To the Members of the Covenant Design Group and the Windsor Continuation Group:

I write to you as a concerned member of the Covenant Design Group, as a committed member of the Episcopal Church (USA), and as one whose professional and spiritual life has been and continues to be devoted to the strengthening of our common witness as Anglican Christians. This is a simple plea for us to do our work better in the midst of continuing ecclesial disintegration.

What motivates this plea at this time? On the one hand, no more than the general evidence of ongoing divisions within North America and the Communion at large. The recent Lambeth Conference has done nothing to mitigate these, as far as I can see. On the other hand, particular evidences arise every day that demonstrate not only a lack of mitigation, but further retrenchment of polarization and division.

For example, yesterday my bishop in Colorado, the Rt. Rev. Robert O’Neill, ordained to the transitional diaconate a well-known partnered homosexual. As we know, such an ordination in itself is no longer news in parts of North America. What made this news in Colorado (and this is where I heard about it first, in the newspaper) was that Bp. O’Neill has, since becoming bishop in 2003, made a public commitment to refuse such ordinations. He did this, not on the basis of his personal views, but – frequently referring to the Archbishop of Canterbury’s own distinction between personal and episcopal teaching roles – on the basis of his desire to abide by the Communion’s stated teaching and discipline for the sake of common life. He frequently emphasized his affirmation of the Windsor Report, both in its underlying theology and specific recommendations. To be sure, he did not vow any time-frame for these commitments; but the purposes were clear.

Yet yesterday, he changed course. The issue here is not to lodge a complaint. Bishop O’Neill has made his decision, he has done so on the basis of convictions that were long-known, and he does so in concert with many of his American colleagues. Nonetheless, he does so in the known context of TEC’s and the Communion’s own difficult grappling with what has now turned into a horrendously destructive matter, and he does so deliberately. This is the issue worth pondering.

Let me rehearse the obvious:

* In 1998, the Lambeth Conference passed a clear resolution on the matter of homosexual partnerships and the ordination of partnered homosexuals (Res. I.10.e): “[We] cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions”.
* After noting Lambeth I.10 as reaffirmed by Primates and Canterbury (25), the Windsor Report explained how I.10’s teaching had been contradicted in many ways by TEC and parts of Canada. It then observed (28) that “The overwhelming response from other Christians both inside and outside the Anglican family has been to regard these developments as departures from genuine, apostolic Christian faith.”
* The Primates, as the Windsor Report noted, had already in 2003 reiterated their understanding of Lambeth I.10: “We also re-affirm the resolutions made by the bishops of the Anglican Communion gathered at the Lambeth Conference in 1998 on issues of human sexuality as having moral force and commanding the respect of the Communion as its present position on these issues.” At their meeting in 2005 (Communiqué, 6 and 17), they repeated this: “Many primates have been deeply alarmed that the standard of Christian teaching on matters of human sexuality expressed in the 1998 Lambeth Resolution 1.10, which should command respect as the position overwhelmingly adopted by the bishops of the Anglican Communion, has been seriously undermined by the recent developments in North America”.
* Soon after, the Anglican Consultative council upheld these views of the Primates (2005, res. 10): “The Anglican Consultative Council:

“takes note of the decisions taken by the [Primates at their recent meeting in Dromantine](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/39/00/acns3948.cfm), Northern Ireland, in connection with the recommendations of the Windsor Report 2004;

notes further that the Primates there reaffirmed “the standard of Christian teaching on matters of human sexuality expressed in the 1998[Lambeth Resolution 1.10](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004/appendix/p3.6.cfm), which should command respect as the position overwhelmingly adopted by the bishops of the Anglican Communion;

endorses and affirms those decisions”.

* In 2007, the Arcbishop of Canterbury, who had already on several occasions affirmed Lambeth I.10’s position as the “mind” of the Communion on related matters, issued an Advent Letter, in which he said this: “But the deeper question is about what we believe we are free to do, if we seek to be recognisably faithful to Scripture and the moral tradition of the wider Church, with respect to blessing and sanctioning *in the name of the Church* certain personal decisions about what constitutes an acceptable Christian lifestyle.  Insofar as there is currently any consensus in the Communion about this, it is not in favour of change in our discipline or our interpretation of the Bible”.
* Finally, he ended the 2008 Lambeth Conference of this past summer, by stating (Concluding Presidential Address): “The Resolution of Lambeth ’98 was an attempt to say *both* ‘We need understanding and shared discernment on a hugely complex topic,’ *and* ‘We as the bishops in council together are not persuaded that the new thoughts offered to us can be reconciled with our shared loyalty to Scripture.’ Perhaps we should read that Resolution - forgetting for a moment the bitterness and confusion around the debate and acknowledging that it remains where our Communion as a global community stands - as an attempt to define what a healthy Church might need - space for study and free discussion without pressure, pastoral patience and respect, unwillingness to change what has been received in faith from Scripture and tradition. And this is not by any means to say that a traditional understanding and a new one are just two equal options, like items on the supermarket shelf : the practice and public language of the Church act always as a reminder that the onus of proof is on those who seek a new understanding”.

