

What's the Story with the Windsor Report?

by Stuart Bradshaw, SCM Canterbury

The Windsor Report of the Anglican Communion was released this October, about a year after the consecration of gay Bishop Gene Robinson, which vividly shone a light through the cracks of global communion. North America has not responded yet to the recommendations that the consecrating bishops repent or resign, and that rites of same-sex unions cease.

While 'flying' bishops were seen as a reasonable response to disaffected communities, 'rogue' bishops intervening in other jurisdiction were asked to repent. The Primate to Nigeria reacted strongly to this saying it was patronizing and unfair that faithful bishops should be rebuked while the seditious provinces embracing sin get the benefit of the doubt.

Well, the sexuality debate is certainly a long way off from conclusion while such volatile opinions remain. But this report was commissioned to tackle the issue of how such a global brawl erupted in the first place. Of great interest is the question on scriptural authority and the way in which Christians balance local differences with a universal faith and retain a meaningful fellowship.

Paragraphs 54-60 of the Report explains that [*paraphrased*]the authority of scripture is the authority of the Triune God exercised through a written record of the consequences of Christ's authority in reconciling Israel and mankind to God. They are important because it is through this account that the Spirit continues to develop and inspire the community. Scripture is **not** a legal touchstone, orders, or a repository for instructions on private spirituality.

It points to the authority of God which is not in orders but in a radical orientation toward relationship with God.' While a clear denial of popular elements of biblicism/fundamentalism in the youth ministries of many mainstream churches, the report also cautioned against biblical scholarship that critically dismisses scripture all too quickly. What seems clear is that both sides do not place much value in listening to each other and the report blamed structures of communication and decision making for not facilitating this.

It particularly pointed out that autonomy is not sovereign independence but a derivative and limited interdependence of freedom *in relation* to others. In deciding what issues were *Adiaphora* or not doctrinally essential to communion, the report concluded that we cannot fall back on relative cultural pluralism, but should ask whether the issue would cause members to conscientiously object and break their communion.

Considering the applicability of female ordination as a previous testing example the historical account of that 'crisis' was vague. The report describes an arguably inaccurate account of how the instruments of unity functioned to contain the differences between Hong Kong, New Zealand, and England, implying obedient deference and timely movements forward.

Although the report observed that the ministry of female bishops is not accepted in certain provinces, it paradoxically concluded that this was bearable, in the same way that since there were significant differences in opinion regarding remarriage and divorce, that this was then **not** a criteria to consider when electing bishops *para 125-6*.

This circular reasoning also demonstrates a hidden element to the determination of *Adiaphora* above, that not right rule, but majority rule will hold sway. The report mentions nothing about the legitimacy of groups in excommunicating themselves from Christian fellowship and worship, nor a comparison with the countless persons who participate in their Christian community despite being dismissed and silenced for years.

In fact, what gay-Christians live, in great opposition to secular society, gay subculture and mainstream Christianity, is the hope that the Gospel inspires human partnership that grows not despite, but through differences and learning from each other. Unfortunately there are those who feel they have nothing to learn. Yes, the North American churches could have consulted more on a global stage and knowingly acted in a way that jeopardises the communion. But the question might have to be whether 'unity' should be our priority. We who are many are one body in Christ through common humanity and God's unconditional love for us, so why should unity require so much effort and strain to level out diversity?

God spoke with one voice as a Nazarene in 1st Century Palestine, and since then the Spirit has moved divergently in particular times, cultures, places and people. Up until recently these specifics of liberating theologies in South America or assimilating theologies of post-colonial indigenous people confronted us at our leisure, but global media and law now mean that lives on opposite end of the globe can directly impact each other.

Consensus on such a scale and on an ever increasing list of divisive issues is unlikely to have been contemplated 2,000 years ago. Is it appropriate to subject the circumstances in Canada, where 7 of the 9 states have legal same-sex marriage and the church has three times at the national level affirmed the sanctity of same-sex relationships and the contribution of gay persons as visible and fully participating members of society, under the very different political and cultural climate of Central Africa, its corruption, poverty and post-colonial identity?

Is it reasonable to delay development in the hope of consensus. Fellowship will always be under threat if it comes with the proviso that all members at the dinner table have to agree. Disagreement and conversation should be embraced at that table because we know that no matter how bad it gets we're darn well staying for dessert. The report requested evidence of serious theological development to support the moves in North America, but perhaps the onus should be on those who feel justified in excusing themselves from the Communion table, to those who feel they have nothing left to learn. It is also an ironic charge given the vast amount of published 'queer' theology.

SCM has taken seriously the charge that before you advance your argument you should demonstrate that you understand those opposing. Our efforts resulted in the submission on the civil unions bills.

We also advanced a theological understanding of marriage and sexuality that supports same-sex marriage. We welcome the comments and reflection of Senior Friends on our submission, which is available on www.scm.org.nz or contact the office for copy. **(Stuart Bradshaw, SCM Canterbury)**