
Statement concerning the work of the Diocese of Virginia's Commission on Reconciliation

January 14, 2005

Introduction

The 209th Annual Council of the Diocese of Virginia, recognizing that “profound differences have arisen over issues addressed at the 74th General Convention, specifically the consent to the election of the Rev. Canon V. Gene Robinson and Resolution C051 dealing with the blessing of same sex unions,” established a Reconciliation Commission with a charter, among other things, to:

- offer guidance for ways that congregations can offer meaningful opportunities for reflection, prayer, worship, and discussion of the aforementioned issues; and
- report to the 210th Annual Council ways that the diocese of Virginia can increase trust and respect for conscience, thereby helping to maintain unity.

After 10 meetings, the 13 members of the Reconciliation Commission have wrestled with how we might come to a civil and gracious response to the bitter divisions in parts of our diocese that have arisen in response to these decisions of the 74th General Convention of the Episcopal Church and the continuing controversies they have engendered.

The most positive and honest response our reconciliation commission can make to the Diocese of Virginia is to acknowledge that there is a spectrum of worldviews held among us that inform what we believe Scripture teaches on matters of human sexuality, with two markedly different worldviews at either end of the spectrum and with various viewpoints around the middle. We believe that these worldviews are not likely to change significantly. Although our views are quite divergent, all of us believe we are acting and speaking in accord with Scriptural truth, and that is the root of our disagreement.

There are many who find themselves in the middle, who like those at the ends of the worldview spectrum, are struggling with the challenges of ambiguity and uncertainty but eager and confident in their commitment to the apostolic tradition of mission and witness in the name of Christ.

Even as we struggle with the painful reality that polarizing conflict draws energy and attention from mission and ministry, we cannot avoid the difficult question: “Can we continue to live together?”

We understand from some of those among us that the answer may ultimately be “No,” and that in this case there must be provision for an amicable divorce. We do not see it as our charter to delve into this possibility, other than to acknowledge that at some point our church and our diocese may need to explore this eventuality.

Our Commission assumes that the answer to whether we can live together in the midst of conflict is: “Yes—but how?” The question then becomes: “To what extent are we willing to change in order to remain one for the sake of the Gospel?”

This document suggests ways that we might be able to move forward together, as individuals, parishes, and as a diocese. We first will describe our approach and the conclusions to which we came prior to the publication of the Windsor Report on October 18, 2004, and then will describe our response to this report.

Key points on which we agree

First, there is much we have in common, despite our deep differences over the proper re-

sponse of the church to gay and lesbian people. We share foremost a faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and a desire to be faithful to his will for the church. (If we did not have this faith in common, we would not be working so diligently to find a way through our differences.)

The 13 of us join together in our affirmation of Jesus Christ, as Savior and Lord, the head of the church and the author of our salvation. In the midst of our disagreements here in the Diocese of Virginia we take comfort in the fact that through his own death on the cross and resurrection, Jesus the Christ has already reconciled the broken and fallen world to himself: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All who believe in Him now have the hope of eternal life with God.

Second, we profess a common commitment to the basic principles of Anglicanism, as articulated in the *Book of Common Prayer*—the confession of a common faith as set out in the Nicene and Apostles Creeds; a life of common prayer; the authority of scripture, tradition, and reason; the celebration of Baptism and Eucharist; the service of ordained ministry in historic succession of bishop, priest, and deacon; the ordering of our common life through conciliar structures; and a shared common life of service and mission of the gospel.

These shared beliefs bind us together in the church. We often define the essential beliefs in the creed, which we say in unison during services. At other times we see ourselves, because of the resurrection of Christ, as uniting ourselves at the foot of the cross-seeking forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

We have consistently heard a desire on the part of each person on the commission to remain in the Anglican Communion. While there surely are many differences that manifest themselves in the life of our various parishes, the commonality that defines us is a communion of life with God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is important to note that not every member of the Commission wishes to remain in the Episcopal Church in its present condition; and for some, communion of life with a Trinitarian God cannot be separated from a shared understanding of a fundamental truth of the Gospel, which they believe in all humility that the Episcopal Church has compromised.

