

Comments re Ecumenical Relationships By Archbishop Edward M. Scott, Primate, Anglican Church of Canada

There is rightfully real concern within our Church about the impact of our action on ecumenical relationships, particularly with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. This concern is shared by people in favour and those opposed to the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood. There is general recognition that it will constitute another obstacle in achieving closer relationships but it is also believed that it will not cause a severing of relationships. The issue is an alive one in both Churches. May I suggest that there may be a possibility of our action having a creative impact upon relationships. I suggest this from an historical perspective. When one studies the ecumenical conferences and subsequent Vatican Councils, it seems evident that these conferences and Councils did not, in fact, initiate completely new courses of action in the Church. They, in fact, confirmed some beliefs and practices which were underway and rejected others. It is logical that this should be the case in the early Church when communication was difficult and slow, when thinking developed and action was taken very much in isolation. But even with the Vatican Councils, the action was rather the confirming or rejecting of things already under way. This meant that many practices had been tried or tested before the Church passed its corporate judgement - tried and tested in particular cultural contexts or in some area or region. Some were approved for more general practice, some were approved for regional practice, some were rejected.

In our world of rapid communication, we think more in terms of the possibility of achieving a universal consensus. This means that we would be seeking to make universal judgements about possible courses of action before they had been tried or tested in some particular context. I wonder, "Is this how developments can or should take place?". I wonder, too, given the realities of today's world, if waiting for a universal consensus does not in fact rule out any action. In the early Church many things were tried in one area and then either approved or rejected for catholic use. Perhaps, today, we need again to consider this as a valid way of acting. We recognize that the step we are taking is controversial. I do not believe we have taken the decision "unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly." The majority of those present at two Synods believe it is a step we should take. They rightly or wrongly believe it is a response to God's call. If we are prepared to act but also to recognize that our action must be tested by experience and if we are prepared to have other Churches help us evaluate the results of the action, then we may, in fact, be making a contribution to wider ecumenical relationships. We may be helping the whole Church reflect at a deeper level. Whether our action turns out this way or not will depend in part on the attitude with which we move ahead. If we move ahead arrogantly, implying that those who disagree with our action are wrong, the action will not help ecumenical relationships. If we move ahead with conviction, but with humility and with a willingness to have the results of our action carefully evaluated, then a real contribution to ecumenical relationships may well result. I hope that it is in this spirit that we are preparing to move.
