

Report of the R-5 Commission to the 213th Annual Council of the Diocese of Virginia

Background

The R-5 Commission was created by Bishop Peter James Lee in response to the 212th Annual Council of the Diocese of Virginia, which recommended, in Resolution 5 (R-5)¹ that he appoint a Commission “to discern a possible ‘emerging consensus’ regarding the permitting of ‘local option’ for the blessing of same-sex unions,” with the Commission reporting to the 213th Annual Council.

In March 2007, Bp. Lee appointed the Rev. John Ohmer, Rector of St. James’ Church--Leesburg, to chair this Commission, and also appointed the Rev. Sue Eaves, Rector of St. Thomas--Richmond and the Rev. Rick Lord, Rector of Holy Comforter--Vienna as the initial members of this Commission. Bp. Lee requested the three of them to function as a Steering Committee charged with:

- 1) Developing a charter for the Commission’s work and then
- 2) Making recommendations for the remaining members of the Commission.

Over the course of April and May 2007, the Steering Committee endeavored to complete this work.

1) Development of a Charter for the Commission’s Work

Because R-5, as passed by Diocesan Council, is open to interpretation, the first order of business for the Steering Committee was to develop a charter for the Commission’s work.

The first question the Steering Committee faced was,

“Is the Commission’s task to follow the letter of the “resolved clause” of the resolution--namely, to discern if there is an ‘emerging consensus’ and report back to Council?

Or is the Commission’s task to follow the *spirit* of the resolution, as indicated in the ‘whereas clauses,’ and as the resolution is interpreted by Bp. Lee--namely, for the Diocese of Virginia to ‘find a way forward that is pastorally responsive to the gay and lesbian Christians in our midst while at the same time being mindful of our membership in the wider body of the Anglican Communion’?”

Even if the R-5 Commission’s task were as seemingly straightforward as following the letter of the resolution, many questions are begged:

- How does one discern a possible “emerging consensus”?
- Assuming one can discern a possible “emerging consensus,” are we talking about consensus in the Diocese of Virginia, in the Episcopal Church, in the worldwide Anglican Communion, or in some combination of all three?

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- And what do we mean by “‘local option’ for the blessing of same-sex unions”?
 - that the Anglican Communion would allow a communion-by-communion “local option” whereby the Episcopal Church would be free to exercise its own “local option” vis-à-vis the worldwide Anglican Communion? or
 - that an official rite for the blessing of same-sex unions be included in The Book of Occasional Services that diocesan bishops in the Episcopal Church would or would not be free to allow as a diocese-by-diocese “local option?” or
 - that Bp. Lee would allow local clergy within the Diocese of Virginia the option of blessing same-sex unions, as a parish-by-parish “local option” within the Diocese of Virginia?

What became very clear to the members of the Steering Committee is that the most important work of the R-5 Commission would be the work of discernment. Questions of *where* and *how* blessings of same-sex unions *would* or *would not* take place are answered only after prior questions of *whether or not* such blessings *should* take place. And that, of course, is one of the big questions facing our church today --our local churches, our diocese, our wider church, our communion, and Christianity itself.

The Steering Committee was thus led full circle to the question raised by Bp. Lee, and recommended this as the R-5 Commission’s charge: *how do we, as a Diocese, “discern a way forward that is pastorally responsive to the gay and lesbian Christians in our midst while at the same time being mindful of our membership in the wider body of the Anglican Communion?”*

If the R-5 Commission is to be engaged in the work of discernment, then the Commission should be engaged in the work of the Holy Spirit--the divine initiative, past and present. In Scripture, and specifically in the book of The Acts of the Apostles, “we do not find the church busy at its tasks, healing, teaching, preaching, but rather the disciples are told to return to Jerusalem and wait – wait for the spirit from on high. This is a way of saying to the church, ‘you are not in charge here.’ It is God’s spirit who will make the first and most decisive moves. What a breath of fresh air to those churches rooted in activism: the question is not ‘what shall we do?’ but ‘what is God doing?’ Where is the Spirit moving? This may prove not merely a helpful corrective, but a transformative one...a shift of focus...a focus toward God’s will and the Spirit’s way.’ⁱⁱ

