

Reflections on the Episcopal Church's 2009 General Convention from the Archbishop of Canterbury for the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful of the Anglican Communion.

1.

1. No-one could be in any doubt about the eagerness of the Bishops and Deputies of the Episcopal Church at the General Convention to affirm their concern about the wider Anglican Communion. Their generous welcome to guests from elsewhere, including myself, the manifest engagement with the crushing problems of the developing world and even the wording of one of the more controversial resolutions all make plain the fact that the Episcopal Church does not wish to cut its moorings from other parts of the Anglican family. There has been an insistence at the highest level that the two most strongly debated resolutions (DO25 and CO56) do not have the automatic effect of overturning the requested moratoria, if the wording is studied carefully. There is a clear commitment to seek counsel from elsewhere in the Communion about certain issues and an eloquent resolution in support of the 'Covenant for a Communion in Mission' as commended by ACC13. All of this merits grateful acknowledgement. The relationship between the Episcopal Church and the wider Communion is a reality which needs continued engagement and encouragement.

2. However, a realistic assessment of what Convention has resolved does not suggest that it will repair the broken bridges into the life of other Anglican provinces; very serious anxieties have already been expressed. The repeated request for moratoria on the election of partnered gay clergy as bishops and on liturgical recognition of same-sex partnerships has clearly not found universal favour, although a significant minority of bishops has just as clearly expressed its intention to remain with the consensus of the Communion. The statement that the Resolutions are essentially 'descriptive' is helpful, but unlikely to allay anxieties.

3. There are two points which I believe need to be reiterated and thought through further, and it seems to fall to the Archbishop of Canterbury to try and articulate them. To some extent they echo part of what I wrote after the last General Convention, as well as things said at the Lambeth Conference and the ACC, but they still have some pertinence.

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4. The first is to do with the arguments most often used against the moratoria relating to same-sex unions. Appeal is made to the fundamental human rights dimension of attitudes to LGBT people, and to the impossibility of betraying their proper expectations of a Christian body which has courageously supported them.

5. In response, it needs to be made absolutely clear that, on the basis of repeated statements at the highest levels of the Communion's life, no Anglican has any

business reinforcing prejudice against LGBT people, questioning their human dignity and civil liberties or their place within the Body of Christ. Our overall record as a Communion has not been consistent in this respect and this needs to be acknowledged with penitence.

6. However, the issue is not simply about civil liberties or human dignity or even about pastoral sensitivity to the freedom of individual Christians to form their consciences on this matter. It is about whether the Church is free to recognise same-sex unions by means of public blessings that are seen as being, at the very least, analogous to Christian marriage.

7. In the light of the way in which the Church has consistently read the Bible for the last two thousand years, it is clear that a positive answer to this question would have to be based on the most painstaking biblical exegesis and on a wide acceptance of the results within the Communion, with due account taken of the teachings of ecumenical partners also. A major change naturally needs a strong level of consensus and solid theological grounding.

8. This is not our situation in the Communion. Thus a blessing for a same-sex union cannot have the authority of the Church Catholic, or even of the Communion as a whole. And if this is the case, a person living in such a union is in the same case as a heterosexual person living in a sexual relationship outside the marriage bond; whatever the human respect and pastoral sensitivity such persons must be given, their chosen lifestyle is not one that the Church's teaching sanctions, and thus it is hard to see how they can act in the necessarily representative role that the ordained ministry, especially the episcopate, requires.

9. In other words, the question is not a simple one of human rights or human dignity. It is that a certain choice of lifestyle has certain consequences. So long as the Church Catholic, or even the Communion as a whole does not bless same-sex unions, a person living in such a union cannot without serious incongruity have a representative function in a Church whose public teaching is at odds with their lifestyle. (There is also an unavoidable difficulty over whether someone belonging to a local church in which practice has been changed in respect of same-sex unions is able to represent the Communion's voice and perspective in, for example, international ecumenical encounters.)

10. This is not a matter that can be wholly determined by what society at large considers usual or acceptable or determines to be legal. Prejudice and violence against LGBT people are sinful and disgraceful when society at large is intolerant of such people; if the Church has echoed the harshness of the law and of popular bigotry – as it so often has done – and justified itself by pointing to what society took for granted, it has been wrong to do so. But on the same basis, if society changes its attitudes, that change does not of itself count as a reason for the Church to change its discipline.

