

Reflections on the House of Bishops Meeting

The recent House of Bishops meeting in New Orleans is now completed. The much awaited [response](#) of the HOB to the Communiqué of the Primates, issued on Feb 19, 2007 at Dar es Salaam, has been made. From my perspective, the HOB meeting was extraordinary in the way in which it carried out its deliberations. It was frank, open, serious and cooperative. I found the deliberations around the “response” surprising and at times even encouraging. The response itself, however, is another matter.

A week before this meeting began, I was asked by a group of laity in one of our congregations what I expected from this meeting. My answer was a bit terse. I said that in light of the March meeting, I did not expect much. Then someone asked, “What would be the best outcome.” I answered, “Backing off the precipice – giving ourselves time to pray and talk and know each other better and look for what is best for the Church.”

If I did not expect much, it was because of the arrogant tone of the resolutions from the March meeting. Claims to a special “polity” or to our “autonomy” as The Episcopal Church obviously did not indicate a great potential for caring for and helping to heal our connections with the Anglican Communion.

I was surprised by the readiness of many colleagues, especially those with whom I have differed in the current crisis, to approach this meeting with a real concern for the unity of the Communion and a desire to take steps to assure our place within it. And there were a number of such moments.

I had to leave the meeting in the afternoon before any vote was taken, in order to catch my plane. I left somewhat encouraged. Then came the conclusion and the final response.

Will the response be sufficient for the Primates? That judgment will be made by the instruments of unity themselves, and especially the Primates. But here I want to give you my own assessment and the reasons for it.

What did the Primates ask, specifically?

In their [Communiqué](#) of February, the Primates wrote:

In particular, the Primates request, through the Presiding Bishop, that the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church

1. make an unequivocal common covenant that the bishops will not authorise any Rite of Blessing for same-sex unions in their dioceses or through General Convention (cf TWR, §143, 144); and
2. confirm that the passing of Resolution B033 of the 75th General Convention means that a candidate for episcopal orders living in a same-sex union shall not receive the necessary consent (cf TWR, §134); **unless** some new consensus on these matters emerges across the Communion (cf TWR, §134).

The Primates had noted earlier in the Communiqué that there had been a “lack of clarity” in the responses of the 75th General Convention. They addressed the House of Bishops as colleagues who could give assurances as to how to interpret these actions. The Primates well understood that the bishops were not the sole or even primary authorities who spoke for The Episcopal Church. And yet, since the resolutions of the General Convention in question addressed specific responsibilities belonging to bishops, it seemed natural and appropriate to ask the bishops to make the requested clarifications.

What did our bishops say?

The final response of the House of Bishops takes the form of a document with a summary up front followed by paragraphs addressing and amplifying the summary items. This form was agreed to early in the informal discussions of the response. It will be helpful to understand the process that resulted in the “summary” and “discussion.”

The Windsor Bishops meeting at Camp Allen in August had prepared a set of resolutions to be presented to the House of Bishops. These resolutions were indeed made available to the bishops. Three bishops, Jenkins of Louisiana, Bruno of Los Angeles, and Chane of Washington, took these resolutions and reworked them. This reworked set was also presented to the House.

Quite apart from these two documents, the House itself had a Committee for the drafting of the response, and it independently came up with a rather long narrative document, which was read out to the House.

Once all three documents had been seen or heard, discussion ensued. Almost immediately bishops took positions with regard to the JBC (Jenkins-Bruno-Chane) document *or* the Committee document.

In due course, the JBC document seemed to be the favored basis for a future statement, and the Committee was encouraged to find a way to bring the documents, i.e., JBC and their own, together. The Presiding Bishop herself reiterated 8 points that arose with consistency during the discussions, and these were taken by the Committee as the “summary” around which to build the next draft.

On B033 – Consents to Consecrations

The bullet for [B033](#) says:

- We reconfirm that resolution B033 of General Convention 2006 (The Election Of Bishops) calls upon bishops with jurisdiction and Standing Committees "to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion."