Therefore, borrowing from Acts, the Steering Committee recommended six guiding principlesⁱⁱⁱ for the work of the Commission:

- a) **Recognize that conflicts have a pre-history.** What is behind the presenting issue of same-sex blessings? Identity? Humans as *imago Dei*? Relationship? Justice?
- b) **Frame the issue.** In the Jerusalem Council, was the question: “can Gentiles be saved?” Or was it: “what is necessary for table fellowship in a new and mixed community of Jews and Gentiles?” The church, then and now, is confronted with a

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challenging question: “what is precious and what is expendable?” How can we be in fellowship with one another when we hold different views?

- c) **Hear testimony.** “The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter,” and there was “much debate.” (Acts 15:6-7). The apostles and elders *listened to the testimony of those involved in the conflict*: Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James. What did they perceive God to be doing?
- d) **Provide authority.** Wait on the Spirit, but at some point authorize an appointed person or group to render a decision or resolution.
- e) **Distinguish between democracy and discernment.** Democracy seeks the will of the majority; discernment seeks the will of God. We listen to others, not because they have a “right to their opinion” but because we never know through whom the Holy Spirit might be speaking. “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us.” (Acts 15:28)
- f) **Recognize that conflicts have a post-history.** Ongoing teaching, pastoral care and communication will be needed as resolution and change are worked out.

2) Membership of the Commission

In June and July 2007, the task of the Commission was to ensure it was as representative as possible of the wider diocese. At the Commission’s recommendation, Bishop Lee invited 10 additional persons to serve, and by mid September, the composition of the Commission was complete with the addition of these members:

The Rev. Charles Alley, St. Matthew’s--Richmond
Ms. Auguste Bannard, St. Stephen’s--Richmond
Mr. Frank Baxter, Calvary--Front Royal
Ms. Mary Causey, St. John’s--West Point
The Rev. Sarah Kinney Gaventa, Emmanuel--Greenwood
The Rev. Cuthbert Mandell, Aquia--Stafford
Ms. Jamie Roberson, St. Anne’s--Reston
The Rev. John Thomas Sheehan, Church of Our Redeemer--Aldie
Mr. Alex Slaughter, St. James’s--Richmond

3) The Work of the Commission

The R-5 Commission met a total of eight times--including five all-day meetings and three evening meetings--between late September and late November 2007.

We began each meeting with a time of prayer and reflection on Scripture.

Using the guidelines principles for our work together, we discussed issues of theology, sexuality, discernment, scriptural authority, and church discipline and polity.

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Were the dual tasks of “discerning an emerging consensus on the blessing of same-sex unions” and “finding a way forward that is pastorally responsive to the gay and lesbian Christians in our midst while being mindful of our membership in the wider Anglican Communion” not challenging enough, completing such tasks during 2007 meant aiming at a moving target, as the following events unfolded:

- **February 2007:** Primates’ Meeting in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. Communiqué issued recommending the Episcopal Church’s House of Bishops 1) declare a moratorium on all same-sex blessings, whether done through pastoral provision or authorized rites, 2) covenant not to consent to the election of any openly gay or lesbian bishop; 3) agree to an alternative primatial oversight scheme for dissenting members of the Episcopal Church. The Primates give the House of Bishops a September 30th deadline to respond.
- **March, 2007:** Camp Allen, Texas, House of Bishops (HOB) meeting, responding to the Primates, declaring the HOB cannot act unilaterally, without the assent of General Convention, to effect an indefinite moratorium on same-sex blessings or the consecration of gay or lesbian bishops. Affirming their desire to remain in the Anglican Communion, they further seek a direct conversation with the Archbishop of Canterbury as soon as possible.
- **April-May, 2007:** The Archbishop of Canterbury agrees to meet with the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church at its upcoming meeting in September. The Rev. Martyn Minns is consecrated bishop in the Church of Nigeria, installed as Missionary Bishop in charge of the Convocation of Anglicans in North America (CANA) by Archbishop Peter Akinola.
- **Late May, 2007:** The Archbishop of Canterbury states that Bp. V. Gene Robinson and Bp. Martyn Minns, along with a handful of other bishops of the Anglican Communion, will not be invited to the 2008 Lambeth Conference. Bishop Robinson, however, may be invited as a guest. Archbishop Akinola threatens a Nigerian boycott of the Conference.
- **June, 2007:** The Executive Council of the Episcopal Church follows the House of Bishops’ recommendation in rejecting the Primates’ proposed “pastoral scheme,” noting that participation in it would ultimately require a decision of General Convention, particularly provisions that call for moratoria on the consecration of openly gay and lesbian bishops.
- **September, 2007:** The Episcopal House of Bishops meet with the Archbishop of Canterbury in New Orleans where it affirms the “desire to maintain and nurture the Episcopal Church’s role within the Anglican Communion, while asserting our determined commitment to include gay and lesbian persons in our common life.” The bishops reconfirm the vote at the 2006 General Convention to “exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion,” further acknowledging that such language pertains specifically to non-

