

The Top Ten Reasons We Should Heed The Windsor and St. Michael Reports
(with apologies to David Letterman)

By now elephant terminology has become standard in Church parlance, referring as it does to that which speaks volumes even as it is not mentioned. Both the reports with which we will be dealing in this hour are classic elephant documents, for both seek to talk about something else, in one case how we can stay together, in the other what kind of issue the issue is, without talking about the issue per se. And in so doing the issue thunders silently forth. So let's be clear from the beginning- these reports are not about gay relationships, and so at another level they are. Now anyone who has been involved in Church life in recent years knows that nothing is more oppositional than that issue, especially when people say they are in dialogue. So here at the very outset, as we do (not) talk about the issue, minds begin to close or parrying arguments begin to be planned. In reply, I want to tell you where I sit, and thus how I intend to go about my work. I will endeavor to offer arguments why these theological reports from seemingly distant committees do matter to ordinary lay people. And though a conservative, I will endeavor to offer arguments equally applicable to Christians of liberal persuasion.

My experience as a parish priest is that it is hard enough to make people in Belleville or Brockville think that Kingston matters. Getting them to think that the views of fellow Anglicans in Lagos or Dar-es-Salaam impinge on their lives is well nigh impossible. Furthermore, we live in a democratic market culture, and think readily of our church as

our affinity group- what right really have others to tell us what to say or do? We must readily admit that in offering these reasons we are swimming straight upstream.

Let's start with thumbnail summaries of the reports in question. After the ordination of Gene Robinson in 2003, the primates of the Communion met, and in response to their concerns the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, commissioned a report. The resulting *Windsor Report*, made public in October of 2004, was one of the most theologically serious committee findings in memory. Again it is important to recall that their mandate was not to pronounce on the subject of homosexuality. But they did state clearly that the Communion is not without a teaching on this subject. The "instruments of unity", the Archbishop and primates and Lambeth conference, the gathering of bishops worldwide every ten years, had all reiterated a traditional view question of sexuality. This was not so much a statement of what the commission thought the teaching should be, only a statement that there was already a teaching acceptable to the preponderance of the Communion. At the same time, the report acknowledged that there was no mechanism internationally to enforce doctrinal uniformity, since the Communion assumed a considerable level of autonomy for its member churches. So, the report is really talking about the conditions under which communion between churches can be maintained. Think of the analogy of a family- each member is autonomous, so if one member wants to go do something wild he or she is at one level free to do so. But the others are also free to decide the terms under which they will continue to live under the same roof. You will sometimes hear people say, in retort to the *Windsor Report*, "what right have those Africans to tell us what to do?" But you can see that this in fact is

inaccurate, since the report in no way ever claims such a right. It addresses only the question how relations between churches can be maintained.. The report uses several key terms that are good to bear in mind: “walking together” and “walking apart”, referring to actions taken by an individual church to maintain or to break communion. The report also speaks of the “bonds of affection” which are to be protected among different communions within the one communion (here the report leans on a trend in modern ecumenical theology built around the concept of communion, or, in Greek, *koinonia*, literally “holding in common.”) The report finally allows time for churches to deliberate, and then to demonstrate their will to walk together. It speaks of the future need for what it calls a “covenant” in which the canon laws of different Anglican churches [join]. At no point does it move toward sanctions for actions against unity in the past.

The Canadian part of the drama began shortly thereafter, with the general synod of 2004, to which was brought a motion for “local option,” according to which each diocese could make up its own mind about same-sex unions. But the synod worried that it really was an issue of sufficient import for the whole Church, and in response the primate gave a theological commission the specific task of discerning whether or not it was an issue of doctrine. In answer to the question, the answer was, quite simply, “yes.” To be sure, it also said that it was not “core doctrine,” using a term derived for the most part from the infamous trial of Bishop Righter in the American Episcopal church. In other words, this issue did not rise to the level of the affirmations of the creed, whose binding status [is to] us self-evident. The heart of the matters, says the report, is that this proposal is so closely related to Christian marriage, which sits prominently in the BCP, as to involve a

redefinition of marriage. The report also states that in its relation to marriage it touches on a range of other doctrines from creation to sin and redemption. In effect the bar is thereby raised for the canonical requirements to change the teaching.

Well fine, but why might these reports in fact seem problematic to Anglicans? One could give an answer from historical theology, but something more everyday may help more.

