

## **THE GIFT OF COMMUNION**

### Reflections from the Standing Commission on World Mission

The Episcopal Church is an international church. It is made up of the dioceses within the United States of America and the Dioceses of Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador Central and Ecuador Litoral, Haiti, Honduras, Micronesia, Puerto Rico, Taiwan, Venezuela, the Virgin Islands, and The Convocation of American Churches in Europe. Membership of the Standing Commission on World Mission reflects this international character. The current Commission includes members from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Churches in Europe, along with U.S. members of Cuban, Honduran and Puerto Rican nationality as well as others from the USA.

The following collection of reflections represents some of the voices within the Commission. Each addresses an aspect of Christian community in the Anglican Communion. We offer these reflections as part of the collective work we have shared while overseeing the Episcopal Church's missionary engagement and its common life.

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### **THE GIFT AND BLESSING THAT IS THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION**

The Anglican Communion is a gift of God. It is nothing that any church on its own can create, but it is a gift that we receive through building one another up. It is a gift we receive through blessing one another. In relationship of mutual blessing, and with patience, and love, our communion has developed over the centuries like a family - creating bonds across distance, class, politics, and culture.

Anglicans often describe these bonds with the words, "partnership" and "covenant," relational practices determined by reciprocity and charity. These name the form of love Anglicans receive and give in Christ. In the body of Christ, we recognize different realities and different existences, some grievous and some joyful. But beneath our differences, we share a common bond of faith. And that bond reconciles and orders our differences within the vocation to mission in the world that Christ has given to Anglicans.

"Partnership" means more for Anglicans than its normal use within secular business practices; it refers to what families do when they take on a common task. It refers to building one another up into the mission of Christ. Through

partnership, Anglicans around the world transcend liturgical, cultural, financial and political differences. Sometimes those differences strain our relationships, but in the Spirit we always have the power to resolve strife as we renew our participation in Christ's love.

"Covenant" refers to a major institution of that sustaining power in Anglican life. All Christians live in a covenant with God that empowers us to live in communion with our Creator. Because of that covenant, we Anglicans feel empowered to enter into communion with each other, and so we name several of our ecclesial bonds "covenants." These covenants empower us to enter and renew the reconciling communion of Christ. We take heart that God has always been faithful and forgiving toward us, even when we have on many occasions been unfaithful to our covenants.

Partnerships and covenants shape major ways Anglicans receive God's gift of communion. They shape the way Anglicans feel called to mission around the world. They are major ways we build up one another and bless each other. They are gospel expressions, which lead us toward mutual responsibility and interdependence in the body of Christ.

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### **CALLED HIS FRIENDS: MISSION IN SOLIDARITY WITH EACH OTHER**

"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you my friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (*John 15:15*)

Ministry, the doing of small things in the name of God, is all about connections, relationships, friendship and companionship. A friend, a companion in Christ, is someone whom we know and highly respect. The discipleship of ministry is fundamentally and foremost a ministry of friendship. For in the doing of small things with the people of God we become friends with God.

From the start of his ministry Jesus gathered a community of friends. They became His fellow sojourners in ministry; his companions in mission. The root word for companion comes from the Latin "*panis*," which means "bread". Thus, the disciples of ministry are those who sojourn with Jesus and break bread together in the name of Jesus. In the sharing of His journey and His bread, the disciples are made friends by the presence of Jesus. In the process, those called, gathered, and sent out again become a community of friendship. They love each other, build up one another, and give themselves for each other. As a

community of His friends, Jesus' disciples are empowered to love one another even unto laying down their life for each other.

Friendship in the pattern of Christ is a fundamental test of our faith. Fidel Castro reportedly once said: "The Christian gospel is a revolutionary document. When Christians take their faith seriously, then the true revolution will take place." Castro's words challenge us to show the world the way the gospel liberates people into community. That is the witness of living our lives as Jesus lived: in obedience to the will of his Father. In other words, it is not enough to preach and teach the Word of God. We need to breathe, and live, and act out the friendship of the Word.

In his book, *Horizons of Mission*, Titus Presler calls us to see God as the missionary at the heart of Christian mission. Presler suggests that God's central mission is to create a community of life (pp. 30-31). That community of life takes form as the Church engages in the mission of God at local, regional and diocesan levels. It also happens as the Church ventures beyond the boundaries it knows, doing mission with those who are far away geographically and/or socially. In-reach mission and out-reach mission go hand in hand. Both are forms of friendship with Jesus, and each nurtures the other. They both teach us how Christ makes us friends with very different people, and together they express God's missional creation of a community of life.

