

**TO:           The Right Reverend Peter J. Lee**

**DATE:       September 28, 2006**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

We greet you in the name of the Crucified and Resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ.

We are the six members of the Diocese of Virginia serving on a special committee to help reconcile the divisions within our diocese. The members of the team appointed by the Bishop of Virginia, Peter James Lee, are comprised of three laity and three presbyters. We have been charged with "helping congregations continuing in conflict over the decisions of the 2003 General Convention get on with their mission **in as close a union** as possible with the diocese." (Emphasis added)

Over the past nine months of intensive, focused, and honest engagement, every meeting always beginning in serious Bible study and prayer and always conducted with true Christian charity, we have learned many things. Among the most important:

**Close** is a relational word.

**Close** is also a paradoxical word.

During these nine months the "bonds of affection" amongst the six of us have deepened significantly even as we candidly and regretfully acknowledge that we may be entering a period in the history of the Anglican Communion when we (the Church, the Body of Christ) will be walking the way of the Cross together, but apart.

It is precisely because all of us have "been sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever" (Book of Common Prayer p. 308), and yet, all of us "see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." (KJV; I Corinthians 13:12), that we can with integrity as fellow members of the Body write you a hope-filled epistle.

Much of the recent work of the committee has been compiling lists of affirmations, essentials both of the Faith and of Anglicanism drawn from the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, the Hymnal, the 39 Articles that all of us cherish and celebrate.

As trust and candor deepened amongst us so also did the Spirit of God's grace, allowing us to address the heart of the matter: how exactly do we go forward, apart. We hope that these very specific proposals will not be needed. They are offered in a spirit of mutual respect and trust. Details of implementation are peculiar to each situation within the Body.

## Protocol for Departing Congregation

After nine meetings spanning nine months, the Committee believes, for some members of the Diocese, separation from the Diocese and the Episcopal Church is increasingly likely. Accordingly, with a view toward prudence and stewardship, the Committee offers the following protocol to departing members including concomitant issues concerning real and personal property.

### Procedure

- a. Before any vote by a congregation on whether to leave the Episcopal Church, a period of reflection and discernment of at least 30 days shall occur. The period of reflection and discernment should include "live" presentations directly to the congregation on behalf of the Diocese by persons appointed by the Bishop.
- b. Voting on the issue to leave the Episcopal Church shall occur at a special congregational meeting called by the vestry after at least ten (10) days notice of the time, place and object of the meeting having been given either on an occasion of public worship or by other adequate means to the rector, each vestry member, and the congregation. (The Bishop's appointees may appear at the meeting.)
- c. As a predicate to any such congregational meeting, the vestry, by at least a seventy percent (70%) majority of all members, shall have voted to recommend to the congregation that it leave the Episcopal Church.
- d. Any vestry members voting against such departure shall be afforded an opportunity to submit in writing and/or orally, and distribute to the congregation, their reasons for voting not to leave.
- e. All adult communicants in good standing, registered in the particular church in question, shall be entitled to vote at the congregational meeting. The voting shall be by ballot in person and a 70% majority of the votes cast shall be necessary to support such withdrawal from the Episcopal Church.
- f. If the required voting percentage is achieved, a second vote shall be taken. The question presented shall be, "Should the real and personal property of \_\_\_\_\_ (name of parish/mission) be offered to the departing congregation?"
- g. If the second vote passes by a 70% majority, the amount of the payment to the Diocese for its claim to the real and personal property and the terms of such

payment shall be determined by agreement, after disclosure of the nature and amount of parish assets, between representatives of the departing congregation and representatives of the Diocese, appointed by the Bishop. The representatives of the Diocese should include a representative of the remaining congregation, if available. In approaching their agreement, we urge the parties to be guided by principles of fairness, equity and Christian charity.

- h. Any agreement will require the further consent of the Bishop, Standing Committee, and Executive Board.
- i. The departing members of the congregation shall not include the word "Episcopal" in any "name" it chooses.

There are many other issues - for example: inclusion of the members of a congregation who wish to stay in the Episcopal Church if the congregational vote is to leave - that we have wrestled with and that will require the input of other members of the Body. Notwithstanding the division which may cause some to "walk apart", we shall always share in our own way our devotion to spreading the Good News. To that end, we shall earnestly seek to find areas of cooperative ministries in "as close a union as possible." What we hope to communicate is that there is a way forward that will require faithful humility and forbearance on the part of all of us, if we wish to model something of Christ's costly reconciling love. Given the state of the world in which we live, we believe we are called as a Diocese to work together and that we will respond to that call.

We end this short epistle on another note of hope. You may have learned that some parishes, considering whether to remain in the Diocese, will be entering a forty day period of fasting, prayer, and discernment later this fall. We recommend that it would be good for all of us, all 192 parishes and missions that make up our church family, to be intentional about reflection and prayer for one another as we all seek God's guidance and grace, especially this year as we pray for the Diocese of Virginia as we prepare to elect a Bishop Coadjutor.

Imagine for a moment if we agreed to fast for six Fridays, agreeing to donate what we would have spent on food to feed the poor. Imagine what we, the Diocese of Virginia, ninety thousand baptized strong, could do to alleviate some of the misery amongst us, and just as importantly, witness to our essential unity in Christ, albeit in trying times.

We acknowledge the challenges we face, we maintain our confidence in God and we are called to remember the words of Jeremiah; "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." (ESV; Jeremiah 29:11).

We believe that every parish, or cluster of parishes or regions, should be free to develop its own approach to this forty day period.

**Close** is a relational word.

We pray that all of us stay close to the Holy Spirit and to one another as we navigate these turbulent waters knowing that Christ promises to be with us always, even to the end of the ages.

A. Hugo Blankingship, Jr., The Falls Church, Falls Church  
The Rev. Andrew T.P. Merrow, St. Mary's, Arlington  
Russell V. Palmore, Jr., St. Paul's, Richmond  
The Rev. Caroline Smith Parkinson, Grace Church, The Plains  
The Rev. John Yates, II, The Falls Church, Falls Church  
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