

**DIOCESE OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA
RESPONSE TO**

“Communion Matters: A Study Document for the Episcopal Church”

1. What are some of the gifts of being a part of the Anglican Communion, which you highlighted?

Most of us who participated feel strongly that belonging to the Anglican Communion provides us with a vital sense of being a part of something larger than ourselves, more truly a part of the Church universal, and less limited in our discernment and faithful response by our particular immediate context. We believe that being a part of the Anglican Communion can be a great aid to our becoming what we are--the Body of Christ.

Almost all respondents feel a deep personal appreciation of the Anglican Communion, which has been strengthened by experiences of worship, ministry, and mission in dioceses and congregations around the world, and in the personal relationships that have been formed by those experiences. (Sadly, some have had recent experiences of exclusion--and even hostility--in certain provinces of the Communion, simply for being associated with the Episcopal Church, and are grieving a loss of communion.) Many feel a sense of ownership of the rich and varied practices that are expressive of the many cultures in this Communion, and celebrate that diversity.

Pragmatically, being part of the Anglican Communion has been important to us in terms of global recognition of Holy Orders, reciprocity of ministry, mission collaboration, ecumenical standing, and practical assistance.

Noting that there is considerable suffering on both sides of the issues now dividing us, one priest credited our being part of the Anglican Communion as contributing significantly to the (essential and urgently necessary) ability “to openly acknowledge the presence of each other, to recognize that differences exist, and then to allow ourselves to be changed by the presence of the other in our midst.”

A lay leader expressed great appreciation of the Anglican Communion, but added: “On a strictly personal level, of what value is it to me to remain in communion with a group which includes a bishop whose diocesan canon law threatens expulsion for anyone seen in public with a gay person—with my own daughter?”

2. What did you hear about what the via media and “comprehension for the sake of truth” might mean for us in today’s context?

There is widespread agreement that this is indeed a charism bestowed upon us by the Holy Spirit, and, as such, something to be both carefully nurtured and protected, and also boldly utilized. Many told stories of being initially attracted to the Episcopal Church by this very charism.

Many also expressed great concern about a perceived pull towards becoming a confessional church.

Some feel that what passes for comprehension today really masks an unwillingness to obey clear dictates of Scripture.

One senior priest stated that for this charism to be effective in our midst, we must do the hard work of discerning the difference between “absolute essentials and the variables which won’t necessarily work for all the churches.” He added that “we really have no other choice but to stay at the Table with each other in the presence of Christ. Our differences will not go away. By God’s mercy the Via Media and the Church will continue to stand. The alternative option is utter diminishment for all of us, and I do not believe that to be God’s will....”

3. Were there any opinions about best ways for the Anglican Communion to consult about important matters without a centralization of authority that has not been our tradition over the years?

Most respondents are very concerned about a perceived drift towards centralization of authority in the Communion. Several former Roman Catholics expressed particular discomfort. In general, though willing to accept some form of the proposed Covenant, most people seemed to feel that the familiar arrangement—being held together by bonds of affection—was and should still be sufficient. Does our current crisis really warrant structural change? Not if we make the best use of what we already have.

Many responded with variations on a general theme: “Surely there were differences before—why can’t we live with them like we used to? Must we have conformity to have unity? Must there be structural changes? How would centralization help create sufficient space so as to enable the members of the Communion to more fully embrace one another—if they’re not already inclined to do so?”

A few feel that nothing short of total acceptance of the draft Covenant and of the Primates' Communiqué can assure a basis for consultation on important matters.

Some respondents feel that we can better utilize existing bodies/gatherings/etc., becoming more intentional about building relationships of trust. The recent gathering in Spain of American and African bishops, sponsored by Trinity Church, Wall Street, was pointed to as something very hopeful. Many said that we need to find ways to concentrate more on mission, and less on issues.

Many also observed that our current crisis is intensified to a large extent by cultural and political factors, and being driven by persons with little regard for the Episcopal Church, and thought that the Church needed help to clarify its situation. Most were willing to admit that we have not yet learned to listen well to one another in a non-judgmental way. A few persons see the need for some new vehicle helping us to do that, but aren't sure what that might be.

4. Were there observations about how, in the midst of sharply differing views in the church, we can live in “mutual forbearance long enough for the church to discern God's will?”

Some respondents expressed concern that any delay in resolving the current crisis looks like avoidance of something difficult but inevitable. Some also pointed out that a system will always tend to resist change, and wondered if the appeal to forbearance masks collusion in a pull to (unjust) stasis.

Several expressed concern that “we are being asked to be tolerant of intolerance.”

Many persons observed that there seem to be quite a few among us who are so certain of God's will that they are unwilling to engage in any further dialogue, and that the Listening Process has not really been given a chance.

One priest indicated that he would “no longer personally engage in dialogue on any matter about which the Scripture is clear.”

Several persons stated that at the root of the issues facing us are problems of biblical authority and interpretation.

