

**Final Report  
of the  
Primate's Theological Commission  
The Anglican Church of Canada**

**January, 2010**

**History of the Primate's Theological Commission**

1. The Primate's Theological Commission came into being following the *Report of the BAS Evaluation Commission* to the 1995 General Synod. Noting that the *Book of Alternative Services* and the *Book of Common Prayer* "embody divergent, though not necessarily incompatible, accounts of matters of faith and theology," the Evaluation Commission had observed:  
*"Frank debate of these (theological) issues would be facilitated by the creation of a Theological Commission which, unhampered by other agenda, could address itself to issues of the theological identity of the Anglican Church of Canada."* (p. ii)
2. In the light of this, Recommendation 5 of the Report involved establishment of a Theological Commission, "composed of Anglicans with appropriate expertise and representative of the diversity of theological opinion in the Church, with the task of encouraging and promoting theological discussion in the Church by producing statements and study materials on central theological questions." In regard to its mandate the Evaluation Commission again commented:  
*"It should restrict its agenda to key theological issues, and should have some freedom to pursue matters which it feels to be central to theological reflection on the life of the Church. The Commission should be a reflective and not a reactive body."* (p. iv)  
and further suggested that:  
*"... such a Commission should exist at a relative distance from the routine business of the Church (not being responsible, for example, for drafting statements on, or commenting about, particular questions which arise in the life of the Church)." (p. 67)*
3. The existence of such a body was, for some, controversial, and in most discussion regarding the mandate of the Commission both leading up to 1995 General Synod, and again in the lead-up to the 2004 General Synod, the view was clearly expressed that the Commission should not be regarded or treated as a source for "definitive answers."
4. The original mandate of the Commission was established by a resolution of General Synod 1995 enacting the recommendations in the BAS Evaluation Commission Report. In its original establishment the mandate of the Theological Commission was:

- a. To encourage and promote theological discussion in the Church by producing statements and study materials on central theological questions;
  - b. To set its own agenda, in consultation with the Primate, concentrating on key theological issues;
  - c. To discuss the foundational theological questions underlying matters referred to the Commission by the Faith Worship and Ministry Committee and/or the House of Bishops and/or the Council of General Synod.
  - d. To reflect and respect the diversity of theological opinion in the Church.
5. Members of the first Commission met from 1996 until 2003, and between 2001 and 2003 produced a series workbooks published by the Anglican Book Centre under the general title, *Wrestling With God*, to assist the Anglican Church to address 'fundamental theological questions'. The individual volumes were entitled: *Longing for God: Anglicans Talk about Revelation, Nature, Culture and Authority*, and *Turning to God: Anglicans Talk about Sin, Grace and the Christian Life*, and *Meeting God: Anglicans Talk about Creation, The Trinity and the Church*. An attempt to produce a video failed due to lack of financial resources and unforeseen obstacles to production.
6. The first Commission undertook its work in the context of the experience of social and economic change, particularly in rural communities, brought on by globalization, and of the Church's wrestling with its history of broken relationships with First Nation Peoples as a result of the experience of the residential schools, and the impact on our common life of the need for repentance, restitution and reconciliation, and a new covenant for life together. While the Theological Commission arose from the recommendations of the Commission that evaluated the process and fractures that resulted from the coming into being of the *Book of Alternative Services*, the first Theological Commission's work was also shaped by the fact that tensions in the life of the Church were shifting to the issue of the presence of lay and ordained gay and lesbian people within the life of congregations.
7. In this context, the work of the first Commission addressed in various ways, and from a range of theological perspectives, matters of faith and its cultural shaping and expression, the interpretation of scripture, notions of 'received' doctrine, the contextual nature of all theology, and basic elements of the creedal expression of the Christian faith (creation, salvation and redemption, sanctification). In obedience to its mandate it sought to explore the foundational nature of such questions for all theology, and to engage the church with its material through sharing it in a workbook format.

