

An Open Memorandum of Explanation  
For Immediate Release

July 29, 1976

TO: The Minnesota General Convention of the  
Episcopal Church in the United States

FROM: Charles V. Willie

RE: Why I Resigned

In the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, when it becomes necessary to dissolve a legal and moral bond such as that between an officer of an association and the electorate, a decent respect for the opinions of those whom one has elected to serve requires an explanation of the cause which impelled the separation.

August 18, 1974, I announced my resignation from the leadership structure of the Episcopal Church in the United States. I informed Presiding Bishop John Allin and President of the House of Deputies John Coburn that I resigned from the Office of Vice President of the House of Deputies of the General Convention and from membership on the Executive Council, "as a protest against the inhumane treatment of women in the Episcopal Church, particularly the women priests."

This action was taken on the basis of religious values, in prayer, after consulting with my wife Mary Sue and other members of the Episcopal Church, the President of the House of Deputies and other deputies of the General Convention, and after alternative approaches, such as calling a Special General Convention into session, had been rejected.

When I pray to God to grant me the grace to contend against evil and to make <sup>no</sup> peace with oppression, I sincerely mean it; and as a result of such prayer I recognize my personal responsibility to contend against evil and oppression wherever they exist, in the Episcopal Church or elsewhere.

In terms of religious values, I believe that love is the basic principle that should govern all social relations, that justice and equity are the manifestations of love in our daily activities, and that freedom is a necessary and essential condition for loving relationships, including those in church and society.

Also, I believe that a society or association that is free, respects diversity of human opinion, uses when necessary a democratic method of decision-making, harmonizes differences through a consensus of the majority, and guarantees the existence of minorities.

As an officer of the Episcopal Church, I was denied the opportunity to act in accordance with these values and beliefs because of the Church's conventional practice of oppressing women, by denying them the opportunity of full participation in the Church, including the opportunity to be priests and bishops.

Among the many institutional indicators of sin in our time, we have become increasingly aware of racism, sexism, and elitism. I digress to explain the concept, institutional sin, which is seldom used. The concept has to do with the

structure and function of organizations rather than the attitudes and behavior of individuals. A concept of sin that is limited to personal action is too narrow and is of little utility in a complex, industrial society consisting of formal, specialized, and indirect social relations as well as those that are intimate or personal. In general, institutional sin consists of those procedures and practices of organizations that harm individuals whether or not intended. It can occur quite independently of the attitudes and motivations of people who make up the organization. Indeed, institutional sin could be the unintended outcome of behavior thought to be helpful. Institutional sin, therefore, has to do with the effect rather than the intent of social interaction with reference to a specific category of people, such as women, racial minorities, or the poor. The institutional sin of sexism or racism, for example, exists when the opportunities, obligations, and behavior of the people of one sex or race are limited in a way that is inequitable and unfair in comparison with the people of another sex or race. Institutional sin is a concept seldom used not because there is so little of it and not because the effect is less damaging, but because it is more difficult to recognize, comprehend, and prevent. The sin of the individual is easier to see and church people tend to attack it with glee, ignoring our collective practices and procedures that bring continuous harm to many. Our sexist policies, procedures, and practices

in the Episcopal Church have brought untold harm to many women. Now is the time to stop institutional sexism. The Church is a good place in which to begin.

The Episcopal Church indicated its awareness of sexism as an institutional sin by ceasing to exclude women from the office of deputy in the General Convention and by affirming their right to be ordained as deacons in the Church. But it refused to recognize women as priests and bishops which is a kind of sexism compounded by the institutional sin of elitism. Sin is evil and oppressive and should be rooted out whenever and wherever it exists. My resignation was for the purpose of helping to accomplish this in the Episcopal Church, since other ways of overcoming it had been blocked.

Before discussing how this issue of sexism in the Church could have been handled in a just and equitable way, may I share with you the wisdom of Thomas Mann, Biblical scholar and author of a trilogy of novels about Joseph. His wisdom helped me to understand the action that I took and may help you to understand, too. He said, "Were I to determine what I personally mean by religiousness, I should say it is attentiveness and obedience; attentiveness to the inner changes of the world, the mutation in the aspects of truth and right; obedience which loses no time in adjusting life and reality to these changes, this mutation, and thus in doing justice to the spirit. To live in sin is to live against the spirit, to cling to the antiquated, obsolete, and to

continue to live in it, due to inattentiveness and disobedience. And whenever the book speaks about the 'concern with God,' it speaks about the just fear of this sin and folly."

