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## **“One Baptism, One Hope in God’s Call”**

*A Summary and Brief Analysis of the SCECAC Report to the Episcopal Church*

Christopher Wilkins

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The Special Commission on the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion released in April 2006 a report entitled, “One Baptism, One Hope in God’s Call.” This report is the Episcopal Church’s most recent response to the challenges posed to it by the Windsor Report and the ongoing tensions related to the future of the Anglican Communion. The product of a special commission appointed late in 2005 by the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies, “One Baptism, One Hope in God’s Call” is designed to provide guidance and a start to the legislative process regarding matters raised in the Windsor Report for the Episcopal Church’s 75<sup>th</sup> General Convention, which takes place this June. Each member of the special commission serves on the Church’s Executive Council. The commission members represent a wide range of views and commitments within the Episcopal Church, and they have each demonstrated loyalty to it, and through it to the God it serves.

The report is divided into seven main sections:

- 1) a biblical and theological introduction on what communion means for the Episcopal Church;
- 2) a summary of recent Anglican Communion and Episcopal Church history;
- 3) a theological exploration of interdependence for the Church and the Communion;
- 4) a discussion of how the Episcopal Church has expressed regret and repentance, and what more might be needed at General Convention and beyond;
- 5) five suggestions as to how the Episcopal Church can better interact with the Anglican Communion;
- 6) an analysis of the types of covenants that are being discussed in the Communion; and
- 7) a conclusion that proposes eleven resolutions for General Convention 2006.

There follow several appendices containing relevant documents from 2003 to the present.

The overarching theme of the report is that what unites us as the Episcopal Church is whatever enables us to fulfill our mission—or, better yet, what the report calls “our unity in God’s mission” (p. 3). The more mature and deep a unity we can find, create, and sustain, the more effective will be our service in support of that mission. This is why the report offers us several ways to understand the past, face the present’s tough issues, and bind ourselves more closely together in the future. Each of these is based on how it furthers that mission. The report urges us not to accept any move toward a unity or a disunity that would make its mission impossible.

To avoid such a move, the report recommends that the Episcopal Church express regret that any of its actions in 2003 caused pain, but does not suggest that those actions were incorrect. Likewise, the report calls on the church to repent of acting, or even seeming to act, as though it had no need of its Anglican Communion partners, but does not suggest that its actions were otherwise wrong. The report also argues that our need for unity in God’s mission means that, of the three potential forms of covenant that the commission mentions, the one that focuses on relationships and mission at home and abroad is the one to be encouraged.

This focus on action is key. It is what we do, not what we believe or what we say we do, that matters most to ourselves and to others. As was true for the earliest Christians and has been true throughout Christian history, so it remains true today. How we affect the world and those in it, and how we can do so better, will remain vital questions for the church and for us all.

As its title suggests, this report roots us as a church in baptism, the Eucharist, and “our service to God’s mission in the world” (p. 2). It sees the fullest expression of our faith in that service. That service needs to focus on reconciliation, but it is by no means limited to this task. The report’s way of treating the scriptures is richly pragmatic. It encourages us to ask of the scriptures not only “what do they mean?” but also “how can we best learn from them to help us in our ministry?”

The report shows that we are grounded not only in texts, but in history, including the haphazard, colonialist way in which Anglican churches developed. This history continues to affect how Anglicans interact around the world and has left wounds that Americans, especially, need to understand and continue to help heal. When we as Americans act independently, we may appear either to ignore or to condescend to those in post-colonial societies who disagree with our actions or with those of the U.S. government. To build stronger relationships and dampen ill will, we Episcopalians need to attend carefully to how our actions, along with those of our compatriots, affect others around the world, and we need to listen closely to how they are perceived.

As important as these matters are, they also show how questions about gay and lesbian persons, ministries, and relationships have been changed into questions about other things. It is wise for us to notice, since the change is worrisome. It was not brought about by those who voted “yes” or “no” on Bishop Robinson’s election and on allowing dioceses to continue developing liturgies to bless same-sex unions. Most of those who voted on these questions were, and remain, faithful Episcopalians. There was, however, a small group who chose to incorporate their opposition on these matters into an ongoing effort to destabilize the Episcopal Church and even replace it in the Anglican Communion. Most Episcopalians, however they feel about the actions of our General Conventions, did not do this and do not support it. Unfortunately, the effort was amplified by some of the dynamics the Windsor Report set in motion. As “One Baptism, One Hope in God’s Call” shows, the best response to this challenge is to strengthen the theologies and ministries of justice and reconciliation which the Episcopal Church and most other Anglican provinces seek to bring to those in their care, and to do so openly before the whole Communion.

In any discussion about how best to care for those who disagree with its welcome to gays and lesbians, the Church needs to continue to be careful—in both senses of that term. That is, it must be both cautious and filled with care. The commission’s report shows the church being careful, and this is wise and welcome. It regrets causing pain without rejecting any healing that it has begun to bring, particularly to gays and lesbians. It seeks how best to continue with those healing actions without encouraging further divisiveness or schism. In order to do these things effectively, the report addresses questions of justice only when it has established their foundation in a shared gospel ministry of reconciliation. Thus linked, they are readily shown to be inseparable.

In addressing the matter of an Anglican covenant, which the Windsor Report recommends as a way for the whole Communion to move forward together, the special commission has done an intriguing thing. Section VI of the report first offers three ways to understand this ancient term, and then asks which one best serves reconciliation, interdependence, and communion. The first way of covenant is one that would use various Anglican structures to enforce uniformity. As the commission notes, the Windsor Report has primarily this idea in mind when it speaks of covenant. The second way would set common doctrines and a confession to be used to mandate uniformity and judge innovations. The primates’ Dromantine statement and parts of the Windsor Report have this way of covenant in mind. The third way, which the Anglican Consultative Council, the Episcopal Church, and other Anglicans recommend, changes the focus from structural or confessional uniformity to one a communion bound primarily by relationships and shared missions.

A covenant based on relationships and mission would help Episcopalians and other Anglicans better work together to heal the world without sacrificing provincial autonomy or our traditions of Anglican diversity, faithfulness, and tolerance. This form of covenant seems likely to help us find a comprehensive reconciliation, not just a compromise for the moment. Were it to do so, it would strengthen our communion. The SCECAC report is written so as to show that this form of covenant is the best of the three offered, since its anticipated fruits are the reconciliation and truer communion that we seek. These two things, the commission notes, will be central if the Episcopal Church’s ministries are to continue to thrive. Given the quote that the report offers from Archbishop Rowan Williams in this section (p. 23), it would appear that he favors this third way as well.

Read carefully, “One Baptism, One Hope in God’s Call” will help lead the Episcopal Church further on its middle path between extremes, out of divisions, and toward the love of a living God.