We cannot become disciples of ministry in isolation; we become ministers of Jesus through companionships in ministry. Diversity is one of the greatest gifts of the Spirit of God, not least because it shapes, tests, and refines our friendship with Jesus. The Spirit's gifts do not come abstractly, but through the lives of many others. We find those diverse gifts expressed in so many wonderful ways - theologically, religiously, culturally - and in so many different contexts - geographically, ethnically, politically, socially. We must continue to learn how to embrace others across those differences, affirm each other within them, and praise God for them. Learning to receive these many gifts, we not only affirm the creative nature of God, we learn how to become friends with God.

Companionships and partnerships in mission are important ways Episcopalians learn those embraces and that praise. We are formed into the friendship of Jesus through the bread-breaking and sojourning of mission, for mission requires a spirit of understanding, mutuality, trust and solidarity. These are the fruits of the Spirit for engaging in mutual mission, learning how to love across differences. Perhaps in the process of mission we can rediscover those gifts as we try to understand the differences within our own Church and Communion, and seek to return to the friendship of Jesus.

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## THE GOSPEL AND AUTONOMY

The relationship between the wider Communion and the Episcopal Church has been characterized by cooperative desire to preach and teach the gospel to all nations (*Matthew 28:19*). It is a relationship formed in the command of Jesus to love one another (*John 13:34-35*). Carrying out that commission requires both spiritual and material involvement; therefore, part of preaching the word with each other involves sharing our financial resources.

While preaching the gospel, Anglicans have built schools and hospitals along with churches. As part of our joy in the gospel, we continue to educate our young people and care for the ill. For as Jesus warns us, his disciples will have to give account of their care for all God's children (*Matthew 25:31-40*).

We must care for each other then, as brothers and sisters who help each other in friendship and patience. As sisters and brothers we must always remember to treat each other with mutual respect, as equals before Jesus. In respect for one another, we cannot allow economic status, race, education, or any other social difference to deform Christian liberty. Instead, following the example of Jesus, we must love one another without demanding that we first be understood.

For Anglicans therefore, autonomy means something unique. It means more than acknowledging that others are different from us. It means seeing the way our churches embody ethnic, cultural, and moral traditions of their own as part of our shared mission. Indeed, as part of our cooperative desire for mission, we are called to trust one another's autonomy as part of our trust in God.

For Anglicans, preaching the gospel together builds reciprocal relationships among freely autonomous expressions of faith. Supporting reciprocity and autonomy requires sharing spiritual and financial resources. Also, when we are called to continue sending monetary support, it must be with every signal of respect for the autonomy of administration and self-government of the other, until there is total and complete economic independence that maintains dignity and those bonds of friendship, interaction, cooperation and relationship that are based solely on the Christian love that should remain on both sides.

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## RECONCILIATION

“If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 *Corinthians* 5:17-18).

In our woundedness, we have a great opportunity to express the Church’s faith to this world of chaos, brokenness, hatred and division. Those menaces interpolate our proclamation of the good news of reconciliation; they are the wounds by which our message of peace and hope offers healing.

Paul reminds us that as Christians, our ministry is reconciliation. Christ’s new creation heals the old wounds and unifies our real differences into a community of love. Those differences, the ones reconciled in Christ, are not of our own making. They are the reality of creation. The Church is called to express the creation’s new reality in Christ by overcoming chaos and respecting the gifts of diversity. It does not combat difference, but asks how to live in relationship among differences, using them to glorify God.

God has made us in different colors, languages, and cultures – but nothing can threaten the unity God’s Word makes in us. Following Christ, we live out authentic diversity within God’s love, and we have to do that individually, collectively, and in shared mission. In mission for the sake of the world, together we discover ourselves as gifts of God.

Our catechism asks: “What is the mission of the Church?” The answer is: “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” We find neither unity nor diversity apart from reconciliation. Yet there will “be no reconciliation without repentance and forgiveness,” without the gifts of Christmas and Easter.

The decisions taken by the last General Convention in Minneapolis have been profoundly hurtful, very divisive and still threaten the wholeness of the Anglican Communion. They have created many sufferings, not only in the Anglican world, but ecumenically and even among certain secular societies. The whole world is watching us.

