

REFLECTIONS ON THE HOUSE OF BISHOPS MEETING Holy Week 2005

For the almost eight years that I have been the Bishop of Northwest Texas, and thereby a member of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, I have enjoyed the camaraderie and fellowship of the community of bishops. I have been paired in small groups with those with whom I agree about a wide range of issues as well as those who hold other convictions. We have argued passionately with one another, often without the resolve that any of us would wish. We have worshipped together, prayed together, debated, dined, and relaxed as a community of believers in the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As I prepared for this year's Spring meeting of the House of Bishops at Camp Allen, however, I felt a sense of dread that we just might not be able to meet the request of the Lambeth Commission in their paper entitled the *Windsor Report* or the Primates' request in the communiqué from their February meeting in Ireland. Having read both and studied them with intensity, it seemed to me that the requests were clear and attainable: 1) an apology for harming the bonds of affection that bind the Anglican Communion by the consecration of a partnered homosexual, 2) a moratorium on ordaining bishops living with a partner with whom that bishop was not married, 3) a moratorium on blessing same-sex couples, 4) a moratorium on crossing diocesan boundaries without the permission of the diocesan bishop, and, from the Primates' communiqué, 5) voluntarily withholding our voting delegates to the June 2005 meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council. I have supported the requests of the Windsor Report publicly for several months, and more recently the request of the Primates.

Our meeting at Camp Allen was charged with an anxious energy from the beginning. Certainly there were warm familial greetings, but almost all of us were aware that we must respond to the WR and the communiqué in some way. I believe I can say that it was the desire everyone of in attendance to keep the Anglican Communion "in tact" with the Episcopal Church a vital part of that communion. Our first meetings on Friday night and Saturday were opportunities for those

who wished to speak about our response to do so. We met in small table groups of six or seven, expanded groups of about 25, and in plenary. By Saturday evening it appeared as if an impasse were developing with little chance of resolve. One of the concerns of some was that the Episcopal Church is not legislatively ruled by the House of Bishops, but rather is a bi-cameral legislative body composed of both the Bishops and Deputies from each Diocese. For us to rule that any action would be completely binding on the whole Church without General Convention's concurrence would have been usurping the authority of the General Convention. Others of us argued that we could take action for ourselves until General Convention in June 2006 and lead the Church toward further resolution next year.

Sunday is always a day of worship and rest, with time for recreation as each would choose. Something happened on Sunday that began to give me hope. A group of bishops, with diverse positions on the issues that currently divide us, gathered to enter into deeper conversation about how we might move forward. On Sunday evening they presented us with a draft document that we spent much of the next two days debating, amending, re-amending, and editing. Some of the concerns were taken care of by "word-smithing" and some were much more to the core of the matter. On Tuesday afternoon the final draft was presented, discussed, and passed. It was not unanimous, but the vote was overwhelmingly in favor of the statement. I am only aware of the identity of a couple of those bishops who dissented because the vote was by show of hands.

I believe that what we presented as a response to the Windsor Report and the Primates' communiqué is remarkable in that it was acceptable by so many who represent the broad spectrum of the Episcopal Church. The full text of the document and the final Word to the Church are available at the Episcopal News Service website, and I would encourage everyone to read both documents for themselves.

Our response covers all of the requests. No one could gloat in complete victory, and no one was totally defeated. We spoke of apology for violating the bonds of affection and not preparing the rationale for such actions prior to moving forward with same-sex blessings and

consecration of a partnered gay man. A moratorium on not consecrating any one group of people would never have passed, but a compromise was reached by which we agreed not to consecrate any bishops until after June 2006. This may create some difficulties for a few dioceses, but we also pledged to do our best to meet whatever needs arise between now and General Convention. We also agreed to a moratorium on bishops performing same-sex blessings or authorizing such blessings. We agreed to cross diocesan boundaries only with permission of the current diocesan bishop, a tradition that extends from Canon 9 of the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 through Lambeth 1998 and both the Windsor Report and the Primates' communiqué. The final request from the Primates, that we voluntarily withhold our voting delegates to the Anglican Consultative Council, was referred to the Executive Council who has canonical authority to appoint our delegates. I would have preferred that we at least recommend that we not send our delegates, but that was not accepted.

All in all, I believe that this is a stunning document. It does not go as far as some wanted. It goes farther than others desired. Everyone, in good Christian fashion, had to give a bit. But it was not just another "political decision" made without prayer and genuine discernment. The Holy Spirit was present as the document was first crafted, as we debated, and finally as we voted. I do not believe that the work which was begun at Camp Allen is concluded. There will be work to do as we look toward General Convention in 2006. But I am convinced that we are on a path that will ultimately draw the Episcopal Church back together in union with the Anglican Communion.

I began this message by saying that I drove to Navasota, the town nearest Camp Allen, with a sense of dread. As I drove home Thursday that dread was lifted and I am hopeful for our Church. One final personal anecdote. During the Confession on Sunday morning these words washed over me and brought me to tears, "We have not loved you with our whole heart;..." At that moment I realized that the dread I had been feeling was the result of my lack of trust in God. I did not know what would transpire later in the day, continuing over the next two days. I was so caught up in me that I forgot the rules. Rule

number one: God is in charge. Rule number two: when I try to take charge and when all else fails, and it will, refer to rule number one.

Is the Church beyond this crisis? Not today and probably not for a long time. Our task, however, is to remain faithful to the Risen Lord who we celebrate this week and in the weeks to come. Do not let the darkness of Good Friday impair your ability to see the Light. As the old preacher said, "Brothers and sisters, its Friday; but Sunday's coming!"

In Christ
Wallis