The “discussion” section relating to this bullet goes on to say:

The House of Bishops concurs with Resolution EC011 of the Executive Council. This Resolution commends the Report of the Communion Sub-Group of the Joint Standing Committee of the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates of the Anglican Communion as an accurate evaluation of Resolution B033 of the 2006 General Convention, calling upon bishops with

jurisdiction and Standing Committees "to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion." [1] The House acknowledges that non-celibate gay and lesbian persons are included among those to whom B033 pertains.

Does this response give the "unequivocal" assurance sought by the Primates?

With this question in mind, it may be helpful to see how the drafting on this first bullet progressed: (I use the following abbreviations:

- WINDSOR BPS = the resolutions drafted by the Windsor Bishops at Camp Allen in August;
- JBC = the reworked presentation made by Bps Jenkins, Bruno and Chane;
- COMMITTEE = the first draft presented by the Writing Committee of the House of Bishops;
- DRAFT 1 = The reworked draft amalgamating JBC and the COMMITTEE document;
- DRAFT 2 = The final form of the document accepted by the House after debate.)

| WINDSOR BPS | JBC | COMMITTEE | DRAFT 1 | DRAFT 2 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The House of Bishops, noting that the Executive Council in their resolution EC011 accepted the report of the Communion Sub-Group of the Joint Standing Committee of the Primates Meeting and the Anglican Consultative Council as a helpful evaluation of the 75 th General Convention's response to the Windsor Report, concur with the conclusion of that report, that the passing of B033 of the 75 th General Convention means that a candidate for Episcopal orders living in a sexual relationship outside of Christian marriage shall not receive the necessary consents, unless some new consensus emerges on these matters across the Communion." | The House of Bishops concurs with resolution EC011 of the Executive Council, which commends the Report of the Communion Sub-Group of the Joint Standing Committee of the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates of the Anglican Communion to this House as an accurate evaluation that Resolution B033 of the 75 th General Convention meets the requests of the Windsor Report on the matter of the election of bishops, and further that the bishops of the Episcopal Church understand themselves to be bound by Resolution of General Convention 'to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on our communion.' | We have attempted to respond to the Primates' questions regarding Resolution B033. In honesty we must report that within the House of Bishops there is disagreement as to how this resolution is to be interpreted and applied. As we live with this painful reality, conversation, study and prayer will continue. We recognize the challenge our disagreement presents for some in the Communion, and we respectfully ask for their patience and forbearance. | We reconfirm that resolution B033 (The Election of Bishops) calls upon bishops with jurisdiction "to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on our communion. ... The House of Bishops concurs with Resolution EC011 of the Executive Council. This Resolution commends the Report of the Communion Sub-Group of the Joint Standing Committee of the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates of the Anglican Communion as an accurate evaluation of Resolution B33, calling upon bishops with jurisdiction "to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on our communion.' A majority of us concur that non-celibate gay and lesbian persons are included among those for whom consent might be withheld. | We reconfirm that resolution B033 of General Convention 2006 (The Election Of Bishops) calls upon bishops with jurisdiction and Standing Committees "to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion." ... The House of Bishops concurs with Resolution EC011 of the Executive Council. This Resolution commends the Report of the Communion Sub-Group of the Joint Standing Committee of the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates of the Anglican Communion as an accurate evaluation of Resolution B033 of the 2006 General Convention, calling upon bishops with jurisdiction and Standing Committees "to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion." [1] The House acknowledges that non-celibate gay and lesbian persons are included among those to whom B033 pertains. |

The Windsor Bishops resolution interprets B033 to mean that candidates living outside of Christian marriage "shall not receive the necessary consents." The JBC document interprets the action of the General Convention to mean that "the bishops of The Episcopal Church understand themselves to be bound by Resolution of the General Convention." The first Committee effort claims that "in honesty" the bishops understand the demands of the resolution B033 very differently. There was considerable

discussion over whether resolutions of Convention were binding or not. It was pointed out that if, in fact, a majority understood B033 to be binding, then this question could be answered in the affirmative (at least with respect to this specific resolution). Such a clear answer was urged by many on all sides as the only appropriate response to the Primates' request. This discussion was one of the most surprising turns in the whole House of Bishops meeting as far as I was concerned.

