

Letter to Diocese re: Primates Meeting

January 28, 2016

Dear Diocesan Family,

The “Communique” issued on January 15th from the Anglican Primates Meeting has given rise to many questions, confusion, and even anger across our Diocese. It was my plan to discuss this matter during my Pastoral Address to the Diocese, which was to have been delivered at our Annual Council last week. Of course, the crippling snowstorm necessitated the cancelling and re-scheduling of that Council. Given the strong feelings and important questions among some of our clergy and congregations, I believe it is important to offer a substantive response, and so I write now in hopes of offering some information and perspective which will be helpful.

We have put several articles, reports, and analyses of the Primates Meeting on our diocesan website and on social media. You will also find the entire text of the Primates’ Communique through hot-links within some of those posted titles. So, I’ll not address the whole Communique itself in detail here; please do read the available material for yourself and you will be very well served.

It is evident that many of the questions being asked arise from not fully understanding just who the Anglican Primates are and what kind of authority they have within our Anglican Communion. After that, there are pointed questions about why any of this should matter to The Episcopal Church at all: “Shouldn’t we simply go our own way?” In answer, I begin with some of the basic facts.

The recent Primates Meeting was held at Canterbury Cathedral during the week of January 11-16. It was a special meeting called by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev. Justin Welby. Since the Archbishop of Canterbury is the very symbol and focus of our Anglican Communion’s world-wide fellowship, he is the convener of the Primates Meeting.

The international Anglican Communion is comprised of thirty-eight “Provinces” spanning the globe with well over eighty-million members. Our Episcopal Church is one such Province, the Church of England is another, the Anglican Church of Nigeria (by far the largest) another, and so forth. The “Primates” are the respective leaders—variably titled Archbishop, Presiding Bishop, or Primus—of each Province. Together, they are *de facto* the ranking representatives of the whole Communion. The Archbishop of Canterbury, by virtue of the office which is itself the very cradle of the Anglican Tradition, leads the Primates Meeting, but not in a Papal sort of way; rather Archbishop Welby is termed “*Primus inter Pares*,” that is, “first among equals.” Thus, the Primates Meeting is a Council from the entire Anglican Communion gathered with the one Archbishop who is the focus of our mutual commitment to one another. We in The Episcopal Church would do well now to remember our own history, since we are the ones who, in the aftermath of the American Revolution, literally established this ecclesiological principle that communion with Canterbury was absolutely essential for our Church.

The Primates may be the “ranking representatives” of the Communion, but I emphatically note that they are not the “*leaders*” of it. The Anglican Communion is not a single entity; we do not have any legal, or even formalized, central authority. Instead, we are a *fellowship* of **autonomous** Churches, meaning that each Province is recognized to have the right to make its own decisions for itself. This fellowship is rooted by being in communion with one another through the See of Canterbury.

My own perspective is that a Primate certainly does have a definitive importance for the single Province that he or she leads, but having no specific authority beyond those borders, the Primates in themselves have no actual jurisdiction, no binding authority in oversight for the larger Church throughout the world. To me, the most important fact about the Primates is that, together, they are one of four “Instruments of Communion” for Anglicanism—the other three being Canterbury, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Lambeth Conference of Bishops (a once-a-decade meeting of all Anglican bishops from across the world).

As one of those Instruments of Communion, it must be said that the Primates, as a Council, certainly carry a uniquely important voice for all of us who gather and worship in the Anglican Tradition. It is in that whole context that I receive

the Primates' recent Communique with a profound respect and every prayerful consideration. I note particularly that while each Anglican Province is, in fact, "autonomous," we are—equally—**interdependent**. I submit that the Primates, gathered in Council together, are a very strong *personification* of that interdependence.

As you will find from the Communique itself, the agenda of their meeting covered a very broad range of critical matters of concern for the mission and ministry of the whole Church in every Province. But the portion of the text that has attracted the most interest, of course, is that the Primates, by a very large majority, have expressed strong concerns about and objections to The Episcopal Church's approval of sacramental marriage for same-sex couples. At present, we are the only Anglican Province to have done so, although at least two others (the Anglican Church of Canada and the Scottish Episcopal Church) are seriously considering their own approval, and are rather far along in their own processes. So, I believe that the Communique is directed not only to our Episcopal Church but is also meant to deter other Anglican Provinces from following our lead.

Everyone must understand one defining fact. Despite the language used in the various reports—whether in print, on-line, or on television—the Primates have NOT "suspended," "sanctioned," "excluded," "expelled," "banned," or even "disciplined" The Episcopal Church. You will search the text in vain for such language. Such characterizations were purposely avoided. Instead, the actual terminology they used is "**consequences**" in response to the actions of our General Convention last summer. It is a key point to remember that the Primates do not have the authority to impose "sanctions" or to "expel" a Province. They can *request* that certain actions be taken, and then we can ourselves agree to them, or the Anglican Consultative Council, the only Anglican body that has the power to enforce such actions, will make the final determination. In this light, you should know that a number of leading figures on the ACC have already expressed detailed opinions that the Primates are now over-reaching in their authority with respect to The Episcopal Church. It is therefore possible that the ACC itself will take exception to this part of the Communique and decline to enforce, or will modify, the Primates' requests.

I'm not at all surprised that the Primates expressed their strong objections to our actions, but I am very much surprised by the relatively restrained "tone" of the Communique. I thought it would be much more harsh and hard-lined. Instead, I found the Communique to be measured and matter-of-fact. We must remember, we did do what, in their own several ways, they urged us not to do. Because our General Convention took what is widely perceived to be an essentially unilateral action, I actually expected worse from the Primates' response and am quite impressed with the Communique's reasonable approach—as contrasted with a *reactionary* one. It is especially notable that we have not been asked to "repent" or somehow "undo" what we've passed. We've simply been asked to back away from a very few aspects (important though these certainly are) of the Communion's work for a period of three years, while the Primates work with an in-house committee that will seek to facilitate understanding, healing, and reconciliation. I think we can and should work with that.

