

Where Are We Now? The Anglican Communion post TEC General Convention

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TEC General Convention July 2009

I was privileged to be a guest at the General Convention of The Episcopal Church, the United States' version of our General Synod. I was one of more than thirty five overseas guests from some twenty two different countries and a number of international organisations and networks. Thirteen primates of Anglican Churches around the world were present. There might have been around 60 people from overseas altogether. By any measure such a strong international contingent speaks volumes about the priority given to engagement with the international Anglican Communion and to global mission.

The General Convention is a strange beast. Someone described it as a cross between a legislative assembly, an extended family reunion and a county fair.

Each of the 110 dioceses sends four clergy and four laity to sit in the House of Deputies, constituting a body of over 800. Beyond this, deputies may have alternates, many of whom also attend the Convention and take turns sitting in the house. The House of Bishops includes all the diocesan bishops, all assistant bishops and all retired bishops – who continue to have a voice and vote in the house should they choose to attend. This means the number of official participants exceeds 1000. That's the legislative body.

In addition there is an army of volunteers to shuffle paper, organise worship, prepare and clean up meeting rooms, guide people to the myriad venues and generally enable the event to happen. Many ordinary Episcopalians also attend for some, if not all, of the time which stretches over a fortnight. Some are there to staff stands in the vast exhibit hall, which provides show and tell opportunities for just about every episcopal organisation under the sun, together with a host of purveyors of goods ecclesiastical as well.

One estimate put the number of people who would flow through the General Convention, in one way or another and for some or all of the time, at seven to eight, maybe even thousand. It's said to second only to the democratic and republican party conventions. I don't know if that's true or not, but it's a big event.

And the processes are complex, too. The House of Deputies and the House of Bishops sit separately. For a motion to become a decision of General Convention it must be passed by both Houses. So, if the Deputies pass a resolution it is then sent to the House of Bishops for consideration. If the Bishops vote against, it is lost. If they amend it then it goes back to the Deputies again. And vice versa.

Things are more complex still. Much of the work of the Convention is done in what are called legislative committees. (Both motions and canons are referred to as

legislation.) These eighteen committees include both deputies and bishops sitting together. They work over motions, and sometimes combine several on similar topics, before a final form is submitted to one or other house. For example, there were some sixteen motions related to human sexuality issues that were combined into one by the World Mission Legislative Committee. That omnibus motion was passed by the Deputies but amended by the Bishops and so was on its way back to the Deputies again, at the time I left the Convention.

Imagine eighteen legislative committees meeting simultaneously and not only deliberating on matters themselves but also conducting public hearings at which any interested person may make submissions to the committee. The hearing of the World Mission Committee on human sexuality attracted over 1,000 people.

Virtually every mealtime, breakfast, lunch and dinner, every day is also grasped as an opportunity for networks, issue groups, organisations or seminary reunions to meet. 'Brown-bag' lunches allowed delegates and visitors to hear a host of speakers from around the world on various topics. Evening meals afforded opportunities to focus on particular mission challenges. Breakfasts often included briefings on matters in focus in the Convention that day.

Just timetabling and organising the logistics of such a diverse event with such complex and intricate processes is mind-boggling on its own. Finding one's way as a formal delegate and staying informed about all that's going on is just about impossible.

For all the complexities, and there are many, I and other international observers could only admire the very substantial investment of time and energy in the whole event. The work is undertaken prayerfully, respectfully and seriously in a manner befitting such a Christian gathering. And, dare I say, I think there are some things we could learn and possibly adapt for our own use.

What then of the General Convention's dealings with human sexuality? Well, sixteen different motions were submitted for consideration. As I've explained they were shunted off to the World Mission Legislative Committee to process. A hearing was held one evening for 2 hours to which over 1,000 people turned up. You do the maths. Speakers were given 2 minutes, I think. They were mostly set pieces, exhortations, either to include fully gay and lesbian people or to maintain the faith once delivered.

The House of Deputies took the very unusual step of moving into a committee of the whole to allow open discussion of any and all related issues, without the need to debate the terms of a specific motion. I think, from memory, two hours were set aside for this. Again each speaker had 2 minutes. Lots were drawn to see who would get the opportunity to speak. About 50 speakers were called one after the other until the session ended. No extensions of time. When time was up the microphone at which the speaker was standing was simply switched off and the microphone for the next speaker switched on and that person called. That was rarely needed. It was an impressive piece of organisation on a quite grand scale. The short set pieces were articulate pleas from the heart, often quite moving. Participants were disciplined, prepared, respectful, prayerful. But there was little real debate or engagement across the divide.

