

**A Letter from The Rt. Rev. Don E. Johnson
Regarding the Primates' Meeting
Tanzania, February 2007**

Dearest friends,

Literally, as we were finishing the great celebration of the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of The Diocese of West Tennessee at February's annual convention, two very important documents from a meeting of the Anglican Primates in Tanzania were released for public scrutiny. Since then the speculation about their significance and implications for The Episcopal Church and the wider Anglican Communion have been filling lines of email and pages of print. What comes to mind is a line from the familiar hymn that asks "What more can he say than to you he hath said, to you that for refuge to Jesus have fled?" (Hymn 637) Apparently, quite a lot "more" can be, and is being, said.

The Primates provided two principal statements as a result of their meeting: (1) a Communiqué giving an overview of the meeting itself and containing a number of significant requests for your Episcopal Church's bishops to address in a specific time-frame; and (2) an early draft of "an Anglican Covenant" which the Primates felt was developed enough in thought to share with the entire Communion for study, reflection and comments. In both of these "primary documents" and in various responses to them that are already floating through cyberspace, there appear to be a number of anomalies of thought that will need to be considered by us all. Certainly we will want to listen to what others have to say, but first I think it is helpful to read the documents for ourselves rather than reading someone else's thoughts about their meaning. I ask you to take this as your starting point. Without a careful reading of the documents, we leave ourselves open to being predisposed to see what we have been told to look for, rather than what we may see if we just open our own eyes. Go to our diocesan website, www.episwtn.org (**click on Episcopal News Service, then click on Primates' Meeting**), and prayerfully encounter the words from Anglican Primates around the world. The question is not only "What do these words mean?" It is also, "What does this mean for my Christian faith?"

As I study these primary documents, there are questions that emerge for me that I would like to share with you. I ask that you consider them, and others that may come to mind. To the extent that you share your thoughts with me, you will be helping me formulate responses as I meet with clergy and lay leaders in the Diocese and beyond.

Your reflections will also help me take your voice to the House of Bishops when it meets later this month. I want you to be heard, and I ask your assistance.

In asking myself questions about the documents, I have sought to clarify why the Primates' Communiqué and the proposed Anglican Covenant are worth spending the time and energy to understand them. For me, I have discovered that the questions I started with are not the ones with which I have ended. My questions grow out of a general observation: The Communiqué and the proposed Covenant make certain assumptions and assertions about the Anglican Communion, its nature as a "Communion," the way some would like it to be structured, the manner by which its membership would be determined and how "un-membership-like-behavior" might be disciplined by "the Anglican Communion." Certainly, other questions could, and eventually will need to be answered. But for now, I find the following ones most helpful for me.

My first question is this: "What characteristics described in these two documents do we understand to be in accordance with what we believe is true for us in order to be faithful Christians?"

And the second is: "For those of us who seek to live out our baptismal covenant faithfully as Episcopal Christians, what characteristics of the Church as described in the Primates' two texts would lead us to choose to stay with The Episcopal Church if it were to sign off on the requests of the Communiqué and the proposed Anglican Covenant?" A corollary question naturally follows: "What gets in the way of our choosing The Episcopal Church as the community through which we will faithfully live out our Christianity as the texts describe Anglican Christian faithfulness?" These questions also grow out of another observation: Many of us chose The Episcopal Church as our expression of Christian faith, having been raised in another Christian or even non-Christian tradition. Others of us have been bought up exclusively in The Episcopal Church and have seen Christendom only through these eyes. Given this reality, my questions to you build on your careful observations and reading of the primary texts.

I continue to believe and preach that West Tennessee is a place where God's promise in Christ is good news for all people. I look at the Communiqué and the proposed Anglican Covenant with this vision for Christian living in view. I look at the questions through those same filters, and I invite you to do the same. In the end, this is what we are being asked to consider: What is the nature of the Church being described in the Primates' documents, and to what extent am I willing to commit my life in service to that Church? These are critical questions to answer truthfully, faithfully and in the sure and certain hope we have in Christ.

We, the members of the Anglican Communion, are being called to listen, pray and act. We must find a way to do this with spiritual integrity and, I believe, with joy. After all, it is "good news" we have been sent to proclaim. As far as I am concerned, if there is

not joy in this offer of Christ's love for the world, then I have chosen the wrong expression of Christian living. Please note that I did not say "comfort" but "joy" is the keynote of my Christian living. I ask you to explore where you find you abiding joy in the abiding and steadfast love of God.

"What more can be said . . ." remains to be seen. But for those of us – all of us – who "to Jesus for refuge have fled," our firm foundation in faith has as its cornerstone God's promise that is both sure and certain. Do the Communiqué and the draft Anglican Covenant provide the bricks to build the house of faith that God would have us become a part of, a house not built with human hands, but by God? This is the time for study, prayer and reflection. Once done, we need not fear. We will act in the faith that God is with us. And if God is with us, who can be against us? In this Lenten season, take the time to watch and pray. Let us do it in the confidence that in the end, the Easter promise of God in Christ has overcome the world. + Don