8. The Commission made a deliberate choice to travel to different parts of Canada, as a part of pursuing its mandate to engage Canadians Anglicans with the work of theology, and also out of its conviction that context and culture are important in the shaping of theological language and interests. The group also met with local Anglicans and worshipped in local parishes as it traveled to Vancouver, Moose Jaw, Halifax and Crousetown, Mississauga, Walpole Island, Sorrento and St. John's Newfoundland. The second Commission initially hoped to follow suit, but the shrinking budgets of the period made this increasingly impossible.
9. The Commission experienced considerable tension at times in its work because in its formation and process it sought "to reflect and respect the diversity of theological opinion in the church." For this reason it chose to model as best it could both the dialogical quality of Canadian Anglican theology, and its rootedness in a deep tradition. The workbooks sought to pay credit to this tradition, which extends back to the Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and through them to the theologians of the first five centuries and the emergence of the scholastic methods culminating in the work of Aquinas that so influenced Hooker. That tradition also extends forward through the Evangelical and Tractarian movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and into the expanding work of ecumenical dialogues and Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox theology in their contemporary discussions and debates. The debt of that Commission and of the whole Church to the energy and immense learning of the Rev'd Dr Joanne McWilliam who edited all three workbooks over several years is incalculable, and one of the sad moments of the life of the second Commission was receiving the news of her death in 2008.
10. In obedience to its mandate, the Commission set its own agenda, and Archbishop Michael Peers, Primate at the time, attended and participated in some portion of nearly all of its twice-annual meetings. In 2001, it reported to the Primate and General Synod on the work it had undertaken and accomplished, and Act 26 of that Synod was:
 

*That this General Synod commend the work of the Primate's Theological Commission and extend its mandate for two years in order for it to complete projects presently in hand, and  
That the Primate's Theological Commission then be reconstituted for a further seven years, with a renewed mandate which would include reception and discussion of the foundational theological questions underlying matters referred to the Commission by the Faith, Worship, and Ministry Committee, and/or the House of Bishops, and/or the Council of the General Synod.*
11. At the time of the establishment of the present Commission in 2003, with a term of seven years, the Faith Worship and Ministry Committee had asked the Commission to 'comment and reflect on the theological basis on which Anglicans approach inter-faith dialogue'. The Commission began its task with some eagerness in January 2004. As the freshly constituted Commission consisted

almost entirely of new appointments, members took some time in preparation to review the work produced by the previous Commission. To some extent this Commission has understood the work of the first Commission as part of an extended conversation about foundational theological questions that undergirds the work of the past seven years.

### ***The St. Michael Report***

12. General Synod 2004 chose to defer a decision on a motion to “affirm the authority and jurisdiction of any diocesan synod, with the concurrence of its bishop, to authorize the blessing of committed same-sex unions.” In deferring the resolution, the 2004 Synod requested that the Primate ask the Primate’s Theological Commission “to review, consider and report to the Council of General Synod (CoGs), by its 2006 meeting, whether the blessing of committed same sex unions is a matter of doctrine.”
13. The Commission, which had been newly constituted at the beginning of that year and had met once, convened in Montreal following General Synod. The Chair, Bishop Victoria Matthews, was absent due to illness, and the meeting was chaired by Dr Walter Deller. We began our deliberations with the Primate, Andrew Hutchison, who delivered the request of the 2004 General Synod, in attendance. The Commission reflected on its mandate to “set its own agenda”, but agreed that the request being issued by the Synod touched on foundational theological questions, and felt duty bound to respond in as helpful a way as possible.
14. Although the Church had requested a report by 2006, we committed ourselves to completing our work within the year. We met face-to-face on two occasions at St Michael’s House in Oakville, Ontario, and numerous conversations took place as the Commission divided tasks among various members and communicated by e-mail and conference calls. The *St. Michael Report* was completed and forwarded to the Council of General Synod prior to its meeting of May 2005, a year earlier than requested. The Report was then released to the Church accompanied by a study guide produced by the Faith Worship and Ministry Committee. The *St. Michael Report* was hailed in many quarters as a notable achievement of consensus and a useful contribution to the discussion in the Church of sexual ethics. Members of the Commission, and notably Bishop Matthews, spent much of the intervening time leading up to General Synod 2007, visiting Provincial and diocesan gatherings in order to introduce the report and facilitate conversation using the study guide.
15. The Commission spent time in its subsequent meetings resuming discussions begun at our first meeting and exploring other topics we deemed as significant. One session was spent on the theology of interfaith encounter, while another considered the experiences of those engaged in cross-cultural ministry. We felt compelled to reflect on the significant issue of the authority of Scripture in *The Windsor Report*, and issued a statement in the autumn of 2006. The Council of

General Synod released its resolutions on the *St. Michael Report* and the blessing of same-sex relationships in March 2007. Having reviewed the responses we had received to the *St. Michael Report*, we followed this with a statement clarifying the relationship between the *St. Michael Report* and the Council of General Synod resolutions.

