

Primates' Statement of October 16, 2003, Annotated

The Primates of the Anglican Communion issued the statement printed below at the conclusion of their emergency meeting held on October 15–16, 2003. The statement, including a footnote that has not been widely distributed, appears in the left column. The right column contains a summary of the document, organized by paragraph, in the form of bullet points. A few editorial comments are included there as well. Additional comments appear at the end.

The purpose of this document is to facilitate understanding of the Primates' statement and to provide a quick index to it. The text shown is intended to be definitive, but we note that the versions distributed by the Episcopal News Service and the Anglican Communion New Service were not identical.

The Primates of the Anglican Communion and the Moderators of the United Churches, meeting together at Lambeth Palace on the 15th and 16th October, 2003, wish to express our gratitude to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, for calling us together in response to recent events in the Diocese of New Westminster, Canada, and the Episcopal Church (USA), and welcoming us into his home so that we might take counsel together, and to seek to discern, in an atmosphere of common prayer and worship, the will and guidance of the Holy Spirit for the common life of the thirty-eight provinces which constitute our Communion.

At a time of tension, we have struggled at great cost with the issues before us, but have also been renewed and strengthened in our Communion with one another through our worship and study of the Bible. This has led us into a deeper commitment to work together, and we affirm our pride in the Anglican inheritance of faith and order and our firm desire to remain part of a Communion, where what we hold in common is much greater than that which divides us in proclaiming Good News to the world.

At this time we feel the profound pain and uncertainty shared by others about our Christian discipleship in the light of controversial decisions by the Diocese of New Westminster to authorise a Public Rite of Blessing for those in committed same sex relationships, and by the 74th General Convention of the Episcopal Church (USA) to confirm the election of a priest in a committed same sex relationship to the office and work of a Bishop.

These actions threaten the unity of our own Communion as well as our relationships with other parts of Christ's Church, our mission and witness, and our relations with other faiths, in a world already confused in areas of sexuality, morality and theology, and polarised Christian opinion.

As Primates of our Communion seeking to exercise the "enhanced responsibility" entrusted to us by successive Lambeth Conferences, we re-affirm our common understanding of the centrality and authority of Scripture in determining the basis of our faith. Whilst we acknowledge a legitimate diversity of interpretation that arises in the Church, this diversity does not mean that some of us take the authority of Scripture more lightly than others. Nevertheless, each province needs to be aware of the possible effects of its interpretation of Scripture on the life of other provinces in the Communion. We commit ourselves afresh to mutual respect whilst seeking from the Lord a correct discernment of how God's Word speaks to us in our contemporary world.

We also re-affirm the resolutions made by the bishops of the Anglican Communion gathered at the Lambeth Conference in 1998 on issues of human sexuality as having moral force and commanding the respect of the Communion as its present position on these issues. We commend the report of that Conference in its entirety to all members of the Anglican Communion, valuing especially its emphasis on the need "to listen to the experience of homosexual persons, and . . . to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ"; and its acknowledgement of the need for ongoing study on questions of human sexuality.

- Primates thank Archbishop of Canterbury for bringing Primates together to discuss events in Canadian and U.S. churches.
- Primates worshipped and studied together.
- Have deepened commitment to preserving Anglican traditions and the unity of the Anglican Communion.
- What unites is greater than what divides.
- Acknowledge pain and uncertainty of some resulting from authorization of rite for blessing of same-sex unions by (Canadian) Diocese of New Westminster and confirmation of homosexual priest in committed relationship by General Convention.
- Actions threaten unity within Communion and greater Christendom, mission and witness, relations with other faiths. (This is a difficult sentence to parse definitively.)
- Scripture is central in determining the basis of our faith
- A legitimate diversity of interpretation of Scripture exists.
- Acknowledge that all sides respect the authority of Scripture.
- Each province should consider possible effects of its interpretation on the life of other provinces.
- Primates commit to mutual respect while seeking discernment for contemporary world.
- Lambeth 1998 resolutions on sexuality remain the consensus moral position of the Primates (including that "homosexuality is incompatible with Scripture").
- The entire report from 1998 is recommended for study (especially that the matter of homosexuality is not settled and requires additional study, and that there is a need "to listen to the experience of homosexual persons, and . . . to assure them that they are loved by God").