After many negative and positive reactions, we must quiet our emotions and take time to listen once again to God’s voice, seeking to follow the Spirit into a renewed community of faith. How might Christ help us put away the old and make of us a new creation? – Surely not by putting away the Communion or any of its members. We must seek healing even in our struggles and through our suffering. We can understand the groaning of our community as the groans of creation for glory.

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We proclaim the gospel of liberation and hope in a world of sufferings and chaos. Indeed, we ourselves suffer that chaos. When we live together, patient and respectful of each other even in our woundedness, we begin to let the old pass away while we anticipate the new. We let our wounded body be taken into Christ's death and resurrection for the sake of salvation for all flesh. In Christ we begin to see all things, even chaos, used to manifest the glory of God.

Too often we use our divisions to satisfy our own glory, even for the sake of power and money. However, by the power of the Holy Spirit we can live beyond ourselves and open ourselves to reconciliation. When the Church does this, opening its wounds to God's healing, it lets God use it for the reconciliation of the whole world. It lets the old pass away so the new can enter in. It lets God heal the wounds between rich and poor, North and South, reconciling us even in our political antagonism and ideological blindness.

Finding ways of reconciliation for our wounded body requires finding among ourselves the spiritual, canonical, biblical and pastoral resources to resolve practical problems in order to renew the unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the Church. By our baptism, God has always called us to the ministry of reconciliation for the sake of fellowship in the Trinity. For in the triune God, all differences exist in and for God's glory, which is the reality of creation, destined for unity in Christ. For by Him it is said: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (*John 12:32*).

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## **HUMILITY IS THE GROUND FOR UNITY AND RECONCILIATION**

Humanity longs for reconciliation and persons everywhere reach for peace. Concerning this, much has been written and many projects attempted. The 2005 Assembly of the World Council of Churches, for example, implemented a ten-year program for the suppression of violence. This program represents one way the Church gives voice to the yearning for reconciliation among all the peoples of the world.

Divisions in the Anglican Communion have jeopardized our unity, and we have been talking about the need for practices of reconciliation. We worry for our witness to the world. I believe unity and harmony can be preserved, but only by walking forward in a particular way. Above all, those in confrontation should clothe themselves in humility. Humility signals a spiritual modesty which stands contrary to vanity and arrogance. It gives witness to the presence of the Spirit.

In his letter from jail to the Philippians, St. Paul speaks about what some have called “The Secret of Christian Fellowship.” St. Paul tells us that the secret consists in striving for humility, not participating in rivalries or seeking vainglory. From this standpoint, St. Paul explicitly urges that each one have the humility to esteem others as greater than themselves (*Phil. 2:3b*). The unity of the body of Christ begins fundamentally in that spirit. In other words, unity results from great humility and mutual understanding. Indeed, we risk humility for the sake of unity in the body of Christ.

In this same way of thinking, St. Paul gives us the example of Christ, who although he was God, became man, although rich became poor, although first, became last and the servant of all. That is God’s way of dealing with strife, Christ’s way of loving humanity.

Christ made the search for unity and reconciliation central to his teaching, particularly emphasizing the importance of the love of God and the neighbor. He maintained unity among his disciples by counseling humility, and prayed to the Father, that “they may all be one, as you Father are in me, and I in you, that they too may be one in us that the world may believe that you have sent me” (*John 17:20-21*).

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul exhorted Christians to love their neighbors by becoming servants to one another. Then he warned them that, “if you bite and devour one another, be careful, for you begin to lose everything!” (*Galatians 5:14-15*). Let us not, by biting at each other in one thing, begin to lose everything!

We Anglicans have a great challenge before us: humility. It is the foundation of unity and reconciliation, and the test of the Holy Spirit. It is also a great risk, for we must open ourselves to others even in the midst of confrontation. But if we take the risk, we will see results which testify to glory, results of which we can say, with humility: “All this is the work of God, who has reconciled us to Himself in Christ and has given to us the message of reconciliation” (*2 Cor. 5:18*).

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## **MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE IN CHRIST (MRI): A VISION MISLAID?**

Forty-one years ago the Anglican Congress meeting in Toronto developed a vision called “Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in Christ” – subsequently known by its initials, “MRI.” It was a vision developed in recognition that: “In our time the Anglican Communion has come of age. Our professed nature as a world-wide fellowship of national and regional churches has suddenly become a reality” (Report of the Proceedings, p.ii8). But the MRI vision seems no longer to excite and stir the imagination as it once did.