Third, we affirm the centrality and authority of Scripture in our common life, while recognizing profound differences over what we believe Scripture teaches. We acknowledge that the church is currently struggling with differences in interpretation of the Biblical narrative in regard to human sexuality. These differences today—like ones that have come before—are profoundly real and threaten to divide not only our diocese, but also the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion itself.

Although the election and consecration of a person in a same-sex relationship to be the Bishop of New Hampshire has become the flash point of difference, we believe that the issues of difference between us transcend conversation regarding human sexuality.

There are larger issues of the interpretation of scripture, the apostolic tradition, and the relationship of the Episcopal Church with the Anglican Communion. In the context of our apostolic tradition and our relationship with the Anglican Communion, these differences have led to genuine pain, fear, confusion, and impaired communion. We lament the perilous position in which the Episcopal Church finds itself in relation to the rest of the Anglican Communion as a result of General Convention 2003, as well as the actions taken in response to that General Convention. It may be that the Diocese of Virginia has a contribution to make to help effect reconciliation.

The reality that we face is that within our diocese, our church, and our Communion, as within the Reconciliation Commission itself,

are people and communities who are still in conflict over the events that occurred in August 2003 at the 74th General Convention. We note that there has been little significant reconciliation, and many in the church are stuck in a “level 5 conflict.” (*A level 5 conflict is one where “individuals have firmly committed themselves to a particular position... The outcome can only be defined in terms of win, lose, or compromise. Each disputant attempts not only to increase the effectiveness of his argument and his power in this situation, but also to undermine the influence of those who oppose him,” per “Management of Differences” by Warren Schmidt and Robert Tannenbaum, originally published in Harvard Business Review, November-December 1960.*)

The situation may be getting worse as positions harden. The only hope we have—as a commission, as a diocese, as a national church—is to recognize, as our Communion has already done, the depth of the impasse. By God’s grace, and in his ways and not ours, we trust we will be able to allow the Spirit to break in with creative new life.

Given this reality, we believe that an important achievement might simply be to reduce the level of conflict significantly.

Some of our members believe that the only way now to reduce the level of conflict is for our bishop and national church leadership to admit the sinfulness of their actions, both in terms of their theological content and the havoc caused by their chosen disregard of the wider Communion; repent by reversing these decisions; and apologize to the Church.

Others of us believe that to repudiate the full and equal inclusion of all members of our church is to repudiate the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Reconciliation Commission met in May 2004 with the Rt. Rev. Mark Dyer, who served

on the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Lambeth Commission that issued *The Windsor Report*. Bishop Dyer summarized the crucial question before the church this way: “Is the church changing the Biblical narrative in a fundamental way by what it is doing?” He noted that persons with differing views of the scriptural message answer this question in opposite ways at this time.

Some say we are changing the story in a fundamental way. Others say that the changes with respect to sexuality are consistent with the biblical message. These differences over the interpretation of Scripture are at the core of our conflict. It is not the charge or capability of this commission to resolve these differences. Rather, our aim is to determine whether we can coexist in shared ministry in a church where such differences exist—and if so, how.

Fourth, a principle that we hold in common is the value, worth, and dignity of each individual human being, who is created in the image and likeness of God. Our faith expects us to respond to one another in a manner commensurate with this dignity.

The intrinsic value of each person is established through being created in the image of God. It is solidly grounded throughout scripture, and demonstrated in the redemptive love offered to all through Jesus Christ. Consequently, we are to treat one another with respect as unique individuals loved by God and called to new life in Him. This respect is due even when—and perhaps especially when—we have profound differences over the nature of God’s redemptive love. We acknowledge that all of us are in need for a savior, and thanks be to God, He is available to us all.

God does not force us to love him, but allows us to respond to his grace. Neither can we force one another by coercion to change deeply held views. The intrinsic dignity and freedom which

God confers to each individual calls on our part for a certain measure of respect of conscience.

We need to seek valid ways in which we can respect the good conscience of those with whom we differ, when that conscience is held accountable within a community of faith. That is our challenge: to see what balance should be struck between freedom of conscience and accountability to God and one another, and to reach within to see whether the impasse is so deep that the only outcome is separation. Bishop Dyer argued for maximizing communion and unity in the midst of these differences. Individually and collectively, we need to discern God's call to us and to his church in this. In all things we should direct our eyes upon Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and pray that God's Holy Spirit will guide each of us into all truth.

