

The State of the Communion.

**A talk at the annual meeting of Anglicans Together, Sydney.
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Thank you for the kind invitation to speak at your annual dinner. It is good to be with you. Indeed, I am very grateful for all the warm hospitality that I have received during my three month visit to Australia, which sadly is almost over, and I am particularly grateful to the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra: the Visiting Fellowship awarded to me by the Centre has enabled me to give lectures and participate in university and church life in various parts of the country, including coming here today to talk to you all.

On Monday this week (September 16th), the Archbishop of Canterbury issued a pastoral letter to the Anglican Communion's primates and presiding bishops, expressing concern that the divisions in the church had left many ordinary churchgoers "puzzled, wearied and discontented", and certainly with no desire for the Communion to split.¹ That may be how some or all of us feel. Perhaps we have got to a state where we would like to shut our eyes and get back to what we thought Anglicanism was: a broad church that "left room in the middle for wayfarers of all sorts and conditions, a Church whose very refusal to subject members to orthodoxy tests or to weekly cross-examination in the confessional, created an atmosphere of acceptance that allowed it to be a home for all seasons" as my colleague at Oxford, Marilyn McCord Adams (the Regius Professor of Divinity and Canon of Christ Church Cathedral) put it in a recent sermon.² This is what we thought we had signed up to... and now we find that for some parts of the Anglican Communion this is not what Anglicanism is, at least not any longer.

What then does it mean to be Anglican in a global communion? Ingredients that were common in the time of the British Empire – the Prayer Book and the Church-State connection, for example – are no longer so common, and indeed there have always been local differences. We can identify a dynamic tradition as our heritage, in which scripture, historic tradition and reason are taken together, but in that 'mix' some Anglicans allow more open questioning than others. We all emphasise liturgy but there is now more than one Book of Common Prayer. Bishops are a focus of unity but they mean something different in America - where there was no bishop until 1784 though the first Anglican churches arrived in the 1620s - than they do in Africa, where there is often a more hierarchical model of the episcopate and the number of bishops has proliferated with local, tribal differences. The church-state connection remains important in my own country (England) but irrelevant to other parts of the Communion.

It is, perhaps, surprising that the Communion did not have a crisis of identity before this, given how it came into being and the period of history during which it evolved.

¹ See: <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/releases/060915a.htm>

² 'Waiting on others can stifle prophetic action': a sermon preached by Marilyn McCord Adams in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, UK, 2 July 2005.

Its formation was largely ‘accidental’ and its identity initially bound closely to the British Empire. The Lambeth Conference first met in 1867 simply because isolated bishops –most particularly those in Canada – wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury asking whether they could get together to discuss matters of mutual interest. The Archbishop agreed but made it clear that such a gathering could not (according to the 39 articles) be a synod, and could not make binding decisions; it was merely a group of friends meeting for conversation. The Chicago/Lambeth Quadrilateral was formulated as a summary of the essentials of faith in 1886 – 88 (scripture, ancient creeds, 2 sacraments, episcopate). Other instruments of unity were added to that of the Lambeth Conference. The provinces of the church in different areas of the world were, however, always shaped by the society and prevailing cultural norms in which they developed.

In 1993, the distinguished church historian, Sir Henry Chadwick, described the Anglican Communion as “a fairly loose federation of kindred spirits, often grateful for mutual fellowship but with each province reserving the right to make its own decisions.” i.e. the Communion exercised dispersed authority.

But how long could this ideal hold?

As it turned out, the election and consecration of a gay man in a same-sex union as a bishop in the diocese of New Hampshire was the decisive issue, though it came on the heels of disapproval of the ordination of women in some quarters, and increased post-colonial resentment amongst the numerically strong churches in the Global South about the continued centrality of the Church of England, and power and wealth of the church in North America. And although these are all the ‘presenting’ issues, I suspect that the current conflict is about power and authority far more than it is about gender, sexuality or even the interpretation of scripture. Who will own the Anglican franchise? And at the heart of that question is another question about the nature of the church. Should the church be broad enough to hold all? Those of you here this evening would, I am sure, all say yes, and would see the church too in terms of historical continuity and the deposit of the historic faith. But another vision, one that is not traditionally Anglican, has come to predominate in some quarters, a much narrower vision that sees church in terms of the like-minded, the ‘gathered’ church which is doctrinally pure.

