

Church of the Spirit

Kingstowne Community Church

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General Convention and the Windsor Report June 2006

The Episcopal Church's General Convention is held every three years. It is currently meeting in Columbus (June 2006). Much of the business this year involves shaping a response to what is known as the Windsor Report, acted on by the rest of the leaders of the worldwide Anglican church, to which the Episcopal Church belongs. The leaders of the Anglican Communion from around the globe agreed to the Windsor Report, in which they asked the Episcopal Church to make a decision either to continue in communion with the rest of the Anglican Church or to "walk apart." In order to remain in communion, the Episcopal Church was told it would need to issue a moratorium on the blessing of same-sex marriages and to offer its regret and repentance for consecrating Bishop Gene Robinson as the Bishop of New Hampshire.

Back in 2003, the General Convention delegates voted to allow local churches and their bishops to offer "non-official" services for the blessing of same-sex marriages in the church. It also agreed that Gene Robinson, a man living in a sexual relationship outside of marriage (that is in a long-term committed same-sex relationship) could be a bishop of the church. While both of these issues seem to center on sexuality, they are also matters of authority.

Do the delegates to a General Convention in this country have the authority:

- ▶ to overturn decisions made in agreement with the rest of the church?
- ▶ to change traditional understandings of the Bible?
- ▶ to set a new course for American churches without affecting the rest of the Anglican churches worldwide?

Here's one insider's comments on the situation. Bishop N. T. Wright of Durham, England, is a prolific author of books in which he often appears in friendly debate with the scholars of the Jesus Seminar. He also served on a number of the groups that have been working to review actions taken by the American General Convention. He served on the group that wrote the Windsor Report, giving him a unique insight to reflect on how the American Church is responding to its requests.

The Choice Before ECUSA

**By the Bishop of Durham, Dr. N. T. Wright
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Introduction

Having tried to keep up with this over the last few weeks, I have reached the conclusion that the crucial issues are comparatively simple, and that attention must not be diverted from them by the plethora of sub-questions which will no doubt run this way and that in General Convention. What follows is in the spirit of what I said at the English House of Bishops nine days ago: What follows now emerges both from my own prayers for the Episcopal Church over the last years and months and, particularly, from my participation in the Lambeth Commission which produced the Windsor Report. I cannot stress too highly that this was a unanimous report produced by a Commission of widely differing views ... but all were agreed that these recommendations were the essential requirements if the church were to continue in full communion and fellowship with the rest of the Anglican Communion. I write not only as one of the authors of the Windsor Report but as one of those who discussed, prayed over and debated, phrase by phrase and line by line, the whole document, not least the specific recommendations. I then had the task of presenting the Report to the Church of England Synod in Feb. 2005, where it was endorsed by an overwhelming majority.

Issue

We cannot and must not forget (a) that the reason the Lambeth Commission was called into being was that the Primates (including the Presiding Bishop of the American Church which we shall refer to as ECUSA) had become convinced that if the consecration of Gene Robinson went ahead this 'would tear the fabric of the Communion at the deepest level'; (b) that the Commission was thus the chosen way of discovering how to mend a tear that had already happened, an emergency measure for a specific purpose rather than a general 'doctrine commission' charged with musing on possible futures, and that the Commission's recommendations were drafted with this specifically in mind; (c) that the Primates at Dromantine last spring, and ACC at Nottingham last summer (and, of course, the C of E General Synod in February 2005), specifically endorsed the Windsor Report and its recommendations, so that these very specific and particular recommendations now come before ECUSA with such weight as the whole Anglican Communion can muster. It is not, in other words, as though ECUSA has been asked to stand on stage and make a speech of its own choosing about some issues of general concern; it is, rather, that the rest of the Communion, having discovered in sorrow that one of its members has chosen to act specifically and knowingly against both the letter and the spirit of the instruments of communion which are the characteristically Anglican bonds that hold us together, has asked ECUSA to make certain statements which are the least that can be done that will restore the unity that has already been lost.

The American Report of the Special Commission

The Commission has produced a document which, in its opening, is solid and impressive. There are all kinds of signs of careful, prayerful and thoughtful work and drafting. But a careful reading of the opening section raises questions. It is surprising to see that in its account of the history of the current issue there is no mention of what the Primates said in October 2003 and hence of the fact that the consecration of Gene Robinson had gone ahead in full knowledge of the consequences. (One response to this, of course, will be that since General Convention had already endorsed the New Hampshire election this was unstoppable. This raises, for the rest of the Communion, two further matters: (a) that the Presiding Bishop led the consecration having just signed the Primates' report, and (b) that General Convention 2003 had already been told (by Archbishop Josiah of Kaduna) before endorsing the New Hampshire election, precisely what consequences would follow.) It is also surprising that, in its summary of Windsor sections, it makes no mention of the key interlocking themes of autonomy and subsidiarity, 'adiaphora' and – flowing from these – the all-important question of how the church can discern the difference, so to say, between those matters which make a difference and those matters which don't make a difference. Since this is the point upon which the current problems turn, it is worrying that they are not mentioned, still less discussed.