Later, the 1998 Lambeth Conference stirred imaginations of a Communion come of age in a new way. At that conference, a strong majority of bishops from “The Global South,” signaled that no longer would the Anglican Communion be guided by agenda solely from the West and North. There the Communion seemed to come of age in defiance of mutuality and interdependence.

But perhaps neither assessment was correct; perhaps the Anglican Communion had not come of age forty years ago, nor had it seven years ago. For the failure of MRI points to a collective Anglican vision somewhere lost. It is not a matter of a goal delayed, but a goal mislaid. Its failure betokens a failure of the Anglican Communion. It is not failure by forgetfulness, but a failure of nerve.

Ian Douglas, addressing the Episcopal House of Bishops in 2001, said this about the MRI vision:

[T]he vision of MRI remains a goal to be achieved rather than a reality that is lived. The real question for Anglicans today is how does this mutual responsibility and interdependence play itself out in a community of 38 equal, and autocephalous, churches. What are the challenges prohibiting us from realizing the vision of the 1963 Anglican Congress? I believe there are two large forces, one political and economic, the other philosophical and theological, that stand in the way of the Anglican Communion’s genuine embrace of mutual responsibility and interdependence.

Dr. Douglas identified those two forces as the ongoing legacy of colonialism and the philosophical and theological roots of modernity. These two intimately related forces have led to the Communion’s failure of nerve before perverse privilege. The Church perpetuates ongoing colonial privilege when it identifies true religion with Western philosophical assumptions about reality and European theological constructs.

Dr. Douglas observed that

“...the majority of Anglicans in the world today are able to live in multiple realities, both the Western Enlightenment construct as well as their own local contexts. It is important to emphasize here that marginalized people in the West, especially women, people of color, poor people, gay and lesbian individuals, have always lived multiple realities; their own particularities and that of the dominant culture. It is only those in power, historically white, financially secure, heterosexual males in the West that are ordained, who have the privilege of believing and acting as if there were only one reality, ours! The movement within Anglicanism from being a Church grounded in modernity and secure in the Enlightenment, to a postmodern or extra-modern reality is as tumultuous as the shift from colonialism to a post-colonial reality.” (p.8)

These tumultuous shifts – from modernity to the postmodern and from the colonial to the post-colonial – are not two shifts, but one: a shift away from the privileged reality of the West. Until now that privilege has been retained by the Anglican churches of the North and by the theological constructs supporting their expressions of the faith. This shift away from privilege has confounded faithful Anglicans in the North and, ironically, in the South.

The vision of MRI originally signified that the power relationships among the older and younger churches of the Communion no longer fit an ecclesial fellowship which had come of age. For example, no longer should churches be divided into giving and receiving subsets, but rather every church would be both giver and receiver. Mutual responsibility and interdependence would then advance, and dependency and paternalism would retreat.

It is no surprise that the continued inequality of resources available to the various churches would set mutuality aside for ongoing forms of financial granting. Yet there is a certain power of privilege attached to grant-giving. Indeed “grant” designates a privileged, resourced sort of giver. In the absence of the genuine mutuality of reciprocal gift-giving, grant receivers must ask for those things the granters want to give. Real needs and causes often go unaddressed and interdependence cannot flourish.

The Communion has occasionally attempted to address the problem of privilege among its churches, but with little consequence for increased mutual responsibility and interdependence. The Partners In Mission (PIM) Consultations, for example, encouraged provinces to critically study themselves and articulate their needs in light of their relation to the whole Communion. Unsurprisingly in the context of grant giving and receiving, many churches

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treated PIM for its role in asking and making grants. Partnership had no chance to develop.

“Mutual responsibility and interdependence” emerges from our existence in the body of Christ. It is only in relation to the “third” party that the Communion churches are mutually responsible and interdependent. The third party, Christ, is therefore no external third, but our only fundamental reality. MRI tried to offer the churches a way to see themselves without any privilege save that of Christ’s. It tried to remind the churches that their mysterious collectivity is Christ’s embodiment for the world. MRI is not finally about the Anglican Communion, but about Christ’s presence in the world.

The goal of MRI “has not been delayed, but mislaid”. We have mostly forgotten its vision because we continue, in North and South, to live for privilege, repeating the colonial models and the ideologies of modernity. Perhaps we can once again envision life in Christ’s privilege. Only this time we should do so for a post-modern, post-colonial context.

We hope that the Lambeth Conference of 2008 will take the opportunity to address the vision of Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in Christ, and call us to renewed emphasis on the core value it places on the gift of communion.

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*Standing Commission on World Mission*

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