

The Diocese of Easton's Response to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Request to the Presiding Bishop

On October 17, the Presiding Bishop sent an email to diocesan bishops asking them to respond to the Joint Standing Committee's report to the Archbishop of Canterbury regarding the September 2007 statement of the House of Bishops. She said that Archbishop Williams had asked for "the sense of this Province," suggested that "consultation" in each diocese would be helpful, and asked us to give an indication of what that looked like.

This came to our attention on Saturday, October 20. Because of the short time frame, we knew it would not be possible to gather in convocation meetings, so we sent out the request by email. It went to all clergy, members of the Standing Committee and Diocesan Council, lay leaders, and delegates and alternates to diocesan convention, probably about 200 people. Over the next two weeks, we received sixteen thoughtful responses. The responses were split roughly one-third satisfied with the JSC assessment that the House of Bishops had responded positively to the requests of Windsor and of the Dar es Salaam message of the primates, and two-thirds dissatisfied – although for very different reasons.

The broad middle appreciated the effort the bishops had made to "avoid a meltdown" in the Communion, and to keep the path open for continued dialogue. "It appears that the statement indicates the willingness of ECUSA to live within the constraints of the Communion's requests despite a strong desire to do otherwise. I saw this as a noble thing to do and a sacrificial act."

Some of this group questioned the sincerity of the bishops' response that they would not develop public rites of same-sex blessing. "I hate to admit it," one said, "but I think [the radically conservative] have just cause: in the same weekend that the HOB issued its response, there were blessings of same-sex relations in California and there is a lesbian living in committed relationship as a candidate for the Bishop of Chicago. Both seem to violate the letter of the Windsor Report and Primates' request."

Half of the "dissatisfied" responses pointed to "word games" they felt were being played by the House of Bishops response, and the "wobble room" that was left for individual bishops to act any way they pleased, without discipline or consequences. One said, "responses coming from ECUSA have been, almost invariably, disingenuous and equivocal." Another said, "It appeared to be only a legalistic move to compromise as little as necessary to get back in the 'good graces' of the Anglican Communion, while continuing to allow great latitude to pursue their unchecked agenda to dignify homosexual behavior." Four of these responses came from people in the same parish, and used remarkably similar language.

Others were equally unhappy that the House of Bishops had not gone far enough. "Have we promised to ignore the Holy Spirit until further notice?" "Since 1776 our church has set its own course as we see the Spirit directing us. That should not change now; we should not seek approval from the world to do that which we feel is right." Concern was expressed about missionary bishops "invading our country." Another was concerned that the statement on p. 26 that gay and lesbian persons are "full and equal participants" was not "congruent with the position of ECUSA on same-sex unions and elections to the episcopate."

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Some of those who responded, from either end of the spectrum, didn't precisely address what was being asked, instead taking the opportunity to state their "position" on matters of church polity and the current debate about full inclusion of homosexual persons in the Episcopal Church. These opinions were along the same lines as those we heard when the diocese discussed the *Communion Matters* document last July. Some are convinced that ECUSA needs to stand for "justice" and "inclusion," regardless of the cost; others are convinced that ECUSA is slowly bleeding to death because it will not take a firm moral stand about homosexual behavior and is ignoring scriptural mandates.

Respectfully submitted by:

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Diocese of Easton
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