

Testimony to the Lambeth Commission June 15, 2004

By Diane L. Knippers

Thank you so very much for your willingness to meet with us and to hear our concerns this morning. I want to talk to you about three things:

1. I will begin by sharing some personal aspects of my life over the last year as I've struggled with cancer. In particular, I will focus on some spiritual lessons I'm learning.
2. Second, I want to tell you about the ministry of the church in cultural context, particularly in the context of the social crisis of our nation – the breakdown of marriage and family life.
3. Finally, I will conclude with a few words about Christian unity.

Let me begin with my most earnest plea to you. I want to remain an Anglican. I am an Anglican. I believe what most Anglicans believe. But today, I am an Episcopalian in name only. I cannot remain in the Episcopal Church in its present state. I pray that you will find a way for me to remain an Anglican, but not an Episcopalian. I beg you for this.

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April 30 last year was my 31st wedding anniversary. It was also the day when my husband and I learned that I had cancer. I had a sizeable tumor. Last summer, I had radiation and chemotherapy, which ended just in time for me to spend two weeks supporting the efforts of orthodox bishops at the Episcopal General Convention in July. When I returned home, I learned that the tumor had disappeared. But in the fall, I was told that the cancer had already spread to lymph nodes. My doctor told me that this could not be cured. I began a grueling round of chemotherapy, simply designed to prolong my life. But my latest CAT scan showed unexpected good news – no sign of cancer. I will have another test in late July.

Before the convention last summer, my husband, Ed, said that if the church agreed to Gene Robinson's consecration, we would have to leave the church. But I reminded him how much I needed my local congregation as I struggled with cancer. I couldn't face finding a new church home right now. So, he agreed.

Ed and I have learned so much spiritually over the last year. Our Lord has become so close and so dear to us. I've also learned some lessons that I believe apply to the church and to the crisis we face.

The first lesson is that cancer must be treated early. In its early stages, the patient doesn't even know she has a disease. It's easy to pretend it's not there, particularly since the treatment is so traumatic. It is costly, time-consuming, sometimes agonizingly painful,

humiliating, and exhausting. Why endure all this for a problem that is barely noticeable? The reason, of course, is that without treatment, this disease will kill the body.

False teaching is like cancer. It begins in small ways easy to overlook. A bishop begins to teach heretical things and it's easy to say, "Well, nobody is really paying attention and he'll retire soon." Or, "they are tolerating unbiblical behavior in that diocese – or that province – but it doesn't affect us." Standing up against false teaching is traumatic. It is costly, time-consuming, sometimes agonizingly painful, humiliating, and exhausting. But if the Church does not aggressively treat the cancer of false teaching at its early stage, it will grow, and it will kill the Body.

The second lesson I've learned is that only God knows the future. I don't know what's ahead for me. Have I been completely healed? Is this simply a wonderful reprieve and do I still face a painful and premature death? I can only place my trust in the Lord and commit my future to Him.

That's precisely the way it feels in my parish. We don't know what the future holds. In some ways, this commission is like the doctor and we patiently await your diagnosis and advice. But we recognize that no earthly power will bring healing to the Church. We remain active in worship, work and witness, but we do not know what our future holds – the structure of our Church or its relationships. We only know that God does know and that the future is in His hands.

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I began by telling you that it is not possible for me to remain an Episcopalian. This is not an easy conclusion for me. I've spent the last 30 years – my entire professional life – working for the renewal of mainline churches. I believe that churches can be reformed. And my whole life has been oriented toward seeking that end by working within the structures of denominations. But I also know that repentance and renewal may come through God's judgment, as it did so often to the Israelites. Judgment may be a means of grace. I believe that the wider Anglican Communion is being called by God to mediate that judgment.

The primary reason that I cannot remain an Episcopalian is that effective witness to Christ in our society is not possible within the Episcopal Church at this time. My friends who are trying to plant new Episcopal Churches tell me that it is next to impossible to attract young families. So let me now turn to my second point – the context of ministry in North American society.

The current leaders of the Episcopal Church say that our Church's acceptance of sexual intimacy by same-sex partners is a necessary accommodation to our cultural context. But in reality, the opposite is true. In our social context, it is necessary for the Church to make a counter-cultural witness. For forty years, North American culture has been in the grips of a sexual revolution. We've seen soaring rates of promiscuity, divorce, co-habitation, out-of-wedlock births, and now the acceptance of homosexuality. Even within our

churches, some are now endorsing polyamory or calling for the acceptance of clergy who have had sex-change operations. It's all connected – all a part of a sexual ethic that puts personal desire and pleasure above the common good and that has no standards to determine right and wrong.

