

PASTORAL LETTER

We write as bishops within the Church of England, who seek both to maintain and promote its Catholic heritage, believing that this demands maintaining the ministry of bishops, priests and deacons in a manner consistent with the tradition of the Church, East and West. We address all those, ordained and lay, who look to us at this time for pastoral guidance.

In July 2010 the General Synod of the Church of England took yet another decisive step in the direction of enacting legislation that would make it possible for women to be admitted to the episcopate. At the same time General Synod declined to make any appropriate provision that would satisfy the consciences of those of us who cannot accept that such ordinations would be a legitimate development in the life of the Church. Some have already decided that they can no longer remain within the Church of England. We genuinely wish them Godspeed as, heeding the call of conscience, they embark on a new episode in their Christian discipleship. We, too, in similar obedience to conscience, seek, if at all possible, to remain faithful members of the Church of England and undertake to support all who seek to do likewise.

Even at this late hour we are seeking a way forward that would enable us with integrity to retain such membership. We are passionate in our commitment to the mission of the Church of England and urgently seek a settlement through which we would be free to play our part to the fullest measure. We believe this could be done by the formation of a society within the Church of England, overseen by bishops committed to our viewpoint. Such bishops would need, of course, the necessary ordinary jurisdiction that would enable them to be the true pastors of their people and to be guarantors of the sacramental assurance on which we all depend for our authentic sharing within the Body of Christ. Given that our parishes are also constituent parts of local dioceses we also understand that some way would have to be identified for sharing jurisdiction with the diocesan bishop. We understand it to be something of this nature that our archbishops were trying to achieve in their ill-fated amendment at the July meeting of the General Synod. That amendment, though narrowly defeated in the House of Clergy, was widely supported elsewhere in the Synod and, indeed, a majority of members supported it. It might well be that a revisiting of the archbishops' proposals, with some further development of them, could still help our Church to find a way forward that enabled us all to remain faithful members of it.

To this end we have set about forming 'The Society'. It is under the patronage of Saint Wilfrid and Saint Hilda. Two of our number, the Bishops of Blackburn and of Gibraltar in Europe, have agreed to serve as episcopal protectors of The Society. The Bishop of Beverley will be the co-ordinating bishop. We are still in the process of giving more substance to its constitution. It may well be that the latter cannot be finally resolved

until we know whether or not the House of Bishops and then the General Synod will be prepared to build further on our initiative. You can find more details as to our thinking by visiting The Society's website. Many have already enrolled as prospective members of The Society and we now encourage all who support us to do so. We need to discover whether such a way forward commands the support of those who look to us for guidance. If that were to be so then it would be good to demonstrate to the wider Church just how many of its members need such provision in order to remain faithful members of it.

We do not want to build up false hopes. Every attempt we have made so far to persuade the Church of England to make the kind of provision that would enable us in good conscience to remain within its fellowship has been thwarted. We feel, nevertheless, duty bound, once again to seek a way out of the impasse that otherwise would make it impossible for many of us to remain faithful members of our Church. We recognise the huge change of heart that would need to happen for us to succeed. We ask you to pray fervently that such a change of heart might take place and encourage you to support us by enrolling in The Society.

- + Nicholas Blackburn
- + John Cicestr
- + Geoffrey Gibraltar
- +Martyn Beverley
- +John Burnley
- +Peter Edmonton
- +Mark Horsham
- +John Plymouth
- +Anthony Pontefract
- +Martin Whitby
- +Lindsay Urwin
- +Robert Ladds