

**RESPONSE TO  
Communion Matters: A Study Document for the Episcopal Church**

Please summarize the insights gained from your diocesan conversations about Communion Matters and return to the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops, [hparsley@dioala.org](mailto:hparsley@dioala.org) or by mail at Diocese of Alabama, 521 North 20th Street, Birmingham, AL 35203.

We need to receive your response by September 4 please.

*In your diocesan conversations:*

**Introduction:** At the end of July on three successive evenings, the Diocese of Easton held “listening sessions” with the bishop in each of our three convocations. About eighty people attended each of these sessions. We divided into ten small groups, and folks responded to three questions, then reported back to the whole group. It would have been very helpful to have had these questions ahead of time. What follows is our distillation of responses to the questions we asked. Not all areas (especially your question 3) were addressed directly.

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

There was an almost unanimous response that we value our connection with the rest of the Anglican world through common worship. Being a part of the Anglican Communion makes us something larger than ourselves and broadens our perspective by being aware of different cultures. This is a healthy counterbalance to what can sometimes be seen as the arrogance of the United States. Another gift is that we are enabled to contribute to global mission work.

**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 was discussion about the fact that we have always had differences within the Communion, why should it be any different now – is it just because this time, the topic is sex? We like and appreciate this via media. Some felt strongly that we must preserve this. Others felt strongly that the Episcopal Church has “a responsibility to maintain the high road” in leading the way toward full inclusion for all God’s people, that this is a matter of justice, and we can’t abandon justice for the sake of unity (which may be a false unity anyway). There were comments that Jesus never counseled us to sit around and wait for everyone to agree before doing justice work; that’s when the via media becomes simply fence sitting. “Is the Anglican Communion more important than being right?” Another said, “Kindness requires of us that we seek to remain in communion, but justice comes first.” Another wrote, “The American Church is a small part of the Anglican Communion, and hasn’t the right to demand that the majority accept [the homosexual] agenda, no matter how altruistic the motivation.”

Comprehension for the sake of truth requires patience, respect, and an understanding of cultural differences. The deadline imposed by the primates interferes with this. There was also a sense that we are doing all this work, acknowledging that we have strained the bonds of affection, and are struggling with these issues – “but we have not received anything from those who disagree with us.” Are the African and other churches engaged in this struggle as well? If only one part of the Communion is engaged in struggling with the present issues, how will progress be made?

**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?**

This question really wasn't addressed directly, but some felt that a covenant would be helpful. Others resisted this idea mightily, saying a shared confession of belief (beyond the creeds) has never been a part of our Anglican heritage, that our relationship isn't rooted in simply being like-minded people. There was frustration expressed that other provinces don't understand our polity, that it is not just up to the House of Bishops, but also the House of Deputies, to guide our church. Education throughout the Communion about the different ways churches govern themselves would be helpful.

**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 of these questions are overlapping similar subjects. There weren't a lot of responses about "how" or "best ways." However, there was a strong desire to stay together, and for that to happen, people felt we needed to be patient – again, no artificially imposed deadlines and no tampering with our church by other provinces. There was a recognition that biblical interpretation is at the heart of the matter, and that people may need much more instruction and practice in reading the bible. One said, "Let us not be afraid of diametrically opposed positions; they have marked Christianity from the very beginning. The New Testament is full of diametrically opposed positions." A minority view was that we should apologize to the rest of the Communion, and that "our leaders should exercise discernment of the Holy Scriptures as opposed to human judgment."

**5. What insights or suggestions came forth about the response of the House of Bishops to the requests of the Primates' Meeting?**

"Talk softly and listen." "Focus on Christ." "Find common ground, listen to the Holy Spirit, and pray." "Keep to the middle way." "The September 30 deadline has been imposed upon us; ask for more time. We need to stay in dialogue within our own Episcopal Church and within the Anglican Communion until we work this out." "We must be patient – this process may be decades long." "Do things in the right order and in the right way. Don't ask us to live outside the Outline of Faith, and outside scripture. Don't hide behind 'polity.'" "Get off the social gospel; keep the Anglican Communion intact." "Apologize and repent." "The General Convention has already responded. The Bishops can help clarify how seriously we take that resolution." "Allow the House of Deputies to talk this over." "Stay in communion, unless it threatens our inclusiveness and diversity; there are limits." "Yes, Communion matters, and we have made no move to leave the Anglican Communion, nor should we. But if bowing down to their requests to make second-class members of gays is the price, we should not pay it. If they throw us out, so be it."

**6. Other comments?**

Ultimately, the Diocese of Easton seems to be a microcosm of the larger Episcopal Church. At the listening sessions, as well as in the correspondence received, there was about an 85-15 “progressive”-“traditional” difference, or whatever terms you want to use. Those with the latter perspective tended to express themselves in more forceful, uncompromising language. At each of the sessions, someone commented something along the lines of, “Didn’t we already address interference from outside powers from 1776 to 1782?” Many people spoke of the importance of prayer, of not rushing things, and of the difficult position the House of Bishops is in. Some expressed weariness with the whole sexuality issue, and a yearning for the church to move past this and “get on with mission.” For the most part, there was a lot of compassion in the room and respect for differing points of view. We saw how far we had grown in grace since General Convention 2003. Perhaps that’s why so many commented that patience and respectful listening are essential.

It seems that at least some of our differences spring from a basic human way of looking at life, and how we order the information we take in. Some come from a perspective of absolute standards, following the rules, seeing an unbending right or wrong, black or white. Others come from a perspective of relationship, living comfortably with the grey areas, able to compromise for the sake of the other. This is true on both the “liberal” and “conservative” sides, although it is expressed differently. This also seems to underlie how scripture is interpreted. We don’t see how to get past that, except by patience, prayer, and mutual respect.

Submitted by:           The Rt. Rev. James J. Shand  
                                  The Rev. Canon Heather E. Cook  
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                                  22 August 2007

Thank you.