



The Incorporated Synod
of the Diocese of Toronto

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Dear Friends,

I write to you as I return from a significant meeting of the General Synod in Winnipeg. Much has been written and spoken about this in both the religious and secular media, some of it accurate, some not. Hopes had been built up prior to Synod that there would be a final resolution of the contentious matters before us. That was not realistic given the lack of consensus and the breadth of opinion and belief on the subject of same-sex unions. There are people who are very hurt by the decisions, on both sides of the debate. Many are confused. I write this lengthy letter to set this in some context.

Twenty-five of us represented the Diocese of Toronto; in addition, two clerics representing the Religious Orders in Canada, are clergy of this diocese. The voting patterns of the members from Toronto show that we represent the various voices and interests that we have always honoured as an essential part of our diverse diocesan family. Surprising to some, the Toronto members almost never vote as a block, and this was evident on all the most contentious issues in debate at this Synod. I believe this is healthy and good.

What was decided at Synod? Let me put the motions on the same-sex unions in the wider perspective of what else happened at General Synod.

First, the members of General Synod elected and installed a new Primate of All Canada, the Most Reverend Fred Hiltz, until now the Bishop of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. He is a most welcome addition to a list of distinguished archbishops who have served our Church with faithful generosity since the General Synod was created 1893. He and his wife, Lynne Samways, will be moving to Toronto to take up this ministry in September. Please pray for them.

We also approved funding of the Council of the North - our dioceses in northern and western Canada - at current levels, and endorsed additional fundraising opportunities to bolster support for the Church's mission in these economically poor and sparsely populated regions. Coordination and funding of these ministries was one of the founding purposes of General Synod. It was good to reclaim this: real people engaged in real ministry.

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We spent a day with our full communion partners, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, who also elected a new National Bishop, the Reverend Susan Johnson. We have welcomed Susan to our diocesan Synods several times over the past few years. The Lutheran Church, too, was dealing with blessings of same-sex unions and narrowly defeated a motion for local option, on a secret ballot.

International partners, including the Archbishop of York who is Primate of England, bishops from Burundi and Tanzania and The Episcopal Church, and a number of international and local ecumenical partners, spoke and worshiped with us.

Canon Robert Falby, our diocesan chancellor, was elected as deputy prolocutor, one of the senior officers of General Synod. He, Suzanne Lawson and I will be serving on the executive body, the Council of General Synod, for the next three years.

Blessing of same-sex unions has become a focus of disagreement among churches of many denominations across the world. The Windsor Report was commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury to address not the issue of the doctrine of same-sex blessings but rather how we as Anglicans can remain in the highest degree of communion with one another in the face of disagreement on critical issues.

General Synod, after very lengthy, fully public and magnanimously civil debate, made several important decisions in connection with the blessing of same-sex unions.

It approved a response to the Windsor Report that outlined broad areas of agreement with the Report, affirmed our desire and commitment to remain as full, participating partners within the Anglican Communion, and noted a number of areas that we believe need further study, clarification or change.

We received the St. Michael Report of the Primate's Theological Task Force and accepted its conclusion that blessing of same-sex unions is a matter of doctrine but not core doctrine in the sense of creedal doctrine; and that it should not be considered to be a communion-breaking issue.

Building on that, Resolution A186 was passed with amendments that applied that statement of the St. Michael Report to the Canadian Church. It states "that this General Synod resolves that the blessing of same-sex unions is not in conflict with the core doctrine (in the sense of being creedal) of The Anglican Church of Canada."

We defeated Resolution A187 that would "affirm the authority and jurisdiction of any diocesan synod, with the concurrence of its bishop, to authorize the blessing of committed same-sex unions."

We adopted two other resolutions, one asking the Council of General Synod to begin a process to consider revisions to the Marriage Canon for initial consideration at General Synod in 2010. This will put the theological and pastoral discussion of same-sex unions in relation to marriage, the place it now holds in our civil society. This passed without debate.

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The final resolution requests the Primate's Theological Commission to undertake the reflection on the scripture, tradition, reason and current scientific understanding that both the Windsor Report and the St. Michael Report asked for, and to develop a process for dialogue within parishes and dioceses. We affirmed the House of Bishops' pastoral guidelines and asked for "the most generous application possible within the existing teaching of the church to gays, lesbians and their families."

I want to say how proud I am to be a Canadian Anglican. The tone of the discussion at this Synod was much different from the Synod three years before. Members were quiet, attentive, respectful and courteous, even if some spoke more often than they ought. It was obvious to me that there was a real effort to discern the Spirit's call to us at this time. There were moments of confusion and times of clarity. It was evident that Anglicans in different parts of the country and in different cultural situations are in very different places. There was great resistance to close prematurely the ambiguities present.

