

By Hugo Blankingship

Let me say at the outset, as others have, how very grateful I am for the privilege of being here. We are all keenly aware of the importance of the work of this Commission.

The Remit of the Commission

The Directive or Remit of the Commission, as found in the October 2003 statement of the Primates following their emergency meeting called by the Archbishop of Canterbury, noted that the 1998 Lambeth Conference had requested the Archbishop of Canterbury to establish a commission “to consider his own role in maintaining communion within and between provinces *when grave difficulties arise*.” (Resolution IV-13. Emphasis added.)

The Primates directed that the Commission’s “remit be extended to include urgent and deep theological and legal reflections on the way in which the dangers we have identified with this meeting will have to be addressed.” From these central issues there have emerged related questions such as, “What is the maximum level of Communion that can be observed given the present circumstances?” and “What is the canonical understanding of impaired communion and broken communion?”

Dangers Identified by the Primates

The dangers identified by the primates in their October statement were:

1. The decision in New Westminster, Canada, to authorize a Public Rite to bless same-sex relationships, and
2. ECUSA’s decision at General Convention to validate the election of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire.

These were the dangers. A consequence addressed to ECUSA was identified by the Primates with the following language: If the consecration proceeds, “this will tear the fabric of our Communion at its deepest level.” Clearly, the Commission’s primary task is related to unity within the Communion, given the extraordinary events which have occurred in North America.

Where Are We Now?

What has happened since then? The New Westminster problem has recently spread to the entire Canadian church which has declared the blessing of same-sex unions “holy — sanctified. This is just one more illustration of how this plague that is upon us spreading Reaction throughout the Communion was swift and clear.

In ECUSA:

1. Two weeks after the London meeting, Gene Robinson was consecrated on the Sunday after All Saints’ Day with Bishop Griswold serving as chief consecrator. (Bishop Griswold signed the

October document in London acknowledging the consequences if the consecration should take place.)

2. Gene Robinson is being proclaimed as a hero — the product of a new revelation that has dawned within ECUSA. What we have now is a new doctrine hailed by ECUSA which has little or no acceptance by a vast majority of the Communion.
3. A few weeks ago, the Rector of a colonial church in Virginia where George Washington once worshiped declared that homosexuality was a gift from God. He was not publicly reprimanded by his Bishop, who previously had openly declared to his Diocesan Council, “If you must choose between schism and heresy, choose heresy every time.”
4. This past Saturday, the Bishop of Washington — in whose cathedral the memorial service for Ronald Reagan was just held — conducted a “blessing” of the relationship of two homosexual men using a liturgy which he commissioned for further expected use within his diocese.
5. Bishops are using canonical force to impose an agenda which has exceeded the limits of Anglican diversity.
6. Ecumenical relations have been affected.
7. These and other tragic events have been mentioned by previous speakers. Grave difficulties have arisen.

The search for the highest level of communion possible under these circumstances is a challenge indeed and, I believe, will call for some innovative thinking on the part of the Commission.

The worst fears of the Primates (as expressed in London last October) have been realized. The situation continues to deteriorate. A number of Primates and Provinces have declared impaired or broken communion to exist. Within ECUSA itself there is an irreconcilable division. There is no longer any realistic middle ground. Communion between the divided segments within ECUSA is either broken or hopelessly impaired. Normal order within ECUSA is in disarray. Bishops, in response to emergency situations, have crossed diocesan lines to provide some relief to distressed parishes. Children are being transported to orthodox dioceses for Confirmation to escape unwarranted canonical discipline. Money is being withheld by parishes at odds with their bishops. Many have left the Episcopal Church. Charges of schism or disruption of catholic order are being hurled at orthodox “dissenters.” But what is catholic order without catholic faith? Where does the true responsibility rest? Who broke the trust?

When a bishop moves to support a new agenda that not only does not have approval from the vast majority of Anglican leadership but is in open defiance of that leadership and its synodical judgments, that bishop is acting schismatically. When the leadership of an entire province acts in open defiance of warnings from every corner of the communion, that province has acted schismatically.

It is vain to argue that the Robinson affair was handled within the constitutional and canonical framework of ECUSA's structure, and therefore deserves recognition by the rest of the Communion. Yet this is exactly what is being promoted.

