"What does the Lambeth Conference mean for the future of the Anglican Communion and the diocese of Sydney?

ANGLICANS TOGETHER ANNUAL DINNER

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Two quite powerful forces have come together to make the 2008 Lambeth Conference both significant in itself as an event and also historically very interesting from the point of the view of the direction and future of the Anglican Communion. One the one hand the last three conferences have established modes of preparation and program that have changed the perception of their role in the life of the Anglican Communion and given the resolutions of the conferences a new profile. At the same time conflicts over the place of homosexuality in the public life of the church have been engulfing the new institutions in the Anglican Communion.

LAMBETH

There has been a gathering momentum in the last three Lambeth Conferences giving priority to preparation for the conference in terms of what are perceived to be the critical issues in provinces around the globe. These were then streamed through to a process, which produced resolutions on these matters. The expectation in this process is that the Lambeth Conference will address the problems of the Communion. It has the effect of encouraging the idea that the conference has some of the marks of a parliament or synod and that its resolutions as a consequence should be regarded as procedurally authoritative. The reporting by the world media encouraged this understanding as they presented the conference as a kind of summit of Anglicanism.

At the 1998 conference there was intense and heated argument at the final plenary session when a resolution on homosexuality was debated and amended. In the full glare of the mass media deep divisions were on display. That intensity arose not

just because those involved thought the subject was very important but also because they thought that a resolution at the Lambeth Conference meant that something would happen as a result. That is exactly how the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) primates interpret the conference and this resolution. They complain it has not been enforced.

Rowan Williams made his thoughts known well in advance when he wrote to the Primates in March 2006. The 1998 resolution on sexuality would not be re-visited, though there would be space to reflect on the work being done in the Provinces on this subject and also time to think about the theological principles and practical suggestions made in the Windsor Report. But the main focus would be 'equipping the people of God'. He was looking for a style of meeting that could maximize opportunities for training and development. There would be no large section groups, but smaller groups for discussion.

In the event this was the kind of conference that happened. There were no resolutions and the discussion groups or indaba simply had a report of the things they talked about. The conference commenced with a three-day retreat. What Rowan Williams was looking for was a new situation in which there could be genuine and respectful engagement.

This 2008 Lambeth Conference signified a very different notion of the role of the conference. In line with the longer history of the conferences it was not a policy or executive gathering. Rather it was a meeting for consultation. This reversion to the earlier model reflects a notion of change in the Anglican Communion that is achieved by persuasion and conversation. Such an approach was not enough for some, and in particular archbishop Peter Akinola from Nigeria when he announced the GAFCON confefrence.

GAFCON

There have been earlier conflicts over issues of sexual ethics such as marriage and divorce practices. These have arisen in the context of the interaction between gospel and culture. They have to do with how what is perceived to be a gospel truth of universal application can be applied in the particularities of the cultural context where

the gospel is to be lived out. This is the point rightly identified by Peter Akinola in relation to homosexuality when he announced GAFCON.

In a contrast which set the tone for the public perception of this conference he went on to say

> Those of us who will abide with the Word of God, come rain come fire, are those who are in GAFCON. Those who say it does not matter are the ones who are attending Lambeth' . . . 'Uganda, Rwanda, Sydney, Nigeria: we are not going to Lambeth conference. What is the use of the Lambeth conference for a three weeks jamboree which will sweep these issues under the carpet. GAFCON will confer about the future of the church, which will set a road map for the future.[1]

These enthusiastic words came to be modified in the publicity of the conference and a number of bishops announced that they would be going to both Lambeth and GAFCON. In later publicity GAFCON, transformed itself into a pilgrimage to the biblical lands and denied it was an alternative to Lambeth.

