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A Statement by the Primates of the Anglican Communion meeting in Lambeth Palace

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Detail from a banner celebrating the ministry of the Anglican Communion News Service and *Anglican World*

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.

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 arise . 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.

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)

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