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Pastoral Letter Calls For Unity in Christ

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Episcopal News Service

PORT ST. LUCIE, Fla. -- The House of Bishops approved, at its final session Oct. 7, a Pastoral Letter setting forth the chief actions and considerations with which its 150 members had dealt during its 1977 interim meeting at Sandpiper Bay, Sept. 30-Oct. 7.

The Pastoral discusses such key topics as freedom of conscience for those who cannot accept General Convention's authorization for the ordination of women; the inadmissibility of ordaining "anyone who advocates and/or willfully and habitually practices homosexuality;" the confining of "nuptial blessing exclusively to a marriage between a man and a woman;" concern for crises in urban and rural areas; increased ecumenical awareness at local levels; and the "significant converging of theological views" in ecumenical conversations.

"As your fellow Christians," the bishop said, "we share with you our awareness of the hurt and anger being felt by many members of the Church. We are also aware of greater hurt being experienced by millions throughout the world who are hungry, homeless, dispossessed, powerless and victims of crisis."

The bishops declared in their Pastoral, "The hurt and hunger of body and spirit in the world and in our Church call us to new unity in Christ. He is our Lord and bids us to demonstrate our oneness in him. As your bishops, we hold a wide range of views on the problems of the world and of the Church. Yet we experience deep rooted oneness in Christ.

The letter concludes, "Your bishops believe that the great days of the Church are not just in the past but in the present and in the future."

The Pastoral Letter

From the bishops of the Episcopal Church : greetings and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

During our October, 1977, meeting, we have discovered an encouraging degree of unity among ourselves as we deliberated and prayed together. Since the Minnesota General Convention, we have seen some new dimensions incorporated into the life and practice of our Church. For this, we rejoice.

We are convinced that canon law is necessary to good order in the Church, but it cannot create unity. The only source of the Church's unity is the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ upon whom we wait in trust and patience.

As your fellow Christians, we share with you our awareness of the hurt and anger being felt by many members of the Church. We are also aware of greater hurt being experienced by millions throughout the world who are hungry, homeless, dispossessed, powerless and victims of crisis. We have heard you. We have heard them. So we respond.

We have applauded the leadership of our Presiding Bishop in the search for a wider understanding of mission. We commend to this Church our common "Venture in Mission."

The hurt and hunger of body and spirit in the world and in our Church call us to new unity in Christ. He is our Lord and bids us to demonstrate our oneness in him. As your bishops, we hold a wide range of views on the problems of the world and of the Church. Yet we experience deep rooted oneness in Christ.

We call on you to journey with us in faith as we seek to follow our Savior and bring his love to the deep

human hurt which all of us feel.

We agree that those who find that they cannot accept the decision to ordain women to the priesthood and episcopacy are nonetheless members in good standing of this Church.

Our present understanding of the Bible and Christian theology makes it inadmissible for this Church to authorize the ordination of anyone who advocates and/or willfully and habitually practices homosexuality.

We are convinced that this Church is to confine its nuptial blessing exclusively to a marriage between a man and a woman.

We urge our Church's increased concern for the crisis in our cities and in our rural areas.

We challenge the members of this Church to accept responsibility for increasing our ecumenical awareness and activity in parishes and dioceses.

We are encouraged that ecumenical conversations reveal a significant converging of theological views among Christians from many traditions.

On The Matter of Conscience

We have sought to recognize that many were dismayed because of General Convention's action concerning the ordination of women, even as others were gladdened and encouraged. No attempt was made to recommend a change in that decision during our meeting. We do affirm that one is not a disloyal Episcopalian if he or she abstains from supporting the decision or continues to be convinced it was an error.

We call for careful avoidance of any kind of pressure which might lead either an advocate or an opponent of the action to offend against his or her conscience. We acknowledge that as bishops we have a special responsibility in this regard. The Minnesota Convention sought to permit but not to coerce. We affirm that no members of the Church should be penalized for conscientious objection to, or support of, the ordination of women. A vivid personal example is the Presiding Bishop himself. He has acknowledged his inability thus far to affirm such ordinations. This has dismayed many who rejoice in the admission of women to the priesthood. We nonetheless express our full confidence that he will continue to carry out the duties of his office with integrity. We have made this decision about respect for conscience because we believe it is just. We will continue to reach out to any who might separate from us.

