

## The Office of the Presiding Bishop

### A word to the Episcopal Church

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It has been a little more than six years since my investiture as Presiding Bishop. Over these last days I have been asked frequently – both in gatherings of bishops, clergy and lay people, and by reporters – about my view of the "state of the church." As I mark the passage of this time, I have thought about our life as a community of faith in this season, and wanted to write now to share my reflections with you who are the Episcopal Church.

Though, to be sure, we face difficulty and deeply challenging issues within our common life, yet my overall sense is that our church is focused on mission, understood as the restoration of all people to unity with God and one another in Christ, as our Prayer Book tells us. Our General Convention devoted much attention to the commitment to reach beyond ourselves. The budget developed for these next three years reflects that commitment. The needs are so great. Hungers of both body and soul are deeply present in our nation and our world. We are called to share the good news of Jesus Christ, which embraces all forms of human need and satisfies the hungers and desires of all hearts. Dioceses, congregations, individual Episcopalians, members of my staff at the Church Center, as well as numerous committees and commissions, are actively engaged in the fundamental tasks of proclamation, evangelization, witness and service.

It is also part of the reality of the Episcopal Church that we live with divergent points of view regarding the interpretation of scripture and understandings of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Though we believe "the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation," as it is stated in the ordination liturgy, there is no neutral reading of scripture, and we interpret various passages differently while seeking to be faithful to the mind of Christ. It is therefore important to recognize that people of genuine faith can and do differ in their understandings of what we agree is the "Word of God."

As well, we each have different images of the church. These images often contain within themselves our own expectations of what the church should be and hopes of what it might become. When the church acts in a way that seems to threaten or overturn our expectations we feel a profound sense of loss. Something that had seemed dependable and unchanging in the midst of our ever-changing lives has been taken away. This sense of loss can lead to grief and to anger.

Equally, when we see the church as slow or reluctant to change, and our hopes for what the church might become are not realized, we can become frustrated, disappointed and angry. There is a real tension within our community, which in some places is profound and severe, as some grieve because the church does not seem to meet their faithful expectation of what it should be, and others are equally saddened because the church does not seem to meet their faithful expectation of what we might become.

All of these differences: in our interpretation of scripture, in our understandings of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, and in our images of what the church should be and ought to become, were laid bare at the time of our General Convention last summer. For quite some time we had been living with the paradox of both/and. We had not been called to say either/or about some of the questions before us concerning homosexuality – which is undeniably a difficult issue for many. Nevertheless, at that Convention, our constitution called for diocesan bishops and the House of Deputies to give consent to the ordination as bishop of a man living in a committed relationship with a partner of the same sex. Since that time, we have been learning a great deal about what it means to live openly and honestly with differing points of view. It has not been easy, and yet we have not drawn back from this necessary, painful and often grace-filled work. I live in great hope that through the tension of this complex season in the life of our church God is leading us more deeply into who we are called to be as a community of faith. I have never felt more privileged to serve this church.

I have heard from many of you that you are now participating in respectful conversations reaching a deeper level than seemed possible before. I continue to be grateful to our bishops, members of the clergy and all others who are doing such important work in helping the church to engage in the costly and demanding discipline of deep conversation about how our faith is shaped and formed in response to the gospel.

As we go about this work we are blessed by our Anglican tradition. One of the distinctive characteristics of Anglicanism across the centuries has been its ability to make room for difference within a context of common prayer. In worship our various perspectives and understandings of the gospel are brought together. Our differences are reconciled not by our cleverness or ability to compromise but through our common adherence to the risen Christ who meets us in word and sacrament. It is for this reason that common prayer is particularly important in our Anglican tradition. As we gather week by week in our congregations we are being fed and nurtured in that tradition, and given the ability to live together in a love worked into us by the Holy Spirit which unites us beyond our differences.

In virtue of our baptism into Christ, dimensions of "the truth as in Jesus" are reflected in each of our lives. The search for truth is a corporate undertaking. As the mind of Christ is formed in us by the Spirit, we are able to discern Christ in the lives and experiences of one another. In this way, the dimensions of truth we share are enlarged. We grow to maturity in Christ by encountering one another with our differences, rather than in spite of them.

God's truth is ever unfolding and the Holy Spirit is still leading us on. According to Jesus' words in the Gospel of John it is the function of the Spirit of Truth to lead us ever more deeply into the fullness of truth. Jesus is speaking to his disciples not individually but collectively as a community. He tells them he has many more things to say which they are unable to bear at the present moment. He tells them the Spirit will draw from what is his and make it known to them. From this we know that the appropriation of "the truth as in Jesus" is a process of continuing prayer and discernment which involves us both personally and collectively as a community of faith.

As I listen to various voices around our church I become ever more aware of what I call the diverse center: people, lay and ordained, who share a common commitment to one another as limbs and members of Christ's risen body, even as their prayer and reflection and life in Christ have led them to different points of view. The diverse center is able to accept the tension caused by these different points of view. They are able to see this tension as part of the reality of being baptized into a community in which difference can be reckoned as something potentially positive and creative rather than a threat. The diverse center can live with difference, knowing that not one of us has the fullness of truth, and that we each perceive different aspects of truth. This is so because, for the Christian, truth ultimately resides in the One who is the truth, namely the risen Christ.

The Episcopal Church has been energized by a renewed commitment to mission. This is evident as we reach out to seekers and new generations, as diocese after diocese commit themselves to giving in support of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, and as new Jubilee Centers seek to address the needs of local communities. I do not think it is accidental that our sense of revitalization is coming at the same time as a difficult season of living with our differences. Both have to do with what it means faithfully to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ and therefore with mission. Prayer and discernment have led us to a graced confidence that we, shaped by our Anglican tradition, have much to share with the world in Christ's name. May this confidence ground and guide us in the days ahead. And, may we remember, as we engage this work – which is nothing less than God's work – that God's power "working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."

Please be assured of my prayers for you all as I ask you also to pray for me.

Yours in Christ,

Frank T. Griswold  
Presiding Bishop and Primate  
The Episcopal Church, USA