We are not likely to resolve our differences over the interpretation of scripture in regard to sexuality. However, our response with respect to church order and common life, if it is to be authentically Christian and worthy of the honor due to the Name of Jesus Christ, must be sought in humility, where we all recognize that we are sinners in need of God's amazing grace. Any reconciliation is only possible if we stand together at the foot of the cross of Christ.

We begin with prayer

We commend to our diocese the power of prayer. We thank the Standing Committee and bishop of our diocese for calling us on April 22 to pray for the unity of the church, the healthful Spirit of God's grace, that God's Word may be truly preached, that God's sacraments may be faithfully administered and faithfully received, and that God's love may be shown among us all by the fashioning of our lives according to the example of Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

We commit ourselves to seek ways always to be respectful of one another, to elevate our

speech and avoid polarizing language that demonizes those with whom we differ. We find ample teaching in Scripture that calls us always to a high standard in our speech.

We offer thanks

We offer profound thanks that there are people in the Episcopal Church and in our diocese who feel greatly alienated yet would prefer not to leave the Episcopal Church or the Diocese of Virginia. Our desire for unity does not minimize the difficulties that lie ahead of us, but we affirm our work as a good-faith effort to find a mutually respectful way forward through Christ Jesus, despite the things that divide us.

Safe Harbor

A key metaphor that guides us is the concept of "safe harbor," a way in which we can all find respite from the pressures of these issues and continue to live out our lives in Christ Jesus.

We commend the metaphor of "safe harbor" as a guide to envisioning our future. The cross of Jesus stands as both welcome and beacon. A safe harbor must be open and available for those who are navigating the shoals of conscience. But we must also realize that the very things that define "safety" for one person may signify "danger" for another.

In a very real way the Lord is our only place of "safe harbor," or safety:

- Psalm 119:117 asks God to "Uphold me that I may be safe, that I may have regard for Your statutes continually."
- Proverbs 18:10 claims the name of the LORD as the place where the righteous run for safety.
- Psalms 4:8 says, "In peace I will both lie down and sleep, for You alone, O LORD, make me to dwell in safety."
- In Jeremiah 32:37 the Lord promises to bring his unfaithful people to safety: "Behold, I will gather them out of all the lands to which I have driven them in My anger, in My wrath and in great indignation;

and I will bring them back to this place and make them dwell in safety.”

- Jeremiah 33:16 goes on to say: “In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety; and this is the name by which she will be called: the LORD is our righteousness.”

In addition to these passages of Old Testament scripture, we specifically name Jesus as the fulfillment of these promises of safe harbor.

- Matthew 12:28-30 “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Within the concept of the safe harbor is naming what we each perceive as the stormy sea, identifying our lighthouse, and dredging the channel periodically.

We should specifically extend a welcome to those who choose to affiliate as members of the “Network of Anglican Communion Dioceses and Parishes” (“the Network”), as well as specifically to lesbian and gay persons.

The concept of “safe harbor” means that the various parties in the disputes over sexuality are not to be persecuted or demeaned for their stands, but respected. We each have heard or read stories from other dioceses about how what we characterize as “bad behavior” has been detrimental to unity. We find ourselves fortunate and are grateful to be in a diocese where thoughtfulness abounds due to the generosity and leadership of our bishop: We know of no acts of persecution of people across the entire spectrum of response on this issue. We celebrate our bishop’s permissive rather than directive style. We recommend that such generosity extend to not threatening to take away voice or vote at Council, or applying any other canonical sanctions, solely because of principled opinions expressed on the basis of conscience.

“Safe harbor” also needs to provide a place from which we can depart to serve the mission

of the church. We rejoice that the Executive Board of our diocese, as directed by our 209th Council, designated ministries and mission opportunities that we can continue to work together and—for one year only—support with designated contributions. Those areas are principally related to children and youth, meeting human need, and church development and planting:

- The Mustard Seed Fund
- Youth Mission
- College Chaplaincies
- Shrine Mont Camp scholarships
- Diocesan Fund for Human Need, and
- The first free-standing Latino mission in the diocese.

