

*Office of The Bishop
The Rt. Rev. Gary R. Lillibridge*

*The Episcopal Diocese
of West Texas
The Bishop Jones Center*

November 10, 2009

The Clergy and Vestry
Christ Episcopal Church
510 Belknap Place
San Antonio, TX 78212

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing in response to your letter of September 15, 2009, to me and to the leadership of the diocese. As you probably know, there have been many conversations and no small amount of anger about it. I am also aware that the vestry's letter has created tension within the Christ Church family. I have received a number of comments from members of Christ Church who were not happy with the content or the tone of the letter.

When I received the letter, I forwarded it to the elected leadership of the diocese since there was a request in the letter to take it "to the Standing Committee and Executive Board for their consideration and approval." I also asked them to send me their responses to your letter.

As I have told several of you in conversations over the past few weeks, one of the main problems with your letter was the "respond within sixty (60) days" comment. This was most unhelpful and was viewed variously as "a demand, a threat, arrogant, an ultimatum, one church telling everyone else what to do," and included an underlying tone of "or else." Bishop Reed and I shared these responses and other such comments with your rector, Tom Hardin, and Jed Morrison at a meeting in my office on October 30. They acknowledged with regret that this had so deeply influenced how people viewed the letter as that was not the intention of the vestry in sending the letter.

As we mentioned in the meeting on October 30, we want to move forward in a positive direction with the vestry, clergy, and parishioners of Christ Church. I've been giving a lot of thought to an appropriate way to respond to your letter which would represent an honest, generous, and Christ-like response. In this, I've been thinking about how St. Paul wrote letters to the churches of the first century.

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Paul always begins his letters to congregations with gratitude for their ministry. I am grateful for the powerful and wonderful ministries engaged by so many of the parishioners at Christ Church. He often acknowledges that he is praying for them. I have been praying for you. Paul begins his letters with the words, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This letter comes to you with that familiar greeting.

I mention these things because they are important examples that testify to the fact that no matter how difficult or divisive matters in the community were, Paul was always in prayer and expressed Godly concern for the churches. Paul spoke honestly and framed his letters in ways that built up the body of Christ, not in ways that caused further division among the faithful. It is my hope that this letter will be received by you in the same light.

As I mentioned at the October 30 meeting, it was surprising to be asked many of the same questions once again. It is hard to see some of these requests (numbers 2, 4, 5) as good faith questions, especially in light of the fact that I addressed them at the Christ Church vestry meeting attended by many parishioners on August 18. I have addressed them in many ways during these past several years. As I told Chuck, Tom, and Jed, it seems that no matter what I say or what the leadership or Diocesan Council may say, there seems to be another list coming forth from those who want a particular phrase mentioned or want to keep pushing in one direction or another. To quote a familiar theme expressed in several of the leadership responses: "The issue seems to be that if the Bishop/Diocese does not state things exactly as Chuck and the vestry desires them to be worded, it is not enough."

Regarding the Ridley-Cambridge draft of the Anglican Covenant, there was almost unanimous opinion that since we are weeks away from a finalized version, there is no compelling reason to act on a "draft" document and then take the matter up again a few weeks later when the final form (including a revised section four) is released in December or early January. As the leadership letter of September 17 stated: "We continue to support the ongoing covenant process. A final form is expected by the end of this year. We will then dedicate significant time to the covenant proposal at February's Diocesan Council."

Regarding the accession clause changes you suggest, the leadership noted repeatedly in their responses that this was a matter for Diocesan Council and it couldn't be done in the sixty day time frame even if everyone wanted to do it, which many do not. Of course, any congregation is welcome to bring a resolution to Diocesan Council as long as it meets the requirements of Canon 25 of the diocesan canons. I would remind you that the right to bring a resolution to Diocesan Council also brings with it the responsibility to take into account the effect that any given resolution will have on Council, and through Council, on the diocesan family as a whole.

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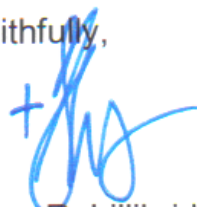
We all know that we are in a complicated and difficult time in the Church, and at the heart of much of it is how people approach the subject of "the interpretation of scripture." There are many persons of strong faith and with a deep trust in the authority of scripture ministering in the Name of Christ who hold differing understandings regarding this important subject. That does not mean that we are not brothers and sisters in Christ who cannot worship together around the same altar and join together in the work to which Christ's calls us as members of His one body.

I invite you, as a vestry, and all members of Christ Church as well as the diocesan family, to participate in Godly conversation with those who hold a different understanding of the meaning of "the interpretation of scripture." Perhaps all, then, might grow in understanding the mind of Christ in how we shall live together. Perhaps in these conversations we all might come to see that even in difference on particular points, we are all followers of Christ and that there are strong areas of agreement that unite us, rather than divide us, in our mission and ministry. This will also be a focus of our work at Diocesan Council in February and throughout 2010. As the leadership stated in their letter, we "believe that this year's Diocesan Council should not be dominated by resolutions and reports; rather it should provide ample time for deep engagement of the issues before us."

We all share in the responsibility of shaping and building our common life. In the meeting on October 30 with Chuck, Tom, and Jed, they expressed a sense that Christ Church is being marginalized within diocesan life because of a traditional stance. I do not believe this to be the case. In fact, I have heard it expressed repeatedly by the diocesan leadership and many others that their desire is that the members of Christ Church be even more involved in our common life. This is certainly my hope and desire as well, and I am currently working with your senior warden to involve more Christ Church parishioners on the committees and commissions of the diocese so that there can be a deeper connection for all of us as we minister together as a diocesan family.

Christ Church, like all churches in the diocese, is an important member of our family. We appreciate your commitment to the mission of God as it is lived and expressed through our shared diocesan life and pray that we all might "lead lives worthy of the Lord, pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God" (Colossians 1.9-10).

Faithfully,



Gary R. Lillibridge
Bishop of West Texas