The negative effects of family breakdown multiply with each generation and it is children who pay the biggest price. Over half of the children growing up in America today will spend a part of their childhood living without their father. Among urban poor blacks, the effect is devastating. There are whole city blocks without a single intact family of children living with their own Mom and Dad. But the effect isn't just on the poor. Recent studies show the rapid rise of serious mental disorders and addictions among American children. Among high school students, one in five has considered suicide. We are a wealthy nation, but our children lack the basic emotional security that comes from strong families.

In this regard, I was shocked by the results of a recent study of American teenagers (including some 16 percent who are not religious) compared to Episcopal teenagers. The average American teenager is more likely to believe in God and to have made a commitment to God than is the average Episcopal teenager. The average American teenager is less likely to say morality is relative or to say that adults in the church are hypocrites than the average Episcopal teenager.

Given our ineffective witness to our own children, is it any wonder that the Episcopal Church has lost one third of its members in the last 40 years?

We live in a sex-saturated society. Our children are bombarded with sexual images in advertising and entertainment. Worst of all, our rich and powerful nation is exporting our most morally decadent side, through the media, around the world. But I don't need to tell you that. You see it in your own homes and communities.

The Church of Jesus Christ must stand against this cultural onslaught. And it must stand for marriage. But the Episcopal Church is doing the opposite. We not only tolerate sexual sin, we bless it. Within the United States, the Episcopal Church is very small, but it is disproportionately prestigious and influential. Last summer, the Episcopal Church, ignoring the teaching of the Anglican Communion, publicly and proudly embraced sexual sin. I do not believe it is a coincidence that we have seen an enormous political push for same-sex marriage in our society in the last 10 months. The advocates for same-sex marriage had been given moral permission by my church.

Can you understand the anger, the guilt, the shame, and the grief we bear? Our culture faces a moral crisis and our Church is on the wrong side. In this cultural context to stand with the Episcopal Church is to betray our society, betray our children, betray the Gospel.

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My final point has to do with Christian unity. At our last diocesan council meeting, our bishop, Peter Lee, quoted James McCord, saying that if you must choose between “heresy and schism, always choose heresy.” I agree that Christian unity is essential. But it is wrong – completely wrong – to suggest that we must choose between Christian truth and Christian unity. Unity and truth are inextricably linked. Genuine unity protects truth – that which is believed always, everywhere, by everyone. Genuine truth defines our unity in Christ. To sow heresy is to reap schism. If the Episcopal Church had embraced true unity – if it had been willing to submit to the Anglican Communion – it would have been protected from false teaching.

Last summer, the Episcopal Church chose schism by abandoning the biblical standards of the universal Church. Most particularly, the Episcopal Church blatantly disregarded the warnings and entreaties of the Anglican Communion. Since then, in the face of appeals to repent, many have responded by hardening their hearts.

Not only has the Episcopal Church been rebuked by other provinces in the Anglican Communion, there are new deep strains in relationships with Eastern and Oriental Orthodox and with Roman Catholics. The actions of the Episcopal Church are an ecumenical disaster.

But what of the Church in the United States? Here too, the Episcopal Church stands virtually alone. Over two thirds of American Christians are either in the Roman Catholic or in evangelical churches. While these are not perfect churches, their basic teachings on sexuality and marriage are biblical. Their numbers are growing. Less than 20% of American Christians are in the historic Protestant churches. But even among these more liberal denominations, only a couple of the smallest and most marginal have abandoned biblical teaching on sexuality. Just last month, the largest mainline church, the United Methodist Church, reaffirmed and strengthened its teaching and disciplinary standards on human sexuality. In fact, it even endorsed civil laws to protect the definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

The Episcopal Church is not the vanguard of the future church. It is captive to a confused and troubled culture. Anglicanism has proudly asserted itself as the *via media*, generally understood as between Catholics and Protestants. But the Episcopal Church in United States is becoming the *via media* between Christians and the Unitarian Universalists.

Our culture needs the Anglican witness. Anglicanism could be especially attractive to younger generations in American society. Young people are attracted to liturgical worship – to its connectedness with the Church through the ages. Young people also desire the close connections with believers globally. Anglicanism could flourish and expand in North America – but only if we offer the transforming Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I will not follow the Episcopal Church into disunity with the universal Church of Jesus Christ. My husband and I have agonized and prayed about where to go. Should we become Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or join an evangelical denomination? But

why should I? I am Anglican. But dear brothers and sisters, hear me when I tell you that I am Anglican.

I cannot remain an Episcopalian. We need a new provincial structure – nothing less. My earnest desire is to remain an Anglican. I believe what most Anglicans believe. I worship as most Anglicans worship. I want to live, and by God's grace, to die an Anglican. Will you find a way for me?