16. *The St. Michael Report* was presented at General Synod 2007 by the Chair, Bishop Matthews. There was discussion on the floor, leading to a motion “to accept the conclusion of the Primate’s Theological Commission’s *St. Michael Report* that the blessing of same-sex unions is a matter of doctrine, but is not core doctrine in the sense of being creedal, and should not be a communion-breaking issue.” The motion carried.

### ***The Galilee Report***

17. One of the outcomes of General Synod was a further motion :

*That in light of the statement of the House of Bishops to members of General Synod, dated April 30, 2007, this General Synod 2007:*

- e. ask the Primate to request the Primate’s Theological Commission to consult with dioceses and parishes and to report in advance of General Synod 2010 on:
 
  - i. the theological question whether the blessing of same-sex unions is a faithful, Spirit-led development of Christian doctrine.*
  - ii. Scripture’s witness to the integrity of every human person and the question of the sanctity of human relationships.**

18. The Commission set aside the work with which it had been engaged, and began this new stage of its work with a conference call in July 2007 and continued with four residential meetings (January 2008, Spring 2008, November 2008, January 2010). Due to budget constraints we did not meet in 2009. With the resignation of The Rev’d Dr. Wendy Fletcher in 2007 our membership changed as the Rev’d Gertrude Lebens joined in January 2008.

19. In its earliest meeting the Commission wrestled with the questions presented to it by General Synod. We discussed the request to consult with the Church and determined that the mandate of the Commission was rather to reflect theologically with those present on the Commission and offer that reflection to the Church for further discussion. An elaborate consultation with the Church was neither in our mandate nor practicable in the time available nor were the resources available. However, we did participate in the conference *Human Sexuality and the Nuptial Mystery* held at St. Margaret’s Church, Winnipeg in April 2008. Two members of the Commission presented papers at that conference. Members also consulted with gay and lesbian people in their own home contexts and reported back to the Commission on these conversations.

Five of our members were present at the Synod of the Diocese of the Arctic in May of 2008, which included a presentation by the Zacchaeus Fellowship. Many members of the Commission were present at synods within their own and other dioceses, attending to the ongoing conversations around human sexuality.

20. In the first three meetings we explored the questions asked by the General Synod to see if a consensus report could be produced. A variety of papers were written and discussed between 2006 and 2009. However a consensus proved difficult to achieve.
21. The Chair of the Commission, the Rt. Rev'd Victoria Matthews, stepped down in May 2008 as she took up her new role as Bishop of Christchurch, New Zealand. The Primate, Archbishop Fred Hiltz, appointed the Rt. Rev'd Linda Nicholls as Chair for the completion of the term of the Commission. The meeting in November 2008 took up the challenge of assessing the work of the Commission to date in relationship to the questions asked by General Synod 2007. The theological question of whether the blessing of same-sex unions is a faithful, Spirit-led development of Christian doctrine had prompted papers and discussion of scriptural concerns (*Papers 3 and 4*), development of doctrine (*Papers 5 and 6*), pro and con arguments for the blessing of same-sex unions (*Papers 7 and 8*); alternative approaches to considering human sexuality (*Papers 9, 10, and 11*), holiness and tradition (*Papers 12 and 13*). Further papers were later requested of members to explore other aspects such as past examples of changes in pastoral practice and doctrine (*Papers 14, 15, and 16*).
22. Noting that many members were experiencing 'issue fatigue' and aware of significant theological differences, the Commission came to the conclusion that a complete consensus would not be possible. Discussion did however lead to an agreed statement, *The Galilee Report*, setting forth a framework within which the theological discussion should continue. It also produced a consensus reflection on "Scripture's witness to the integrity of every human person and the question of the sanctity of human relationships", (Paper #2 of the Full Report).
23. We undertook to build on the *St. Michael Report*, following particular questions arising from that Report, and exploring the criteria by which the Church might come to deeper understanding of the particular question about how it might discern a faithful, Spirit-led development of doctrine. The papers were developed within this context of that exploration.
24. As we explored the various aspects of this question it became clear that, although consensus was not possible among the members, we had significant pieces of theological reflection to share with the Church along with the process of our struggle to hear one another in the context of prayer and study. The Report, written at The Galilee Centre in Arnprior, Ontario, took the name of that location and was released to the Church in May 2009 through the General Synod website. The accompanying papers were posted in June 2009. The national