The two last drafts back away from such clarity. Draft 1 does say "a majority of us concur that non-celibate gay and lesbian persons are included among those for whom consent might be withheld." But that is far from assuring anyone that the consents "will be" withheld. The adopted form (Draft 2) simply eliminates any assurance at all. It amounts to simply repeating what the original resolution (B033) said – and that the Primates found to lack clarity.

(The final draft also includes "Standing Committees". The suggestion was that this would help inform our Communion partners about our specific polity. This point seems gratuitous, however, since what Standing Committees might or might not do was never a concern to the Primates.)

About Blessing Rites

The bullet dealing with the blessing of same-sex unions says:

- We pledge as a body not to authorize public rites for the blessing of same-sex unions.

The "discussion" goes on:

We, the members of the House of Bishops, pledge not to authorize for use in our dioceses any public rites of blessing of same-sex unions until a broader consensus emerges in the Communion, or until General Convention takes further action. In the near future we hope to be able to draw upon the benefits of the Communion-wide listening process. In the meantime, it is important to note that no rite of blessing for persons living in same-sex unions has been adopted or approved by our General Convention. In addition to not having authorized liturgies the majority of bishops do not make allowance for the blessing of same-sex unions. We do note that in May 2003 the Primates said we have a pastoral duty "to respond with love and understanding to people of all sexual orientations." They further stated, "...[I]t is necessary to maintain a breadth of private response to situations of individual pastoral care."

Again, let us look at the development of these responses:

| WINDSOR BPS | JBC | COMMITTEE | DRAFT 1 | DRAFT 2 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| RESOLVED, The House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, mindful that it is the duty of a Bishop to order the public liturgy of the church in his or her diocese, undertakes and covenants not to authorize or permit any public Rite of Blessing for same-sex unions in our dioceses or General Convention . . . | Resolved, we, the members of the House of Bishops pledge neither to develop nor authorize for use any Public Rites for the blessing of same-sex unions while we await the completion of the full Communion-wide examination of the issue of same-sex relationships through the "listening process: recommended at the Lambeth Conference of 1998 and endorsed in Paragraphs 135m 14-46 (sic) of the Windsor Report. We note the words of the Primates in May 2003 when they wrote, "it is through liturgy that we express what we believe, and that there is | Because we are a liturgical church our actions concerning blessings are expressed in public liturgies. No rite of blessing for persons living in same-sex unions has been adopted or approved by our General Convention. We wish to make it clear that the House of Bishops has not voted to authorize such liturgies. Even in the absence of such public rites, we acknowledge that the blessing of same-sex unions, no matter how public or private, is unacceptable to some of our brothers and sisters in our own House, in our church and the communion. | We pledge as a body not to authorize public rites for the blessing of same-sex unions." ... We the members of the House of Bishops, pledge not to authorize for use in our dioceses ay public rites of blessing of same-sex unions at least until General Convention 2009. At that time we will be better able to evaluate the results of the Communion-wide listening process. In the meantime, it is important to note that no rite of blessing for persons living in same-sex unions has been adopted or approved by our | We pledge as a body not to authorize public rites for the blessing of same-sex unions. ... We, the members of the House of Bishops, pledge not to authorize for use in our dioceses any public rites of blessing of same-sex unions until a broader consensus emerges in the Communion, or until General Convention takes further action. In the near future we hope to be able to draw upon the benefits of the Communion-wide listening process. In the meantime, it is important to note that no rite of blessing for persons |

| | | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | <p>no theological consensus about same sex unions. Therefore, we as a body cannot support the authorisation of such rites. This is distinct from the duty of pastoral care that is laid upon all Christians to respond with love and understanding to people of all sexual orientations. . . . [I]t is necessary to maintain a breadth of private response to situations of individual pastoral care"; we further note that General Convention has not authorized the blessing of same-sex unions and dioceses who have previously allowed such rites have ceased doing so.</p> | <p>... The Primates have written that there must be a breadth of private pastoral responses to individual situations. It is the case that for many decades, the Episcopal Church has explored the most faithful ways of ministering to and with gay and lesbian people who are part of our common life. We acknowledge that in some of our dioceses this includes the blessing of same sex unions."</p> | <p>General Convention, nor has the House of Bishops voted to authorize such liturgies. As the Primates have said, we have a pastoral duty to "respond with love and understanding to people of all sexual orientations." We acknowledge that in some dioceses a pastoral response includes the blessing of same-sex unions.</p> | <p>living in same-sex unions has been adopted or approved by our General Convention. In addition to not having authorized liturgies the majority of bishops do not make allowance for the blessing of same-sex unions. We do note that in May 2003 the Primates said we have a pastoral duty "to respond with love and understanding to people of all sexual orientations." They further stated, "...[I]t is necessary to maintain a breadth of private response to situations of individual pastoral care."</p> |
|--|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