So: the question of authority has now arisen rather sharply, within the communion as a whole, within provinces and within dioceses. We are not like the Church of Rome. As my Oxford Colleague Canon Vincent Strudwick put it in a recent *Church Times* article, while the Anglican Communion’s “outward presentation makes it *appear* like a faint copy of the Roman Catholic church, and it is correctly described as the second largest (with 77 million members) world-wide grouping after that church, it is in fact a very different grouping from that of Rome, and the Archbishop of Canterbury is not a mini-Pope, or ‘head’ of the Communion – although popular perception accords him that role.” Strudwick goes on to suggest in that article that “It is indeed misconceptions about the nature of the Communion that have contributed to the perception of our troubles as a major tragedy, rather than as an opportunity to tackle the reality of what the Communion is, and re-imagine it for the future.”³

³ Vincent Strudwick, “It’s a relationship, not a doctrinal quiz. The Anglican covenant

When the Episcopal Church said yes to Gene Robinson, conservative Anglican leaders both within the Episcopal Church itself and around the world wanted that church to be disciplined by the centre. But then questions arose: what was the centre? What would such discipline entail (never mind whether it was 'right!')? And who could impose it? There were no instruments or means of discipline in the Communion. Then came bullying and threats of splitting, and these remain alive and well today. The fear is that the Anglican Communion will break up and that will leave us not so much with a looser federation (as some people might hope) but rather with "competing and fragmenting ecclesial bodies in many contexts across the world" as the Archbishop of Canterbury put it in his address to the General Synod of the Church of England in July this year.⁴

The solution that has been suggested is that of a covenant in the Communion. This idea came out of the Windsor Report, which was produced by the Communion-wide commission given the task of sorting out the mess. The Windsor Report played its hand, trying to stop 'innovation' in individual provinces (although what some call 'innovation' would be, for others, the proper development of the tradition), so it was widely regarded as a fairly conservative document, though it did not please one of the most conservative and most outspoken of the primates, Peter Akinola in Nigeria, who said "After an initial reading it is clear to me that the report falls short of the prescription needed for the current crisis."⁵

I would argue that the Windsor Report is not a very *Anglican* document.

Why not?

1. It quotes scripture out of context, making little reference to scripture in relation to people's experience.

2. There is little engagement with the historic tradition, and this is ironic. Didn't Augustine deal with precisely this problem of people (the Donatists) and deal with them very sharply? Didn't the Reformation tackle the problem of the local vs. global church?

3. Anglican Communion documents are treated as magisterial documents, almost as legislature, but they have no binding power on the individual provinces.

It is worth noting too that there were no theologians (besides Tom Wright, the Bishop of Durham, who is in fact a biblical scholar rather than a theologian) on this commission, but it was canon lawyer heavy!

While that report might seem like old news (it came out in 2004) the 'processes' it recommended are rumbling along at a bureaucratic level and we should keep careful track of them because they do potentially affect all of us. First the Commission was 'received': comments and reactions were gathered throughout the Communion (a sample can be viewed on the Anglican Communion website). Secondly, a panel of reference has been set up, chaired by your former primate, Peter Carnley, to help sort out congregations which are in serious dispute and unwilling to accept the Episcopal ministry and authority of their bishop. Thirdly, a consultation paper was written by a

is about working together, not agreeing on doctrine." *Church Times*, 7 July 2006

⁴ <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/41/50/acns4164.cfm>

⁵ See: <http://www.aco.org/commission/responses/index.cfm>

sub-group of the Anglican Consultative Council about the pros and cons of this 'covenant' idea. It admits that a covenant could 'go' either way:

It says:

Negatively, some worry that a covenant might be seen to alter the nature of the Communion towards that of a narrowly confessional family, with the attendant danger that preparedness to sign up to the covenant becomes a test of authentic membership. Others might see a potential danger in establishing a bureaucratic and legalistic foundation at the very heart of the Communion; putting at risk inspired and prophetic initiatives in God's mission and threatening Anglican comprehensiveness. There is also a fear that the Anglican Communion might become a centralised jurisdiction. If the covenant were too detailed, it might prove too restrictive or inflexible to address unforeseen future challenges; if it were too general, it might commit the Communion to little or nothing: in either case, it would be inadequate.

On the other hand, it states:

Positively, a well-written and concise covenant would clarify the identity and mission of the Churches of, or in association with, the Anglican Communion. By articulating our ecclesiological identity, a covenant will also help the Anglican Communion in self-understanding and in ecumenical relationships. A covenant could provide, for all provinces and/or national churches, a fundamental basis of trust, co-operation and action in relationship with one another and in relation to the whole Communion. A covenant could express what is already implicit, by articulating the "bonds of affection", that is, the "house rules" by which the family of Anglican churches wishes to live together. These would be intended to develop a disciplined and fulfilling life in communion.

However, the group (not surprisingly) recommends the covenant idea, suggesting that the following ingredients will prove positive outcomes of a covenant:

Relational: The formulation and adoption of a covenant, while unable to resolve our current difficulties, could assist the process of reconciliation post-Windsor. It would do so by focussing us on that which unites us, reaffirming our commitment to one another, and thereby helping to heal and strengthen the bonds of affection that have been damaged in recent years.

Educational: It could also become a significant educational tool within the Communion, enabling Anglicans worldwide to understand and deepen their commitment to the beliefs, history and practices they share in common and their development of these as they engage together in God's mission in the world.

Institutional: Any covenant also has the potential of providing what is currently lacking - an agreed framework for common discernment, and the prevention and resolution of conflict. It could do this by bringing together and making explicit much that until now has been a matter of convention within the Communion's common life.

