

# Our decision not to consent

On September 16, 2006, the Diocese of South Carolina elected Father Mark Lawrence, rector in the Diocese of San Joaquin, to be their bishop. His consecration is planned for February 24, 2007. Notice was sent from the Diocese of South Carolina on September 18.

According to Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church, "No one shall be ordained and consecrated Bishop ... without the consent of a majority of the Standing Committees of all the Dioceses, and the consent of a majority of the Bishops of this Church exercising jurisdiction." That majority must be achieved within 120 days of notice of election.

The decision to consent or to withhold consent is made separately by the bishop and the standing committee.

At its meeting of December 6, 2006, the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Bethlehem voted unanimously not to consent to the election of Mark Joseph Lawrence as bishop of the Diocese of South Carolina.

The provision for "consent" has been compared to the process whereby the U. S. Senate gives or denies consent to presidential selections of court justices. Extending the analogy, one might say that consent should not be withheld except for compelling reasons. Only twelve elections have failed to receive consent in the history of the Episcopal Church, none in more than 50 years

Because our diocesan community elected us to exercise this authority, we want you to know why we did not consent.

Notwithstanding our varied theological positions, all of our members

December 7, 2006

*President of the Convention  
Diocese of South Carolina*

*A majority of all the members of the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Bethlehem, having been duly convened at Bethlehem, PA, fully sensible how important it is that the Sacred Order and Office of a Bishop should not be unworthily conferred and firmly persuaded that it is our duty to bear testimony of this solemn occasion without partiality, do, in the presence of Almighty God, testify that we have denied consent to the election of the Reverent Mark Joseph Lawrence as Bishop Diocesan for the Diocese of South Carolina*

*Robert C. Wilkins, President  
Standing Committee, Diocese of Bethlehem*

were firmly opposed to consenting to the election of Father Lawrence. His own words, stated variously in several places, indicate that he would not be able to "guard the faith, unity and discipline of the Church," a vow required in the ordination service of a bishop. It is not any theological position Father Lawrence holds that urged this decision upon us. It is rather our concern for the unity of the Episcopal Church.

According to Episcopal News Service, "Both South Carolina and San Joaquin are part of a group of seven dioceses, out of the church's 110 dioceses and one convocation of European congregations, that have requested a relationship with a primate of the Anglican Communion other than the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, citing 2003 and 2006 General Convention actions. The process is being called alternative primatial oversight.

Asked if the Presiding Bishop would be welcome to preside at his consecration, Father Lawrence said that "would be a most unwelcome situation for the vast majority of priests and laypersons of the Diocese of South Carolina."

Asked further if he would recognize Katharine Jefferts Schori as Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal

Church and as his Primate, Father Lawrence evaded the question, saying simply that he recognized her "as the legitimately elected Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church," and that he recognized also that "her actions as bishop of Nevada in condoning same sex blessings ... put her in violation of the Windsor Report and, consequently, compromise her ability to function in primatial authority and relationship."

Considering the current nature of the Windsor Report, one cannot be "in violation" of it, though one can act in violation of the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church. We heard Father Lawrence's answer as non-responsive.

To a question about what his response would be if the convention of the Diocese of South Carolina voted to leave the Episcopal Church, Father Lawrence said, "I don't think that speculative questions of this nature ... are either reasonable or helpful."

We heard that as a refusal to respond to a question we thought had to be asked, and answered.

To the question whether he would "uphold the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Episcopal Church as now constituted," Father Lawrence said "neither the Standing Committee

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of South Carolina nor I have made plans to leave the Episcopal Church.”

We would have been encouraged if Father Lawrence had a plan *not* to leave the Episcopal Church.

Some may ask why we would not consent to the election by South Carolina of Father Lawrence as their bishop when the Episcopal Church consented to New Hampshire’s election of Canon Gene Robinson.

We consider the consent question to be an ecclesiological, not a theological, question. Neither Father Lawrence’s nor Canon Robinson’s theology is relevant to the consent process.

Had Canon Robinson been as unclear or cavalier about his willingness to remain at table with those who disagreed with him, even defaming his character, it is likely he would not have received the required consents for him to be a bishop.

The crucial difference between the ecclesiology of these two men is that one clearly indicated that he would not work for reconciliation within a church with whom his own theology and understanding of scripture disagrees. Father Lawrence’s own words suggest rather that he would work with those who would expel the Episcopal Church from the Anglican Communion.

We do not see how Father Lawrence can claim to promise to uphold the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Episcopal Church. He would see himself as a bishop of the Anglican Communion and not of the Episcopal Church. However, we are only in the Anglican Communion by virtue of our being a part of the Episcopal Church.

Though our decision not to consent to the election of Father Lawrence was unanimous, we want to be sure

that you know also how difficult it is for us. It was difficult not because we think we could have arrived at a different decision, but because the election of Father Lawrence by the Diocese of South Carolina presented us with a lose-lose event in the life of our church and relationships within our church that this event will make so much more distressing.

Thank you for reading and considering our explanation for the decision we made.

*The Standing Committee  
of the Diocese of Bethlehem*

*Mr. Robert C. Wilkins, President*

*The Rev. T. Scott Allen*

*Mrs. Connie Archer*

*Mrs. Laura C. Drum*

*Mrs. Elizabeth House*

*The Rev. Canon Anne E. Kitch*

*The Rev. Canon Walter L. Krieger*

*The Rev. Canon Bill Lewellis*

*The Rev. Canon Gwendolyn-Jane Romeril*

*Dr. Edwin Schatkowski*