

Task Force on Communion Across Difference

May 7, 2020 | Zoom Meeting

Present: Megan Allen, John Bauerschmidt, Gregory O. Brewer, Fred Ellis, Thomas Ely, Scott Garno, Mary Gray-Reeves Jordan Hylden, Susan Russell, Tanya Wallace, Christopher Wells

Absent: Miguel Escobar, Anna Haeffner, Moises Quezada Mota

The meeting was convened by co-chair John Bauerschmidt after an opening prayer by Tanya Wallace.

Our assignment for this meeting was to each craft a paragraph offering priorities for the form and content of the Task Force report to General Convention: recommendations, resources and/or resolutions. The responses from task force members are attached to these minutes as an appendix.

The primary focus of the meeting was discussion of the various perspectives represented in those paragraphs and the exploration of common desires and points of difference. That discussion included:

- Prioritizing resources equipping us to be in communion across difference over resolutions attempting to resolve differences.
- Recognizing that structural change in the post-COVID church is inevitable and wondering what creative opportunities for engagement across difference might emerge. What could we imagine now that would have been previously unimaginable?
- Concern that regardless of what we do or model there will still be resolutions forthcoming that will diminish the “breathing room” for members of the theological minority.
- Expressions of confidence that we can structure for reconciliation while recognizing that we cannot ask the institution to do work it is not designed to do. “We can’t get canon law to do that work for us.”
- Lifting up the positive example of the work toward reconciliation bearing fruit in the Diocese of Dallas. Wondering about how to amplify that and other work being done around the church
- Consideration of a “standing dialogue” on communion across difference to equip participants with tools for relationship building
- Celebrating what the work of this Task Force has generated: the Definition of Mutual Flourishing; the bilingual exercise created for churchwide engagement; the 1500+ member Facebook community that has formed.
- Finding ways to articulate the various issues, questions, concerns, challenges, needs, etc. of both the theological minority and the theological majority within TEC.
- Expressions of our own limitations, frustrations, shortcomings as a TF due to Covid-19 and lack of relational face to face time.
- Robust conversation about the relative strengths and limitations of the General Convention process and how we have moved more recently toward a more positive posture of deeper listening and mutual respect for various perspectives, especially in the crafting of resolutions.

Action Items:

- Mary Gray-Reeves agreed to convene a working group made up of Megan, Fred, Jordan and Greg to draft a “20,000-mile view” structural look at how our report might be framed. Their recommendations will be completed by June 15, 2020.

- From that work, writing groups will be convened to draft sections of the report with a late August deadline. The committee of the whole will then review and consider next steps at our August meeting ... whether in person or virtually.

Next Meetings:

- A Doodle poll will go out to determine the meeting time for the 20K working group, convened by Mary Gray-Reeves.
- The next full meeting of the Task Force will be **Tuesday, June 16** from 12-2Pacific/2-4Central/3-5Eastern via Zoom. Susan will arrange with GCO
- The GCO has offered the option of an in-person meeting -- if safe and possible – in St. Louis during a **August 24-28** window and we agreed that our work would benefit from such a meeting. Susan will follow up with GCO and report back.

Respectfully submitted,

(The Reverend Canon) Susan Russell

with thanks to Jordan Hylden for his comprehensive verbatim notes

Appendix to Minutes of 5/7/2020 Meeting of Task Force on Communion Across Difference

Task Force member responses to the request for “a paragraph offering priorities for the form and content of the Task Force report to General Convention: recommendations, resources and/or resolutions.”

Megan Allen: Two weeks ago, my classmates and I discussed LGBT+ marriage in our liturgy class. While many of us lean theologically liberal and some are personally connected to the topic, there is a genuine desire from each student not only to better understand those who hold differing theological perspectives, but to also find a way to honor our tradition and faithfully serve all of God’s people. Our work on this task force is not only to model being in communion across difference, but to also provide as much guidance as possible to others engaging in these conversations. And it is important work that needs to be done.

However, I often feel like I showed up too late to the party when we meet. Even after going over past minutes and the work done before I arrived, I still find myself wondering how our conversations are moving us forward. And to what exactly are we moving towards? Conversations on LGBT+ marriage are happening at seminaries and parishes all over the church, with or without this task force. And, in addition to our own resource, there are already a plethora of resources available regarding how to engage polarizing issues constructively.

