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An Open Letter to Bishops, Standing Committees and their Constituency of the Episcopal Church:

My friends in Christ:

I am writing you on behalf of Kevin Thew Forrester, Bishop-Elect of the Diocese of Northern Michigan. I have been an ordained person for nearly 49 years, and I have served as a bishop for 28 of those years in two dioceses, an area mission and faith communities that represent the complexity and the vitality of our Episcopal Church. Kevin Thew Forrester and his wife, Rise, have been significant gifts within my faith story, particularly during their ministries in Eastern Oregon. Both being Episcopal priests, they lived into their shared priestly vocation with sensitivity, care and wisdom. There was never a question of the obedience to and the appreciation of their ordination vows.

It is because of my personal experience with Kevin that I am confounded by the controversy over his election by his home diocese to be their bishop. In the matter of his practice of Zen Buddhist meditation, when did the way in which we are deepened into the Presence of God become a litmus test for being a follower of Jesus Christ? Christians have employed countless ways and environments in their search for an integrated and clearer focus on the Holy One. When I worked and lived with the Navajo and employed some of their images of their creation story in my own devotions, was I being disloyal to my Christ and to my Creator God? I think not. In the 6th century when St. Columba of Iona honored the culture that preceded him by referring to Jesus as his "druid brother", was he lessening Christ or was he honoring the Spirit of God that was in Celtic lands long before Christianity arrived? I am especially dismayed when a significant world religion, Buddhism, is subtly tainted in this matter. Kevin could not be clearer: he is a Christian who on occasion practices Zen Buddhist meditation. I would think he would be commended for such exploration into a milieu that is known for peace and healing and harmony.

The other significant issue raised by The Living Church in their editorial of March 22, 2009 is the discernment/election process Northern Michigan employed in electing Kevin. The editorialists should have done their home work and not left such negative and constricted views in the wake of their words. More than a

year ago, a Northern Michigan Diocesan Convention gave to a 21 member discernment committee the responsibility for reflecting, dialoguing and praying into being a ministry team that would support and enhance the ministry and mission of the Diocese of Northern Michigan. Contrary to The Living Church, Kevin was not the chair of this working committee. I wish the readers of this letter could have been privy to any part of the work this devoted community of people advanced over these past months. They discerned what their diocese needed in multiple arenas of their Christian life, building on the rich traditions of decades of Mutual Ministry experience, and they set out to recommend to their next diocesan convention persons who were fit to do the tasks. One of these positions was bishop. Again, contrary to The Living Church editorial, there were a number of people considered for the episcopal office. Serious honoring and prayerful attention were paid to these persons and, in obedience to the mandate given them by the 2007 Diocesan Convention, the discernment committee decided on one person as their nominee for Bishop of Northern Michigan and that person is Kevin Thew Forrester. There have been many pot shots taken at this process, and I am saddened by this response. Is our present norm of selecting bishops the wisest way of the Spirit? I think not. Is an electing convention with multiple nominees the most sensitive method? At times it has been when political in fighting was nil and honesty on the part of the nominees was at a premium. But Northern Michigan's diverse and representative discernment committee also should receive our affirmation as a way in and through an episcopal election IF the diocesan convention creates and affirms such a model. Northern Michigan's Convention had two opportunities to affirm or deny this avenue and in both instances they overwhelmingly chose to affirm the discernment committee's work. For those stuck on our cookie cutter approach to episcopal elections, think back to how Matthias was selected and read up on Ambrose. Northern Michigan would be the first to say that to simply adopt their model without the hard preparation they embraced would be a mistake, but what they have done does invite every diocese to think outside the box a bit, pay primary attention to the context of ministry needs in our dioceses and discern early on in our processes where the office of bishop fits in our ministry and mission needs.

It is this last issue I wish to emphasize. Again, in The Living Church editorial, it is stated: Northern Michigan has been a leader in the "Total Ministry" approach to pastoral care in its congregations, but its attempt to extend that concept to the episcopacy could bring about an unsettling precedent. I find so many things wrong with this statement that I need to rein my emotions in. Total Ministry is not primarily about pastoral care in its congregations. It is about offering to our membership the privileges and the responsibilities of their baptism into Christ's Body. I believe that unless a bishop is integrated into this empowering Gospel with his/her constituency and rooted in the context of life as it is with that diocese, there will be trouble. I spent 20 years as an active bishop in the House of Bishops, and it is my memory that much of the heartache and disillusionment

of the episcopacy came from isolation and lack of feeling connected to the faith community. Certainly some of that malaise was our own doing, but there is much in the office of bishop that separates a bishop from the people of God. Total Ministry prioritizes that leadership within the Body of Christ, lay or ordained, should prayerfully pursue a course of transparency, collaboration, clarity, wise sharing of authority and consistent listening for the Holy Spirit's next intervention. If we as bishops embraced these priorities more than we do I would welcome such an "unsettling precedent."

Kevin has devoted himself to a priestly ministry that constantly strives for the honoring of the integrity of all the people of God. He has done so with discipline in being attentive to and embracing of the theological and liturgical traditions of our Church, and he has also employed openness and imagination in exploring new ways to think and behave within our baptismal promises. In so being, he stands in the impressive episcopal tradition of Tom Ray and Jim Kelsey.

Episcopalians in Northern Michigan have spoken clearly and decisively in their affirmation and election of Kevin Thew Forrester as their bishop-elect. If any believe this process to be skewed or manipulated or short sighted, they know little about the integrity, the strength of character and the wisdom of the people of Northern Michigan. Kevin Thew Forrester is my friend in Christ, and I urge the Bishops and Standing Committees of our dioceses to confirm his election.

This comes with prayers for us all and the assurance that I am

Faithfully yours in Christ,

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