Therefore, as a body we deeply regret the actions of the Diocese of New Westminster and the Episcopal Church (USA) which appear to a number of provinces to have short-circuited that process, and could be perceived to alter unilaterally the teaching of the Anglican Communion on this issue. They do not. Whilst we recognise the juridical autonomy of each province in our Communion, the mutual interdependence of the provinces means that none has authority unilaterally to substitute an alternative teaching as if it were the teaching of the entire Anglican Communion.

To this extent, therefore, we must make clear that recent actions in New Westminster and in the Episcopal Church (USA) do not express the mind of our Communion as a whole, and these decisions jeopardise our sacramental fellowship with each other. We have a particular concern for those who in all conscience feel bound to dissent from the teaching and practice of their province in such matters. Whilst we reaffirm the teaching of successive Lambeth Conferences that bishops must respect the autonomy and territorial integrity of dioceses and provinces other than their own, we call on the provinces concerned to make adequate provision for episcopal oversight of dissenting minorities within their own area of pastoral care in consultation with the Archbishop of Canterbury on behalf of the Primates.

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church (USA) has explained to us the constitutional framework within which the election and confirmation of a new bishop in the Episcopal Church (USA) takes place. As Primates, it is not for us to pass judgement on the constitutional processes of another province. We recognise the sensitive balance between provincial autonomy and the expression of critical opinion by others on the internal actions of a province. Nevertheless, many Primates have pointed to the grave difficulties that this election has raised and will continue to raise. In most of our provinces the election of Canon Gene Robinson would not have been possible since his chosen lifestyle would give rise to a canonical impediment to his consecration as a bishop.

If his consecration proceeds, we recognise that we have reached a crucial and critical point in the life of the Anglican Communion and we have had to conclude that the future of the Communion itself will be put in jeopardy. In this case, the ministry of this one bishop will not be recognised by most of the Anglican world, and many provinces are likely to consider themselves to be out of Communion with the Episcopal Church (USA). This will tear the fabric of our Communion at its deepest level, and may lead to further division on this and further issues as provinces have to decide in consequence whether they can remain in communion with provinces that choose not to break communion with the Episcopal Church (USA).

Similar considerations apply to the situation pertaining in the Diocese of New Westminster.

We have noted that the Lambeth Conference 1998 requested the Archbishop of Canterbury to establish a commission to consider his own role in maintaining communion within and between provinces when grave difficulties arise¹. We ask him now to establish such a commission, but that its remit be extended to include urgent and deep theological and legal reflection on the way in which the dangers we have identified at this meeting will have to be addressed. We request that such a commission complete its work, at least in relation to the issues raised at this meeting, within twelve months.

We urge our provinces not to act precipitately on these wider questions, but take time to share in this process of reflection and to consider their own constitutional requirements as individual provinces face up to potential realignments.

Questions of the parity of our canon law, and the nature of the relationship between the laws of our provinces with one another have also been raised. We encourage the Network of Legal Advisers established by the Anglican Consultative Council, meeting in Hong Kong in 2002, to bring to completion the work which they have already begun on this question.

- Primates regret actions in Canada and the U.S. Despite appearances that actions short-circuit the discernment process and unilaterally alter the teaching of the communion, they do not.
- The independent authority of provinces is recognized, but no province can substitute its own alternative teaching for that of the entire Communion. (None has tried to do so.)
- Actions in Canada and U.S. do not represent mind of Communion and jeopardize fellowship with one another.
- Primates have concern for those who conscientiously dissent from local teaching.
- Territorial integrity of dioceses and provinces is, and must be, respected.
- Provinces asked to provide adequately for oversight of dissenting minorities, in consultation with Archbishop of Canterbury.
- Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold explained process of electing and confirming bishops in Episcopal Church.
- Primates cannot pass judgment on that process.
- There is a sensitive balance between provincial autonomy and critical opinions of outside Primates.
- Many Primates have difficulties with Gene Robinson's election, which would have not have been possible in their provinces.
- Future of Anglican Communion will be put in jeopardy by Gene Robinson's consecration.
- Bishop Robinson will not be recognized everywhere.
- Some provinces will declare themselves out of communion with the ECUSA.
- This will "tear the fabric of our Communion" and may lead to further divisions.
- The foregoing applies also to the Diocese of New Westminster.
- Primates reiterate request for the Archbishop of Canterbury to establish a commission to consider his role in maintaining communion, considering also theological and legal matters.
- Commission should complete its work on these issues within 12 months.
- Provinces urged not to act precipitately.
- Time needed for reflection and to consider constitutional issues.
- Questions of canon law across provinces have been raised.
- Network of Legal Advisers established in 2002 should complete the work it has begun.