So, where might we fit? If I followed correctly, I agree with Jordan. At this point it might be most useful for us to name transparently and courageously our differences and include them in the Blue Book to provide examples of areas where specific attention can be paid in conversations. This might also be helpful for our future conversation, especially if it is determined that the work of this task force shall continue.

John Bauerschmidt: I think we should discuss what provisions the church needs to make, in order to remain a place where communion across difference is honored. As our Task Force has said, we seek "a lasting path forward for mutual flourishing;" our authorizing resolution from 2018 acknowledges "the indispensable place that the minority who hold to this church's historic teaching on marriage have in our common life, whose witness the church needs." What will be needed by those holding this teaching in order to continue to secure this witness within our church?

Gregory Brewer: 1. Support an ongoing commitment to acknowledge and "respect" the integrity of the two different views on marriage made by GenCon 2018 resolution.
2. In making the GenCon 2018 did in respecting two views of marriage, our report hopes that those two views are reflected in both our polity and our liturgy as the doctrine, discipline and worship of the church.

Fred Ellis: We have, in my view, crafted a very good statement on what Mutual Flourishing should be. How do we bring that to our Church in way that allays the fear of people, on both sides of the issue, to insure that we are successful in remaining in communion with each other? The struggle that I have

is insuring that all people have access to marriage, even in dioceses like Dallas, without the issue of alternate oversight. There are at least 3 other parishes that would do same sex marriage, but they are unwilling to go down the path of alternate oversight. That is the only option here. Additionally, we still have a diocesan canon forbidding the performance of any marriage, other than between a man and a woman, by a priest canonically resident or licensed, and on property held in trust by the diocese. While Bishop Sumner has agreed not to enforce that against the 3 parishes under alternate oversight, it is still out there should someone choose to follow a different path. Respect for positions needs to go both ways, and I would hope that we find a way to present of easing the fear on both sides.

Thomas Ely: I believe our Task Force has accomplished three important items (at least), each of which could/should contribute to The Episcopal Church's capacity to honor, celebrate and embrace "communion across difference." Those items are 1. Our working definition of Mutual Flourishing 2. Our Tool for Focused Conversation and 3. Our launching of the Communion Across Difference Facebook page. Each of these, has the potential of helping people enter more deeply into conversation with others about and across the differences (theological and otherwise) that are present in the spectrum of belief and practice in The Episcopal Church today. Sadly, those three contributions have not received as wide an engagement as either the Task Force hoped for or as (I believe) would have been to the benefit of the wider church. Instead, we remain apart in our capacity to embrace one another according to the terms established in our definition of mutual flourishing. This may well be a reflection of the reality of our times beyond our church! So, maybe our task is to just keep trying?

I say that, in part because as we come to General Convention 2021, still in the midst of the Covid-19 epidemic, I worry, and sadly don't think, that the work of this Task Force is, or will be, high on the agenda of most church leaders, and certainly not the rank and file membership. Perhaps, I am just being too pessimistic? General Convention is a legislative body and I don't believe there is the energy to reopen debate about the provisions regarding marriage that were negotiated at the General Convention 2018 (B012), or to craft new legislation that seeks to clarify expectations and practices further on this subject, as much as I would like to see some. Several of the recommendations from the Task Force on the Study of Marriage that were not adopted at GC 2018 were referred to the SCLM and/or Task Force to Plan for the Revision of the Book of Common Prayer in A068 (Catechism, Marriage collects, etc.) and I am interested in seeing where those matters stand. Hence, I am hesitant to offer Resolutions that try to "resolve" or "solve" our theological differences.

Among the challenges I continue to see are: 1. fundamental differences of belief regarding the distinction between sacraments and sacramental rites (recognizing that some see no distinction) and 2. the theology of the episcopate with regard to marriage, in particular, which is where the work of our Task Force was grounded and where the division seems the most severe. The approaches by various bishops to comply with the provisions of B012, while laudable for the most part, have nonetheless continued to highlight the disagreements. The tension between our marriage canon and the BCP (and some diocesan canons) is one obvious example, which is present and recognized in our charge from GC and in our definition of "mutual flourishing." It is also true that for many LGBTQ members in some dioceses of our church (and those looking to TEC for recognition of their partnered life-long relationships) the apparent ambiguity of our theology of marriage and belief in their unequivocal place of inclusion, welcome and belonging in our church is a very real issue.