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celibate gay and lesbian persons; repeat their pledge not to authorize public rites for the blessing of same gender unions until a broader consensus emerges in the Communion, or until General Convention takes further action; and express their hope to draw upon the benefits of the Communion-wide process of listening to the experiences of gay and lesbian persons.

- **October-November 2007:** The Archbishop of Canterbury reacts to the House of Bishops' statement and resolutions, and receives the reactions of other provinces.

4) Conclusions and Recommendation

Part I: A Description of Viewpoints within the Commission

As Episcopalians seeking to live out the Gospel in a society where differences in sexual orientation are openly discussed and increasingly acknowledged in all areas of public life, we must strive to articulate a reasoned theological explanation for the actions we take in the hope of finding a place of healing and reconciliation for the wider Anglican Communion.

All voices are needed in that process of discernment and theological inquiry. We need careful attention to matters of Scriptural authority and interpretation, which have historically been strong gifts of those from the conservative and moderate evangelical traditions (though not exclusively). And we need careful attention to matters of reconciliation and justice, which have historically been strong gifts of those from the social justice and progressive Christian traditions (again, not exclusively).

These needed gifts were abundantly present in the Commission's work of discerning a possible way forward that is "pastorally responsive to the gay and lesbian Christians in our midst while at the same time being mindful of our membership in the wider body of the Anglican Communion." The practice of prayerful discernment helped us shift the question from "what shall we do?" to "what is God doing?" "Where is the Spirit moving in us as we live with our differences and seek to maintain our unity in mission?" The conversation has been respectful, engaging, and has called forth needed attitudes of empathy and understanding.

With regard to the actual task of discerning a possible "emerging consensus," the Commission discovered some common ground. The members acknowledged that any option for the blessing of same-gender unions are ultimately subject to General Convention and the Bishop of Virginia. We are of one mind that the entire conversation be seen as part of a larger concern for providing faithful and loving pastoral care and spiritual support for all members of the Church. We firmly believe that the Church is to be a community that provides pastoral care and spiritual support for all who are part of it, and that such care will not necessarily be done in the same way in every context. Through study, conversation, and prayer, the Commission identified three views on the essential question of "local option."

The majority of the members of the Commission believe there is an "emerging consensus" regarding the permitting of "local option" for the blessing of same-gender unions. There is a shared desire to actively support those who are in same gender partnerships reflecting mutuality and fidelity, and a conviction that pastorally responsive ministry should include the blessing, under appropriate circumstances, of those partnerships. Scripture addresses lifelong

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committed relationships characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect and the holy love that enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God. The document *A Response to the Invitation of Windsor Report*, states: “It seems very likely that there was no phenomenon in the time of biblical writers directly akin to the phenomenon of Christians of the same gender living together in faithful and committed lifelong unions as we experience this today.” (page 19, paragraph 2.18) This majority acknowledged the lack of use of available spiritual, theological and scriptural resources (such as materials from Integrity and the document, “Claiming the Blessing”) for better education within our own diocese. It is believed these deficiencies have hindered forward movement in faith and understanding.

