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PRIMATES MEETING – NEVER DO TODAY, WHAT YOU CAN PUT OFF UNTIL TOMORROW

By David Phillips

The final product of the Primates meeting was a Communiqué which took far longer to agree than had been anticipated and was not finalised until quite late on the last day. It was also rather confusing when it first appeared because the main meat of the proposals do not appear in the Communiqué itself but in the appendices, which were not released immediately.

Sections 1-7 deal with introductions and other matters. Section 4 mentions the 'Holy Eucharist' in Zanzibar but not that there were Primates absent (the Anglican Communion website calls it a 'mass').

Section 8 concerns proposals for a worldwide study of hermeneutics. Rowan Williams also drew attention to the interpretation of Scripture in his recent General Synod address. It is good that people recognise that the differences in the Communion stem from different understandings of the nature and authority of Scripture, in particular is it the Word of God? But too much that goes under the name hermeneutics seems to be about explaining why we don't have to accept what the Bible says.

From section 9 onwards the communiqué concerns the divisions caused by the antics of revisionists. There are strong statements on the nature of the problem - the communion is beset with an 'illness', we no longer recognise one another as 'faithful disciples of Christ', and 'the fabric of our common life together has been torn'.

They re-affirm Lambeth 1.10 a number of times, in particular that in upholding marriage as a lifelong union between a man and a woman and that 'abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage' (para 11). The Primates assert that it is the deviation from this position that has torn the communion. The actions of some Primates to intervene in the US (and elsewhere) to support those who have opposed error is mentioned and accepted as a necessary step until reconciliation is achieved.

But what will all this mean in practice? The Primates have not done what was asked of them, that is take action now to show that the US and Canadian provinces have stepped beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. The primary goal of the communiqué is to find reconciliation. This is a laudable goal but when a group is unwilling to turn from error, discipline is necessary in the hope that it will lead to repentance and reconciliation. In this case discipline must be by breaking fellowship.

The problem the primates now face is how to decide that the point for action has come. The obvious time was when Gene Robinson was appointed, it was such a clear and blatant act. But they failed to do this and instead set up a group which produced the Windsor Report.

The Windsor Report made some rather weak proposals which the Primates accepted and called on the US church to respond. This response should have come at the General Convention in 2006, but instead they took bits, played with words and ignored other points completely. Therefore another group was set up to decide whether the resolutions of the General Conventions complied with Windsor. This group concluded, by some tortuous misuse of logic and language, that in many respects it did comply, but not in all.

The Primates considered this report at their recent meeting, but again they have not acted. Instead they have set up another group, this time a Pastoral Council, part of whose job is to monitor the response to Windsor.

In principle the Primates have also been asked that the US Bishops respond by 30th September giving a commitment that they will not authorise Rites of same-sex blessing and that they will not allow the consecration of a Bishop living in a same-sex union. But there are already indications that this will fail. The Presiding Bishop, Mrs Schori, has indicated that a commitment not to authorise Rites will not stop parishes from performing same-sex blessings using unauthorised Rites.

In fact all this reveals a fundamental problem which the Primates and Windsor have consistently failed to address. They have focussed again and again on only two things - same sex blessings and actively homosexual bishops. But it is a scandal that there are actively homosexual people in any ordained ministry and that people are being allowed to teach the acceptability of homosexual practice and thereby leading people into error and destruction.

The fact is that despite the good intentions of many of the Primates they are not going to be able to get the majority to act. Every time it comes around there will be more obfuscation and delay. The orthodox primates have tried valiantly to achieve a good result but they appear to be outnumbered by those who are unwilling to act in a Biblical manner.

The Vicar, the Council and the Covenant

Whilst inaction is taken the Primates have had to chart a way to help those in the US who are unable to remain in fellowship with the US Episcopal Church. The proposal is to ask the Presiding Bishop to delegate some of her role to a Primatial Vicar who will then be responsible to the new Pastoral Council. Together they will seek to chart a way forward which allows those who have broken fellowship to remain within the structures of the Communion but out of communion with the USEC until that body changes its ways. Until all this is achieved the Primates have effectively endorsed the intervention of individual primates in the US.

In principle all this could work, but its purpose is dubious. It appears to be a way of allowing those who want to be faithful to Scriptural teaching to stay within the same structures as those who do not whilst retaining a clear conscience. The better way would be to make it clear that the US Episcopal Church is no longer part of the communion.

One proposal to be put forward by the Windsor Report was the establishment of a Covenant which provinces would be asked to endorse as a condition of them being part of the Communion. A draft was included in the Windsor Report and a working group was set up to refine this. Though this was made public before the Primates meeting it appears that it did not receive much attention mainly because it is a long-term solution and therefore cannot hope to deal with the current problems.

If it is taken forward the covenant has potential for great good and great harm. It ought to reassert that the Anglican Communion is a federation of confessional churches. We have beliefs that we hold in common and it is unacceptable for people to step beyond those beliefs. However, if the covenant is too weak, or has too many loopholes, it will be taken to mean that it is legitimate to believe anything you want as an Anglican and will therefore undermine what we stand for. There is also the problem of policing, essentially the proposal is that it will be self-policed, provinces will be required to assent to it. But what will happen if a province assents to it, and then acts in a way that is totally opposed to what the covenant says? Will it be like the 39 Articles in the Church of England, something which the majority claim to acknowledge and then completely ignore?

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