GAFCON included lay and clergy in its numbers though the Primates involved and the Archbishop of Sydney essentially led it. It was populist yet at the same time had a hierarchical character to it that comes out in the Jerusalem Declaration. That declaration claims the Anglican Communion is so damaged 'that it cannot simply be patched back together'. GAFCON claims to be a fellowship of confessing Anglicans, a fellowship that includes 'provinces, dioceses, churches, missionary jurisdictions, para church organizations and individual Anglican Christians.' Their goal is reform and they are not breaking away. The document asserts its confessional identity in fairly traditional Anglican terms, but then declares 'we do not accept that Anglican identity is determined necessarily through recognition by the Archbishop of Canterbury.'

At all sorts of levels Anglican identity is a crucial issue for GAFCON and its organisational ambitions. It is not surprising that the standing of the Archbishop of Canterbury has been under attack. The Primate of Uganda, Henry Orombi, did so on

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[1] Quotes taken from http://www.gafcon.org Generated: 9 May, 2008, 08:48. It is interesting that there is no reference here to Kenya, Tanzania or the Southern Cone.

the grounds that the archbishop is appointed by a secular government.[2] But hardly any provincial constitution in world wide Anglicanism suggests that Anglican identity for any province or diocese is settled by recognition by the Archbishop of Canterbury. In fact many provincial constitutions, including the constitution of the Anglican church of Australia, establish communion with the Church of England not the Archbishop of Canterbury. Fellowship with the Church of England was the basis for invitations to the first Lambeth Conference. Some provincial constitutions, like ours in Australia, provide that if the Church of England departs from the faith as set out in their constitution then they might terminate their communion with the Church of England. Nonetheless Identity is already and will be even more a crucial issue if GAFCON wants to move in organisational directions that conflict with well established recognition and trusts. So one can sympathize with the identity issue that GAFCON has created for itself, even if it is construed in historically mistaken terms.

The tradition of territorial diocesan jurisdiction is clearly secondary in the GAFCON declaration since such matters cannot stand in the way of gospel truth. There is something of an oddity here in that some of the primates and bishops involved in these cross jurisdictional interventions have subscribed oaths of office in church constitutions that make this territorial arrangement a clear commitment. So we have the unhappy sight of bishops who on oath are committed to observing this territorial jurisdiction at the same time breaking that same rule in other places. The issue then becomes not just a matter of legal detail, but also of the honesty of those bishops. Given the kinds of institutional arrangements within which Anglicans work the easy separation between order and morality is not so easily sustained, as some seem to think.

The 2008 Lambeth Conference was about influence, sentiment and relationship. GAFCON was about resolution organisation and action.

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[2] See The Times newspaper London, August 1, 2008. The Church cannot heal this crisis of betrayal, and his later clarification

http://www.anglicantv.org/blog/index.cfm/Lambeth-2008

CATHOLICITY

The Anglican model of Christian faith emphasizes the priority of the local and the immediate setting of the call to be faithful and that is sustained by connecting with other locals and the engaged whole. The underlying dynamic of this connectedness is in fact the long tradition of catholicity in Anglicanism. It applies to the local church at whatever degree of extent. It is reflected in Paul's rebuke to the very local Corinthian church 'For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if were not a gift? (1Cor 4:7). It is expressed in the collection Paul initiated from the churches of the Aegean area for those in Jerusalem. This approach to catholicity has meant that Anglican ecclesiology developed in institutional terms up to the extent of the province. The province provides sufficient immediacy of connection and the necessary structures for the discipline of clergy and bishops in order to secure an appropriate ministry of word and sacrament. That is how and why Anglicans have local provincial autonomy. But the extension of Anglicans around the world and the re-configuration of distance and proximity are the occasion of extending the terms of catholicity to the global for precisely the same reasons that apply within provinces and dioceses. Any given local is likely to become a caricature of itself, or as Williams says risk 'slowly surrendering to the culture around' them. They also risk becoming captive to the strengths in their own traditions to the point where those strengths become calcified. Thus the local church holds the faith in humility, recognising their need of others in other circumstances to sustain their own faithfulness to the gospel of the apostles.

Embracing the conflict and dealing with it directly would provide a better environment for winning agreement about general issues. It would also have the effect of not implying anything beyond the issues in the conflict that could and should be dealt with in their own terms. In any case it is something more than astonishing on any grounds that the current Anglican Communion instruments have not directly addressed the actual issue in conflict in the last ten years.