We commend joint engagement in hands-on mission projects across ideological lines. For example, these might include compassionate ministry to the poor, to those suffering from HIV/AIDS, or to victims of the Asian tsunami. We recommend that the above list of diocesan mission and ministry opportunities be expanded and the deadline be extended at least through the next General Convention.

We learned from Bishop Dyer (and the *1997 Virginia Report*) that the heart of Anglicanism is local, centered on the parish. Yet we are accountable to God and there is mutual accountability one to another at the diocesan, national, and international level. How can these opposite tendencies be balanced? Not all parishes need be the same. We are struggling to find the limits to what is acceptable.

We will await answers to these questions from the workings of the Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church. However, as we collectively struggle as a diocese with answering these questions, we encourage teaching within the diocese (i.e., in the regions and congregations of our diocese) on the essential parts of Christianity, especially the Anglican understanding.

The commission encourages a recommitment to study and dialogue in the areas of biblical theology and ethics. We recommend appointment of a standing commission of scholars to serve as guides in this regard. Their task could be to produce position papers and related curricula to assist congregations and individuals in their ongoing engagement with Christian tradition and experience. Such a commission might be charged to address specific matters arising within the church that affect the faith and life of the whole community. In this manner, the people of the diocese would have an appropriate means to examine and discuss matters of theological and moral significance prior to their consideration at Annual Council and the General Convention.

Finally, one of the aspects of serving on the Reconciliation Commission that has been most helpful is to have shared fellowship, Bible study, and worship with those who are not “like-minded” on the issues that divide us. We want to emphasize that our shared life of prayer, study, worship, and conversation has been meaningful and mutual, and that our lives have been enriched by candid dialogue and deepening relationships.

At such a moment in our lives and in the life of the church we are humbled by our inability to “solve” the problems we face. The good news is that God is merciful, with God all things are possible; we seek His will and pledge to open ourselves to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Our response to the Windsor Report

The release of the Windsor Report came late in the life of our Commission, yet is an important development in the long process before all of us. The report resonates with the members of this Commission and is consonant with the approach that we are taking. The report honestly recognizes the reality of the conflict, documents the symptoms and causes, and makes a number of specific recommendations.

We strongly encourage all parishes to use the Windsor Report as a vehicle to further theological conversation. As the report says, “We clearly need more mutual exploration and explanation of our theological beliefs, our understanding of the Bible, and of many aspects of our common life and witness.” In this context, we suggest that each parish institute a program based on the report, separate from worship services, which would educate those who are unaware of and refresh those who have forgotten the basics of Episcopal life and belief. In the spirit of unity we also recommend that regional councils find ways of facilitating these discussions in extra-parochial settings.

The foreword states that: “This Report is not a judgment. It is part of a process. It is part of a pilgrimage towards healing and reconciliation.” It goes on to say, “Perhaps the greatest tragedy of our current difficulties is the negative consequence it could have on the mission of the Church to a suffering and bewildered world.” Therefore, with an eye to the mission of the Church, mindful of the approach by the Reconciliation Commission of being honest about differences yet respectful of those with whom we differ, we offer some thoughts towards continuing the pilgrimage.

At its beginning the report notes that our unity and communion are grounded in God’s purposes and mission in the world: “The *unity* of the church, the *communion* of all its members with one another, and the *radical holiness* to which all Christ’s people are called, are thus rooted in the trinitarian life and purposes of the one God. They are designed not for their own sake (as though the church’s in-house business were an end in itself), but to serve and signify God’s mission to the world... All that can be said about unity and communion assumes this foundation in the gospel itself. Unity, communion and holiness all belong together. Ultimately, questions about one are questions about all.” Our unity and communion are gifts of God’s grace, and not something that we can

achieve by human coercion or political manipulations.

