

The Bishop's Statement Regarding House of Bishops

The Rt. Rev. Duncan M. Gray, III

My dear friends in Mississippi, This morning I returned from the meeting of the House of Bishops in New Orleans and wanted to share with you some initial and rather disjointed thoughts and impressions of our time and work together. The time there was so terribly full that I cannot begin to cover everything, or give it a proper context, but I will try to make some measure of sense out of it. I know that there are many who are offering their own interpretation of these events, but in all candor, much of what I see being reported in both the secular press and unofficial web sites is simply wrong.

The full text of our response to the Primates' Communique from February, 2007 as well as our general description of our time together is attached to these comments. I trust that my personal reflections will shed some light on these two documents.

First, I think it is wrong to say that we rejected the requests from the Primates' Communique, as some have reported. On the contrary, we significantly clarified with unprecedented specificity, as was requested, the meaning of General Convention Resolution B033. We also articulated, again as requested, the fact that this church has never authorized the blessing of same gender unions. We spoke clearly to the fact that a majority of dioceses already function on this matter in the way that we do in this diocese. We also made reference, as the Primate of Australia suggested we do, to the fact that the Primates themselves have affirmed that pastoral care for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters requires the Communion "to maintain a breadth of private response to situations of individual pastoral care."

Secondly, we again expressed our willingness to provide for alternative episcopal (bishop) pastoral care and oversight for congregations who were in serious theological conflict with their bishop. We reaffirmed our willingness to participate in a communion-wide consultation with respect to the "pastoral needs of those seeking alternative oversight." I believe that, working in good faith, this consultation can produce what is genuinely desired by all - the pastoral and sacramental care of those alienated from their diocesan bishop - in such a way that is consistent with our Constitution and Canons. Both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Primate of Australia commended the Presiding Bishop for her new plan for "episcopal visitors."

I am one of about ten bishops designated by the Presiding Bishop to function as bishop with clergy and congregations alienated from their bishop. I really don't need additional congregations to be responsible for, but I am willing to do this for the sake of those who are estranged from the wider church.

All of the above were serious and significant steps toward our sisters and brothers in the wider Anglican Communion. Clarity, not ambiguity, was the guiding principle in the development of our response. There were four earlier drafts before the final response was adopted. Each preceding draft was sent back to the "writing group" with a demand for more specificity and

clarity. That desire for less ambiguity was, in itself, a dramatic departure from the past. The move to clarity required a considerable shift for several bishops. Their willingness to release previous strongly held positions was the decisive factor in allowing us to move forward. I greatly appreciated the sacrifice required. Within such mutual sacrifice, trust can grow.

You will also note that, responding to Archbishop Williams own expressed desire, we requested that Bishop Robinson receive an invitation to the Lambeth Conference. We expressed strong opposition to the incursions of uninvited bishops into dioceses. (As you are aware, this "radical revisionist" bishop of yours must contend with ongoing uninvited bishops and archbishops from Kenya and Rwanda). We also encouraged the development of the communion-wide "listening process" as mandated by Lambeth 1998 and suggested that we would be willing to assist in the necessary funding of such a process.

All of our work was done in the context of the devastation of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Most of the bishops and spouses spent Saturday working on rebuilding projects in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. On Sunday many visited our churches on the coast. Thursday night Archbishop Williams preached at a city-wide ecumenical service where the bishops brought offerings from their dioceses for recovery to Bishop Jenkins of Louisiana and me totaling \$933,000! I think I have been preaching something about "One church in Mission."

Let me now offer a few additional personal observations of a general nature. I was deeply disturbed that, once again, a very few bishops chose not to be a part of the development of our work and response. Some simply did not come to New Orleans. Others chose to leave immediately following the reflections by Archbishop Williams. I have missed their perspectives as colleagues, and their lack of participation has hampered our work over the last several years.

Both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Most Reverend Philip Aspinall, Primate of Australia, spoke of the power of perceptions. Archbishop Williams reminded us of an old saying, "A lie is halfway around the world before truth gets its boots on." Both remarked on separate occasions that the Primates' Communique was not intended to be "a line drawn in the sand," nor was it meant to be a threat to the Episcopal Church. However, perceptions have a way of becoming reality.

Over and over again Archbishop Williams urged us for the sake of deeper gospel truth to be willing to hold seemingly contradictory things together in what will often be a very painful paradox. We must find a way, he said, "to live in fidelity to a process of 'common discernment' **and** in fidelity to gay and lesbian persons." We cannot turn away from the pain that such commitment will inevitably require of all. "Turning away from each other is turning away from the cross," he admonished.

In his comments to us Archbishop Aspinall, himself a major contributor to the Primates' Communique in February, suggested a way of response to the requests of that statement. He went through the individual requests with general comments as to how we might respond that would be helpful to the Communion while maintaining the integrity of the Episcopal Church. Much of his "roadmap" is reflected in our final document. In addition, there was significant conversation between some drafters and members of the Anglican Consultative Council.

The presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury and members of the Joint Standing Committee of the Primates and Anglican Consultative Council made this an extraordinary meeting. Our conversations, both formal and informal, were candid, respectful and passionate about the Episcopal Church's need for the Anglican Communion and the Anglican Communion's need for the Episcopal Church. Deep and careful listening took place as we tried sincerely to understand the cultural contexts in which each of us seeks to live faithfully in obedience to Jesus Christ. I believe much was learned. In his closing press conference Archbishop Williams was asked a rather caustic question by a reporter, "Have you really learned anything about the Episcopal Church that you didn't already know?" "Yes, he responded, "I have learned several things." He then listed a deeper appreciation for our polity, including its theological underpinnings, and the centrality of the baptismal covenant as the two most significant learnings. We, too, learned much from our guests.

What I saw beginning to emerge for the first time was a vision of how we might be a church, as Bishop Charles Jenkins described, of one heart and two minds. We have much, much work to do to make that a reality, but in New Orleans I caught a glimpse of how it might work.

I look forward to deepening that conversation at our Lambeth Conference next summer. I trust that our faithful response to the request from the wider communion will be a significant step in "mending the tear in the fabric" of our common life.

I will be reflecting more fully with the clergy at our upcoming Clergy Conference next week. A few days' distance may give me a better perspective.

I believe we have found a way forward. Time will tell. May God give us the grace and courage to live more fully into God's call to us to be One Church in Mission - a church of radical invitation, opened to the transformational power of the Holy Spirit and engaging the world as instruments of God's reconciling love.

In Christ's Peace,

The Rt. Rev. Duncan M. Gray, III