

## A Response to the 1998 Lambeth Conference of Bishops

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While Scripture has always been read with profound and prayerful seriousness in the Anglican communion, our tradition has usually been wary of claims to be guided by "Scripture alone." We are aware that faithful persons of good will may reach different conclusions regarding the interpretation of Scripture. Indeed, history has shown that the community of the faithful has sometimes come to discern God's will only after a protracted, agonizing, and contentious process. The struggle against slavery in the 19th century United States is a case in point. In our own day, people of good faith may hold soundly-reasoned, divergent positions on the Bible's significance for questions including the ordination of sexual minorities, the nature of Christian mission, and Christian postures regarding war, international debt, and a host of other issues.

We respect the crucial role of conscience in discerning God's will through the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit. We also respect the tremendous complexity of the biblical materials and of the history that produced them.

For those reasons, we are concerned by claims to understand Scripture univocally, especially with regard to urgent moral, political, and ecclesiastical questions where the community of the faithful has not reached a consensus. Such claims often minimize the complexity of Scripture, short-circuit the hard work of prayerful discernment, and polarize the community of the faithful along lines of "right" and "wrong" interpretation.

The understanding of human sexuality is a case in point. The bishops at the 1998 Lambeth Conference acknowledged a variety of "understandings" among themselves relative to Scripture and homosexuality, a point underscored by Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold as well.

We welcome the counsel of Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, directed to issues of homosexual persons in the Church but appropriate to broader conversations on the role of Scripture in our common life:

"Argument and controversy solve nothing. We need a new kind of 'conversation'--one that begins with respect for the integrity of another and a willingness to study the scriptures together, to reflect on our experience--including the experience of homosexuals--and to share in a process which attempts to put into practice . . . 'the Church as a community of moral discourse.'"

We are further confident that a wide range of interpretive perspectives such as those provided by historical criticism, theological-pastoral concerns, feminist/womanist studies, and socio-economic analysis (to name only a few) have a salutary place in such conversations.

We call upon lay and clerical leaders in our Communion to cultivate an atmosphere of abiding mutual respect around the interpretation of Scripture: respect for the complexity of the questions that face us all as we strive to live out our baptismal covenant, and respect for one another as persons who share the enlightening and gracious presence of the Spirit of God.