website also highlighted brief articles announcing the provision of the Report and papers and inviting responses. During the summer of 2009 the Chair sent a copy of the full Report and papers to all Canadian diocesan offices and theological colleges to invite them to respond to the Report. Further dissemination was not within the resources available to the Commission.

25. A summary of website activity notes that, as of January 21, 2010, there were 7,643 separate visits to the website location and several hundred downloads of the Report and/or papers. Twenty-four responses were received: from individuals (15), parishes (4), dioceses (2) and colleges (3). Several parish responses noted that they had held multiple sessions to review the Report and/or papers in order to reflect appropriately on the material. In some cases, individuals as well as their parishes responded, which allowed us to perceive differences of approach even within a single parish setting. Diocesan responses were received from Doctrine & Worship committees that had reviewed the materials.
26. The Commission is deeply grateful to those who took the time to reflect on *The Galilee Report* and papers. We reviewed all the responses and they prompted significant conversation, enriching our subsequent discussion. Some of the issues raised appear in our further reflections below.
27. The number of responses received led us to wonder whether there is a waning of interest in the Church in continuing discussion of this issue, or whether the way in which *The Galilee Report* was disseminated and discussed was the most effective way to engage the Church broadly in substantive discussion. The Commission was pleased, however, to learn the story of one parish in particular where the papers engaged them in serious and deep conversation and parishioners expressed gratitude for the breadth, depth and prayerfulness of the papers and process described by *Galilee*.
28. The mandate of the Primate's Theological Commission includes, as a priority, the publication of papers from time to time to stimulate theological dialogue. It was clear from the responses that wherever groups had engaged with the material, whether or not they agreed with it and its methods, it had generated considerable discussion and thoughtful responses. Even where comments did not accurately reflect the content of the Report and its accompanying papers, we found it informative in reflecting on how better to do the task before us. As with *The St. Michael Report* a number of respondents noted that the Report was too academic. We were reminded of a continuing challenge of language:
  - a. How do we learn together to hear and understand the theological language used by others from different outlooks and pieties?
  - b. How does a Commission such as this draw from our own experiences of engagement with each other to engage more effectively the Church broadly in theological dialogue across diversities of language, piety and perspective?

For both the earlier Commission and this Commission, this has been a perplexing challenge.

29. Other than the Executive Summary of *The St. Michael's Report*, none of the work of the Primate's Theological Commission has been translated into aboriginal languages, and we are aware that this has meant that a significant constituency among Canadian Anglicans has not been able to access the basic reports.
30. Almost all the responses to the Galilee report indicated that in our statement that we could not come to a consensus they saw reflected the present state of the Anglican Church of Canada, and to a lesser extent, their own parishes. What this lack of consensus might mean was a matter of differing interpretation. We noted that for several respondents, lack of consensus was in and of itself a criterion indicating, if nothing else, a lack of clarity about where the Spirit might be leading.
31. The responses and our further discussion indicated that there are widely varying understandings and considerable confusion about what the Church is doing when it blesses. Several responses alluded to the importance of cultural anthropology as an integral part of this discussion and we are aware that we have not done a great deal of focused work in this area. We note particularly issues of cultural formation and the function of 'tradition' within non-western cultures and communities as well as in the more Eurocentric communities Anglicanism is often assumed to represent.
32. Other responses raised ongoing questions and confusions about marriage. We recommend again the various papers accompanying the Galilee Report, as well as the St. Michael Report. We note again that there has been considerable study material offered over the past few years out of the work of the Faith Worship and Ministry Committee, as well as part of its work during this triennium. Some of the confusions at the present time seem to be about the varying types of legally sanctioned relationships in Canada, and how the Anglican Church views and interacts with these.
33. At the request of the Council of General Synod a few members of the Theological Commission and the Faith Worship and Ministry committee undertook to draft a brief paper on blessings and the understanding of marriage. As a Commission we reviewed this material at our final meeting, recommending that the material on the distinctions between approaches to various types of legal marriages would be of wider value, and suggesting other possible approaches to the much more complex question of the understanding of blessing and blessing as an action of the Church.
34. More broadly, while we would not claim our work to have been definitive or comprehensive, we continue to recommend for study and discussion the material



