to be pointed out that no province is being required to participate in an agreement to which it would have theological objections. Evidently such a proposal would, because we are a world-wide communion, be as broad as possible and only as specific as minimally necessary.

The Windsor Report warned: "There remains a very real danger that we will not choose to walk together. Should the call to halt and find ways of continuing in our present communion not be heeded, then we shall have to begin to learn to walk apart." (paragraph 157). Like the authors of the Windsor Report, we hope that the Anglican communion will be maintained and strengthened, for the building of Christ's kingdom and his glory.

Believing that God is sovereign in all matters, including the present deep divisions in our Anglican Communion, those of us with conservative theological convictions take encouragement that God's will is becoming manifest. We believe that Church discipline is sometimes necessary, humanly speaking, for the functioning of the institution, under the direction of the Holy Spirit; one God, whom we serve.