It is clear that recent controversies have opened debates within the life of our Communion which will not be resolved until there has been a lengthy process of prayer, reflection and substantial work in and alongside the Commission which we have recommended. We pray that God will equip our Communion to be equal to the task and challenges which lie before it.

“Now I appeal to the elders of your community, as a fellow elder and a witness to Christ’s sufferings, and as one who has shared in the glory to be revealed: look after the flock of God whose shepherd you are.” (1 Peter 5.1,2a)

¹In view of the very grave difficulties encountered in the internal affairs of some provinces of the Communion, [this conference] invites the Archbishop of Canterbury to appoint a commission to make recommendations to the Primates and the Anglican Consultative Council, as to the exceptional circumstances and conditions under which, and the means by which, it would be appropriate for him to exercise an extraordinary ministry of episcopate (pastoral oversight), support and reconciliation with regard to the internal affairs of a province other than his own for the sake of maintaining communion with the said province and between the said province and the rest of the Anglican Communion. (IV.13.b)

- Recent controversies will take time to resolve.
- God asked to help Communion bear the challenge.
- Primates asked to look after their flocks.
- Archbishop of Canterbury invited to appoint commission to recommend exceptional circumstances and conditions under which and by what means he should exercise oversight in internal affairs of a province in order to maintain communion with the wider Communion.

Additional Observations

1. The Primates did not chastise, rebuke, censure, or expel the ECUSA. Clearly, some Primates would have had it otherwise, but the strongest word used in the document itself is “regret.” Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold indicated after the meeting that he did not share in this regret.
2. The statement does not “realign” anything or create anything new, as was requested by the American Anglican Council.
3. The ECUSA is not asked to undo anything. In particular, it is not requested to cancel or postpone the consecration of Canon Robinson.
4. The Primates did not issue an ultimatum. The statement acknowledges that Canon Robinson’s Consecration will cause some Primates to act unilaterally, which will lead to a dangerous situation that may well spin out of control. No coordinated response of the Primates is threatened in the statement, however.
5. The ECUSA is not ordered to do anything. It is asked to make “adequate provision for episcopal oversight of dissenting minorities within their own area of pastoral care in consultation with the Archbishop of Canterbury on behalf of the Primates.” The Presiding Bishop promptly began to study this request. (He held a meeting on this matter on October 20.) This request comes closer than anything else in the statement to giving The American Anglican Council something it explicitly asked for. As written, the request involves the Archbishop of Canterbury as a consultant only. It is unclear whether the request is meant to apply both to, say, conservative parishes in liberal dioceses and to liberal parishes in conservative dioceses. The context suggests that perhaps concern is only being expressed for conservatives, but a literal reading of the sentence admits of a broader sphere of applicability.
6. The statement acknowledges the historic and legal independence of provinces. (The *raison d’être* of the Church of England was, after all, to be a national church.)
7. The statement acknowledges that Scripture is subject to legitimate and diverse interpretations by faithful people.
8. The Primates ask that two studies be completed. These studies buy some time for the Communion, but they are, in and of themselves, of grave concern. Since the organization of the Episcopal Church after the American Revolution, we have celebrated our independence and our lack of an analogue of the Roman Catholic Pope. The moves by the Primates, especially obvious at the 1998 Lambeth Conference, to gain increasing control over doctrine and polity of individual provinces, threatens the independence of the ECUSA and its ability to respond to the challenges of contemporary American society. General Convention has not endorsed the Primates’ exercise of “enhanced responsibility.”
9. It seems fair to say that the statement is more concerned with unity and threats to unity than to issues of human sexuality.
10. The comment in paragraph 7 to the effect that no province can unilaterally substitute its own teaching “as if it were the teaching of the entire Anglican Communion” is curious. It was widely believed at General Convention that confirming the election of Gene Robinson did not even change the teaching of the ECUSA. Certainly, no one believed the teaching of the Anglican Communion as a whole was being altered.