The Commission then rightly turns its attention to the key

questions, 'expressing regret and repentance'. This section is crucial as an introduction to the key recommendations. It does not, however, quote the next part of Windsor, but contents itself – vitally, as will emerge in a moment – with a summary in terms of 'a statement of regret for breaching the bonds of affection' and 'moratoria on particular actions'. It notes that 'statements of regret have been made by the House of Bishops and the Executive Council', though without noting that these have not been the 'statements of regret' asked for by Windsor, but rather statements of regret that some people were hurt by ECUSA's actions, and a statement (from the House of Bishops in March) of regret for breaching the bonds of affection 'by any failure to consult adequately with our Anglican partners before taking those actions', which as we shall presently see is clearly and specifically not what Windsor asked for. The section continues to speak in general terms of 'statements of regret' without quoting, or addressing, the specific statements asked for in Windsor. Instead, it says, 'We also believe that the General Convention's consideration of such expressions of regret and repentance will provide clear evidence of our desire to reaffirm the bonds of affection that unite us in the fellowship of the Anglican Communion.' This is a puzzling statement, whose implications become clear in the resolutions that follow. Certainly the fact that General Convention will consider expressions of regret and repentance will demonstrate that most in ECUSA want to remain within the Anglican Communion. But the important question is whether that desire will lead to the specific and particular expressions of regret and repentance asked for by Windsor, or whether ECUSA will try to attain the goal of staying within the Communion without travelling by the only route that will get there, namely that of the road mapped by Windsor ...

Once more, the key question seems to be avoided. It states, 'How, then, is the General Convention to express the rest of the Communion to catch up with what ECUSA has already decided to do'. In fact, it would be naïve not to read it in that way. That does not give great hope for what is to come.

The report then says, 'We acknowledge and regret that by action and inaction, we contributed to strains on communion and "caused deep offense to many faithful Anglican Christians" as we consented to the consecration of a bishop living openly in a same-gender union.' This quotes directly from Windsor, though it is not yet a statement of what Windsor asked for in response. The paragraph then goes on, 'Accordingly, we urge nominating committees, electing conventions, Standing Committees, and bishops with jurisdiction to exercise very considerable caution in the nomination, election, consent to, and consecration of bishops whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strain on communion, until a broader consensus in the Anglican Communion emerges'. A footnote to the report states that some members of the Commission had wanted to say 'refrain from' rather than 'exercise very considerable caution in'. Knowing how Commissions work (there is constant give and take about wording, but this doesn't normally show up in footnotes), the fact that this discussion resulted in an explicit statement of dissent indicates that some Commission members insisted on their minority view being expressed. It also shows that the

Commission knew very well that its main statement, resulting in the Resolution A161, was not complying with the specific thing that Windsor had asked for. (The Bishop of Exeter had also pointed this out when he spoke to the American House of Bishops just this year).

When it comes to public rites of blessing of same-sex unions, the Commission suggests that its previous resolution (2003—C051) has been misunderstood. That resolution recognized that 'local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions'; but the Commission denies that this means that such rites were 'authorized', since the only 'authorized rites' are those in the various prayer books. This then clears the hermeneutical space for paragraph 54 to recommend that no 'authorization' (in this rather narrow sense) of such liturgies should happen, which is then reflected in Resolution A162. From a Windsor perspective, this sounds like a straightforward attempt to have one's cake and eat it, using a narrow definition of 'authorized' (= 'printed in an official prayer book') to deny that local liturgies come into that category, while explicitly encouraging their development and use. See (17) below for the outworking of this, where it becomes clear, as noted in Windsor 144, that General Convention is seen as 'making provision' for, and individual diocesan bishops can then 'authorize', such blessings.

There are several other matters dealt with in the Report. Some of these raise interesting and important issues in their own right, not least the questions of the care of dissenting minorities and the problem of episcopal border-crossing. But for the sake of brevity we must turn at once to the proposed Resolutions, and specifically to those which appear to address the central concerns of the Windsor Report.

The Key Resolutions

The report quotes the preamble to Windsor but never quotes the recommendations themselves. The reason for this, sadly, becomes all too clear: the Commission clearly had the Windsor Report before it throughout, and decided to decline Windsor's request and to do something else instead, using some words and phrases which echo those of Windsor while not affirming the substance that was asked for. This, with real sadness, is my basic conclusion: that unless the relevant Resolutions are amended so that they clearly state what Windsor clearly requested, the rest of the Communion is bound to conclude that ECUSA has specifically chosen not to comply with Windsor.

