

Good Friday 2007

Dear Bishops,

We are a group of academic theologians serving in parishes or theological institutions who are committed to the welfare of the Anglican Church of Canada, and we are writing to you out of grave concern for the integrity of our Christian community.

We are disturbed by the proposed motions coming out of the Council of General Synod's March meeting. We believe that these motions do not reflect the implications of the *St Michael Report*, and that even to treat them as legitimate options is to neglect the kind of discussion the *Report* encourages and our Church deserves. In particular, we affirm the following:

1. **Sexual ethics is a doctrinally serious matter.** Bishop Ingham has recently said, 'Christianity as a religion stands in need of a better theology of sexuality, a better understanding of the complex role sexuality plays in our human nature, and of the purposes of God in creating us as sexual beings, [. . .]' (address delivered in Ottawa on 7 March 2007). The *St Michael Report* could have been cited in support of this statement, and the question of 'the purposes of God in creating us as sexual beings' is the subject of over half of the *Report*. Indeed, the *Report* identifies six central doctrines that must be engaged in any discussion of sexual ethics, and it classifies the matter of the blessing of same-sex unions as doctrinally 'important' (§ 3). We submit that a matter of this gravity should not be dealt with in the manner of a simple resolution.
2. **That the way this matter is treated is ecclesologically significant.** Here we are thinking beyond the certain political and legal ramifications nationally and internationally if the Canadian Church is perceived to be 'walking apart' from the Anglican Communion. Our concern to maintain our communion with the historic see of Canterbury is not rooted in our fidelity to the Church's constitution or in nostalgia, but in the awareness that the path of divergence is the path to North American Protestant sectarianism. Episcopacy is a sign of the Church's catholicity. We believe that it is therefore incumbent upon bishops who bear a particular responsibility for guarding the unity of the Church to ensure that this issue and the way it is handled in our councils does not subvert *koinōnia* or the peaceable intentions of the *Windsor Report*.
3. **That there has been no sustained debate on this matter in the Church.** Twelve years ago a group of British academics published 'The St Andrew's Day Statement', a non-polemical document identifying some of the important theological matters raised by the Church's response to those living in same-sex relationships. As recently as this past January, one of the document's authors, The Rev. Professor Oliver O'Donovan, maintained that the Statement has been largely ignored. Bishop Ingham's assertion that the Church 'stands in need' of a better theology of sexuality is itself an affirmation that the doctrinal character of this matter is something that has yet to be worked out. For him, this would involve 'of necessity an entire re-appraisal of Christian tradition, going right back to the Bible itself'. It is true that consultations have been held on the *St Michael Report* across the country. But, with the exception of the 'Faith Seeking Understanding Conference' held at Huron University College this past January, most of these consultations have been given over to hearing points of view and not to a critical exchange of ideas. Quite simply, what is lacking

is a biblical and theological justification for changing the Church's teaching.

4. **'Core doctrine' is problematic.** The term 'core doctrine' is not drawn from the Principles and Canons of our Church, and is therefore confusing to those who appeal to the Church's incorporating documents for direction in how to deal with this matter. In truth, the standard to which we are called in these documents is not 'core doctrine', but doctrine as understood by the Solemn Declaration: 'we are determined by the help of God to hold and maintain the Doctrine, Sacraments and Discipline of Christ as the Lord hath commanded in His Holy Word, and as the Church of England hath received and set forth the same in "The Book of Common Prayer [. . .];" and in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion; [. . .].' The jurisdiction of General Synod includes the ability to define doctrines of the Church 'in harmony with the Solemn Declaration', but these definitions must be resolved in a constitutional fashion, rather than through simple resolution. Moreover, we worry that not to treat this matter in a constitutional fashion could be to invite a petition to the Supreme Court of Appeal.

In making the above affirmations, we are conscious of some of the arguments that are made in support of treating this more as a matter of discipline than doctrine. We would like to consider these briefly.