So, first of all, many come to the Anglican Church from evangelical or catholic backgrounds, and appreciate its freedom: the Anglicans don't tell me what to believe, the Anglicans value the questions as much as the answers, the Anglicans can live with mystery, and so on- who has not heard or even thought such sentiments? Tracing this back from its modern expression, many Anglican thinkers have pointed to the fact that the Church of England did not begin with a distinct statement of faith, or confession, or a defining thinker (though of course both these statements are very much open to rebuttal.) Secondly, Anglicans have always fancied that they have a special relationship to culture. They were after all the official Church for England. They have always valued artistic and literary expressions of culture. In our own day, why not just leave it to each local culture? Why not step back from definition and leave room for "artistic license"? So the more liberal argument goes.

One more preliminary word is required. You will note that these reports have to do, in a way, with what we nowadays call "process." In other words, not only does the Anglican Communion have a disagreement on the question of sex, but it also lacks the clear mechanism to deal with such a conflict. I once worked for a bishop of a missionary

diocese of a rather experimental kind, who liked to say that we were trying to build an airplane while we flew it. Something similar is true of the Anglican Communion, which is trying to discern how to live together in the midst of a major family fight. So it needs to find the patience and breathing space to stay together long enough to learn the means to remain a family. Analogies from the world of family psychotherapy again leap to mind.

And so we are ready to get started, for I aim to offer 10 reasons why you, even if you are a liberal on all this, and even if you admit to yourself that Lagos doesn't seem to have much to do with your faith, should care about these reports?

Reason #1

Reports that make everybody a little upset can't be all bad.

We live in a deeply conflicted moment in the Church. You cannot overestimate the degree to which everything people do or say, with whom they associate, where clergy will consider going, or what places will consider them, is ruled by this battle. This one will not go away. If you think it will, review its recent political track record. So the first thing to say is that these were not in any way partisan documents. Both commissions were balanced, and in each case [conservatives feared] weighted to the liberal side. In both cases the reports did not satisfy everyone. Conservatives complain that *Windsor* did not rebuke the erring churches. Liberals tried to wriggle out of its calls for contrition for their offenses against charity and unity. Conservatives were unhappy that *St. Michael* declined to say that the issue was church-dividing (i.e. something over which one must

leave), while liberals would overlook the fact that it gave a clear answer to the question asked, and try to shift the conversation toward the “core doctrine” issue, or say that it has no bearing since it is only theological and not canonical (and you wonder why lawyers dominate our society!). Both were balanced, prudent, focused, measured, which is to say classically Anglican documents. What other hope do we have of hanging together if such documents, with such balance, are given no weight or even serious hearing?

Reason #2

We claim to be a tradition that does not check its mind at the door.

So ran the advertisement for the Episcopal Church a few years ago. For so we seek to promote ourselves. But perhaps we flatter ourselves, and in part because of some of the half-truths we soothe ourselves with about our own tradition. Anglicans are fond of saying that they do not have a theological system to which they must bow, but rather espouse the “mere Christianity” which one of our most famous modern adherents, C.S. Lewis, advocated. But these slogans should not absolve us from the need to articulate the faith altogether. Sometimes Anglicans in modern times have hidden behind these non-confessional claims, so as to make the absence of worked out theological accounts of the faith to be a virtue. But we remain under the obligation to give an account of the faith that is in us, as Peter enjoins us.

Some of the questions entailed in the hard work of thinking through our faith are the following:

- What things are central to the faith, and what things are inevitably connected to those essential things, and what things aren't?

- What is the relationship between the standards of the Christian life and the “sorts and conditions” we find within the community itself?
- How can we be faithful and yet compassionate at the same time?
- What does it mean for a Church to teach something, in spite of the diversity of opinion and the need to protect speculation and inquiry?
- When do we assert our claims and when do we accede to the needs of the weaker brother or sister?

These are precisely the questions that the reports are struggling with, questions that are very real at the parish level too, though sometimes the reports resort to technical terms and themes to deal with them. To give answers to such questions, and truly to engage in the process of receiving these ideas, is what it means not to check your mind at the door.

Reason #3

The reports matter because we live in a post-Constantinian moment in the Church.

