



FROM THE BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE OF CENTRAL FLORIDA A STATEMENT ON THE 2016 PRIMATES MEETING

Few would have anticipated that at the most recent gathering of the Primates (the 38 senior bishops of the global Anglican Communion) at Canterbury the results would look like this: words marked by clarity, unity, and vision. Eucharist was celebrated, feet were washed, hard and honest conversations were held and all was bathed in concerted intercessory prayers.

What were the results:

1. *A profound commitment on the part of the Primates to walk together.* Ap Welby reported at the press conference: “The vote to walk together was unanimous. It is not for us to divide the Body of Christ.”
2. *An affirmation of the Biblical doctrine of marriage.*
3. *Negative consequences for those branches of the Communion who choose not to walk together.* Much has been made in the press of the “sanctions” (to quote the press) against The Episcopal Church. At the press conference Ap Welby was at pains to refute the word “sanctions” (“that word was never used”), but did say that while each branch of the Communion is autonomous, “we’re interdependent and if you simply ignore that, there will be consequences in how you relate to other members of the Communion.”
4. *“Consequences” came as a result of the Episcopal Church* for changing the Biblical doctrine of marriage, an action that was seen as a “unilateral action” taken by The Episcopal Church that threatens the unity of the Communion.
5. *Those consequences, which received the overwhelming majority of votes by the Primates, are as follows:* “It is our unanimous desire to walk together. However given the seriousness of these matters we formally acknowledge this distance by requiring that for a period of three years The Episcopal Church no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee and that while participating in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, they will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity.”
6. *The Primates condemned the criminalization of gay relationships.*
7. *The Primates affirmed the centrality of evangelism,* “inviting all to receive the beauty and joy of the Gospel.”

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8. *The Primates discussed the problems of tribalism and corruption in parts of the Communion, as well as the challenge of refugees.*
9. *The Primates affirmed a meeting of all the bishops at Lambeth 2020.*
10. *The Primates cordially welcomed Foley Beach, Archbishop of the ACNA as a participant in their conversations.* When Ap Welby was asked at the press conference if he would be invited back, he replied, "I don't know."
11. *The Primates discussed religious violence:* Ap Welby: "the primary fear for the majority of Anglican communities is the violence that confronts them and their families daily."
12. *An ecumenical and permanent date for Easter* is under discussion with Roman Catholics and the Orthodox.

MY TAKE:

It is inevitable that an international organization that calls itself a "Communion" (held together by faith, polity, and "bonds of affection") would react when one of its members operates "unilaterally" and ignores the unifying faith and polity of the organization. The surprise is that such action was so decisive. We are used to a Communion that "muddles through," and sometimes that is the wisest course of action, trusting that over time God will sort out the inconsistencies. But we have an Archbishop of Canterbury who, among other positive attributes, is a man of action; someone who is acting in ways that bear out his commitments to hold together the tensions between Biblical faithfulness and a coherent church unity.

It is important to note that a clear precedent has been set by the "consequences" imposed on The Episcopal Church. The Primates communiqué makes clear that the actions of The Episcopal Church "on a matter of doctrine" were "unilateral" and "a departure from mutual accountability and interdependence." One could infer that if other parts of the Communion acted "unilaterally" on a matter of doctrine in ways that departed from "mutual accountability and interdependence" then there could also be some sort of consequences.

The Primates also asked Ap Welby to appoint a Task Group to "maintain the conversation among ourselves with the intention of restoration of relationship" with The Episcopal Church. Given that the bishops whom I know that support gay marriage do so out of clear theological convictions, it is hard to see how some sort of change in The Episcopal Church's marriage canon is likely. That said, and though I disagree with Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's position on gay marriage, I cannot help but admire and commend his generosity, kindness, and humility.

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Clearly, there are far reaching consequences to the Primates' decision that have yet to be played out. The message coming out of this communiqué was that each branch of the Communion cannot choose to exist on its own terms and disregard the impact it may have on the rest of the Communion. We are interrelated and global. Much of the conversation around our divisions reflected a growing sense of a new balance of power between various branches of the Communion. This is a good thing. There have been times when the new landscape of post-colonial Anglicanism has been treated with disdain by the West. Sometimes the public comments by Western bishops about bishops in the Global South has been condescending and, occasionally, racist. The Global South does not need to "catch up" with our Western cultural values. Instead, we need to find ways to learn from each other and together seek the mind of Christ who transcends and judges all of our cultures.

While there was hope among the GAFCON Primates that recommendations be made for the ACNA to be formally recognized as a part of the Anglican Communion, that did not happen. It is significant that Ap Foley Beach was invited and seated, but no ongoing formal relationship was established. An application could have been made to the Anglican Consultative Council asking that the ACNA receive formal recognition but the communiqué acknowledges almost cryptically that such an application "would raise significant questions of polity and jurisdiction." It should be noted that Ap Beach's communication about his role at the Primates meeting (in contrast to some bloggers) has been marked by grace and restraint.

Given these divisions, it is remarkable (and an answer to much prayer) that the notes of humility, mutual servanthood, and unity marked this meeting of these Primates. I am also heartened that this meeting was not entirely given over to dealing with divisions: the commitment to unity became the ground out of which important talks about evangelism, religious violence, and other urgent matters were given their rightful place. This meeting of the Primates is a clear signal that global Anglicanism has a significant future, and I find that deeply encouraging.