Later in the Convention a single omnibus motion was presented by the World Mission Legislative Committee. I think it was amended by the House of Bishops before it was finally agreed. I'll come to the terms of the decision itself in a moment, but it's worth saying that I didn't stay for the whole Convention, only for the first week or so, and wasn't present for the actual debates in either of the Houses. At the time I left decisions of the Convention about human sexuality hadn't been finalised.

Two things, however, were abundantly clear by the time I left. First there is a very strong desire that the Episcopal Church remain an active member of the Anglican Communion and an active partner in global mission. Secondly, a strong majority are deeply convinced that the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in all aspects of the life of the church is right, is of God and is what the gospel demands. That includes the blessing of same sex unions, whether those unions be called marriage or not, and admitting partnered homosexual people to all orders of ministry in the church. I would estimate that that the majority in the House of Deputies was greater than two-thirds and might've been as high as three-quarters. I guess it would be similar in the House of Bishops though my impression is that restraint is more evident among the bishops than the deputies. It needs to be remembered, too, that the balance of views has been altered by the conservatives who have left TEC.

Resolutions of 2009

The resolutions of the General Convention 2009 need to be read and understood against that backdrop.

Resolution D025

Resolution D025 is the omnibus resolution that came from the World Mission Legislative Committee as a result of the long process I've described. The approach taken by the Committee and eventually adopted by the General Convention was quite consciously and deliberately intended to be descriptive. That is, to state clearly and directly the way things are at present.

I'll leave you to judge, as others have and will, whether the resolution goes beyond description, whether it makes new policy. I simply indicate that the intention of the Legislative Committee was to present a motion that described the current state of affairs. It's important to understand it against that stated intention.

Clauses 1-3 express and reaffirm the strong commitment of TEC to remain part of, to participate in, to support financially the Anglican Communion.

Clause 4 affirms the communion-wide listening process and states, as a matter of historical fact, the results of its own listening to homosexual persons over the years. That it is stating historical fact is intended to be borne out by quoting a resolution of the 2000 General Convention. The 2000 resolution (D-039) did three things. First it acknowledged that the membership of the Episcopal Church includes persons living in same-sex relationships. Second it set out an expectation that "such relationships will be characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful,

honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God". And third it denounced "promiscuity, exploitation, and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members." Three years later, the 74th General Convention reaffirmed this expectation. So the 2009 resolution affirms that the expectation set out a decade earlier is being lived out in the current experience of the church. Now, I recognise that the original expectation contains some highly contentious and contestable content. I'm just trying to point out how the 2009 resolution endeavours to describe life in TEC as it currently is.

Clause 4 states the reality that that partnered gay and lesbian people are active members of TEC and are engaged in ministry.

Clause 5 recognises the current reality that there are partnered gay and lesbian people in ordained ministry in TEC. It affirms that such people have been called by God and that God may call (in the future) such people to ordained ministry. It affirms that God's call is a mystery which the church attempts to discern through its processes set out in the Canons. The implication is that the Constitutional and Canonical provisions apply equally to all people regardless of sexual factors.

Clause 6 states the bleeding obvious – there is disagreement about these issues both within and beyond TEC. These questions are not yet settled.

Resolution C056

The second relevant resolution of the recent convention was C056 concerning the question of blessings of same sex unions.

Clause 1 acknowledges that governments in various parts of the world are passing laws either allowing or banning gay civil unions or marriages. That's simply fact. Then it affirms that this situation calls for two things. First, a renewed pastoral response from the church. Not many would argue with that. But second it says that this situation calls for 'an open process for the consideration of theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same gender relationships.'

Clause 2 calls for theological and liturgical resources to be collected and developed for report to the next convention.

Clause 3 calls for the process to be open to contributions from around the church and the wider communion.

Clause 4 'That bishops ... may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church' particularly in places where gay unions or marriages are legal. Just what might be included by the term 'generous pastoral response' isn't clear and no doubt will be contested.

So they were the two relevant resolutions for the 2009 Convention.

Response

Before the convention was over parts of the media were carrying stories that TEC had gone rampaging ahead without regard for the rest of the Anglican Communion, that it

had authorised blessings for same sex unions and had decided to proceed with consecrating more actively gay bishops.