Speaking of technical, what does that mouthful mean? From the time of the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century, until the dawn of the modern era, Christianity began to enjoy the status of an officially endorsed religion in close relationship to the state (though with on-going tensions with the state as well). Now the era of such an alliance and its attendant privileges is gone, and a remarkable consensus, from left to right, welcome the shift and say “good riddance.” A church that is post-Constantinian marches to its own gospel drummer; it is, in the words of contemporary ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, a community of “resident aliens” in any culture. People across the spectrum on the Anglican scene say amen, sometimes without stopping to think how ill-prepared we in

particular are for this shift, what a sizeable displacement it will mean for Anglicans, weaned as they must be from their establishment roots. Everyone wants to be “post-Constantinian”, but actually to be so turns out to have a shape and a demand harder than imagined. Take the perfect example of the cultural battle over sexuality. Now this country has homosexual marriage, and some voices in the Church say “if the state allows this, then we will be obliged to minister under the terms that our political dispensation sets out.” This is, as I say, an old aspect of Anglicanism, the desire to accommodate itself to the political realities as a state-sanctioned faith, in what is technically called “Erastianism.” But of course such an arrangement cannot nowadays be taken for granted, for who would claim that ours is a Christian society or culture? Here is in fact a perfect example of the cost, the bite, of claiming to be a post-Constantinian Church, namely entertaining seriously the possibility that we will have to minister against the grain of what state and cultural elite espouse. And both the reports assume that the church must think out its position, and live it out among its Anglican brothers and sisters, for itself, and as itself, without simply taking its cue from the state. This is, when push comes to shove, harder for us to find the gumption to do than we might imagine.

Reason #4

Because the reports take a constrained view of the debate over sex.

That being said, we would also wish to live against the grain in a spirit of tolerance and charity. While we may not want to be defined by the politically correct, we do sense that these values are shared by the church and what is best in our culture. The Church ought to show some pastoral subtlety. It ought to be able to put things in perspective, and so see

that this one issue, around which people may struggle, is but one among many issues of personal identity and behavior around which we may struggle. It ought to welcome people who have this struggle into its life. But are these reports consistent with such a view? They very much are. Remember that they address the issue itself only indirectly, only as they say what kind of an issue it is, and what kind of positions on it the Church has taken. Both reports leave Church-men and women free to voice and to hold other opinions. In some ways the relatively high bar for doctrinal change that they reports assume leaves a good deal of latitude for free debate and thought about such issues, and that balance of doctrinal conservatism and room for free thought is the real Anglican legacy to us.

Furthermore the reports encourage continued discussion over the issue. There is no question that the politically fraught situation we now find ourselves in actually makes such dialogue harder and less likely to occur. This is one of the deep ironies and tragedies of the situation. Windsor and St. Michael describe a more charitable and thoughtful environment than the one we live in. For both reports do indeed assume that the Church must continue to think about the issue, that it cannot simply anathematize, whether from the left or the right, and be done with it. And that, much more than what we now see, is the kind of Church we seek.

Reason #5

Because wisdom takes the long view.

We are at this moment absorbed in the battle over same sex unions. But this is not the only battle on today's front. Nor can we even imagine what new battles may appear in the

next generation. Nor is it likely that the lines will form in the same way we see today. I have just read about the reintroduction of animal sacrifice into the province of South Africa. You would think that is an issue all can rally against, though in our age of cultural affirmation, maybe not. Or take for example the debate over open communion, the practice, increasingly widespread in the Episcopal Church, of allowing the unbaptized to receive communion. What is interesting here is that those supporting this innovation are an alliance of liberals who are drawn to its inclusivity, and church-growth evangelicals who like it as an evangelistic tool and are very picky about the sacraments anyway. In short, we need to hang together so that we have a communion, and a means of discernment for the communion, that will serve us in the future. May it not be that other more terrible issues are on the way, issues for which we will be grateful to have a means of unified global resistance? What if in our cost-conscious society the euthanizing of the elderly catches on. How shortsighted to have broken our megaphone in pieces over this one issue!

Reason #6

Because the reports assume a balanced and integrated view of the Christian life.