The foreword to the report recognizes that “the ‘bonds of affection’ so often quoted as a precious attribute of Anglican Communion life, as well as the instruments of communion and unity, have been threatened by the current divisions.” The report spells out the painful reality of what we have called a “level 5 conflict” in the wider Anglican Communion beyond our diocese: “The language of debate has become adversarial, not to say abusive; recourse has been made to secular courts of law in place of Christian forbearance and charity; undertakings have been ignored; protagonists have acted out of spite rather than the demands of proper administration, and facts have been manipulated to serve party spirit. . . . Despite several wonderful counter-examples, each side has increasingly come to distrust the other, and to accuse the other (not least) of using inappropriate models and methods of reading scripture and reaching decisions.” This commission reiterates its thankfulness that our Bishop has chosen a wiser course that is more helpful to preserving our “bonds of affection” instead of exacerbating the “level 5” conflict.

The Windsor Report calls upon “all parties to the current dispute to seek ways of reconciliation, and to heal our divisions.” An important aspect of our “safe harbor” metaphor is the honest recognition of differences so that we can address them in communion with one another under Christ. Therefore, we have tried to identify some of the issues that various members of our commission have raised. We are not unanimous in our response to these, yet we are united in presenting these as considerations before us for “discernment in communion.” Based on our lengthy deliberations we will offer suggestions in those areas that are most intractable—what might be termed the “outstanding issues still to be resolved.” These should not be characterized as majority or minority viewpoints. We found that attempts to label factions

were counterproductive. As the Windsor Report says, “It is by listening to, and interacting with, voices from as many different parts of the family as possible that the Church discovers what its unity and communion really mean.” The fundamental challenge of the report to all parties is whether—on matters that threaten our communion—we choose to address them together in communion, or apart in broken communion.

Some considerations that have been raised and not resolved.

Identifying the problem. First and foremost, the proximate cause of our conflict revolves around issues of human sexuality. To some, more specifically, the problem is the Church’s teaching and ministry with respect to those who experience same-gender orientation. Neither the Lambeth Commission nor the Reconciliation Commission has the task of resolving these issues.

Resolution I.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference is presumed by the Windsor Report (§ 25,26) to reflect the current teaching of the Anglican Communion, which “in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage.” The Windsor Report says, regarding the controversial actions of the 2003 General Convention, “The overwhelming response from other Christians both inside and outside the Anglican family has been to regard these developments as departures from genuine, apostolic Christian faith.” (§ 28) To some of us this statement represents an accurate identification of the key issue that drives our difficulties.

The report also documents the surface and deeper symptoms of the conflict and shows how the actions of General Convention were contrary to the recommendations of all four

instruments of Anglican Unity. To several members of this Commission it is crucial that these realities be honestly recognized, since only then do the particular recommendations in the report make sense and provide a starting point for movement towards the restoration of broken trust.

The essential principle that guides the recommendations of the Windsor Report is continuing discernment in communion, that is to say, when discernment is needed on Communion-wide matters that wound our unity, the ancient canonical principle applies “that what touches all should be decided by all.” (§ 51) To put it another way, “communion is, in fact, the fundamental limit to autonomy.” (§ 82)

To others in our Commission the proximate cause of our conflict revolves around the issue of creation. We have seen in our homosexual brothers and sisters in Christ wholesome examples of God’s all-inclusive love and have come to understand that their same-gender sexual orientation is part of God’s creation, intrinsically “good,” not part of the fall or intrinsically sinful, as the 1998 Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops would have us believe. For those members, the issue is whether we hold onto the legalism of some of the words of Scripture as if encased in concrete for all time, or whether we embrace a larger picture of the message, much as the earliest Christians did when they took the immensely divisive step of including Gentiles as recipients of Jesus’ saving grace. We recognize that our church is currently conflicted to the point of being unable to agree on an identification of the problem, but see over time the work of the Holy Spirit to change hearts and minds on this matter.

The events of the 2003 General Convention and the response thereto have caused severe division in our Diocese. One major recommendation of the Windsor Report that several of us consider essential to healing these divisions is

an appropriate statement of regret. We will not try to frame such a statement. However, in the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury in his Advent letter to the Primates: “The Church therefore must show God to the world not only in its faithfulness and holiness, but in its willingness to repent and begin again its journey of discipleship. One of the deepest challenges of the Windsor Report is about repentance. And in the Church we can never call on others to repent without ourselves acknowledging that we too in all sorts of ways are sinners in need of grace. ... To repent before one another is to see that we have failed in our witness as God’s new community, failed to live in the full interdependence of love—and so to see that we have compromised the way in which God can make himself heard and seen among us.”