In the Windsor Bishops resolution, the House together "undertakes and covenants not to authorize or permit" such blessing rites. In the JBC document bishops "pledge neither to develop or authorize" such rites. These differ in exact wording. Are they roughly equivalent? Not really. "Permit" in the Windsor Bishops resolution closes a loophole which a number of bishops were willing to march through following the 2003 Convention resolution, C051, by the use of the word "recognize". ([Journal of the General Convention](#), p.615)

Interestingly, the JBC document cites an important distinction made by the Primates in 2003 between "blessings" and "pastoral care" – a distinction that gets blurred in the drafts that follow. Note, too, the final declaration that seemed to go well beyond even the specific request.

By comparison, the Committee's first effort simply drew attention to the fact that neither the General Convention nor the House of Bishops had authorized liturgies of blessing.

On this latter point, the Communiqué from the Primates had been quite clear:

We recognise that the General Convention made no explicit resolution about such Rites and in fact declined to pursue resolutions which, if passed, could have led to the development and authorisation of them. However, we understand that local pastoral provision is made in some places for such blessings. (Para. 21)

It is the recognition of this state of affairs that prompted them to seek clarification in the first place: "It is the ambiguous stance of The Episcopal Church which causes concern among us." (*Ibid.*) The Committee's first effort seemed to miss this point altogether.

The Committee also paraphrased the Primates concerning a "breadth" of pastoral care.

When Draft 1 was presented, it was immediately recognized by many on both sides of the issue that no assurance was being given. Indeed, it was pointed out that the last sentence constituted a "red flag" – making a point that seemed to contradict what assurance one could read into the statements above it. Furthermore, it appeared to many that the quotation from the Primates was leading into the conclusion that such blessing rites as were in use were therefore justified – a conclusion which the Primates Communiqué does not bear! Considerable discussion took place on how to rectify this matter, with a majority opting to eliminate the sentence altogether.

Draft 2 does in fact eliminate the sentence. But does it give any additional clarity on this matter? The final resolution seems once again to restate the obvious, that no liturgies have been approved. It adds

only that the majority of bishops in The Episcopal Church “do not make allowance for the blessing of same-sex unions.” And again, the resolution quotes from the Primates with respect to the need to provide “pastoral care.” The net effect, it would appear, is to suggest that the Primates themselves are unclear.

This final form of the second “response” is unsettling in that it falls short of the clarity requested.

Conclusion

I am grateful for the tone of this meeting and for many aspects of the process and the contributions many bishops from very different perspectives made to it. I wish that such openness and frankness, and serious discussion, had characterized earlier meetings. (And here I refer to 15 years of such meetings!)

But the final result, I must confess, is disappointing to me. I do not believe the answers requested by the Primates have been given. I do not believe we have moved very far – if at all – from where we were before this meeting in terms of the assurances sought. I certainly think that internally, the House of Bishops changed its dynamics in a number of ways that are welcome. But for all that, we still seem, as one bishop has said, “stuck.”

It seems that, even with the best of intentions, we simply cannot get beyond the thought that we might learn from what the Archbishop of Canterbury called “common discernment;” in other words, that our decisions as a House might be wrong and at any rate ought to be subject to the advice and concerns of our Communion brothers and sisters. Many bishops argued for ambiguity as the most “honest” statement of “where we are.” Perhaps that is true. That is the effectual outcome of this meeting.

But “where we are” is “walking apart.” True, but so terribly sad.

Thank you all for your prayers for me and the other bishops as we met. Thank you for your faithfulness to the Gospel. God bless you all as we head toward our own Diocesan Convention.

+James