in the St Michael Report and the Galilee Report with its accompanying papers. In them we have sought to be faithful to our mandate to provide materials that would engage the church with foundational theological questions. Wherever the Spirit may be leading the Church, how we hear that prompting, and how we discern its faithfulness to those things “that were from the beginning, that we have all heard, and seen with our eyes, looked at and touched with our hands, about the word of life”, all these continue to call forth doctrine and theology to help us assess and recognize and be faithful to that leading of the Spirit. In seeking to clarify both the breadth and depth of those criteria, we pray that our work will be of help to the Church.

35. We believe that this task of foundational theological reflection continues to be an essential task in the life of the whole Church, and more particularly, in the life of our National Church as part of the Anglican Communion and the Church Universal.

#### *Expressions of Gratitude*

36. The Commission commends the energetic and clear leadership of Bishop Victoria Matthews for her work as Chair of both Commissions, from 1996 to 2008, especially her work in sharing the St. Michael Report with the wider Church. We deeply appreciate her vision and exercise of an episcopal ministry that so values the enterprise of theological reflection.
37. The Commission wishes to acknowledge the immense giftedness and wisdom of Canon Alyson Barnett-Cowan, former Director of Faith Worship & Ministry for the Anglican Church of Canada, who was servant of and enabler for the life of both Commissions. Without her hard work, theological expertise and nuanced knowledge of Anglicanism, the work of this Commission would not have been possible.
38. Despite our occasional frustrations with our task, and sometimes with one another and the Church that called on us, we are all deeply grateful for the precious gift given to us for the past seven years by the Primate and the Anglican Church of Canada. To be able to pray and study, to work and share fellowship together, even at this time of stress and challenge in the life of our Communion, is something rare and powerful. We know that it has changed and transformed all of us, and we thank the Church for giving us in this way, an opportunity to share and grow in the life and hope that is within us. We continue to pray for our life together, that we may all be drawn into One Body, the very life of the One God who created, redeems and sanctifies us into all eternity.

*Members of the Primate's Theological Commission 2003-2010*

The Right Reverend Dr. Linda Nicholls, Suffragan Bishop of Toronto (Chair from 2008)  
The Right Reverend Victoria Matthews, Bishop of Edmonton (Chair to 2008)  
The Right Reverend Dr. Stephen Andrews, Bishop of Algoma  
The Right Reverend Dr. Ben Arreak, Suffragan Bishop of The Arctic, Kuujjuaq  
Dr. Walter Deller, Saskatoon  
The Reverend Dr. Wendy Fletcher, Principal, Vancouver School of Theology (to 2007)  
The Reverend Gertrude Lebens, St Laurence Church, Coquitlam (from 2007)  
The Reverend Jamie Howison, St. Benedict's Table, Winnipeg  
The Reverend Paul Jennings, Montreal Diocesan Theological College, Montreal  
The Reverend Dr. Joanne Mercer, Queen's College, St. John's Newfoundland  
Dr. Robert Moore, Diocese of Ottawa  
The Reverend Dr. Gary Thorne, St. George's Anglican Church and King's College,  
Halifax  
The Reverend Madeleine Urion, Diocese of Edmonton  
The Reverend Dr. Lisa Wang, St. James Cathedral, Toronto  
The Reverend Canon Alyson Barnett-Cowan, Director of Faith Worship and Ministry  
(to 2009)