Windsor 134 makes three recommendations. The first recommendation reads as follows: The Episcopal Church (USA) be invited to express its regret that the proper constraints of the bonds of affection were breached in the events surrounding the election and consecration of a bishop for the See of New Hampshire, and for the consequences which followed, and that such an expression of regret would represent the desire of the Episcopal Church (USA) to remain within the Communion. The Commission, in their 'explanation' of Resolution A160, says that this Resolution 'addresses the invitation of the Windsor

Report that "the Episcopal Church be invited to express regret" for breaching the proper constraints of the bonds of affection. It does not point out (and at this point, reading and re-reading what they wrote, I have to say with sadness that the word 'duplicity' comes unbidden to my mind) that while this Resolution does indeed address the invitation of the Windsor Report, what it basically says to this invitation is 'No, thank you.' Instead of expressing regret for breaching the bonds of affection in the events surrounding the election and consecration of Gene Robinson, the Resolution, following the alternative route already set out by the House of Bishops in March 2005, expresses regret 'for the pain that others have experienced with respect to our actions at the General Convention of 2003', and says that 'we offer our sincerest apology and repentance for having breached the bonds of affection in the Anglican Communion by any failure to consult adequately with our Anglican partners before taking these actions.' ... It has not even affirmed that there was fault in that respect, since the wording 'by any failure to consult' seems to mean 'we're not sure that there was anything wrong, but if there was, we apologise'. Thus the appearance of Windsor-compliance, and the powerful impact of 'apology and repentance', are, alas, only skin deep. To put it bluntly: Resolution A160 is not, as it stands, Windsor-compliant, and the Commission must have known that only too well. Granted that, the statement in the 'Explanation' that this Resolution is 'thus signalling our synodical intentions to remain within the Communion' must, sadly, be seen as essentially cynical. Windsor said that 'such an expression of regret' – i.e. the one that Windsor requested, not the one that the Resolution offers – 'would represent the desire of ECUSA to remain within the Communion.' The fact that the 'explanation' quotes this latter phrase demonstrates a desire, not apparently to comply with Windsor, but to give the appearance of doing so to those who glance at the text but do not look carefully at what is actually said.

The same is true, sadly, of the third recommendation of Windsor in relation to Resolution A161. Windsor recommended (and the Primates and ACC endorsed the recommendation) that 'the Episcopal Church (USA) be invited to effect a moratorium on the election and consent to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate who is living in a same gender union until some new consensus in the Anglican Communion emerges.' Instead of adopting the Windsor recommendation, Resolution A161 says 'we urge nominating committees, electing conventions, Standing Committees, and bishops with jurisdiction to exercise very considerable caution in the nomination, election, consent to, and consecration of bishops whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion.' At the risk of stating the obvious, this Resolution has done two things, both of which point away from Windsor: (a) it has only recommended 'very considerable caution', rather than a moratorium; (b) it has broadened the reference to persons in same-gender unions into a general statement about persons whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church – which, as various commentators have pointed out, and as the 'explanation' offered by the Commission itself indicates, could mean all sorts of things. Again, therefore, if Resolution A161 is passed without amendment, and still more if it is not even passed, it will be

impossible to draw any other conclusion but that ECUSA has chosen not to comply with the Windsor recommendations.

Further Matters and Resolutions

The meaning, intention and spirit of the Commission's report and the proposed Resolutions already discussed have to be seen in the light of other matters and resolutions. In particular, we note Resolution A167, whose second and third parts have been widely, and in my view rightly, seen as reaffirming previous ECUSA commitments to work in the opposite direction to the main thrust of Lambeth 1.10 (there is no controversy, I think, about the commitment of that resolution to the 'listening process'). These resolutions, sadly, provide the context within which the puzzles of the earlier resolutions (why don't they say what Windsor asked?) can be understood; in other words, they indicate that the reason why the Commission has not recommended actual compliance with Windsor's recommendations is because some Commission members at least believe that to comply would prevent ECUSA developing further the policies of which the consecration of Gene Robinson and the authorizing of same-sex blessings were symptoms. In other words, it is bound to look to the rest of the Communion as though these agendas, which were not of course the explicit subject of the Windsor Report, are driving ECUSA's attitude to questions of global ecclesiology.

Conclusion

It is very important not to let the plethora of material, in the official document and in all the various commentaries on it, detract attention from the central and quite simple question: Will ECUSA comply with the specific and detailed recommendations of Windsor, or will it not? As the Resolutions stand, only one answer is possible: if these are passed without amendment, ECUSA will have specifically, deliberately and knowingly decided not to comply with Windsor. Only if the crucial Resolutions, especially A160 and A161, are amended in line with Windsor, can there be any claim of compliance. Of course, even then, there are questions already raised about whether a decision of General Convention would be able to bind those parts of ECUSA that have already stated their determination to press ahead in the direction already taken. But the Anglican principle of taking people to be in reality what they profess to be, until there is clear evidence to the contrary, must be observed. If these resolutions are amended in line with Windsor, and passed, then the rest of the Communion will be in a position to express its gratitude and relief that ECUSA has complied with what was asked of it. Should that happen, I will be the first to stand up and cheer at such a result, and to speak out against those who are hoping fervently for ECUSA to resist Windsor so that they can justify their anti-ECUSA stance. But if the resolutions are not amended, then, with great sadness and with complete uncertainty about what way ahead might then be found, the rest of the Communion will have to conclude that, despite every opportunity, ECUSA has declined to comply with Windsor; has decided, in other words, to 'walk apart'. My hope and earnest prayer over the coming week will continue to be that that conclusion may be avoided. May God bless the Bishops and Delegates of ECUSA in their thinking and deciding.