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## *Do Not Fear! The Episcopal Church Is Not Suspended and We Are Not Hierarchical!*

by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler

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Do not fear! Apparently, the various primates of the Anglican Communion of Churches, meeting in Canterbury this past week (January 2016), voted on a statement which considers “how we may preserve our unity in Christ given the ongoing deep differences that exist among us concerning our understanding of marriage.” An 8-point resolution followed, apparently supported by a majority of the 38 primates, but not by all of them.

I do yet not have all details of the primates’ vote, but I am seeing various headlines and reports saying that The Episcopal Church has been “suspended” from The Anglican Communion. Other articles mention that the Anglican Communion of Churches is “the third largest Christian body in the world.”

Such reports sound sensationalistic, but they are deceptive and can be misleading. Here’s why: The Anglican Communion of Churches is simply not organized in the way that the Roman Catholic Church is. Casual readers of church news might prefer otherwise, desiring a handy table of hierarchy and doctrine. But no. The various churches and provinces of the Anglican Communion of Churches are quite diverse, and held together by common faith, common heritage, common tradition, and common spirit – but not held together by doctrinal absolutism, or one pope, or one body that sets global policy. For those reasons, large differences of opinion and theology, on matters like same-sex marriage, continue to exist in the Anglican Communion of Churches.

But, whatever else the primates can do, they cannot vote, by any margin, to keep a province or church from participating in the Anglican Communion of Churches. In fact, the word “suspension” does not appear at all in their January 2016 8-point resolution. (Another point: To claim that I, as an Episcopalian, am not an Anglican, would be similar to claiming—in the heat of some rhetorical political dispute—that I, as a Georgian, am not an American.)

For the past fifteen years, various votes among various entities in the Anglican Communion have tried to force theological unity on the controversial issue of same-sex marriage. Many such votes have tried to appeal to some ultimate authority, or tried to assume some ultimate hierarchy, in order to support their position.

I am of the opinion that such desired hierarchies, or such fantasized hierarchies, are simply not there. Though our American Episcopal Church has recently tried to describe itself as an hierarchical church in certain legal situations, our beautiful and larger Anglican tradition is simply (and complex-ly) NOT hierarchical. The Episcopal Church is one of 38 global provinces who have a history and tradition and theology set in the gracious and generous elements of that Christianity which has roots in the British Isles.

Obviously, the issue of same-sex blessings, and same-sex marriage, has obsessed our church in recent years. Whether they are for or against same-sex marriage, some may regret that obsession. On the other hand, however, the issue is not a bad proxy for generosity and flexibility and openness, and, indeed, love. No matter what part of the globe we inhabit, our Anglican tradition has typically been one of the more progressive of the Christian expressions of faith.

I believe that our progressiveness, our openness to development, results from our sensitive observation and attention to the presence of God in the flesh. We believe in Jesus Christ. We believe in incarnation. We continue to seek God in one another, and to affirm the presence of God in people, even in people who think and act differently from us.

In short, we are not an hierarchical church! The primates do not run the parishes of The Episcopal Church. (In fact, our bishops don't actually run them either! In times of controversy, it is not healthy simply to appeal to higher and higher perceived hierarchies. It is healthier to make principled and Christian stands within our own integrity.)

I urge us, then, to continue living out our service and witness, our love and ministry, in the same Christian ways that we have been living them out. Do not fear! Jesus Christ is with us, leading us in the Spirit into all truth.

#### MORE DETAILS ON THE 2016 PRIMATES' RESOLUTION, IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS

The operative words of the January 2016 Anglican Communion primates' resolution, on the matter for further impairments to communion, seem to be these:

“we formally acknowledge this distance [between our positions] by requiring that for a period of three years The Episcopal Church no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee and that while participating in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, they will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity.”

The phrase, “should not be appointed,” seems to be a request of those making appointments, generally the Archbishop of Canterbury and maybe, in some cases, the Anglican Communion Office. This statement seems to be a hope, and it is up to the “appointers” whether they accept the notion of being “required.”

The phrase, “should not be elected” is, again, a wish. How can anyone enforce, or guarantee, an election, which is generally understood to be a matter of voluntary and free will?

The phrase, “internal standing committee” is a bit ambiguous. Perhaps this phrase refers to the rather newly formed “Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion,” whose members include Bishop Ian Douglas of Connecticut.