Perhaps, we would do well to name all that (and more) and commission papers on those subjects for discussion at General Convention (although, the cynical side of me wonders would anyone read them)? It should also be said that there are many places around our church where people are offering opportunities for conversation aimed at “communion across differences,” and that is a good thing. Maybe, in this season, what we need to do is call the church to an even deeper commitment to those conversations and not try to “solve” anything?

Miquel Escobar: I see our purpose as tied to helping the Church live in communion across our differences, not necessarily resolving them either theologically or in terms of governance and polity. This gives us an opportunity to emphasize one of the spiritual charisms of Anglicanism.

While I realize this is oversimplifying a complex history, I believe that Anglicanism has emphasized Common Prayer while other denominations developed doctrinal/confessional statements. For our Taskforce in the Episcopal Church today, this may mean prioritizing the value of coming together in common prayer and worship over our tendency - present on both left and right - to overemphasize governance and polity focused approaches and demands.

Therefore, I believe the most important thing we can offer to the wider Church is a reaffirmation of the importance of people and congregations across a diocese with different theological views on sexuality coming together periodically for a shared Eucharist, to learn to pray together and quite literally have communion across difference.

I also think we could encourage learning from some recent avenues in interfaith dialogues, particularly the work of Paul Knitter, which (again, an oversimplification) has encouraged stepping away from the discussion of the theological difference to emphasize working together when and where common ground is to be found.

Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, this might look like people and communities across the theological spectrum on issues of sexuality coming together to make a contribution toward an effective feeding ministry in the diocese. Encouraging diocesan wide service and collections on issues of common ground strengthens trust and relationships, not to mention being sorely needed at this time.

Again, I see the governance and polity questions as beyond the scope of this committee's work. I recognize that others disagree with that viewpoint. In terms of helping us to live across our differences, I hope that we affirm the need to pray for each other, engage in common worship (esp the Eucharist), and work side-by-side where there is common ground, perhaps with some practical examples of what that might look like. These are effective, and deeply Anglican, avenues forward for strengthening our denominational capacity for living with difference.

Scott Garno: As I have thought about what we might offer to the church as a result of our work, I once again ask if we are willing to do some heavy lifting. We have acknowledged our differences and endeavored to talk in ways that respect each others' dignity and positions, but have we looked for creative ways to address the theological chasm that still remains? I know some dismissed the idea of non-geographical dioceses as a possibility, and perhaps that's not even the best idea, but ought we not be willing to ask is there a way to address this divide that hasn't been thought of or tried before? I know the time is short and world circumstances are daunting, but God has done more with less in the past and I firmly believe God could do it again.

Anna Haeffner: I am encouraged by the messages that I have been reading over the past few days. I think Tanya expressed my feelings most closely. I completely understand why we are unable to meet in person, but at the same time feel that it handicaps us. I found great value from our time in Chicago, not only actually being in the same room for the meetings themselves, but also the shared mealtimes and social interactions. I feel that our physical demonstration of communion across difference speaks volumes.

Jordan Hylden: Building on our enabling resolution, we as a task force came up with a description of "mutual flourishing" within which "all members, faith communities and dioceses of The Episcopal Church may experience an equal, indispensable, and unqualified place and voice in the shared body of Christ." With the time remaining to us, I would like to see us work towards achieving as much agreement as possible on what a "lasting path forward" towards this equal place and voice for both progressives and conservatives on marriage requires in our church. Where agreement is not possible, I would like to see us identify areas of meaningful disagreement; and articulate both agreement and disagreement in respectful dialogue with one another in our Blue Book report.

As I have followed our conversation, it seems to me that there is ongoing disagreement about whether there should continue to be diocesan bishops who teach and practice the traditional view of marriage (like my own bishop, George Sumner), traditional dioceses (understood now in a way that respects Resolution B012, as is the case in Dallas), and traditional congregations (like many in TEC, not only in traditional dioceses like Dallas).