The Episcopal Church could have extricated itself from the sin and folly of sexism by changing its method of counting voting in General Convention. First, there is no justification for a vote by orders in which the opinion of clergy and lay people are tabulated separately. Second, there is no justification for counting the vote of a General Convention deputation of four clergy or four lay people as a negative vote when it is split -- that is, when two vote affirmatively and two vote negatively within the same order. Such practice discounts the opinions of those who voted affirmatively by tabulating the vote of their order in the deputation as if all or a majority had voted negatively. Such practice is a direct challenge to the basic democratic principle of "one person, one vote," and, therefore, demeans the individual whose affirmative vote is ignored; in effect, two additional votes are awarded to the two deputies who voted negatively when the voting in an order is split. Such practice is unjust and inequitable.

As citizens of the United States, the members of the Episcopal Church know that "all. . . are created equal." We recommitted ourselves to this principle during the Bicentennial celebration of the founding of this nation. As

intelligent people, the members of the Episcopal Church know that all include women as well as men. There was a time when some did not recognize this truth. Now that we know it is sinful to exclude women from full participation in our national life, it is time that we acted in the Church in accordance with our new knowledge. In the words of Thomas Mann, we should ". . .[lose] no time in adjusting . . . reality. . . in doing justice to the spirit."

The General Convention would have done this if its methods of tabulating votes had been democratic and fair. Following the Louisville General Convention, Judy Foley wrote an article for the Episcopalian which carried this headline: "Ordaining Women Priests -- The Majority Said Yes: The Vote Said No." How can the Church counsel the nation or even its own members on ways of achieving justice and equity in society when it refuses to be just and equitable in its own affairs and continues to follow an undemocratic procedure that it knows is wrong?

The Louisville General Convention was the second one in which an unfair method of tabulating votes had frustrated the will of the majority of the individual deputies. Three years earlier, the Houston General Convention which voted to seat women as deputies with all rights, privileges, and obligations pertaining thereto would have affirmed the right of women to be priests and bishops, had there been a just and equitable way of counting votes on the resolution

offered by the Committee on Theological Education of the House of Deputies. That resolution affirmed "that women are eligible to seek and accept ordering. . . to the priesthood and to be ordained and consecrated to the episcopate," but did not become Church law because of the undemocratic way of counting votes by orders.

And now may I share with you the wisdom of Benjamin Elijah Mays, Baptist minister, mentor of Martin Luther King, Jr. and former president of my alma mater, Morehouse College. He said that belief is the basis of action. If you do not act upon your belief, you do not have a belief at all; you merely have an opinion. The actions of two General Conventions indicated clearly that Episcopal Church decision-makers did not really believe in justice and equity for women. They merely had opinions about them and were not willing to act. They said they supported the ordination of women but would not change the voting practice that prevented it.

Following the refusal of two General Conventions to root out the sin of sexism and elitism within the Episcopal Church which excluded women from full participation, some recognized that the dominant people of power, like Pilate, would not do what is right even though they knew what was right until the oppressed refused to cooperate in their own oppression. The examples in history are numerous of the oppressed having to initiate their freedom process, including

the ancient people of Israel who were not released from captivity as slaves until they resisted Pharoah and his society, or the American colonies which were exploited and abused by the Crown until they declared themselves free and independent states, or more recently, the Civil Rights Movement by blacks in the United States led by Martin Luther King, Jr. who forced an end to discrimination in places of public accommodation by refusing to go to the back of the bus.

When the Episcopal Church through its General Convention refused to act in accordance with its knowledge and understanding of what was right, and by its action continued to visit oppression upon women by casting doubt upon their humanity and capacity to fully participate in the Church (functioning in all capacities including those of priests and bishops), it left no alternative for women (in the same manner that the Crown left no alternative to the colonies or that whites left no alternative to blacks) but to resist the system that discriminated against them. Peaceful petitions had been repeatedly ignored in Houston, Louisville, elsewhere and at other times. Carter Heyward is on target when she said, "A 'separate but equal' theology has long undergirded the exclusion of women from full participation in the life and ministry of the Church" and that toleration and compliance "for one more day with this blatant . . . discrimination. . . is outrageous to basic Christian values



and human sensibilities."