The need for repentance by people on all sides of this issue is obvious, given the current state of our division. However, others of us find the expectations of this repentance divisive because it seems to say, “You must admit that you are wrong about this issue and ask our forgiveness for being wrong, and turn to our way of understanding of the Gospel message.” The problem is that, while all concerned genuinely regret the pain that they have caused the other, no one thinks that they are wrong on this issue. The challenge will be for everyone involved to find an appropriate expression of regret that will be acceptable to the others without requiring compromise of moral integrity; to confess as a sin an act that one does not believe to be sinful would in itself be a sin. To meet such a challenge will require humility and prayer on the part of all. The Windsor Report reminds us that our unity is a gift of God’s grace. Perhaps we can be encouraged by Jesus’ words to his followers: “*Seek and you will find.*” These words echo the compassionate words of the Lord to the people of Israel, “*You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.*” (Jer. 29:13)

We wish to point out that Lambeth Resolution I.10 also affirms, and we on the Reconciliation Commission unanimously concur, that “We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish 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.” While members of our Commission clearly differ on several controversial points of the Lambeth Resolution I.10, we do affirm its call to “all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex.” As members of the Body of Christ, when one suffers, all suffer. As members of the Body, we are called to respect the image of God in one another, and to stand in solidarity with one another at the foot of the cross as we seek a grace-filled outcome to our controversies.

We recognize that the Diocese does not currently have a listening mechanism in place, but urge creation of one.

We also wish to point out that the Windsor Report does not foreclose the possibility of development on these matters, and the report specifically invites the Episcopal Church to make its case to the instruments of Anglican unity as to how scripture, tradition, and reason support its decision to consecrate V. Gene Robinson as the Bishop of New Hampshire. The Report does not preordain the ultimate resolution of our disputes over sexuality, but for the sake of the Gospel and the mission of the Church, invites the various parts of the Communion to continued discernment-in-communion, where the “bonds of affection” are maintained and we can “walk together” rather than “walk apart.” Consequently the report offers the possibility of responses that could lead to a new and deeper life together in Christ. This is the context for its call for a “statement

of regret” and a moratorium on various controversial actions.

Matters of Grave Concern in Some Parishes

There are numerous issues that have caused apprehension and anxiety in some of our parishes. We identify some of these pastoral and structural concerns below.

Same-Sex Blessings. There are several churches in our diocese that, after years of prayer, study, dialogue, and theological reflection are ready to perform same-sex unions for their homosexual members. However, our diocese has never allowed them, despite its votes on related matters at the 2003 General Convention. Some of us believe that this presents a grave pastoral issue for those parishes and their members.

At the same time we recognize that many congregations view same-sex blessings as a fundamental break with their understanding of Christian teachings. Given that these diametrically opposed beliefs are deeply held, it doesn't seem possible that we, as a diocese and acting in communion, can reach unanimity at this time on this issue.

Some on the commission think that it is very important that the moratorium on developing liturgies for same sex unions recommended by the Windsor Report be upheld, noting that this is consistent with current ban on such liturgies in the diocese. However, others in our commission believe that, should the “matters of grave concern in some parishes” listed below be approved, it should only be done in the context of also allowing same-sex blessings to occur in our diocese, since to do otherwise would create a “safe harbor” for only those on one side of the issue that confronts us.

We also note a pastoral concern for some parishes that our Commission has not addressed:

ministry among those who experience same gender attraction and desire no longer to do so, and the response to those who once lived in such relationships and no longer do so.

Diocesan Contributions. While many churches feel estranged, they nevertheless are proud of their Episcopal heritage and seek healing in the church. We think it would be a mistake to further isolate them by attempting to enforce an arbitrary conformity at this time. Therefore we unanimously recommend that parishes that contribute financially to an approved diocesan enterprise of their choice should still be considered in good standing in Virginia.