As you will read in the reports and various articles, our still-new Presiding Bishop Michael Curry was absolutely magnificent throughout this Primates Meeting. This is all the more remarkable in that he was (and is) still recovering from a serious medical event, a sub-dural hematoma on his brain, and it was reported that the physical difficulties he was experiencing at the time were quite evident. Even so, he simply got *everything* right, most eloquently so, from expressing the pain that LGBT people will experience as a result of the Communique, to speaking about the Church's long history of complicity with oppression of various minority and socially-vulnerable peoples, to humility as the Primate of the "offending" Church, to an unqualified commitment to our full participation in the Anglican Communion. I've already received one telling e-mail from a bishop in another part of the world saying that Michael Curry proved himself right away to be an Anglican leader of true world-stature who commands respect.

Without any question, the most important thing to have been decided in the Primates Meeting (something completely ignored in the media) is that by a unanimous vote, they chose to continue to "walk together." In spite of all of the vitriol and rumors that our Primate, Michael Curry, would be asked to absent himself from future meetings, even with all of the church pundits saying that The Episcopal Church would be "thrown out" of the Communion or so compromised as to be without any real voice or influence, the Anglican

Primates instead affirmed that The Episcopal Church remains a wanted and needed presence in the Anglican family. Perhaps ironically, this is a far-better state of affairs than twelve years ago, and even just a very few years ago. So, the way I see it, the Holy Spirit is surely present and bestowing God's grace in our worldwide Church.

Finally, I don't particularly mind accepting the "consequences" requested in the Communique. I might characterize what we did—approving same-sex marriage in the Church—as a theological version of civil disobedience. We will remember from our civics classes that civil disobedience as a course of action is meant to be a witness against what is perceived to be an injustice enshrined in law. And when you engage in civil disobedience, you simply expect to "pay the penalty." That is also part of the witness.

And that witness is making its case beyond our shores. Fellow Anglicans in many places throughout the world are, in fact, rallying in support of our Church. I have received numerous messages of solidarity from bishops and lay leaders in several of the Provinces in which we as the Diocese of Virginia have relationships of shared ministries. Please be assured that I will work diligently to preserve our diocese's international relationships and ministries in every Province and congregation where that proves to be possible.

Given all of this, my hope and counsel to each one of you is that we keep a perspective with regard to the Communique that focuses on the actual facts, as detailed in this letter, not on some source's spin or blogosphere polemics. It is most important that we not over-react now. Even so, I must say that I am deeply aware of the personal pain and the bitter taste that our LGBT brothers and sisters in Christ surely experience in being the subject of such a statement in the first place. To those of you who are so personally affected in this, I say that your continuing presence with us as the Church, and your own faithfulness, are inspirational.

In the end, what concerns me the most is that our actions (which, again, I firmly believe to be faithful, just, and therefore Godly as a witness in our society and context) have caused such strong offense and a breach in relationship with fellow Anglicans. Many of these are people—for example, in the Church in Sudan—we've been very close to in shared ministry for decades. Sadly, it is inevitable that this disagreement our Episcopal Church has with the

great majority of the other Anglican Provinces is certainly, at present, a case of real and weighty brokenness in our Communion. What is so frustrating for me, though, is that while conservative Primates and diocesan bishops in various parts of the world (most notably in portions of Africa) absolutely insist that Western and Northern Anglicanism must respect their particular—and most certainly difficult—cultural contexts, arguing that we must not challenge some of their traditional norms, allowing them to stand even when they are at variance with the larger Church’s values and witness, those very same Primates and bishops refuse to give The Episcopal Church the same consideration for **our** particular social and cultural contexts. This is clearly a double-standard, and I find it highly problematic (to say the least). I am willing to live with other Anglican Provinces being given leeway to minister within their own unique cultural and social circumstances in the ways that they see as best, even when I find some cultural mores to be concerning—even contrary to the vision of the Scriptures as I understand them. Thus, I don’t think it is bad faith on our part as The Episcopal Church to ask other Provinces for the very same considerations and allowances that they require for themselves.

But here it must be said that by staying at the table in the Anglican Communion, The Episcopal Church can maintain our voice among those who, following Archbishop Welby’s leadership and personal example, decry the dehumanization of LGBT persons, and especially denounce the categorical criminalization of homosexuality. TEC adds significant weight to the Anglican consensus that such attitudes and laws are contrary to the witness of the Church in every place.

That being said, in all of the many links that our diocese has in other Anglican Provinces on four continents, I never lose sight of the fact that we do need each other. This is true both as a theological principle and as a practical and logistical reality for Gospel ministry for innocent people who suffer so terribly and who, to be entirely honest, don’t have the luxury to care about hierarchical squabbles and rivalries. So, whatever your own particular views are on the questions at hand, let us all pray AS ONE for healing, reconciliation, and full restoration in our inter-Anglican relationships.

This has been lengthy, but I think by necessity. It is important to understand the whole picture in order to understand the meaning of the working parts. That “big-picture” of The Episcopal Church remains vital and vibrant, diverse

and unified, faithful and relevant, ancient and modern. I am so proud of our Diocese of Virginia in all of our witness and ministry. May the grace and blessings of the triune God be upon you all.

Faithfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Shannon", with a long, sweeping horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Rt. Rev. Shannon S. Johnston
XIII Bishop of Virginia