The document is clear that the covenant cannot be a panacea, and interestingly it describes the Anglican Communion as becoming “a genuinely global communion of interdependent autonomous churches.”⁶

The Archbishop of Canterbury thinks the covenant idea is the only hope. “I don't think we can be complacent about what the complete breakup of the Communion might mean - not the blooming of a thousand flowers, but a situation in which vulnerable churches suffer further. And vulnerable churches are not restricted to Africa... But if this prospect is not one we want to choose, what then? Historic links to Canterbury have no canonical force, and we do not have (and I hope we don't develop) an international executive. We depend upon consent. My argument was and is that such consent may now need a more tangible form than it has hitherto had; hence the Covenant idea in Windsor.”⁷

Where does this leave us? I think we need to be very cautious, not just because of the potential downside of such a covenant, but because of the real politics of the situation. Conservatives within the Communion have given no signs of being willing to negotiate. Liberals like to be tolerant of all people and all ideas, but the problem is that we end up being tolerant of those people who do not tolerate us or our views, and never will. Let me therefore end with two cautionary tales from this year:

The Episcopal Church at the end of its General Convention this June scurried around to sign up to a resolution that would respond to the Windsor Report's call to the Episcopal Church to “effect a moratorium” on electing to the episcopate persons living in same-sex unions (paragraph 134, Windsor Report). The resolution which was passed (BO33) called on bishops and standing committees to “exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further restraints on communion.” The outgoing Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold spoke of the willingness of the majority to relinquish something in order to serve a larger purpose. He strongly urged the Convention to vote for this resolution, in order to keep the conversation within the Communion going, and expressed the fear that, if the resolution were not passed, the new Presiding Bishop would not be at future Primates' meetings.⁸ As a sign of such willingness to keep the conversation going, to participate in the Communion-wide struggle to sort out these issues, some gay and lesbian clergy and laity voted in favour of the resolution. The incoming Presiding Bishop, Katherine Jefferts Schori, made it clear that in voting for the resolution, she wanted to keep the door open to future developments and was fully supportive of the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the church.⁹ Some bishops tried to move a liberalising amendment, but discussion of this was curtailed. In their statement, they noted that: “Any language that could be perceived as effecting a moratorium that singles out one part of the Body by category is discriminatory.”¹⁰

⁶ See: <http://www.aco.org/commission/covenant/consultation1.cfm>

⁷ <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/41/50/acns4164.cfm>

⁸ For the full text of Frank Griswold's address, see:

<http://www.edow.org/news/window/special/generalconvention/2006/0621griswoldremarks.html>

⁹ See: http://www.ecusa.anglican.org/3577_76388_ENG_HTM.htm

¹⁰ See:

For conservatives, the resolution was not enough, despite the huge compromises made by the liberals. Seven dioceses – Springfield, Central Florida, Pittsburgh, South Carolina, San Joaquin, Fort Worth and Dallas - asked the Archbishop of Canterbury for alternative oversight because they are unwilling to accept the primatial authority of Katherine Jefferts Schori (some because she is a woman, some because she supports the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the life of the church). The Archbishop of Canterbury in his pastoral letter earlier this week – which was written in the wake of a tense meeting between bishops in the Episcopal Church – said there would be no quick response to plans by seven dioceses of the Episcopal Church to seek leadership outside that church, and he urged patience on them.

The second cautionary tale: Peter Akinola, on the 20 September - two days ago – announced that conservative Anglican bishops meeting in Kigali, Rwanda from the 19th to 22nd September will sign an ‘anti-gay letter’. Akinola said: “In order to put to rest this issue of homosexuality, we are working on an Anglican Covenant with provisions that very clearly say what it means to be an Anglican. ... Whoever subscribes to this covenant must abide by it and those who are unable to subscribe to it will walk out.”¹¹

So: conservatives are working on their own covenant. They are once again doing their own thing. However much liberals try to accommodate conservatives, conservatives will not accommodate liberals. Conversation and mutual understanding is not the conservatives’ ultimate goal. Creating a ‘pure’ church is. We should not give up the ideals and longstanding traditions of the broad and inclusive Anglican Church in the face of bullying and threats from individuals, parishes, dioceses or even provinces who will - if they want to – split the church anyway, as these two cautionary tales illustrate.

Post-dinner note:

The Kigali statement from the conservative primates of the Global South came out after I gave this talk. For a strong and helpful statement, from the Inclusive Church network in Britain, about the Kigali statement, see:
<http://www.inclusivechurch.net/article/details.html?id=91&PHPSESSID=5ce8a30683abe2c5ccb605e2b062aa47>

<http://www.edow.org/news/window/special/generalconvention/2006/0621conscience.html>

¹¹ See: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/41/75/acns4193.cfm>

and the group’s own posting at:

http://www.globalsouthanglican.org/index.php/comments/the_road_to_lambeth_presented_at_capa/

and for the report in the Church Times see:

<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/80256FA1003E05C1/httpPublicPages/D343D59C70CD645980256FE3003BE196?opendocument>