

## **Archbishop of Canterbury: address to General Synod on the Anglican Communion**

I am glad to have the opportunity of offering in these few minutes a very brief update on the current situation in the Anglican Communion, particularly in the light of the recent session of the Episcopal Church's General Convention – which was, of course, attended by my brother Archbishop, who made an outstanding contribution to its discussions. The first thing to say is that the complex processes of Convention produced – perhaps predictably – a less than completely clear result. The final resolution relating to the consecration of practising gay persons as bishops owed a great deal to some last-minute work by the Presiding Bishop, who invoked his personal authority in a way that was obviously costly for him in order to make sure that there was some degree of recognisable response to the recommendations of the Windsor Report in this regard. I think that he – and his successor-elect – deserve credit and gratitude for taking the risk of focusing the debate and its implications so sharply.

However, as has become plain, the resolutions of Convention overall leave a number of unanswered questions, and there needs to be some careful disentangling of what they say and what they don't say. This work is to be carried forward by a small group already appointed before Convention by the Joint Standing Committee of the Primates and the ACC. And I have also written directly to every Primate to ask for a preliminary reaction from their province. The next Primates' Meeting in February next year will digest what emerges from all this.

You will be aware of a number of developments in the public arena in the last couple of weeks, notably the request from several US dioceses for some sort of direct primatial oversight from outside the US, preferably from Canterbury. This raises very large questions indeed; various consultations are going forward to clarify what is being asked and to reflect on possible implications. There has also been an announcement from Nigeria of the election by the Nigerian House of Bishops of an American cleric as a bishop to serve the Convocation of Nigerian Anglican congregations in the US. I have publicly stated my concern about this and some other cross-provincial activities.

A working party is also being established in consultation with the Anglican Communion Office and others to look more fully at the question of what sort of 'Covenant' could be constructed to fulfil another significant recommendation of the Windsor Report.

Mention of this leads me to say a word about my own published reflections in the wake of General Convention. In spite of some interesting reporting and some slightly intemperate reaction, this contained no directives (I do not have authority to dictate policy to the provinces of the Communion) and no foreclosing of the character and content of such a covenant. Were any such arrangement to be proposed, it would of course have to be owned by the constitutional bodies governing Provinces. The proposal

has already been dismissed in some quarters as a capitulation to fundamentalism and in others as a cunning plan to entrench total doctrinal indifferentism.

Both characterisations are nonsense. Perhaps you will allow me a word or two of clarification and further thought on all this. When I said, as I did in my reflections, that the Communion cannot remain as it is, I was drawing attention to some unavoidable choices. Many have said, with increasing force of late, that we must contemplate or even encourage the breakup of the Communion into national churches whose autonomy is unqualified and which relate only in some sort of loose and informal federation. This has obvious attractions for some. The problem is that it is unlikely to bear any relation to reality. Many provinces are internally fragile; we cannot assume that what will naturally happen is a neat pattern of local consensus. There are already international alliances, formal and informal, between Provinces and between groups within different Provinces. There are lines of possible fracture that have nothing to do with provincial boundaries. The disappearance of an international structure – as, again, I have observed in recent months – leaves us with the possibility of much less than a federation, indeed, of competing and fragmenting ecclesial bodies in many contexts across the world.

A straw in the wind: in Sudan, there is a breakaway and very aggressive Anglican body that has had support, in the past, from government in Khartoum. Among the varied grounds advanced for its separation is the ludicrous assertion that the Episcopal Church of Sudan is unorthodox in its teaching on sexual ethics. Some mischievous forces are quite capable of using the debates over sexuality as an alibi for divisive action whose roots are in other conflicts. And churches in disadvantaged or conflict-ridden settings cannot afford such distractions – I speak with feeling in the light of what I and others here in Synod know of Sudan. It helps, to put it no more strongly, that there is a global organisation which can declare such a separatist body illegitimate and insist to a local government that certain groups are not recognised internationally.

So 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.

But if there is such a structure, and if we do depend on consent, the logical implication is that particular churches are free to say yes or no; and a no has consequences, not as 'punishment' but simply as a statement of what can and cannot be taken for granted in a relationship between two particular churches. When I spoke as I did of 'churches in association', I was trying to envisage what such a relation might be if it was less than full eucharistic communion and more than mutual repudiation. It was not an attempt to muddy the waters but to offer a vocabulary for thinking about how levels of seriously impaired or interrupted communion could be understood.

In other words, I can envisage – though I don't in the least want to see – a situation in which there may be more divisions than at present within the churches that claim an Anglican heritage. But I want there to be some rationale for this other than pure localism or arbitrary and ad hoc definitions of who and what is acceptable. The real agenda – and it bears on other matters we have to discuss at this Synod – is what our doctrine of the Church really is in relation to the whole deposit of our faith. Christian history gives us examples of theologies of the Church based upon local congregational integrity, with little or no superstructure – Baptist and Congregationalist theologies; and of theologies of the national Church, working in symbiosis with culture and government – as in some Lutheran settings. We have often come near the second in theory and the first in practice. But that is not where we have seen our true centre and character. We have claimed to be Catholic, to have a ministry that is capable of being universally recognised (even where in practice it does not have that recognition) because of its theological and institutional continuity; to hold a faith that is not locally determined but shared through time and space with the fellowship of the baptised; to celebrate sacraments that express the reality of a community which is more than the people present at any one moment with any one set of concerns. So at the very least we must recognise that Anglicanism as we have experienced it has never been just a loose grouping of people who care to describe themselves as Anglicans but enjoy unconfined local liberties. Argue for this if you will, but recognise that it represents something other than the tradition we have received and been nourished by in God's providence. And only if we can articulate some coherent core for this tradition in present practice can we continue to engage plausibly in any kind of ecumenical endeavour, local or international.

I make no secret of the fact that my commitment and conviction are given to the ideal of the Church Catholic. I know that its embodiment in Anglicanism has always been debated, yet I believe that the vision of Catholic sacramental unity without centralisation or coercion is one that we have witnessed to at our best and still need to work at. That is why a concern for unity – for unity (I must repeat this yet again) as a means to living in the truth – is not about placing the survival of an institution above the demands of conscience. God forbid. It is a question of how we work out, faithfully, attentively, obediently what we need to do and say in order to remain within sight and sound of each other in the fellowship to which Christ has called us. It has never been easy and it isn't now. But it is the call that matters, and that sustains us together in the task.

ENDS

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