As the Anglican Communion Network gathers momentum and other Anglican bodies move towards affiliation with the Network to make common cause for the Gospel, the schismatic liberals point their fingers at dissenting orthodox Episcopalians and label them schismatic. This disingenuous tactic has now escalated into a canonical bombardment on orthodox clergy and their congregations. There is a very mistaken notion that the Episcopal Church can be held together by canonical force. Effective resistance to these tactics which have been called "canonical fundamentalism" is an ever-increasing phenomenon.

Not long ago, the Bishop of Alabama prohibited his clergy from having anything to do with the Anglican Communion Network. Opposition to the Network is vocal elsewhere as well. If there was an emergency in October, before the consecration, how should one describe the situation now? What is the status quo? The fact is that the only way to describe the status quo is that it keeps changing and getting worse. We find ourselves tossed between turmoil and chaos. Those who once thought or hoped that the "center can hold" are beginning to see a very different picture indeed. ECUSA is falling apart. There is no real center any longer.

What Is to Happen?

As outlined in the Primates' October statement, here are the questions:

1. What should the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury be in seeking to maintain some degree of communion under these circumstances?
2. How do we as a Communion address the dangers which the Primates have identified from a theological and legal perspective?

These core issues bring the Commission face to face with its own assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Communion itself. Does the Anglican Communion have the authority to act, and are the threats to the Communion grave enough that the Commission in the clearest terms possible will issue a call to action? We believe the case has been made for such a call.

The problem we are facing is not just what ECUSA did but, importantly, the circumstances within which these actions were taken. How has the leadership of ECUSA responded to the authority of Scripture and its membership in the Anglican family? The problem has two components: What is going on within ECUSA? And, more significantly to this Commission, how is the Anglican Communion being affected?

All four instruments of Anglican unity advised — yes — even urged ECUSA not to act as it did. A meeting of world-wide Anglican leaders, gathered at Truro Church shortly before the General Convention, warned that the approval of Gene Robinson's selection as a bishop would bring about a dramatic realignment of the Communion.

As long ago as 1978, the Lambeth Conference in Resolution 11 called on member churches not to take action regarding issues which are of concern to the whole Communion without consulting a Lambeth Conference. Lambeth '78 and a follow-up resolution in 1988 set in motion a study which came to be known as the Virginia Report — a careful analysis of who we are and where we might be headed.

The debate over human sexuality went on for the next twenty years and — most of us thought — was dealt with effectively at Lambeth '98 by Resolution I.10 and which was reaffirmed by the Primates in their October 2003 statement.

Not so. The leaders of ECUSA's controlling liberal faction declared more than once that the urgings of the Communion and Resolution I.10 itself would have little effect on where ECUSA was headed. ECUSA's action has defied the spirit of the Virginia Report, as well as every cautionary warning it had received from every corner of the Communion.

The Episcopal Church has presented the Communion with a new "doctrine" which has no warrant in Scripture whatever and is in direct contravention to Resolution I.10, which was overwhelmingly adopted by the vast majority of all the bishops in the Communion. In so doing, ECUSA has elected to superimpose its own "judgment" that western cultural practices dictate a rejection of clear Anglican pronouncements on the supremacy of Scripture. This crosses the boundaries of Anglican diversity in an impermissible way.

Much has been written about the Communion, about the limited role which the Archbishop of Canterbury may have in the life of the Communion, the autonomy of the Individual Provinces, their "fellowship" with one another, and what, if anything, holds the Communion together. Is the Communion in reality nothing more than a loose federation — or as some have suggested, is it headed in that direction? This Commission may be inclined to comment on its understanding of the Communion and ways that it might be strengthened. Not matter how the subject is approached, and what conclusions are reached, I believe that it comes down to this one word: TRUST.

A Question of Trust

In a legal sense, trust issues include the holding of assets by trustees for the benefit of others. Fiduciaries are held to a higher standard of conduct and accountability. Within ECUSA there now is a serious question concerning the true ownership of church property. Is church property consecrated to the Lord, or is it held in trust for a bureaucratic structure that has lost its spiritual moorings? Sadly, many ECUSA bishops are no longer trusted by orthodox clergy and congregations, and some have walked away from church property in favor of their allegiance to their Anglican heritage.