Interestingly, Toronto is a microcosm of that. I voted in favour of Resolution A187. Our Toronto delegation voted as they believed the Spirit led them: 6-3 laity in favour; 5-3 clergy in favour; 4-1 bishops in favour. That range pretty well mirrors the diocesan climate, I think. The diversity present in Toronto was well and freely represented, which I believe is a sign of health in our diocese. It also embodies in real experience what Resolution 186 says: you can have divergent opinions on this subject without impairing communion. All of us like, respect and work with each other; all participated at the same tables, shared meals and laughter together; all worshipped together both before and after the votes. The same was true for all members of Synod. All bishops were present (except one who was being invested by the Governor General at Rideau Hall) and the church was packed with members of Synod of all stripes for the closing service of installing Archbishop Hiltz as the new Primate.

Whatever your views, I urge you to do the same. Do not act with haste. Do not speak in haste. Pray for those who are hurt. Pray for those who think they have lost. Pray for those who think they have won. Pray for those who are confused. Continue to worship and work and study with your parish and with those who differ from you as well as those who hold your position.

If you have studied and discussed the issues beyond endurance, perhaps you can share your experience with those who have just started. Share your resources with the Anglican Communion Listening Process that the Archbishop of Canterbury has established at the request of the Anglican Consultative Council, the Primates and Lambeth Conference. We have committed ourselves to share our learnings and our experience with the wider church.

I need to say a word about our governance. Synod, both General Synod and ours, are bicameral or tri-cameral bodies. Resolutions must pass in all orders by a majority. You can't simply add up the totals of all orders because each has to have a say. It is true in elections, primatial and episcopal. On other matters and in other years, the clergy house did not concur in votes that bishops and laity were in favour of - and vice versa. Each order has its own particular perspective, rights and obligations. So the bishops don't simply agree with what the clergy or laity want; and let me tell you from experience, clergy and laity don't necessarily agree with bishops or each other!

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I also do not think that A186 and A187 required consistency of votes. It is possible to vote against A186 because you believe it is a matter of core doctrine and therefore you would also vote against A187 allowing a diocese the local option. Or you could vote in favour of A186 because you believe blessing unions is not a matter of core doctrine but against A187 because you believe dioceses do not have the right to make a decision that you think belongs to General Synod. Or you could vote against A186 because you do not believe that blessings of same sex unions are a matter of doctrine at all, and then vote in favour of A187 because you think, therefore, local option should apply and those who want to should be able to move ahead. You see just some of the permutations of motive that make a simple analysis of the vote difficult.

For me the key issue is this: same-sex blessings are not core doctrine and therefore a change in practice might be possible (if passed in all orders). General Synod was not prepared to delegate the authorization of blessings to diocesan synods at this time. No decision was made about which level should decide, although by declaring it a matter of doctrine (not core), dealing with matters of doctrine seems to rest at the General Synod level (which is why some who might be considered more “liberal” voted against A187).

The bishops have agreed (and all orders of General Synod have now concurred) that the most generous pastoral response possible within the existing teaching of the Church should be extended, as outlined in the Bishops' pastoral statement issued in April 2007, prior to General Synod. How that will be lived out will vary somewhat from place to place. Pastoral responses are meant to deal with specific situations and individual circumstances. There is now perhaps more flexibility than there might have been, but there are still some limits.

All of the Bishops in the Diocese of Toronto affirm the contribution of gays and lesbians, both lay and ordained, to the life and ministry of the Church and to the witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You are welcome members of the Church.

The statement which the House of Bishops issued in April 2007, and which General Synod has affirmed says, “We are committed, as bishops in Canada, to develop the most generous pastoral response possible within the current teaching of the church.”

Let me repeat what I wrote to you in April to clarify the application of the statement in the Diocese of Toronto. It is important that this be heard and understood:

No child will be denied baptism in this diocese because of the parents' sexual orientation or marital status. No baptized Christian will be denied communion or confirmation because of being in a committed homosexual relationship or because of his or her marital status.

Among the House of Bishops' suggested pastoral responses is that a civilly-married gay or lesbian couple may celebrate a eucharist (with the bishop's permission) that includes appropriate intercessory prayers, but not a nuptial blessing.

The bishops also expressed an intention to continue to recognize and affirm the ministry of licensed gay and lesbian clergy, and acknowledge the pain and conflict they experience.

They say that while the pastoral responses contained in the statement will “have gone too far” for some, it will be “inadequate or insufficient” to others. “We recognize that they are less than the blessing of same-sex unions or marriage. However, it is the discernment of the majority of the House of Bishops that as of today the doctrine and discipline of our church does not clearly permit further action...”

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You will have heard in this letter that much was accomplished at General Synod to further the mission and ministry of this Church. There is much to digest. As we move into the summer months, I find that my thoughts are shifting to family and the things I enjoy most. For me, summer is a time to explore, to revisit, and to reconnect. It is a time to value God's gifts to us of sunshine and the abundance of nature. This summer will also be a time to sit with the decisions we have made together so that we may continue this journey, refreshed and restored.

May God richly bless you all.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and the name 'Colin', followed by a long horizontal line.

The Rt. Rev. Colin R. Johnson
Bishop of Toronto

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