Episcopal Presbyterian Dialogue Communique

The Presbyterian Episcopal Dialogue Committee met in Berkeley California at the First Presbyterian Church, November 4-5, 2015. Members present from The Episcopal Church: the Right Reverend Dr. Eugene Sutton (co-chair), the Reverend Dr. Timothy Mulder, the Honorable Joanne O’Donnell, and the Reverend Dr. Joseph Pagano. The Reverend Margaret Rose served as staff. From the The Presbyterian Church (USA): Teaching Elder Dr. Dennis Hughes (co-chair), Ruling Elder Dr. Anne Bond, Teaching Elder Dr. Christian Boyd, Teaching Elder Kamal Hassan, and Ruling Elder/ Deacon Gordon Zerkel. Teaching Elder Robina Winbush served as staff. The dialogue committee also welcomed The Rev. Sumner Walters, ecumenical officer of the Episcopal Diocese of California, for part of the meeting. The committee shared in daily prayer and Eucharist, using both Episcopal and Presbyterian liturgies.

Building on the Report and Agreement of the Bilateral Dialogue approved by the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (2008) and ratified by our presbyteries in 2009, and the 76th General Convention of The Episcopal Church (approved in 2009), the committee continues to address theological and missional issues.

The meeting agenda included a discussion of convergences and divergences on the questions of our respective understanding of the local church and of the personal, collegial, and communal dimensions of episkopé. The committee reaffirmed the previous dialogue committee’s statement that both churches were within the “apostolic succession” as defined by the Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry statement: to stand in the succession of the apostolic faith. Furthermore, the committee affirms in this dialogue that the ministry of episkopé, or oversight, is recognized in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and The Episcopal Church as being ‘necessary to express and safeguard the unity of the body.’ As with all ministry, episkopé should have three dimensions, the personal, collegial and communal. We thus agree with The Meissen Declaration which affirms that ‘a ministry of pastoral oversight, exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways, is necessary to witness to and safeguard the unity and apostolicity of the Church.’ In the Presbyterian view, the ministry of oversight in the relationship of the local church to the whole church is exercised in a more conciliar manner (i.e. through councils of the church), whereas in The Episcopal view oversight in the relation of the local church to the whole church is exercised in a more personal manner. Both churches exercise episkopé communally, collegially and personally, yet in different, and we think, complimentary ways.

The rite of confirmation was also discussed. The committee found more convergences than divergences, especially as the practice of confirmation relates to the sacraments, especially to baptism, and to belonging. The committee reaffirms one another’s churches as churches belonging to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, as well as acknowledging that in our churches the Word of God is authentically preached and the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist are duly administered. With that in mind, the committee affirmed the fullness of the baptismal ministry in each church’s members, and that members who transfer should be welcomed as members without the need of confirmation or laying on of hands. The Episcopal Church participants noted that this is in keeping with its understanding of baptism as “full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church,” (BCP 298) and with...
Canon I.17.1(c) which says, “Those who have previously made a mature public commitment in another Church may be received, not confirmed.”

Finally, the committee has begun a list of shared ministries which are emerging or are already in place, and the creation of an interpretive resource in regard to this ecumenical agreement to assist our two churches in ecumenical mission and ministry.