If the Freedom Movement among women for full participation in church and society is understood as following in the tradition of the Exodus, the American Revolution, and the Civil Rights Movement, then the response that the Episcopal Church should make to the Philadelphia and Washington ordinations is clear. With malice toward none, and charity for all, it should accept and recognize these women as priests in the Church who have all of the rights, privileges, and responsibilities associated with that office and rejoice that they desire to continue to serve in the household of the faith. Moreover, the Episcopal Church should repent of its sin of sexism by eliminating immediately all policies and practices of irrational discrimination; having repented, it should beg of those who were offended to forgive the Church for the harm which it caused. In this connection, the Episcopal Church in the United States should weigh and consider the observation of a descendant of King George III, the Queen of Great Britain, who visited this country during its Bicentennial celebration. She said, we lost the American colonies because we lacked that statesmanship "to know the right time, and the manner of yielding what is impossible to keep." Echoing this theme, Robert Golledge, vicar of Old North Church in Boston, said, "Stubborn pride shouted out in every situation is nonsense and evil, not bravery and steadfastness. Knowing when and how to

relinquish something you have but cannot hope to keep in the face of another's fair claim is a strength found in brave [people], not a weakness. Justice and mercy are the only true rallying cries. Reconciliation is the only true victory." He, of course, was talking to the people of Boston who are agonizing over school desegregation and racial integration. The wisdom of the Reverend Golledge is as good for his church as it is for his community, and the Queen's observations should be considered by us as her ancestor should have considered the truth expressed by the colonists.

The Episcopal Church, like other institutions in our society, changes at a slow and deliberate pace until circumstances require more rapid action. Most institutions make appropriate adaptations to new circumstances or to their new understanding of old circumstances. The Episcopal Church did not. The ordination of 11 women as priests July 29, 1974 presented the Church with a new circumstance which it would ignore at its own peril. The circumstance was no less radical than that which confronted the American society following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Faced with ruptured relationships in our cities and seeking some means of reconciliation, Presiding Bishop John Hines called a Special General Convention to respond to this new circumstance of Americans fighting with each other in the street because of the sin of racism.

The Philadelphia ordination service ruptured relationships

within the Episcopal Church and disrupted its order and procedures. It was a new circumstance that required a new response unlike that of General Conventions in the past. In recognition of this fact and as an officer of the Church, I sincerely requested Presiding Bishop John Allin by letter "to lay before the House of Bishops meeting August 14, [1974, in Chicago] a proposal for a Special General Convention to be held immediately." Such a Convention could respond to the new and novel circumstance confronting the Church and seek some means of reconciliation by dealing with the sin of sexism that had caused Episcopalians to exchange unkind words with others. A Special General Convention can be called by the Presiding Bishop with the consent or upon the requisition of a majority of bishops. A resolution to effect this was not placed before that special meeting of the House of Bishops. I asked other bishops to requisition a convention; some replied that a Special General Convention would be too expensive. They failed to count the cost of the agony and suffering of the women and the ruptured relationships between friends. It was more expensive not to call a Special General Convention if the cost is counted in terms other than money. But the bishops did not agree with me. And so my request was not favorably received.

I share with you the full text of that letter so that you may evaluate its merit:

August 6, 1974

Dear Bishop Allin:

I have been thinking of ways of dealing with the ordination service in Philadelphia, July 29, 1974, which I know has caused great agony for you. I wish there were some other way to bring about the ordination of women without engaging in an irregular procedure but the Church refused to recognize the full personhood of women twice during this decade and I no longer could cooperate in their oppression. I wish that you had stood with me. Nevertheless, I can respect your desire to see the orderly procedures of the Church followed. What is done is done and from my perspective, what is done is right.

If the only way the Church can deal with irregularity is by discipline, suspension, deposition, and punishment, it will demonstrate to the world that its pious concepts about love, justice, mercy and forgiveness are platitudes. Probably one of the best ways of implementing these concepts is by official action on the part of the General Convention. The call of a Special General Convention to deal with the ordination of women will lay to rest this issue so that the Church can get on with the business of religion. This letter, therefore, is a sincere request to you to lay before the House of Bishops meeting, August 14, [1974] a proposal for a Special General Convention to be held immediately. The Church, if it should follow this counsel, will be utilizing a method which was found to be effective by the state. Following demonstrations and other irregular actions the state usually passed laws eliminating discrimination in the use of buses, lunch counters, and so on. Following the demonstration in Philadelphia the Church should be given the opportunity to pass laws eliminating discrimination against women. This could be our finest hour. Please let me know if I can be of any help in planning for the action requested.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,  
Charles V. Willie

I called for a Special General Convention as an officer of the Church because it was the only way that I could continue to function as an officer. Recognizing that sexism is sinful and that women no longer wished to cooperate in

their own oppression, I had to stand with the oppressed. I could do nothing else. For this reason, I accepted the invitation to speak at the Philadelphia ordination service. My theme was "The Priesthood of All Believers." At the beginning of my address, I said that "I participate in this service. . . not because I wanted to speak out but because I could not remain silent. Also. . . I speak neither as an officer of the Church nor as a professor of any school, but as a child of God who has decided to make no peace with oppression." And then I said, "I stand ready to suffer the consequences of my action." One consequence of that action was resignation when the Presiding Bishop refused to call a Special General Convention to deal with our new understanding of the old issue of sexism and the new circumstance that confronted the Church as a result of the ordination service in which I participated.