On The Matter of Sexuality

Another issue with which we had to deal was the mysterious and complicated matter of human sexuality. The last General Convention directed this Church to embark upon a study of this important subject in preparation for the next Convention. Nevertheless, under the pressure of questions from Church people, the House of Bishops has decided that some statement at this time is needed on the issues of the marriage and the ordination of homosexual persons.

It is clear from Scripture that the sexual union of man and woman is God's will and that this finds holy expression within the covenant of marriage. Therefore this Church confines its nuptial blessing to the union of male and female. It is likewise clear that in ordination, this Church publicly requires each ordinand to fashion his or her personal life after Christ as an example to the faithful. The bishops, therefore, agree to deny ordination to an advocating and/or practicing homosexual person. In each case we must not condone what we believe God wills to redeem.

We are mindful that homosexual persons as children of God have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, concern and pastoral care of the Church. Furthermore, they are entitled to equal protection under the law with all other citizens. We call upon our society to see that such protection is provided. We are deeply distressed that in parts of the world such persons are deprived of their civil rights and in some cases are subjected to the tragedy of humiliation, persecution and violence. The Gospel of Jesus Christ compels us to act against these injustices and affirm these persons as our brothers and sisters for whom Christ died.

On The Matter of Mission And Ministry

Our Presiding Bishop has challenged us to "Venture in Mission" as a response to the Gospel. He has issued a clear call for us to join in marshalling the human and financial resources of the people of each diocese in order to bring the joy and healing grace of Christ to the hurts and hungers of the people of the world.

A coalition of urban bishops has directed our attention to the distress of people in cities around the world. We are also mindful of the hardships faced by many in our rural areas. Many of our cities and many of our rural counties are in decay, mirroring the joblessness, poverty and oppression of so many of the people who dwell in them. We are seeking to focus the attention of our Church on an understanding of the root causes of these tragic dislocations of human life and freedom.

Through public hearings and other means, our urban bishops will endeavor to lead the Church into a more responsive ministry, growing out of a more informed strategy for the mission to the urban communities in which many of our people dwell. Strategies are being developed for improved ministry to those in rural areas, as, for example, the Navajo Area Mission. We urge all members of our Church to support these efforts with prayer and concern, for these crises are the responsibility of us all.

We are developing new forms of ministry. The bishop in every diocese and the priest in every congregation have long been our usual pattern of ordained ministry. The wider use of the diaconate as a ministry of service, and of the self-supporting ministries is before us. We rejoice that a growing number of lay persons are claiming and exercising their own ministries. Whatever form our ministry takes, each of us is called by God to respond and to seek a deeper understanding of our faith in Christ in order that each may better serve.

As a part of Christ's Body, every Episcopalian needs nurturing for that service. It is the obligation of every member to seek a deeper understanding of the Gospel and to pursue training for the particular ministry appropriate to his or her gifts.

In struggling with our differences, we have discovered an impressive level of agreement in important areas of faith and discipline. This has brought to us a freedom to face anew our task of mission.

We commend to you the following quotation from the 1st "Our message is a message of hope. God is active in his world. The changes which bewilder are not all evil, though all challenge us to find the right human response. God is active in His Church, renewing it so that the Church may more clearly proclaim its faith to the world, more effectively discharge its mission of service to the world, and may recover that unity for which our Lord prayed and without which it cannot be truly itself. It is for us to recognize the signs of his renewing action and to welcome them and obey them. It is no time for either despair or doubt. Rather it is a time to remember the Lord's saying: 'Be of good cheer: I have overcome the world.'" 968 Lambeth Conference.

Your bishops believe that the great days of the Church are not just in the past but in the present and in the future.

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