

**CARING FOR ALL THE CHURCHES**  
**A Response of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church**  
**to an expressed need of the Church**

The church is the Body of Christ. Our life in this Body is a continuing action of God's grace among us. In Christ's power alone the church *is* "joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:21). Through the church's common life in Christ, God intends to signify to the world the beginning of a new and reconciled creation.

We know that the unity with God that Christ has won for humanity, he won through the victory of his passion. We are mindful of the suffering Jesus who, on the cross and through his resurrection, reaches into every corner of alienated human life, reconciling and restoring to the household of God all who come to him in faith. By God's grace the church is continually called, in repentance and hope, to be a trustworthy sign to the world of this costly reconciling power of God. As we trust in Christ and follow him, we share in his unity with the Father through the Holy Spirit. Communion in the Trinity is the salvation of the world. The church, thus, exists for the sake of the world. Therefore, for the sake of the world, bishops have been called "[to] serv[e] before [God] day and night in the ministry of reconciliation" (BCP, p. 521) – a ministry which is to be carried out "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2-3).

We as bishops are not of a common mind about issues concerning human sexuality. Different points of view on these matters also exist within our dioceses and congregations. In some instances there are significant differences between congregation(s) and the bishop, and few of our congregations are themselves of one mind. As we exercise pastoral leadership in our dioceses, we pledge ourselves to work always towards the fullest relationship, seeking, as the Archbishop of Canterbury has said, "the highest degree of communion." We have committed ourselves to living through this time of disagreement in love and charity and with sensitivity to the pastoral needs of all members of our church.

In the circumstances of disagreement regarding the actions of the 74<sup>th</sup> and subsequent General Conventions on issues of human sexuality, we commit ourselves to providing and to making provision for pastoral care for dissenting congregations, and we recognize that there may be a need for a bishop to delegate some pastoral oversight. Oversight means the episcopal acts performed as part of a diocesan bishop's ministry either by the Bishop Diocesan or by another bishop to whom such responsibility has been delegated by the Diocesan. In other Anglican Provinces, the term "pastoral oversight" signifies what we mean by "pastoral care." In our Episcopal Church polity, "oversight" does not confer "jurisdiction." We are aware of current examples of the delegation of pastoral oversight in the gracious accommodations which have occurred in some dioceses. As we commit ourselves to a process for Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight, we also recognize the constitutional and canonical authority of bishops and the integrity of diocesan boundaries. We are in accord with the statement of the Primates: "Whilst we affirm the teaching of successive Lambeth Conferences that bishops must respect the autonomy and territorial integrity of dioceses and provinces other than their own, we call on the provinces concerned to make adequate provision for episcopal oversight of dissenting minorities within their own area of pastoral care in consultation with the Archbishop of Canterbury on behalf of the Primates."

We recognize that we face a complex set of needs. Some Christians of a traditional perspective on matters of human sexuality find themselves in dioceses where the actions of the 74<sup>th</sup> and subsequent General Conventions are overwhelmingly affirmed and where diocesan policies and practices are in line with those General Convention actions (for example, in the ordination of persons living in same-sex partnerships and in episcopal permission for the blessing of same-sex unions). At the same time, some Christians who affirm the actions of the 74<sup>th</sup> and subsequent General Conventions find themselves in dioceses where the actions of those conventions are overwhelmingly opposed, and where diocesan policies do not permit the ordination of persons living in same-sex partnerships or the blessings of same-sex unions. In both cases, it is essential to provide a “safe space” for the exercise of conscience. A particular issue surrounds the ordination of persons from a “minority” perspective within a diocese. Often persons whose perspective runs contrary to that of the majority in a diocese feel that they cannot test their vocation to the diaconate or the priesthood; that their vocations will be dismissed out of hand, without a fair hearing. Thus Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight needs to include the possibility that persons from a parish receiving episcopal ministry under the provisions of this document may test their vocation in that bishop’s diocese.

Sensitive pastoral care does not presuppose like-mindedness. Bishops and congregations have frequently disagreed about particular articulations and interpretations of scripture and the Creeds while being able to transcend their differences through common prayer and celebration of the sacraments of the new covenant. Bishops promise to “support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries” (BCP, p. 518), and that pledge must not be limited to the like-minded. Our theology and practice hold that ordination and consecration provide the gifts and grace necessary for the sacramental acts of a bishop to be effectual. (See article XXVI of the Articles of Religion: Of the Unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacraments.) Yet the conflict over human sexuality reminds us that our support and pastoral care may need to take unusual and extraordinary forms for the sake of the unity of the church.

As bishops we are “servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries” (1 Cor. 4:1), a ministry that none of us possesses alone. Together we must be signs of unity. We seek unity for the sake of the world and in fidelity to our Lord, who gave his life to restore all to unity with God. We acknowledge our failures of charity toward one another in our shared ministry, we repent and ask forgiveness of God and of our brother and sister bishops, and we pledge ourselves to a sacrificial ministry with one another. We will value in each the presence of the Crucified and Risen Christ. While our unity may be strained, we continue to strive for godly union and concord. Our task requires humility, charity, mutual respect and a willingness to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

In March of 2002 the House of Bishops adopted the following covenant:

“We believe that the present Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church are sufficient for dealing with questions of episcopal oversight, supplemental episcopal pastoral care, and disputes that may arise between the bishop and a congregation. We encourage that their provisions be used wisely and in the spirit of charity.