A seminarian quoted Archbishop Harper: “Bibliolatry is a boulder threatening to obscure the dynamic and contemporary truth of the resurrection.”

Some sought to remind us to maintain perspective: “The different ways of seeing human sexuality are often based on generational lines. The matter is complicated by the fact that

the generational lines in one culture do not necessarily match the ones in another. It is unfortunate that some groups will most likely never be able to come to agreement on certain issues. While this fact may result in friction, it need not lead to open hostility or obsequious compromise.”

A few persons recalled Archbishop Rowan Williams’ appeal to us to manifest “radical patience” in these circumstances. Others invited us to trust in God, to keep making room for the other, not to hope for structural solutions, but to be about the work of on-going conversion, growth in holiness, and to seek more true humility. Some recalled the Windsor Report’s charge to us to commit ourselves to do everything we can to strengthen the bonds of communion at every level of our life together.

Several respondents made the point that we need to acknowledge that suffering exists on both sides of the issue. One very respected younger priest quoted Miroslav Volf in this regard: “the equality and reciprocity that are at the heart of embrace can be reached only through self-sacrifice...modeled on Christ’s self-sacrifice, which is nothing but the mutuality of Trinitarian self-giving in encounter with the enemy.”

5. What insights or suggestions came forth about the response of the House of Bishops to the request of the Primate’s Meeting?

Most respondents enthusiastically affirmed the work of the House of Bishops in its March gathering, and hoped that there would be no reconsideration; some felt exactly the opposite. Many also are looking to the House of Bishops to protect the “autonomy” of the Episcopal Church.

Several persons said that the Communiqué feels “belittling” to the Episcopal Church, and called for resistance to what seems a sudden assumption of unwarranted power by the Primate; some felt that power was being legitimately appropriated by those who would save us from ourselves. Many were glad to have the Pastoral Scheme off the table, and expressed support for the Presiding Bishop as she explores alternatives that don’t undermine her authority; others expressed regret at this action. Most feel that, while the House of Bishops might properly reflect, clarify, comment, frame (and re-frame) questions and offer guidance to the Church in this situation, the specific concerns of the Primate’s Communiqué ought to be addressed by both Houses in General Convention; some feel that it is for the House of Bishops alone to decide, and that the decision is long overdue. (“There is no need for General Convention to respond on these issues, as only the bishops are addressed in this request.”)

In general, respondents expressed hope that the House of Bishops will move forward with the Covenant, but only if concerns addressed to Executive Council are addressed (and

always bearing in mind that if peoples' hearts aren't in this or any covenant, it will fall apart at the next big dispute anyway).

Some were emphatic in their appeals: to the extent that the Listening Process hasn't gone forward in a given Province, that Province is failing to honor Lambeth I.10 and the Windsor process. The same is held to be true if boundaries aren't being respected and province and diocesan integrity is violated; in light of this, please do not consider giving assurances to those who have demonstrated an unwillingness to keep theirs. Also, remember that Communion is ultimately about gathering at the Table. To refuse Holy Communion with our Presiding Bishop is to take oneself out of communion with us. Please do nothing to appease such persons. ("To propose that Episcopalians 'sacrifice' members of their body hoping for acceptance by the wider communion would be a denial of our baptismal covenant with God.")

Others were equally emphatic in a different direction: those same persons described above as problematic in fact represent the best hope for the Episcopal Church, which has strayed from the truth. "As much as we abhor offending those unwilling to live by the disciplines required of Christians, we cannot relinquish our beliefs for the sake of 'keeping the peace' with those who stubbornly refuse to fully accept those beliefs." "Same-sex marriage endorsement...would really shatter our churches."

Many, in one way or another, said that it is important to remember that we are committed to a process, and that that process requires time, patience, careful listening, and much prayer.

6. Other comments?

As requested, the comments above are basically a summary of all comments which have been directed to me in reply to my invitations to the entire diocese to respond to "Communion Matters." They do not represent an official position of the Diocese of Northern California. With more time and effort, a wider range of views might have been forthcoming; unfortunately, factors related to timing—a relatively short turn-around period, in the midst of summer—limited the occasions for discussion and the amount of active participation in those events. Even so, between formal and informal group conversations, and individual offerings via phone and e-mail, about one-third of our clergy contributed to this Response. (Regrettably, relatively few laity were heard from.)

Clearly there are deep divisions represented here. These responses came to me with many powerful emotions attached: anguish, anger, grief, impatience, and fear—but also confidence, love, trust, and hope. In every conversation, I observed a desire on very nearly everyone's part to hold all in baptismal regard, as part of a passionate concern to

stay together. I take that as direct evidence that the Holy Spirit is indeed working among us, and I expect that the Spirit will help us find our way.

Personally, I want to say that I greatly appreciate the work of the Theology Committee. May God guide you in the use of this most valuable material, and in all you do on behalf of the House of Bishops and the Church it exists to serve.

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