But I speak of trust in a somewhat different sense. Who, with God's grace, can best say as did St. Paul, "we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel?" (1 Thess. 2:4.) There needs to be a common understanding of trust throughout the Communion that its members will adhere to the maxim, "that which affects all should be decided by all."

The moral authority of the Church must speak to the need for trust. Authority in the church is entrusted authority. Authority and trust go together. Authority without trust is dangerous. In the English Prayer Book, the Gospel reading for the ordination of a priest is the parable of the Good Shepherd. The sheep hear his voice and follow. They trust the Shepherd. Woe to the shepherds who scatter the sheep, Scripture warns us. Sheep will not follow a hireling. When the Bishop hands the new priest a Bible, he declares "Take thou authority to preach the word of God." This is sublime entrustment of authority. It is derivative--it is handed down. It is apostolic in its heritage, relating back to the issuance of the Great Commission. At the consecration of a bishop in the American church, the Presiding Bishop tells him, "With your fellow bishops, you will share in the leadership of the church throughout the world." The selection and ordination of an Anglican bishop is not a local matter as some have erroneously urged. Who then is to be trusted with the authority to serve the people of God within the United States? Who will take the saving good news of Jesus to a confused and unchurched people adrift in the sea of secular America? Who can best reunite those Anglican families and their churches that have been marginalized by ECUSA's leadership? Who can you trust? Who can we trust?

A quick examination of how the leadership of ECUSA has responded to its entrusted authority should lead to the conclusion that it is time for a change, a time to move on. One can only imagine the solemnity with which the Primates who gathered in London last October signed their statement. How could our Presiding Bishop return to the US and do what he did? How could ECUA do what it did?

We believe the Network is worthy of your trust and that of the whole Communion. It was originally suggested by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The idea was refined at an international meeting of Anglican leaders at a London Airport. It is growing despite open hostility from within ECUSA. It has been recognized by a large number of Primates and Provinces. It is faithful to the Gospel, mission-driven, and committed to preserving the Anglican tradition in North America.

Provincial Autonomy and Canon Law

It has been often said that provincial autonomy and total independence within the Communion are not co-extensive terms. There is a clear bond of interdependence and cohesiveness among the provinces brought about by traditions, adherence to apostolic heritage and catholic faith and, more than anything else, the supremacy of Holy Scripture in the common life of believing Anglicans. Highly respected scholastic endeavors have discerned that the constitution and canons of the separate Provinces throughout the Communion have many principles and regulations in common. Moreover, the Communion is "bound together by a corpus of ecclesiastical conventions" . . . which have "such strong persuasive authority" that they may be seen as "quasi-legal." Indeed, so powerful are many of these conventions that they may be treated as if they were law. These, in turn, give credence to the existence of a "common law" of canon law which could become part of the mortar mix that would hold the Communion together. Although there is no agreed upon adjudicatory tribunal dedicated to resolve disputes such as that now before the Communion brought on by ECUSA, nonetheless the law recognizes that for every wrong it is possible to provide a suitable remedy. The issue is one of leadership. Who will lead us?

Here the remedy is simple, commensurate with the problem at hand: separation of the one and recognition of the other. The remedy can be administered by the Primates in the exercise of their “enhanced responsibility.” It can be implemented by the Archbishop of Canterbury under his moral authority as the spiritual leader of the Communion. If they don’t listen to the whole church what is left but separation? (Matt. 18:17)

Moral Authority

The Anglican Communion and the Archbishop of Canterbury have all the authority necessary to do what good conscience dictates. Resolution III.6, adopted at Lambeth 1998, called for the Primates’ Meeting to develop a collegial role under the Presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury to enable the Meeting to exercise enhanced responsibilities in offering guidance on doctrinal, moral, and pastoral matters. As has been wisely noted, Provincial autonomy is not cloaked in any mantle of scriptural authority.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, in consultation with the Archbishop of York, decides who is and who is not in communion with the See of Canterbury. He is able to consult throughout the Communion and certainly this Commission will be heard at Lambeth. The Communion, acting through the Primates’ meeting and decisions of individual primates and their provinces can decide — and, in fact, many have already decided — whether they are in communion with ECUSA or not. It is precisely in a situation like this that Primates are asked to exercise “enhanced responsibility.” It shall not be a major step to establish *de jure* what in the eyes of many already exists *de facto*.