The phrase, “not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity,” takes up the ongoing matter of who decides doctrine and polity in Anglican Communion churches. This is exactly the matter under dispute across the global communion of churches. The primates have been meeting formally only since 1998! They were never intended to be doctrinal governors! Indeed, the manners in which some primates and bishops are appointed, some selected, some chosen, and some elected, vary widely across the globe. The Lambeth Conference of Bishops, whose first meeting was in 1867, was also never intended to settle matters of doctrine. Votes of Lambeth Conference were never originally intended to become doctrine, even though conservative advocates wanted the 1998 resolution, Lambeth I.10 to be interpreted as such.

Will the hopes and “requirements” of the primates' January 2016 resolution be enforced? I am of the opinion that they will not be. The points are certainly heartfelt and sincere and faithful. Though I am progressive on these matters, I know that these controversies are painful for everyone.

But God is doing a new thing among us. Word is that the present Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby does desire to bring the matter of sanctioning same sex marriage to the General Synod of The Church of England. The ever witty Giles Fraser, a priest who writes for The Guardian newspaper, notes that same sex marriages are occurring in England now, presided over by ministers due to a strange legal loophole.

Giles Fraser remarks that “The Anglican church is only nominally a top-down organisation. What matters most is what happens on the ground. And on the ground, in pews across England, Scotland, Wales, Canada, Brazil, Korea, Japan and the US, the movement towards marriage equality is inexorable. Whatever piece of paper Justin Welby emerges with, it won't hold back the tide of history. The best the conservatives can hope for is a few speed bumps.” ([See entire article here.](#))

Essentially, the prediction is that, soon, even the original provinces of the Anglican Communion of Churches, in

sanctioning same-sex marriage, may well be acting in ways opposed by churches in the so-called Global South.

As for American Episcopalians serving on appointed ecumenical and interreligious boards, it is important to remember that the Archbishop of Canterbury made a similar pronouncement of banning Episcopal Church and Anglican Church of Canada representatives in May of 2010 (in his notorious Pentecost Letter!). But The Anglican Communion Office may have found ways to proceed with American and Canadian representatives anyway. (See [the appointment of American Mark McIntosh here](#) and see [the appointment of Canadian Linda Nicholls here](#).)

Finally, of course, there is the Anglican Consultative Council, which first met in 1971, and which might better represent the breadth of the Anglican Communion of Churches. That group also represents the 38 provinces of the Anglican Communion of Churches, but its voting members are comprised of lay people and priests, in addition to bishops.

I urge The Episcopal Church never, ever, to withdraw from our voting participation in the Anglican Consultative Council. A short remembrance of how The Windsor Report was formalized serves as a warning:

The Windsor Report of 2004, with its proposals for certain moratoria on same-sex blessings, was accepted by vote of the Primates Meeting in 2005. Afterwards, a resolution supporting the Primates' decisions then came before the Anglican Consultative Council of 2005. However, one of the Primates' proposals had already been accommodated before its official reception! That is, that members of the ACC from The Episcopal Church and from the Anglican Church of Canada, would absent themselves from official attendance at the next meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council.

Therefore, when the Anglican Consultative Council met in Nottingham, England, in 2005, two delegations were exercising what I would call "gracious restraint." They knew that the atmosphere was tense, and they wanted to indicate some tangible form of respect for those who disagreed with actions in The Episcopal Church and The Anglican Church of Canada.

Unfortunately, however, the matter of accepting The Windsor Report, and thus further "formalizing" it, and thus further "formalizing" its moratoria, was exactly one of the key matters of ACC-13 in Nottingham. One of the emerging "Instruments of Communion" was voting on a matter without two delegations (each including three members, six people in all).

The vote was close! The vote was 30 in favor of affirming The Windsor Report, with 28 opposed, and with 4 in abstention. The chair determined that the resolution had thus passed, and so the Windsor Report, with its notion of "moratoria," became further "formalized." Had the delegations from The Episcopal Church and The Anglican Church of Canada been voting, certainly the results would have been different.

The "lesson" for all Anglicans bears repeating. Stay in communion. Stay at the table. Claim your vote. I acknowledge that such table fellowship is difficult, for believers on all sides of the issues, and especially on this issue of marriage. What we believe about marriage comes from the heart of our theologies of faithfulness and commitment.

Finally, again, "Do not fear" are the familiar words of God's angels throughout scripture. They are the words of Jesus himself. Be of good courage, be of good cheer, said Jesus, "I have overcome the world." The world would have us panicked by sensationalistic headlines and simplistic summaries. The world would have us shown as divided against ourselves. But we Episcopalians and Anglicans have far more that unites us than divides us. We have accepted the love of Jesus, and we are committed to loving him more and more, in each of our neighbors and around the globe.