

A Proposal for Maintaining Love and Order in the Episcopal Church

By Henry N. Parsley, Jr.

The challenges before the 74th General Convention are complex and daunting. The election in New Hampshire and the movement to provide a blessing for persons in committed same-sex relationships have launched a *tsunami* of email and a rising tide of concern in many parts of the church. I write to make an appeal for wisdom and charity and to make a modest proposal for moving forward.

We would do well to remember that the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion are no strangers to controversy. Our *koinonia* in Christ has long been forged in the fire of intense disagreement. Differences of theology and biblical interpretation, of culture and missionary context, of race, language, and society have challenged us to maintain Christian faith and order that both embraces diversity and upholds unity. The *via media* of our heritage is a balancing act that requires the grace of prayer and the hard work of godly discipline and restraint.

Two essential ingredients are especially important in our Christian tradition: love and order. As Anglicans we have been able to sustain and renew our Communion in the midst of controversy because we are a church where love and order prevail, both in equal measure.

The love that the New Testament calls *agape* is both a gift of the Spirit and an act of will, making us merciful, forgiving, and respectful toward all persons, especially those with whom we differ. It makes us a church where all are welcomed and embraced in the community of Christ. This includes gay and lesbian persons, in the complexity of their lives, just like the rest of us.

Order is inseparable from love. The church's good order includes the boundaries of canon, liturgy, and conciliar decision making that enable us to live together with our inevitable differences and self-centeredness. It enables us, in the midst of competing interests, to preserve the catholicity of the church. Good order and godly discipline are necessary for us to be a church where all may know the love of Christ.

In our struggles with difficult issues such as sexuality, love and order often seem to collide. Some insist that the demands of God's love at times warrant the abridging of the church's boundaries. Others, with equal passion, contend that the church's boundaries and structures are precious channels of true freedom in obedience, which must be upheld.

It is evident that we are evolving in our human understanding of human sexuality. New scientific, psychological, and experiential insight into the dynamics of homosexual orientation is challenging the worldwide Christian community to find moral wisdom and pastoral practice in response to these new dimensions of human reality and need. Inevitably, such a time of change is replete with conflict and competing points of view. I believe that with sustained work and faithful conversation we will be able to find theological consensus in these matters. Our present controversy can be an occasion of grace rather than division.

In this situation, love and order need each other, inseparably and in equal measure—lest in our loving we slip into unrooted license and anarchy or in our ordering we fall into legalism and self-righteousness. No one spoke of Christ's love with more passion than St. Paul; no one was more eloquent about the freedom of the Spirit. Yet he was quick to say, "all things should be done decently and in order."

What does this have to say to us in this critical moment?

Surely we desire to be a church abundant in love, where all God's people find grace and welcome, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, age, language, sexual orientation, and all the other things that make us different and unique. We also desire to be a church where order in the service of love prevails and the doctrine, wisdom, and catholicity of the Christian faith are preserved. Only by keeping both in balance can we be a church in which the reconciling grace of Jesus Christ is lived for the sake of the world.

It is apparent that we have not found a theological consensus about the questions of the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of gay and lesbian persons in committed relationships. Recent statements by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the primates of the Anglican Communion, as well as the Report of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops affirm this reality. Good order requires that actions not be taken which are not in keeping with the common mind of the church.

In good Anglican practice, there is a way forward that can preserve both the demands of both love and order. It is to recognize that we are not alone in this struggle to understand how the Christian community is to minister faithfully and pastorally to gay and lesbian persons. We need the Anglican Communion's conciliar wisdom as we seek to allow the Spirit to guide us into all truth. We need sustained theological work and ecumenical consultation. We need to be humble and brave enough to admit that these matters cannot and must not be resolved, *de facto* or *de jure*, by the Episcopal Church unilaterally or by any diocese alone.

Return to Lambeth

The path of wisdom would be to gather up in writing what pastoral insight and theological/moral issues we in the Episcopal Church have found in matters of human sexuality and refer them to the next Lambeth Conference for thorough theological study and conciliar discernment. We should request the Archbishop of Canterbury to appoint a Faith and Order Commission to address the issues that face us, charged to report its findings to the Lambeth Conference for in-depth consultation and debate.

To follow this approach would require General Convention not to confirm the bishop-elect of New Hampshire [TLC, June 29] or to table or otherwise delay the consent process. To do so may seem difficult, indeed painful. The Rev. Gene Robinson is well respected and it is good Episcopal manners to want to honor the discernment of the Diocese of New Hampshire. Under the present circumstances, however, to proceed with confirmation would be *de facto* to assume a theological consensus that has not yet been found among us. Our actions must be grounded in our theology. Such unilateral action by the Episcopal Church would be precipitous and highly divisive at home and abroad.

To request the leadership of a Faith and Order Commission and of a well-prepared Lambeth Conference, as our forebears have done in addressing difficult matters,

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is a way for both love and order to prevail among us. This would provide time to undertake sustained theological work. It would affirm that we are part of a faith and Communion far larger than the Episcopal Church. And it will give space for the Spirit to “bring us all to be of one heart and one mind within God’s holy church.”

For the sake of our church’s theological integrity and unity, may we have the wisdom and humility to follow such a course.

(I wish to express my gratitude to our bishop suffragan, the Rt. Rev. Mark Andrus, for his collaboration in the development of these ideas.)

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