Episcopal Oversight. Some members of our Commission have proposed that parishes electing to do so, may receive Episcopal oversight from retired bishops or other bishops of their choice, in consultation with the ecclesiastical authority of the Diocese of Virginia, and that they should retain their representation in the Council of the Diocese. Since this is the *de facto* policy of the Diocese, most members of the commission have no objection to this in the context of the Episcopal oversight plan devised by the House of Bishops. Some on the Commission want to remind such parishes that the Windsor Report recommends that such oversight be granted only in “those situations where there has been an extreme breach of trust, and as a last resort,” and that while “the temporary provision of pastoral oversight is in place there must also be a mutually agreed commitment to effecting reconciliation.”

The Calling of Clergy. While there is universal praise among commission members for Bishop Lee’s treatment of dissenting parishes, there are nevertheless fears expressed about the future. Several members of the commission propose that the right of succession of rectors and the call of assistant clergy should be protected and reserved to parishes, subject only to the canonical requirement of being free of im-

pediment that would subject the selected new rector or assistant to discipline. Other members of the Commission believe that the current procedure is adequate and does not need to be changed.

Candidates for Holy Orders. Some members of the commission have noted that some Virginia parishes feel aggrieved by some procedures in the selection and education of future deacons and priests. They propose that the Commission on Ministry would treat candidates for holy orders raised up in a parish in a nondiscriminatory way, including the choice of seminary. Other members of the commission see this as entirely under the Bishop’s purview.

Parish Building Programs. Several churches have purchased land on which they hope to build, yet have put their building programs on hold because of the hesitancy of parishioners to invest in something that might be taken away, as well as the hesitancy of some banks to lend money under current circumstances. The Diocese should consider allowing the churches to place their property in separate 501(c)(3) status, free of any possible claim under the so-called Denis Canon. Several members of the commission report that “this would be a large step in restoring the degree of trust needed if reconciliation is to have any real possibility of success.”

Others see this as another kind of trust issue. While everyone in the diocese should be concerned when the expansion of Christ’s mission is jeopardized, this request seemed to indicate to these members of the commission that such parishes might also be setting the stage for eventual withdrawal, and as such could be viewed as provocative. Once again, we take our cue from Windsor which observed: “It is because we have not always fully articulated how authority works within Anglicanism ... that we have reached the point where urgent fresh thought and action have

become necessary.” The report also notes that, “the church must give its primary energy to God’s mission to the world, not to reordering its internal life.”

Concluding remarks

Finally, some hopeful aspects of the Windsor Report are its recognition that within Anglicanism, scripture has always been recognized as the Church’s supreme authority and as such ought to be seen as a focus and means of unity, and that our understanding of scripture is always discerned in communion with one another.

The Windsor Report ends with a sober warning of the dangers that lie ahead: “There remains a very real danger that we will not choose to walk together. Should the call to halt and find ways of continuing in our present communion not be heeded, then we shall have to begin to learn to walk apart.” (¶ 157) It is our hope that this will not be necessary, that we can find “discernment in communion” under the authority of scripture within a framework of Anglican unity. The final words of the report are a humbling challenge to all of us: “Our aim throughout has been to work not for division but for healing and restoration. The real challenge of the gospel is whether we live deeply

enough in the love of Christ, and care sufficiently for our joint work to bring that love to the world, that we will ‘make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’ (Eph. 4.3) As the primates stated in 2000, ‘to turn from one another would be to turn away from the Cross’, and indeed from serving the world which God loves and for which Jesus Christ died.”

With this report, we conclude our work as the Reconciliation Commission. But the work of the diocese is far from over. The same issues that have divided this Commission continue as points of disagreement in the larger body. These must be addressed if we are to survive intact as a contented and fruitful diocese. In the words of the Windsor Report: “what touches all should be decided by all.” (¶51) We offer this report of the Reconciliation Commission in the sincere hope that the Diocese of Virginia—through our witness and our actions—can serve as a model for the larger Church as we travel these turbulent seas in search of “safe harbor.” We are humbled by our inability to “solve” the problems we face. Yet the good news of the Gospel is that God is merciful and with God all things are possible. The members of the Commission pledge ourselves to remain open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in bringing about new life in Christ.

Members of the Commission

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