

September 20, 2008

TO: The Diocese of West Texas

FROM: Bishops Lillibridge and Reed

RE: The House of Bishops Meeting, September 2008

We have returned from the House of Bishops meeting which was held in Salt Lake City, Utah, from September 17-19. The major focus of this meeting was two-fold: a discussion of The Lambeth Conference (Wednesday morning and afternoon) and the matter of considering the deposition (removal from the ordained ministry) of the Bishop of Pittsburgh, The Rt. Rev. Robert Duncan.

The matter of Bishop's Duncan deposition dominated the days of the meeting, and we met in plenary session on Wednesday evening, Thursday morning, and Thursday afternoon dealing with this situation and considering the evidence presented. Bishop Duncan had previously notified the Presiding Bishop he would not be in attendance.

The vote (to consent to the Deposition of Bishop Duncan based on the Title IV Review Committee's findings) was finally taken on Thursday afternoon, and by a vote of 88-35 (with 4 abstentions), Bob Duncan was deposed for "abandoning the communion of this Church by an open renunciation of the Doctrine, Discipline, or Worship of this Church" (quote taken from the explanation attached to the relatively brief resolution itself). Both of us spoke against and voted against the deposition. The discussions by the bishops were firm, passionate, and respectful – even as you could sense a pall descending on the House as we moved toward the hour of decision. The whole situation reflects the brokenness in the Communion in general and the Episcopal Church in particular.

There were several "tracks" on which this discussion and decision occurred. One of particular concern to us and to others was the interpretation of the canons being used to move forward with this deposition, an interpretation with which we do not agree. To us, the plain reading of the canon (see IV.9.Sections 1 and 2, page 154, of the 2006 edition of the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church) requires, among other things, a bishop to be "inhibited" with the "consent of the three senior bishops having jurisdiction in this Church" before a deposition moves forward. Previously, the three senior bishops had declined consent to the inhibition. The canon reads "*shall* then inhibit." In other places in the canons the word "shall" does not mean optional.

Another line of argument was that Bishop Duncan had not yet actually left the Episcopal Church, but that he and the Diocese of Pittsburgh were preparing to consider such action through a "second reading" of a resolution at their upcoming diocesan convention in October. Therefore, any action on the matter of the deposition of Bishop Duncan should wait until after the Diocese of Pittsburgh meets in convention in about two weeks. This was seen as a valid argument by some, including us. However, the

majority of the bishops believed that Bishop Duncan's previous statements and actions had already constituted an abandonment of this Church. Certainly those statements and actions indicated this intent, but it is our opinion that you cannot convict someone on what might happen at some point in the future. However, those in the majority said that they did not consider the upcoming vote in Pittsburgh relevant, but rather that Bishop Duncan's pattern over many months had been to orchestrate the removal of the Diocese of Pittsburgh from The Episcopal Church, and that was reason enough to move forward with the deposition.

Another point of disagreement is the canonical meaning of "a majority of the whole number of Bishops entitled to vote." The chair (the Presiding Bishop) ruled that was to be interpreted as bishops who were present at the meeting. This was challenged from the floor, but a ruling of the chair can only be overruled by a two-thirds majority, and that majority was not forthcoming.

An additional argument put forward by those favoring deposition was that the remaining Episcopalians in the Diocese of Pittsburgh needed this to happen now so that they could begin to move forward with their life as the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh. Who really is the Diocese of Pittsburgh will be the subject of much upcoming debate and, regrettably, likely legal action.

So, the turmoil surrounding this situation will continue for some time. Public pronouncements indicate that Bob Duncan has already been received into the Province of the Southern Cone and his ordination as a bishop will be recognized as valid there as well as by some of the other Provinces in the Anglican Communion. In addition, if the Diocese of Pittsburgh does move forward on the second reading of the resolution to leave the Episcopal Church (which we believe is a virtual certainty), there will be all kinds of legal challenges to follow. The people of the Diocese of Pittsburgh are in great confusion at present, as they have been for quite some time. They need our prayers, as does Bob Duncan and his family. The whole Church does, for that matter.

One of the greatest disappointments to us, your bishops, is that the rest of the Communion sees this as the first thing we do as a House of Bishops following the Lambeth Conference. Yes, there is much blame to go around. Yes, this action was probably not really a surprise, given the run-up to the meeting. But we remain concerned that opportunities for building bridges with those with whom we disagree remain elusive by such actions and that our witness to Jesus Christ as a family of churches continues to be diminished in the eyes of a world that needs such a witness.

We will have more to say about the situation in the Church at our upcoming Clergy Conference, but in the meantime please know that we are deeply grateful to you for your prayers and support as both your shepherds and your servants in West Texas.