The reports we are talking about come out of the Church, but they are also theological doctrines, and theology doesn't have the best reputation. Why should we make trouble over ivory tower ideas divorced from real life? Shouldn't we take a fuller and more integrated view of the human being, one that holds head and heart, thinking and doing together? Well, yes we should, and my argument is that this is precisely what the reports help us to do. For surely the temptation in our culture is to think about things in a

thoroughly pragmatic way. What will work? What will help us to get by? And hold the community together? How can we be pastoral as opposed to[the] rule of doctrine-dominated? But if you stop to think about it, how often in ordinary church life do we really hear about doctrine, or debate and discussion our intellectual commitments? Actually if we are to have a balanced view of our Christian life, we need some attention to head as well as heart. If we really want to lead what we say we want, an integrated life, we need to acknowledge that what we believe must be given attention. If what we say about Jesus Christ and his implication for the world is true, then it ought to effect how we act and what we make of our feelings. If we are to discard worries about doctrine, then I say all that good sounding talk about head and heart have to go too.

Reason #7

The reports challenge our culture addicted to autonomy and obsessed with sex.

I have been reading Tom Wolfe's, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, a book about the culture of university particularly in relation to sexual mores. He begins the book with a study in which rats surgically altered to remove a lobe of the brain that controls behavior, who have begun indiscriminately rutting, are placed in close proximity to a control group of rats. Soon the latter are as frenzied and indiscriminate as their impaired neighbors. His point is clear: disorder is culturally contagious. What if the confused rats are the culture at large, and the control neighbors are we Christians? Let's face the obvious fact, one that conservatives and liberals can agree on readily: we do indeed live in a society deeply disordered on the subject of sex. Think of how we sexualize all commodities for gain, or how our children are sexualized in dehumanized ways at younger and younger ages. This

however is but part of a yet deeper problem. On the subject of sex, and most any other, we simply hate to be told we can't. The very idea of a line, a rule offends our sense of autonomy, on which our culture of the market is built. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," said the great American poet Robert Frost, and in so saying he touched the very heart of our culture. Who has the authority to say to us we can't, unless they can show that I have manifestly trampled on someone else's right to do whatever they will? Whatever you make of the sex debate in the Church, surely you can admit that what it is at least in part about is the affront that someone would say "you can't...here is a wall." Who are those Africans to tell us what to do? Who is St. Paul, ancient geezer that he is, to tell us what we can't do in enlightened 21st century Canada? The reports may be right and they may be wrong, but insofar as they have hit our culturally neuralgic point, they must be taken seriously. Part of what bothers us about them, after all, is that they managed to get right into our kitchen, which is where the Gospel is supposed to get after all.

Reason #8

The reports provide the minimal kind of authority in church teaching we seek

Yes, our culture balks at authority, and no community can preserve itself unless it can find the means to preserve its own self-understanding, its boundaries, the membrane around itself as an organism. But surely we as Anglicans must be wary of this authority as well? Didn't we have our beginning as a separate communion, after all, in protest against the excessive authority of the Roman Catholic magisterium, or teaching office? Here we encounter the most frequently heard objection to the reports, that they are moving us inexorably toward the Roman model of authority. But is this criticism really

fair? When it comes to setting limits, the key qualities are discernment and moderation. Whether you are talking about parenting or governing or running a school, it is a mistake to abandon all discipline for fear of the slippery slope to despotism. In fact what is coming into being for the Anglican communion is, truth be told, a minimalistic kind of mechanism for maintaining limits. First of all it makes innovation difficult; as Richard Hooker, one of the first notable Anglican theologians, prudently advised Anglicans back in the 16th Century, we ought to be careful about changing what has stood the test of time, and ought to do so only when a clear consensus has emerged for the change. And given the relative cumbersomeness of the instruments in question, the need to marshal agreement among so many and so different a deliberative body as the worldwide bishops, they are likely to be used only infrequently, and then only slowly. Furthermore the fact that there are four “instruments of unity,” four bodies or offices charged with exercising authority in teaching, means that we have the same kinds of “checks and balances” that are so important in our democratic polities, and which have a theological warrant as well. (About democracy Reinhold Niebuhr once said that humans are good enough to make it possible and evil enough to make it necessary).

Reason #9

We need the reports because we realize now that we are part of a global network.

So far we have offered reasons why we should take these reports seriously and heed their direction. But they have been reasons that relate to our own Church in our own surroundings. But, you might ask, at the end of day, why shouldn't we be the final arbiters of our own church in our own surroundings? Whichever side we go with, what

have the Nigerians to do with us? Why should the Tanzanians and the Congolese get in the middle of a family fight?