1. **That this is an urgent matter of justice.** We agree that our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters deserve protection under the law in our civil society, and we support the Church's ongoing advocacy wherever human dignity is ignored or threatened. All human beings are created in the divine image and are entitled to exercise their human rights responsibly. But in saying this we are recognising that justice is rooted in the being of the one God in whose image we are made, and not in social convention. Richard Niebuhr warned us long ago of the danger of worshipping the 'Christ of culture', and most Anglicans agree that the 'just us' attitude of much of Protestant individualism is not the same thing as the justice of God. Real justice is to be found where human beings order their common life according to the values and principles of the gospel as revealed in Scripture. And as we remember especially during this Holy Week, these were frequently offensive to the prevailing customs and mores of society.
2. **Serious theological matters have been determined in the past by simple resolution.** The argument has been made that since such matters as the ordination of women, the admission of children to communion before confirmation, the removal of the *filioque* and the adoption of the *BAS* did not require motions treating them as doctrine, neither should the matter of the blessing of same-sex unions. Some of these matters are sufficiently contentious even now that it may be asked whether the Church was wise to dispatch them so readily. Nevertheless, we forget that in each of these actions a developed biblical and theological case was available. The ordination of women had been a matter of discussion in the Church ever since the first deaconess was ordained in the Church of England in 1862. And incidentally, it took the Canadian Church two General Synods to ratify its adoption. The *BAS* was not presented as an innovation, but is alleged to be a return to more catholic, pre-Reformation forms of liturgy. The impetus for this was Dom Gregory Dix's *Shape of the Liturgy*, which was a standard textbook in theological colleges soon after its publication more than sixty years ago. The matter of the *filioque* has been debated since the Council of Toledo in AD 589, and it remains a creedal doctrine for more than 220 million Orthodox Christians. Similarly, the practice of paedocommunion goes back to the earliest period of Church history and is still observed by Orthodox Christians.

3. **One of Anglicanism's most noble traits is its inclusivity.** Anglican comprehensiveness does seek to include as wide a cross-section of theological insight and secular opinion as possible. But even as it 'draws the circle wide' it does so articulating both the centre of agreement and the limits of diversity. We worry that inclusivity is comprehensiveness without articulation. Furthermore, we cannot escape the fact that a circle is still a circle, meaning that some will inevitably be excluded. We hope that the Church will listen carefully to the voices of many from our aboriginal and ethnic communities, as well as those from traditional parishes, before it makes a decision that will exclude them from the Anglican circle. The noblest liberalism is one that insures truly fair process so as to include precisely those toward whom we do not feel an affinity.

For these reasons we believe that the motions proposed by the Council of General Synod are entirely inappropriate for a Church contemplating such a fundamental change in Christian teaching. Not to give this matter the level of discussion it deserves is to fail the whole Church, including our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters who are owed a theological rationale for the way the Church understands their life as an appropriate or inappropriate expression of Christian discipleship.

Respectfully in Christ,

The Rev. Stephen Andrews, PhD (Thorneloe University)

Gary Badcock, PhD (Huron College)

The Rev. Dr Chris Barrigar, PhD (Diocese of Montreal)

The Rev. Canon Timothy Connor, ThD (Diocese of Huron, Wycliffe College)

The Rev. Walter Hannam, PhD cand. (College of Emmanuel & St Chad)

The Rev. John Harvey, PhD (Diocese of Algoma)

Bruce Hindmarsh, DPhil (Regent College)

The Rev. Ranall Ingalls, PhD (Diocese of Fredericton)

The Rev. Ron Kydd, PhD (Tyndale Seminary)

Don Lewis, DPhil (Regent College)

Joseph Mangina, PhD (Wycliffe College)

Darren Marks, PhD (Huron College)

The Rev. Gregory McVeigh, PhD (Diocese of Montreal)

The Rev. Canon John Mellis, PhD (Queen's College)

The Rev. Dean Mercer, ThD (Diocese of Toronto, Wycliffe College)

The Rev. John Oakes, PhD cand. (Diocese of New Westminster)

The Rev. James Packer, DPhil (Regent College)

The Rev. Ian Ritchie, PhD (Diocese of Ontario)

The Rev. Peter Robinson, PhD (Diocese of Toronto, Wycliffe College)

Robert D. Sider, DPhil (University of Saskatchewan)

The Rev. Catherine Sider-Hamilton, PhD cand. (Diocese of Toronto)

The Rev. David Smith, PhD (Diocese of Saskatchewan, Wycliffe College)

The Rev. Canon George Sumner, PhD (Wycliffe College)

The Rev. Canon Gary Thorne, PhD (King's College and Dalhousie University)

The Rev. Lisa Wang, PhD (Diocese of Edmonton)

Bruce Ward, PhD (Thorneloe University)