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## A Time of Trial, Part I: Making Sense of Controversy

This is a February 1996 summary of the issues surrounding the Presentment against Bishop Walter C. Righter. The six part document is from a conservative point of view, with good resources, especially an excellent study guide, with permission to copy if all is copied.

### Introduction

A packet of materials has recently been sent to the bishops of the Episcopal Church from the "Committee for the Defense of Bishop Walter C. Righter." The articles presented here, focusing on the question of doctrine, may help in evaluating the worth of these materials.

The first article, "The Righter Trial and Christian Doctrine," provides a context in which the reader may judge the claims of the Presenters that the Episcopal Church has a doctrine concerning the ordination of non-celibate homosexual persons.

The next section provides a study or discussion guide for use with one of the most important statements on this matter adopted by the Episcopal House of Bishops. The Presenters have contended that at the heart of this matter is a question of Church order. The 1990 Statement by the Presiding Bishop and his Council of Advice deals precisely with this issue in a forthright way. The study/discussion guide is intended to help the reader reflect on the Statement in a thorough way.

The third section, "A Reflection on Doctrine in the Church," presents the role of doctrine in the Church. There are questions which the reader or readers may use to discuss the meaning of this reflection.

Finally, a brief letter from the Presenter Bishops is included. It addresses some of the more commonly expressed reactions by some within the Church.

### "Defense" issues in dispute

The packet in defense of Bishop Righter makes a number of misleading statements and provides materials of questionable relevance. This collection, in addition to providing a fuller view of the issues involved in the trial, will also help the reader evaluate the "defense" mailing. Consider, for example, the following points:

**New canons.** Much of the bulk of the "defense" mailing was comprised of photocopies of the old and new disciplinary canons of the Episcopal Church. The new canons, effective January 1, 1996, affect the process of presentment of a bishop, but the criteria for presentment in Canon IV.1.1(c)(h) remains unchanged: bishops may be charged for holding or teaching "any doctrine contrary to that held by this Church," and for violation of ordination vows.

**Presbyterian report.** The biblical material from the "Report of the Special Committee on Human Sexuality" of the Presbyterian Church combines tendentious exegesis with radical hermeneutics. Its interpretations of individual passages and biblical theology as a whole is a minority voice among biblical commentators. This report and its recommendation was rejected overwhelmingly by the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1991.

**Statement of Koinonia.** The "Statement of Koinonia" has no official standing and at several points is directly at odds with the Church's teaching. The 1994 General Convention Resolution affirmed that "the normative context of sexual intimacy is lifelong heterosexual, monogamous marriage," while the Koinonia statement asserts that "homosexuality [i.e., genital relationships] and heterosexuality are morally neutral." The Koinonia bishops redefine "wholesome example" to include non-celibate homosexuals in direct contradiction to the traditional teaching, affirmed by the House of Bishops and General Conventions continuously since 1977, that "it is not appropriate for this Church to ordain a practicing homosexual."

**Newark resolution.** The Resolution of the Diocese of Newark in support of the ministry of Bishop Righter states accurately the charge against him, that he violated his vow to conform to the doctrine of the Church by ordaining an "openly gay man living in a committed same-sex relationship of long standing"; but it offers no discussion of substance of the charge, namely whether ordaining a non-celibate homosexual person is a breach of doctrine.

**A matter of justice?** The casting by Bishop Righter and his supporters of the trial as a trial of "justice" is inflammatory and disingenuous. They act as if their idea of justice was self-evident. In fact, their justice is clearly a reflection of a secular radical ideology that dilutes the category of basic human rights by applying rights language to interest and lifestyle groups. The simplistic appeal to justice negates the normal process of law and reasoning about what constitutes doctrine.

**Scapegoats?** Bishop Righter's claim that he and the gay community "are being scapegoated because of the private agendas of ten persons in the House of Bishops" is an insult and injustice to those bishops (not only the ten presenters but the other 66 bishops who supported the charge) who have sought to defend the doctrine of the Church. The willingness of Bishop Righter and his supporters to use rhetorical smears against their opponents stands in notable contrast to those who have brought formal charges on serious grounds according to canonical due process. Behind this tactic lurks the same high-handed spirit that led him (and them) to transgress Church doctrine and the will of the majority

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of bishops, replacing reasoned debate with a posture of "I've done it - now what are you going to do about it?"

This document was prepared and distributed in support of the Presenting Bishops by: Concerned Clergy and Laity in the Episcopal Church, Post Office Box 36433, Grosse Pointe, Michigan 48236. More information on the purpose and work of CCLEC may be had by calling 1-800-307-7609.

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