Why would Bp O’Neill go forward in this, given his previous willingness to hold back in the context of these kinds of common views? What has changed? Certainly not the “mind” of the Communion as earlier articulated; nor the burdens of common life. I am not certain of hismotives, since he offered no public explanation before his actions (although he did speak personally to some, but not all, of his clergy).

But I can state one very clear change in his own diocesan context: the disappearance of traditionalist clergy and lay leadership. From the time of his consecration (and before) to the present, the major conservative congregations have either dispersed through departures from TEC (to AMiA or Common Cause-related groups), or departures from the diocese and/or active ministry of conservative clergy leaders. In the last year, for instance, the last 3 or 4 larger conservative congregations have lost their pastors, some for reasons that have nothing to do with diocesan policies, some with the bishop’s at least passive encouragement. In other words, there is no more local political penalty to pay for new dismissals of Communion requests. (The health of the diocese is another matter, with membership significantly down relative to the population and a fiscal bleed, unhelped by the large sums of diocesan funds being used to support lawsuits over property matters.)

I am bringing up only an example, though one close to home that shames me deeply. The more general tenor of many in TEC toward the developing political reality of a dwindling conservative membership is neatly summed up in the recent remarks of two General Convention Deputies, made to their colleagues on a Convention listserve:

“Cleverly, perhaps, certainly not wisely, they [conservative Episcopalians in the Communion Partners group] continue to stay. So, to all you Partners: Go in peace, already! And if peace is a blessing you're unwilling to accept from us heretics, then just go. You'll stop embarrassing yourselves, you'll have a better chance of finding more like-minded bigots-in-the-name-of-Jesus out there.”

“My reading so far sees little other than that these workers in TEC's vineyard are staying in
the sure and certain hope that they can change the majority.  This will not come to pass.  There is an old saying to the effect that you can't be just a little bit pregnant.  The majority hold a view that is pregnant with change and inclusion and we will never consent to the termination of that
pregnancy.  You might say that we are being as dogged and as unbending as the other viewpoint . . . . but we are the majority and, right now, that is the problem that traditionalists face.  If you continue to grumble and force the hand of the majority we all lose.”

What do we learn from the example of Colorado and those who would support (and have supported) decisions like Bp. O’Neill’s? We learn of the politically-driven character of the actual decisions being made (“majority” vs. “minority” calculations); of the way these simply trump Communion realities and formal recommendations, let alone common theological analysis; of the wake of ecclesial destruction this both joins and feeds into; of the ongoing dynamic of separatist energies this fuels, where conservative and more liberal have simply moved apart in mutual anathematization and structural distance; of the continued support this gives to the division of the wider Communion’s provinces among themselves. Most especially, this kind of example buttresses the public testimony given by our collective Anglican churches, with TEC taking the lead and responses forthcoming by her antagonists, that nothing is changing, that no one has the vision or courage or will to do anything to reverse these dynamics, and that we are all willing to accept the demise of the trust given us by God.

And who should do otherwise, if not you and us toegether, at least serving groups ostensibly committed to and charged with forging a better way for our Communion? We cannot control events and the decisions of others. But we can certainly engage honestly and squarely what is at stake and cease equivocating (yes, we do too much of that); we can speak clearly and not secretly or in code; we can offer concrete and effective proposals, and not diplomatic blurs; and we can prosecute them with all the energy God has granted us rather than being sidelined by the doubtless real but nonetheless surmountable bureaucratic obstacles with which common life across the globe presents us.

I continue to pray for all of us, our leaders and representatives, our churches, and the good fruit of our particular ministries in service of our Communion. May the Lord bless us this year with a renewal of faithful witness as His body.

In Christ,

Ephraim Radner

Wycliffe College, Toronto