Indeed so concerned were the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies about the various interpretations of the resolutions being published, they wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and to all the Primates, I think, setting out their understanding of what the General Convention had done.

I think their explanations were too little too late. They were caught on the back foot, responding to aggressive media coverage and I think they lost the media battle and unfortunately that is going to add to our difficulties in the Communion moving forward. It is important though, as we take stock, of where we now are to take a careful look at what the General Convention actually said in contrast to some media reports.

First, the convention emphatically did not authorise any liturgies. The Presiding Bishop and President wrote 'it [C056] does not authorise public liturgical rites for the blessing of same-gender unions. The Book of Common Prayer remains unchanged, the marriage rites are unaltered and the Rubrics ... define marriage as a "solemn public covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God."' It called for work to be done and for a report to the next convention. It 'is a way by which further theological inquiry and debate/discussion can take place, but does not commit any future General Convention to formal adoption of any rites.'

Second, the convention did not overturn Resolution B033 of 2006 which called for restraint in consecrating further active gay bishops. The Presiding Bishop and President wrote 'This year at least sixteen resolutions were submitted asking the 76th General Convention to take further action regarding B033. These resolutions fell into three categories – those calling for the repeal of B033; those restating or seeking to strengthen our Church's non-discrimination Canons; and those stating where The Episcopal Church is today.' As I've said, they took the third road. The Presiding Bishop and President went on to say 'Some are concerned that the adoption of Resolution D025 has effectively repealed Resolution B033. That is not the case. This General Convention has not repealed Resolution B033. It remains to be seen how Resolution B033 will be understood and interpreted in light of Resolution D025.' They were at pains to point out that 'Nothing in the Resolution goes beyond what has already been provided under our Constitution and Canons for many years.'

Of course the Presiding officers view is undermined to some extent by the declarations of personal opinions and intentions of some individuals including some bishops.

The extent to which resolution B033 of the 2006 General Convention (calling for restraint in consenting to election of gay bishops) will continue to hold sway remains to be seen. For the moment the affirmations in D025 and the call for restraint in B033 sit side by side, somewhat uneasily.

Some observations

My own view, then, is that the line that has dominated media reports, of TEC rampaging ahead with scant regard for the rest of the Communion, overstates the case considerably. Especially when you remember that a very sizeable proportion of both houses in the General Convention, maybe up to three quarters, are strongly in favour of doing those things, then the actual terms of the resolutions passed, I think, are remarkably restrained, specifically in two respects.

It struck me as very strange that there was no real engagement by TEC with what seems to me, and many others I think, an absolutely fundamental question. The rhetoric from the majority of members of GC is about inclusion, radical inclusion. In the same kind of way as the slogan arose in the debates about the ordination of women 'If you won't ordain them then don't baptise them,' precisely the same kind of catch-cry dominates the human sexuality debate. 'If you won't ordain them then don't baptise them.' In other words anyone who has been baptised must be afforded the possibility of ordained ministry (subject to the usual canonical processes and criteria that apply to everyone). What's not in view at all, as far as I could see, is the question of sin. One of the unresolved questions underlying or at the heart of the whole debate and fracturing of relationships across the Communion is: 'Is active homosexual sexual activity, in the context of committed, life-long, exclusive, adult, consenting relationships, sinful? Or can those relationships, and sexual activity within them, be blessed by God and therefore by the Church. I feel a bit stupid saying this. It's stating the bleeding obvious. And yet this question hardly rated any mention at all in the whole GC.

So why is that?

Well, in part it's probably because the answer seems perfectly obvious and beyond the need for discussion to those on both sides of the debate.

A second reason might be that people think it has been debated endlessly and further debate on that question isn't going to move us forward or lead to greater consensus. So, depending on your view, we either have to just get on with living together as best we can with differences of conviction or we have to bow to the inevitable and get on with walking apart from each other. Arguably members of TEC have as a good a reason as anyone to take this view, given that they can trace concerted discussion of the issue over about 40 years. It may even be thought that further debate will only deepen division and add to polarisation and is best avoided.

Perhaps the question is undecidable? See Pickard's paper.

Perhaps a tacit assumption of this sort, that further debate won't lead to a common mind, explains the dominant focus in Communion-wide discussions over the last 10 years in relation to this issue and probably more than 30 years in relation to ordination of women issues. That is, how can we live together with the greatest degree of communion notwithstanding deep differences of conviction among us. If it is assumed that we can't reach consensus then there's no point studying the subject of contention any further. The best we can do is maintain the highest degree of communion possible in the face of irreconcilable differences.