Attention has been given to the desirability of developing a Communion-wide codification of canon law to strengthen the bonds of unity within the Communion. A “core covenant” would have real promise, and has been endorsed by Bishop Duncan as the Moderator of the Network. It would place some limits on the autonomy of the individual Provinces and, in all likelihood, would take time to put into place. ECUSA’s steadfast denial of any faithful allegiance to its historical Anglican heritage suggests that it would resist being subject to any legal or covenant restrictions to what it could or could not do, and the process of adoption could thereby be delayed.

Matters facing the Communion are of sufficient urgency so that more immediate measures are necessary. You are likely to hear from the leadership of ECUSA that all is well, that the problems within ECUSA are not significant and will soon go away, that the plan for Designated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight (DEPO) has been designed by American Bishops to care adequately for a “small” minority who have not yet accepted the actions of General Convention of a year ago. This is sad indeed. Their being in a state of absolute denial is all the more reason for action now. You have heard ample testimony this morning of the tragic level to which the Episcopal Church has descended.

Remedies — Separation

I believe that some form of separation of ECUSA from the rest of the Communion at this time is necessary. *To Mend the Net* uses the term “observer status” with the expressed hope that ECUSA

will repent and seek somehow to undo what has happened. The likelihood of any remorse, repentance, or reversal is remote given ECUSA's response thus far to the severe criticism it has already received. Nonetheless, an acknowledged separation would give ECUSA an opportunity to reverse the direction it has selected. As one who has been raised and nurtured with the Episcopal Church, I can tell you that it is not very pleasant to be where we are. I do believe, however, that unless firm and decisive action is taken all will be lost.

Issues of Being in Communion

Whatever else being "in communion" may involve, it certainly requires trust, unity and concord. These essentials no longer exist within ECUSA and between ECUSA and much of the Anglican Communion. The word "impair" comes from "to make worse." Some view impaired communion as something less than perfect, diminished in quality, but not terminated. Broken communion on the other hand does suggest termination, "violated by transgression such as a broken vow." (Webster's Dictionary.)

The Communion might borrow from ECUSA's disciplinary canons where an ordained person who is charged as having abandoned the communion of the Church is inhibited by his bishop for acting in his office as a member of the clergy and is given six months to recant. A failure to recant gives rise to deposing their person from the ordained ministry.

ECUSA's next chance of restoration, absent a special General Convention, will be in the summer of 2006, two years from now. If ECUSA were separated and inhibited from any Anglican activity until then, the issue of repentance could be put squarely before ECUSA's governing body. A failure to repent would then be before the Primates immediately thereafter and before the Lambeth Conference two years later.

Other Relief

This Commission could properly urge the Archbishop of Canterbury to take steps toward the establishment of a new extra-provincial relationship and declare full recognition and communion status for the Network. This would help the Network gather those Episcopalians who have been disaffected by what has gone on within ECUSA but have not been willing up to now to make the necessary move into membership in the Network. Of equal, or perhaps greater, importance, with proper recognition the Network will be able to bring into full fellowship those Anglican bodies in North America which have become outcast from ECUSA and the Canadian Church. The recent "common cause" announcement is a first step towards a long hoped for reunion of these separated groups.

I hesitate to ponder what will happen if this Commission does less than what is being suggested here. The strife between ECUSA and the Network will intensify. Litigation will evolve — ultimate meltdown will occur.

In Summary

Grave difficulties have arisen at the hand of ECUSA, and the unity of Anglican Communion is seriously threatened. Decisive action is necessary. Call it discipline or call it simple justice, ECUSA needs to be separated from the balance of the Communion and the Network, and its affiliates need adequate recognition and status within the Communion

You should know that, throughout all of the orthodox Episcopal Church, and in other parts of the Communion as well, today is set aside as a day of prayer and fasting for this Commission. Thousands of faithful Anglicans are in prayer at this very moment. May God guide you in what is before you.