Despite the disclaimer in the introduction of my address I, as Vice President of the House of Deputies, was an officer of all members of General Convention, including those who favored and those who opposed the ordination of women to the priesthood. My role as a presiding officer is to achieve a consensus of the disparate interests in the Church, using orderly procedures agreed upon. A presiding officer is expected to be fair and to enforce the rules and regulations of an organization which are the basis of social order. When in the course of history it is determined that the rules and

regulations of an organization are harmful and a hindrance or irrelevant and obsolete, such information should be shared with an organization so that its members with due process may change the procedures. I am convinced that a Special General Convention fully informed of the great harm that its past decisions had caused for some women, which resulted in utter frustration and a crisis ordination, would have changed its sexist laws. I could have continued as an officer of a changed organization. It is not the privilege of an officer of an organization to be selective in the rules and regulations that he or she enforces. An officer is a servant of the people who attends to their collective life on the basis of common rules and regulations developed by and for the community or association. Either I had to enforce sexist laws, or get the Church to change them, or resign as Vice President of the House of Deputies.

I could not act like Pilate and do what I knew was wrong. I could not segregate, alienate and discriminate against women because it was legal to do this, and claim to be acting in love. When that which is legal and that which is loving are in contention with each other, legality must give way to love. If the Episcopal Church would not change its sexist ways, I had to resign as an officer of the Church for I could no longer enforce procedures which I knew were evil and sinful.

I had become a partisan, had moved against church custom and convention, had helped to shatter an ancient and obsolete idea of a priesthood that is limited to people who are male. I had endorsed the ordination of women and had acted upon my belief. For me the equality of women was not merely an opinion. It was a belief which had become the basis of my action. And my resignation was a consequence of that action and the action of the House of Bishops that refused to call a Special General Convention to deal with this disruption and to seek reconciliation. It would have been inappropriate to continue to preside over an organization whose practices and procedures I had denied. As a presiding officer, I had forfeited the right to ask others to abide by our common agreed upon procedures having to do with other matters as I had refused to abide by our common agreed upon sexist procedures having to do with ordination.

Finally, my resignation as Vice President of the House of Deputies and as a member of the Executive Council was for the purpose of alerting the members of the Episcopal Church in the United States that their national leaders had failed them. In the face of affirmative action requirements for government, business, and education, the General Convention continued to condone discrimination against women. Indeed, church leaders who supported the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibits sex as well as race discrimination in the secular institutions of our society are in a state

of hypocrisy for condoning discrimination within the Church. The world is not about to abide by the admonitions of the Church or any institution that knowingly practices oppression. Thus the society as well as the Church are hindered in their fulfillment when that institution which is charged with developing and cultivating loving relationships for the benefit of all is sexist, racist, and elitist.

It was my hope, also, that my resignation would alert Episcopal Church members to the fact that the ecclesiastical authority, the House of Bishops, was giving leadership that is theologically defective. By majority vote at its 1974 Chicago meeting, the House of Bishops tried to equate "order" and "legitimate authority" in our common life with "love." Such an assertion is contrary to the statement attributed to Jesus, the Christ, that love of God and love of neighbor are the two great commandments on which all the law hangs. In the Christian religion, law, order, and authority are dependent on love -- a fact the House of Bishops confused by asserting that all are equal, that we should be as concerned with one as with the other. Specifically, the resolution stated that ". . . the Gospel compels us to be as concerned with equality, freedom, justice and above all love as with the order of our common life and the exercise of legitimate authority. . . ." [Emphasis added.] The resolution in which this defective principle was set forth was the same resolution which cast doubt on the validity of



of the ordination of the 11 women priests. Any religious authority that does not recognize the primacy of love over against other relationships in human society is false authority. One ought not to remain silent before false authority. My resignation was one way of calling attention to that kind of authority and a means of resisting it.

Reconciliation is an eternal possibility between members of human society who are in conflict with each other within and outside the Church. But reconciliation remains a dormant possibility until activated by repentance. The Philadelphia and Washington ordinations were clear and present calls to the Episcopal Church, and especially to its leaders, to repent of the institutional sins of sexism and elitism. Nothing else is sufficient now. May God have mercy upon us and forgive us for what we have done and left undone and strengthen us to endure the changes which will surely come.

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