THE DIOCESE OF SYDNEY

The archbishop of Sydney decided that the bishops of the diocese would not attend Lambeth and instead a significant contingent from the diocese and at the

invitation of Peter Jensen from elsewhere in Australia went to GAFCON. The Lambeth Conference received some slight reporting in the diocesan media outlets and generally critical comment. On the other hand enthusiastic images and reports on GAFCON dominated the diocesan media outlets that continue to promote the GAFCON cause. One letter critical of the Lambeth boycott was published.

At GAFCON Peter Jensen chaired the programme group. Others from Sydney were deeply involved. This is all unsurprising and in itself unexceptionable. Like many other dioceses Sydney has generally not regarded the Lambeth conference as an authoritative decision making body. Rather it has generally been regarded as a conference of bishops. It must be interesting for more experienced Anglicans in Sydney to be now aligned with a movement in large part founded on a complaint that the resolutions of the 1998 Lambeth Conference has not been enforced.

Historically that has been the view of the Lambeth Conference itself. It has been a conference of and for the bishops. That in itself, of course, can and should be a service to the churches. The current generation may have been misled by the form of the three conferences before this recent one and they would have been helped in that by the media coverage which in line with the character of the culture of the age, looks for decisions and action and if you can have a bit of conflict and sex mixed in so much the better.

The recent Sydney diocesan synod committed itself to the GAFCON declaration and Peter Jensen in his presidential address set the diocesan mission and its project of Connect 09 together with GAFCON as the way of the Lord to which he is committed and which he challenged his audience to follow as the way of the Lord.

Clearly the rhetoric for following GAFCON is winding up. If that means giving some place to the Jerusalem declaration as a way of reviving a commitment to theological truths to challenge our rather complacent Anglican way, then that is a good thing. You don't have to agree with everything in the declaration to welcome it. There are some things in it which are in my view theologically naïve and historically confused. But it can reasonably be seen to be trying to remind us that as Anglican Christians there are some pretty remarkable truths to which we are committed and which speak to the way we understand our condition and live our lives in faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ.

But, on the other hand the new and enhanced rhetoric might mean an intensification of the already strict control over diversity in the diocese. The already strictly enforced diocesan restrictions on clerical appointments according to gender, or their views about the ordination of women may now be extended. Will all clerical appointments be required to sign up to the GAFCON declaration, or the organisational actions of its council of Primates, of which Peter Jensen is the secretary? That might prove to be something very different from a good thing.

The GAFCON leaders claimed that what they regarded as their orthodox views have not been properly respected or engaged with in the Anglican Communion. They therefore have had to act out in organisational dissent. To claim that at the global level and not to respect and engage with dissenters in your own immediate family is manifestly dishonest.

Fellowships and networks have served the church over a many centuries. Mostly, however, they have worked within a respect for the ministries that have been lawfully appointed in the ecclesiastical structures of parishes, dioceses and provinces. This is not just a question of organisationalism, but of respect for other Christians and a sense of humility about our own perceptions of the particular ways in which our faithfulness is to be expressed. This is not laissez faire tolerance. It is vigorous and committed engagement with others. Organisational re-arrangement is by no means a bad thing in itself. But when dissent turns into organisational revolt in relation to arrangements that have been the subject of mutual agreement and long standing collaboration then that involves other issues of christian conduct and virtue which no christian can properly set aside. It would be a very great defeat if a notion of respectful and courteous catholicity turned out to be something of a victim in relations with other diocese or indeed significantly within this diocese. It would somehow be a contradiction of the gospel in whose name the movement began.

We live in interesting times and many of the changes taking place are beyond our immediate influence. Anglican dissenters do well to remember that they are pilgrims of the crucified Christ and that their obligations are in all things to conduct their lives as those kinds of people. In many circumstances that will mean our practice of the

virtues of patience, humility, faithfulness and hope may be well tested. That in itself should not threaten them. That is their vocation as Anglican Christians.