Maybe that is the case, but I'm not personally convinced the assumption is right. Perhaps it's because I haven't sufficiently grappled with the exegetical and theological questions involved, but I am not convinced that we have yet done sufficient study or had sufficient discussion and debate. I wonder whether it might be possible to achieve greater consensus. I think the picture overall is very patchy. Some parts of the world have done a lot of work on the questions, serious exegetical and theological reflection, while other parts have hardly begun to grapple with the issues. As I said, TEC has been working on it for 40 years. Canada would have a similar story. Australia has some a couple of pieces of significant work. Our Doctrine Commission produced a series of essays from different scholars published as *Faithfulness in Fellowship* together with a study guide. That was followed up by a second publication looking at different approaches to interpreting and understanding scripture, *Lost in Translation*. These exercises have been worthwhile, though I'm not sure to what extent they have really penetrated the life of the church. But they have been exercises in sharing different points of view, different perspectives. That is the first step in a longer journey pursuing consensus that involves working hard at identifying real points of difference and disagreement and undertaking further study and exploration that might resolve those differences. In Australia we haven't seriously embarked on that journey to seek a consensus together.

And if that's true in Australia, it's even more apparent in the Communion as a whole. While individual provinces have done some of this work, there has been little or no attempt at an international level, across the Communion, to tackle the issues involved in a serious way. What might be achieved by a high-level, international, biblical and theological commission charged to develop a consensus view that might attract support around the diversity of the Communion? Might it be possible to produce a reference point which has the potential to accrue a kind of authority of consensus as it is received around the Communion?

Perhaps the newly constituted Inter Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order (IASCUFO, already before its first meeting being referred to as the UFO) could have a go. But it's a very big ask and it's even possible that putting that burden on it before it's had a chance to find its feet might just undermine it from the outset. IASCUFO will have an enormous agenda as it is, bringing together, as it does, the whole international ecumenical agenda for the Communion (previously handled by the Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations) and the Inter Anglican Theological and Doctrine Commission.

Maybe the subject of human sexuality is just too hot to handle, or at least too hot to handle directly. That seems to be part of the thinking behind the Communion-wide project agreed to at ACC-14 in Jamaica. The 'Bible in the Church' project is intended to look at the place of the bible in the church, how it is interpreted, understood and used, how the authority of God is mediated through scripture and so on. The idea is to work initially on a significant topic other than human sexuality, to see if some agreed principles, criteria, processes can be established, away from the sometimes destructive or at least interfering heat generated by human sexuality. And if agreed approaches can be developed, and in the course of that process relationships built up and maybe even some trust re-established, then it might be possible to draw on that capital to tackle the more difficult and emotive questions around sexuality. We'll see how it

unfolds. But it is unlikely to be a fast process. It will take time, possibly quite a long time and whether people are prepared to engage in it, to invest the time and energy that would be required, given that such entrenched and polarised positions have been adopted, remains to be seen. Can we get people out of their trenches and working together in a new way? Can we find a way to wait for each other and to work together on difficult issues that divide us?

A Covenant for the Anglican Communion

Which brings me to the Covenant for the Anglican Communion. The proposed Covenant is an attempt to provide a framework for how the churches of the Anglican Communion might relate to one another, wait for one another in the face of divisive issues and express the communion into which we believe God has called us.

It won't be an easy path though. There are substantial objections to going ahead with a covenant.

1. The Case Against the Covenant

- ◆ Unwarranted centralisation of authority – the Anglican Church has traditionally set its face against any centralised governance in favour of dispersed authority, provincial autonomy, and there is no imperative to change. A covenant could undermine this traditionally significant aspect of Anglican ecclesiology.
- ◆ Communion or federation – what's needed is not a stronger sense of communion but in fact a looser federation arrangement. This view would see the Anglican Communion precisely as a loose federation of provincial churches with a some shared history. It would argue that the federation model has served the Communion well in the past and there's no need to change. A Covenant is, in fact, seeking to create something new rather than recognising the historical character of Anglicanism and the existing reality.
- ◆ Loss of diversity – while much is made of the ecumenical advantages of a Covenant, arguably the Anglican Church has offered its ecumenical partners a significant model of healthy diversity for dealing with their own internal disagreements. We should not be hasty in discarding this gift.
- ◆ Language and culture issues – many cultures and languages within the churches of the Communion do not include the concept of Covenant, only contract. There is resistance to the notion of contracting with our brothers and sisters in Christ (eg Nippon Sei Ko Kai Japan).
- ◆ The 'two-track' development and its complications – A Covenant will inevitably create a distinction between covenanting and non-covenanting churches which will significantly complicate relationships between provinces. This would be even worse should it ever come about that dioceses or groups within provinces may also enter into the covenant. What on earth would happen if there emerged covenanting groups within