For a minority of the Commission, who find no support for same-gender unions in Scripture, a pastorally responsive ministry would not include sacramental blessings. Furthermore, these members, understanding that 1) a blessing is the authoritative pronouncement of God’s favor on a relationship (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*); 2) that same-gender unions are inconsistent with the established position of the Anglican Communion as reflected in Lambeth Resolution 1.10 and the Windsor Report; and 3) that same-gender unions are nowhere approved of in Holy Scripture, are opposed to any action that would support such blessings, at least until further theological study has established otherwise. Since a consensus entails an agreement based on the willing consent of the parties rather than a numerical plurality or majority, these members understand that there is presently no consensus in the Commission and likewise in the Diocese on this matter.

Those who represented a moderate perspective on the Commission spoke of their own theological movement from previously held positions regarding the interpretation of the biblical references said to address homosexuality and acknowledged the faithful witness of those living in monogamous same-gender relationships within their own congregations. These members are willing to “wait with patience” for the development of theological and pastoral guidelines for supportive ministry with gay and lesbian members of our Church through future actions of General Convention.

The Commission does not regard the expression of these views as incompatible with full membership of the Church, and we specifically resolve that we remain in communion with those who hold these views and regard each of them with respect.

Part II: Recommendation as to Finding a Way Forward

We, the members of the R-5 Commission, being mindful of our membership in the Anglican Communion, recommend that the 213th Annual Council of the Diocese of Virginia, building on the process of continued listening and discernment of a possible “emerging consensus” with regard to the permitting of “local option” for the blessing of same-gender unions, appoint a new commission to identify the practical steps necessary to provide for the pastoral care and spiritual support of same-gender couples in committed monogamous relationships. We specifically recommend that:

- 1) An appointed Commission compile and make available theological, catechetical, and liturgical resources within the Episcopal Church and the wider Anglican Communion for the pastoral care and spiritual support of same-gender couples in committed relationships; and

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- 2) The Commission design and execute four town hall meetings, in order to share resources for education and to establish a better sense of an “emerging consensus” pertaining to “local option” for the blessing of same-gender unions ; and
- 3) The Commission be tasked to make a report of its findings and work to the 214th Annual Council, in time for further action to be taken in anticipation of the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 2009.

This recommendation seeks to provide an ongoing commitment to discern ways of being generous and faithful in our common pastoral call, even as we acknowledge that we are not of one mind in this Diocese on the permissibility of “local option” in the blessing of same-gender unions.

Respectfully submitted,

The Rev. Charles Alley, St. Matthew’s--Richmond
Ms. Auguste Bannard, St. Stephen’s--Richmond
Mr. Frank Baxter, Calvary--Front Royal
Ms. Mary Causey, St. John’s--West Point
The Rev. Sue Eaves, St. Thomas’--Richmond
The Rev. Sarah Kinney Gaventa, Emmanuel--Greenwood
The Rev. Rick Lord, Holy Comforter--Vienna
The Rev. Cuthbert Mandell, Aquia--Stafford
The Rev. John Ohmer, St. James-- Leesburg
Ms. Jamie Roberson, St. Anne’s,--Reston
The Rev. John Thomas Sheehan, Church of Our Redeemer--Aldie
Mr. Alex Slaughter, St. James’s--Richmond

ⁱ R-5 "Local Option" Regarding the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions –

Whereas, the 210th Annual Council of the Diocese of Virginia recommended that the congregations and regions of the Diocese of Virginia be urged to use the Report of the Diocese of Virginia's Commission on Reconciliation as a vehicle to further theological conversation; and

Whereas, the 211th Annual Council of the Diocese of Virginia affirmed that the Lambeth Conference and Windsor Report have called us to acknowledge and respond with compassion and understanding to the pain and suffering of those who, because of their sexual orientation, endure marginalization and rejection in the church and in the world; therefore be it

Resolved, that the 212th Annual Council recommends the Bishop appoint a commission to discern a possible "emerging consensus" regarding the permitting of "local option" for the blessing of same sex unions, with the Commission reporting to the 213th Annual Council.

ⁱⁱ Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W. Wall. *Called to Be Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2006), p .6.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Steering Committee is indebted to *Called to Be Church* , above, for these insights.