It also seems to me like there is ongoing disagreement over whether there should be room for the traditional doctrine of marriage in our church's authorized teaching and liturgies. As you all know by now, I have a hard time envisioning an equal place and voice for traditionalists on marriage in our church without those four items being addressed in a lasting way: bishops, dioceses, congregations, and teaching/liturgy. Identifying our areas of disagreement with respect to what a "lasting path forward for mutual flourishing" looks like and modeling a clear, respectful dialogue about them would I think be a service to our church as it takes up the work of discerning what this lasting path forward will be.

Susan Russell: Resolution A227 charged us to seek "a lasting path forward for mutual flourishing" of those Episcopalians who disagree about the church's stance on same-sex marriage. And it framed that goal acknowledging both convention's "clear decision" that Christian marriage can be a covenant between two people of the same sex or of the opposite sex and the commitment to providing access to marriage rites for all – while affirming "the indispensable place that the minority who hold to this Church's historic teaching on marriage have in our common life, whose witness the Church needs."

There are those who would consider the fact that a group as diverse as ours came up with a mutually agreed upon definition of mutual flourishing was in and of itself an "end product" they could not have imagined. I am proud of that work and hope that whatever form our final report takes it will emphasize both the content and process its creation and commend both to the wider church.

That said, I do not understand the charge of our task force as "solving" the differences that challenge us.

My perspective is that our call is to model how we stay in communion with each other across those differences. How we seek and serve Christ in the person who disagrees with us, challenges us, even hurts us.

I would therefore not support a final report that would propose canonical or doctrinal fixes – either to expand access to marriage for couples of the same-sex or to institutionalize protections for those who represent the theological minority regarding the Church’s teaching on marriage. I believe that is beyond the scope of our work.

This is not to say that is not work that will continue to be done. Resolutions may – and arguably should – be considered at the 80th General Convention clarifying the Episcopal Church’s position on marriage. And members of this task force who love, care, and pray for each other might – in fact likely will – find themselves at opposite microphones in hearing rooms and on convention floor.

And there may be some for whom continuing to preserve space for the theological minority that denies access to marriage for same-sex couples means the Episcopal Church is not a spiritually safe place for them and they will leave. And that will grieve the heart of God. And there may be some for whom changing the canons and making inclusive marriage liturgies part of the Book of Common Prayer is a bridge too far for their theological consciences and/or ordination vows and they will leave. And that will grieve the heart of God.

Nevertheless, during this time of COVID19 when the inescapable reality of our interdependence permeates every aspect of our collective experience I believe our commitment to mutual flourishing is and of itself a witness to the church and to the world – a commitment that transcends the issue that brought us to the table. I believe there we have an important witness to make and I look forward to working with all of you in the process of creating it.

Tanya Wallace: I am resonating with what Megan and Scott have written at this time in our work. Megan wondered how our conversations are moving us forward, and Scott asked if we are willing to do some heavy lifting. They helped put words to the questions I've been asking myself. I remember articulating at the beginning of our work together that I really hoped our work would make a lasting difference and be helpful to the wider church. I'm still hoping for that, but unsure that we've accomplished it.

My sense of heavy lifting acknowledges that we have done some important work in listening to each other, building relationships across difference, and creating an important statement. But we haven't, for whatever reason (and some of it, of course, is the inability to meet together again in person) taken the opportunity to dig deeper together, to do the hard work of not just agreeing on what keeps us in communion, but really "going there" together, into the depths of what really separates us and how really to flourish. It may be that work is beyond our scope, but I'm not sure it is. I wonder if it might also be a missed opportunity if we don't find a way to engage it together. I wish I could offer a concrete suggestion in addition to my questions, but I do offer trust in each other, the process, and God above all else.

Christopher Wells: I imagine that our group will not be able to reach consensus on actual policy proposals for what all within our church might hope for in terms of their needs and in terms of what respect will come to. In that case, we will have an obligation simply to record our disagreements, and

to enumerate the several perspectives or options that we came up with. I think this sort of concrete work would be enormously helpful to church leaders--here I think I am agreeing, in effect, with Jordan and Megan and others.

In the process of drafting something, I suspect, too, that our drafters may bump into one or another "creative" idea or suggestion, as Scott and Tanya are perhaps calling us to.

In short, I think today's pre-meeting exercise has provided a little salutary momentum toward writing that we should build on over the next couple months.