non-covenanting provinces, and of non-covenanting groups within covenanting provinces?

- ◆ Reactivity – the notion of a Covenant arises in reaction to a perceived threat to the Anglican tradition of tolerance rather than primarily from a theological understanding of relationships in communion.

Having acknowledged the objections, though, a covenant might be worth persisting with.

2. The Case For the Covenant

- ◆ An aspirational document – those in favour of a covenant often express it in terms of aspiration, that is, a document which captures our hopes for the Communion. +Rowan speaks of covenanting as the absolute self-giving of God and argues that we covenant as a response. A covenantal relationship between Christians is a promise to be willing to be converted by each other. Others suggest it is an attempt to capture and describe the bonds of affection which hold us together as Anglicans, and that a Covenant will promote and deepen the Anglican character that is lived in vastly different contexts.
- ◆ A solemn declaration – it has been suggested that it is entirely appropriate to renew our commitment to each other in a solemn and formal way, such as that offered by a Covenant, particularly when that commitment seems to be under threat. The Covenant speaks to the relationships between churches and of relational consequences of autonomous actions by a church.
- ◆ Establishing the limits to diversity – The Virginia Report asked the question of how we avoid alienating those who through baptism are our brothers and sisters in Christ, but with whom we disagree? What if any are the limits to diversity? The Covenant could provide a process for testing these limits and for evaluating and harmonising the responses of the Communion to an action
- ◆ Time to decide between federation or communion – it is time to decide where on the spectrum between a loose federation of churches who share some common heritage and recognize a family resemblance and a stronger sense of being a communion of churches deeply and integrally related to each other with a profound common life. If we choose to be somewhere towards the latter end of the spectrum we need to find ways to express mutual accountability within the context of a communion of self governing (autonomous) churches. A local church responding to a new challenge needs a way of including in its discernment the judgment of the wider communion. The communion itself needs mechanisms and processes for informing, advising and engaging member churches. A Covenant serves these needs. At the same time it does not attempt to override the constitution or canons of any self-governing province. It searches for the authority of consensus rather than the centralizing of juridical power.

- ◆ Ecumenical tool – It has been argued that as well as serving the purpose of internal coherence within the Anglican family of churches that a covenant could also serve ecumenical purposes. Greater internal coherence in and of itself, is a useful thing ecumenically. Our ecumenical partners need to know who and what they're dealing with, what may be considered authoritative. This can be especially important when an Anglican Church acts in a controversial way. Does that single church represent the whole Communion? A Covenant could provide a means of providing greater clarity in such circumstances.

- ◆ Instruments of unity and organs of authority – sometimes referred to as ecclesial deficit. Do we have the structures and relationships we need to serve something which looks like a communion rather than a loose federation? Who may decide or speak in the life of the communion? Where once the Archbishop of Canterbury could be relied upon to speak for the Communion, in a post-colonial church there has been a rejection of this model. The Primates Meeting is a more collegial group but what of lay people and clergy. Similarly the Lambeth Conference brings together only bishops and only every 10 years. The ACC meets every 3 years, but that's too infrequent to deal with some matters in today's world. It's unclear how these four instruments relate to each other. A Covenant may be a means for clarifying and developing structures and relationships towards greater coherence.

The Standing Committee (of the Anglican Communion) meets in London just before Christmas to sign off on the final form of the Covenant. It could well be before our General Synod next September 2010. If that's to happen a concerted program of education and discussion will need to be underway early in the new year.

Well, there are some reflections on where we are. Where we are going I couldn't be so confident about, but nor am I depressed or even overly anxious about it. I trust that it's all in the hands of our loving God and that as has miraculously occurred in the past, God can and will use eccentric and fallible human beings like us to serve his purposes in the world. So I remain hopeful and, I hope and pray, faithful and I encourage you to do the same.

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