At this point we need someone to read our own lines back at us. We Anglicans tend to pride ourselves on being in touch with, and capable of addressing, our culture. But what is our own culture saying, in its economics and its art and its communications? Surely we live in a dramatic moment of the global, when trade and the internet have drawn us closer, and thrown cultures once isolate cheek by jowl next to one another. While we may ask ourselves, why should I care about those Nigerian Anglicans, it is at the same time an odd thing to say, given what else is happening on our own neighborhood. The East Asian population in Halifax has grown; the church in Toronto increasingly west Indian; our computers and made and fixed in south India; our industry owned by the Chinese; need I go on? Some social observers even wonder if the old ideas of nationality are outdated, with the new notion of global network the rising reality. Well, my friends, we Anglicans are already an global network, and in a movement close to insanity we are in danger of breaking it apart just as it moment of historical, even providential significance approaches. One thinks of the remark of Abba Eban, that the Palestinians “never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.” To close in on ourselves in a new parochialism at this moment because we cannot have our way would be a new chapter of Anglican tragedy.

Reason #10

**The reports matter because they understand us as a part of the Church catholic,
something “deep and wide.”**

Much of what we have offered rises no higher than sociology or politics or practicality. But there is a truly theological cash-out to the argument we have been offering to heed the Windsor and St. Michael reports. We confess every Sunday as we stand in church that we believe in a church which is, among other things, “catholic.” This means literally having to do with the whole, with the world. We are saying, in theological parlance, something similar to what we just said, that we are a global network. The church stretches from north to south to east to west because God is one, his faith one, his baptism one. Our oneness is a witness to God’s oneness: be one as I and the Father are one, says Jesus. And an expression of this oneness is the drawing together of all peoples, as prophesied in Daniel and initiated by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The Windsor document in particular builds on this idea of being one together, of communion, of *koinonia*, which includes the oneness of all peoples. This having things in common includes all dimensions of our life: our beliefs, our goods, our practices, our communion bread. For as we have already stressed our lives are integrated wholes, and this pertains to Churches too. To believe in the Church catholic is to say not just that this is a nice addition to Church life, like a visitor for a Lenten service or an occasional service project, but rather that this is who we are. To suppose that being a church that is catholic is an optional feature is to miss one crucial point of the Gospel. Communion is not then simply that it is a good thing to be together from time to time, as if our relation to our brother and sister Anglicans were, as one eminent Anglican leader has suggested, something like

a social gathering, a tea party. On the contrary communion says that the life we are given by Christ is a life held in common with those with whom we are in communion, a life that implies, as the great 1963 Anglican congress in Toronto said, a life that implies “mutual responsibility and interdependence.” God in other words makes us family, which is something altogether more and harder and more gracious than a more casual affinity. I might add, it is in our own moment deeply ironic. For we claim to remain an expression of catholic Christianity, to be catholic in our worship, but to disregard the catholicity of the communion would be to give the lie to these claims. Furthermore we Anglicans claim to have a passion for ecumenism, and yet we seem all too ready to fail to protect that unity that we already have.

This confession we make, “I believe in the Church catholic and apostolic,” it is theological to be sure, but of the sort you can feel in your viscera as well. For we all have had a sense that the Church we are part of, though it needs to be creative, is something reaching far into the past as well as the future. We are attracted to Anglicanism because it is so very much wider than my little parish, part of something wide as the earth itself, however strange that may make some of it to us. Isn’t that part of the reason, whether we admit it or not, that we are members here, and not the independent church down the street, whose music or youth group may at times appeal more? That instinct is in fact rooted in theology, and it has everything to do with what these reports are seeking to preserve. For there is a real danger that our links, our bonds of affection, may fray and even break in our not so distant future.

Who has not felt the adrenaline of a struggle, the determination to prevail? Who has not felt the regional pride that says, you can't tell me what to do in my own house? Who isn't proud of the liberality of spirit of Anglicanism at its best? Still the moment we [are in] as church men and women is a crucial one, for we have a chance to preserve and support something, the burgeoning Anglican communion, in a moment of danger. What a tragedy it would be if we, for lack of seeing the matter in its real depth and breadth, should stand by as this portion of the communion that is Christ's Church should unravel and so lose its special vocation from God?

Address delivered by Rev. Canon George R. Sumner, at St. James Church, Kingston, ON,
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