“The provision of supplemental episcopal pastoral care shall be under the direction of the bishop of the diocese, who shall invite the visitor and remain in pastoral contact with the congregation. This is to be understood as a temporary arrangement, the ultimate goal of which is the full restoration of the relationship between the congregation and their bishop.”

We are profoundly grateful that the faith that binds us together – grounded in Jesus Christ, rooted in the historic Creeds and in the Holy Scriptures – is deep, and that the bond created in baptism is indissoluble. Our disagreements are nonetheless real, and touch on issues that cannot be easily or quickly resolved. Convictions are passionately held across the spectrum on matters of human sexuality. We must honor conscience in such a way that persons who find themselves in a theological minority know that they have a permanent place in the Church. Thus the “temporary arrangement” called for in the 2002 covenant must also be seen as being “as long as necessary.” Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight is a way of assuring theological minorities that they are beloved and not merely tolerated, and that their presence is a gift rather than a problem.

Expanding on the agreement of 2002, and working always towards “the highest degree of communion,” we offer the following recommendations in order to provide Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight. We expect that the first priority in a relationship between a Bishop Diocesan and a congregation is a striving for unity. As such, it is incumbent upon both the bishop and the rector/congregation to meet together, with a consultant, if needed, to find ways to work together. If for serious cause in the light of our current disagreements on issues of human sexuality, the bishop and rector/congregation cannot work together, we propose the following process for Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight.

- 1) In the spirit of openness, the rector and vestry, or the canonically designated lay leadership shall meet with the bishop to seek reconciliation. After such a meeting, it is our hope that in most instances a mutually agreeable way forward will be found.
- 2) If reconciliation does not occur, then the rector and two-thirds of the vestry, or in the absence of a rector, two-thirds of the canonically designated lay leadership, after fully engaging the congregation, may seek from their Bishop Diocesan, (or the bishop may suggest) a conference regarding the appropriateness and conditions for Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight.
- 3) After such a conference the Bishop Diocesan may appoint another bishop to provide pastoral oversight.
- 4) The ministry of a bishop serving under the provisions of Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight may include the following elements:
  - a. Episcopal visitations
  - b. Administration of confirmation and other initiatory rites
  - c. Providing counsel to the rector, vestry, or canonically designated lay leadership
  - d. In cooperation with the Bishop Diocesan, collaborating in search processes when the parish seeks a new rector
- 5) The bishop providing delegated pastoral oversight may also, with the consent of the Bishop Diocesan and his or her own commission on ministry and standing committee, care for persons from the parish receiving delegated oversight in the ordination process. In that case the canonical provision in Canon III.6.2(a) and III.8.2(a) regarding “other community of faith” shall apply to the parish receiving delegated oversight. Thus the person testing his or her vocation seeks ordination through the discernment process of the diocese of the bishop providing delegated oversight, and his or her formation is under the direction of that diocese. In situations in which the bishop providing delegated pastoral oversight is not a Bishop Diocesan, he or she may ask a bishop with jurisdiction to assume this task.
- 6) If no reconciliation is achieved, there may then be an appeal to the bishop who is president or vice-president of the Episcopal Church province in which the congregation is geographically located, for help in seeking such a resolution. Those making such an appeal must inform the other party of their decision to appeal.
- 7) When such an appeal is made, the provincial bishop may request two other bishops, representative of the divergent views in this church, to join with the provincial bishop to review the situation, to consider the appeal, and to make recommendations to all parties. If a bishop is

invited to provide Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight, that bishop shall be a member in good standing in the House of Bishops.

8) When an agreement is reached with respect to a plan, it shall be for the purpose of reconciliation. The plan shall include expectations of all parties, especially mutual accountability. The plan shall be for a stated period of time with regular reviews and an opportunity for re-negotiation and renewal.

The provincial bishop shall periodically inform the Presiding Bishop, the Presiding Bishop's Council of Advice, and the House of Bishops at its regular meetings of the progress and results of this process.

This difficult season in the Church's life provides, paradoxically, an opportunity to exercise loving pastoral leadership. We commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the provisions of this document, and to the ministry of reconciliation to which it points. Our Lord's prayer for the unity of the Church includes a promise: "so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:23). In other words, Jesus invites those beyond the Christian community to look at the Church and make a decision about him on the basis of our relationships with one another. This moment in our lives has eternal significance, not merely for ourselves, but for the world for which Jesus died.

As bishops of this church, we pledge ourselves to pray and work for patience and the generosity of spirit that can enable a pastoral resolution as we live with our differences. As well, we will strive for Godly union and concord as together we seek to be led by the Spirit of truth who, as Jesus tells us, "will guide us into all the truth." (John 16:13)

**The House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church**

20 March 2012