3.

11. The second issue is the broader one of how a local church makes up its mind on a sensitive and controversial matter. It is of the greatest importance to remember this aspect of the matter, so as not to be completely trapped in the particularly bitter and unpleasant atmosphere of the debate over sexuality, in which unexamined prejudice is still so much in evidence and accusations of bad faith and bigotry are so readily thrown around.

12. When a local church seeks to respond to a new question, to the challenge of possible change in its practice or discipline in the light of new facts, new pressures, or new contexts, as local churches have repeatedly sought to do, it needs some way of including in its discernment the judgement of the wider Church. Without this, it risks becoming unrecognisable to other local churches, pressing ahead with changes that render it strange to Christian sisters and brothers across the globe.

13. This is not some piece of modern bureaucratic absolutism, but the conviction of the Church from its very early days. The doctrine that 'what affects the communion of all should be decided by all' is a venerable principle. On some issues, there emerges a recognition that a particular new development is not of such significance that a high level of global agreement is desirable; in the language used by the Doctrinal Commission of the Communion, there is a recognition that in 'intensity, substance and extent' it is not of fundamental importance. But such a recognition cannot be wished into being by one local church alone. It takes time and a willingness to believe that what we determine together is more likely, in a New Testament framework, to be in tune with the Holy Spirit than what any one community decides locally.

14. Sometimes in Christian history, of course, that wider discernment has been very fallible, as with the history of the Chinese missions in the seventeenth century. But this should not lead us to ignore or minimise the opposite danger of so responding to local pressure or change that a local church simply becomes isolated and imprisoned in its own cultural environment.

15. There have never been universal and straightforward rules about this, and no-one is seeking a risk-free, simple organ of doctrinal decision for our Communion. In an age of vastly improved communication, we must make the best use we can of the means available for consultation and try to build into our decision-making processes ways of checking whether a new local development would have the effect of isolating a local church or making it less recognisable to others. This again has an ecumenical dimension when a global Christian body is involved in partnerships and discussions with other churches who will quite reasonably want to know who now speaks for the body they are relating to when a controversial local change occurs. The results of our ecumenical discussions are themselves important elements in shaping the theological vision within which we seek to resolve our own difficulties.

16. In recent years, local pastoral needs have been cited as the grounds for changes in the sacramental practice of particular local churches within the Communion, and theological rationales have been locally developed to defend and promote such changes. Lay presidency at the Holy Communion is one well-known instance. Another is the regular admission of the unbaptised to Holy Communion as a matter of public policy. Neither of these practices has been given straightforward official sanction as yet by any Anglican authorities at diocesan or provincial level, but the innovative practices concerned have a high degree of public support in some localities.

17. Clearly there are significant arguments to be had about such matters on the shared and agreed basis of Scripture, Tradition and reason. But it should be clear that an acceptance of these sorts of innovation in sacramental practice would represent a manifest change in both the teaching and the discipline of the Anglican tradition, such that it would be a fair question as to whether the new practice was in any way continuous with the old. Hence the question of 'recognisability' once again arises.

18. To accept without challenge the priority of local and pastoral factors in the case either of sexuality or of sacramental practice would be to abandon the possibility of a global consensus among the Anglican churches such as would continue to make sense of the shape and content of most of our ecumenical activity. It would be to re-conceive the Anglican Communion as essentially a loose federation of local bodies with a cultural history in common, rather than a theologically coherent 'community of Christian communities'.

4.

19. As Anglicans, our membership of the Communion is an important part of our identity. However, some see this as best expressed in a more federalist and pluralist way. They would see this as the only appropriate language for a modern or indeed postmodern global fellowship of believers in which levels of diversity are bound to be high and the risks of centralisation and authoritarianism are the most worrying. There is nothing foolish or incoherent about this approach. But it is not the approach that has generally shaped the self-understanding of our Communion – less than ever in the last half-century, with new organs and instruments for the Communion's communication and governance and new enterprises in ecumenical co-operation.

20. The Covenant proposals of recent years have been a serious attempt to do justice to that aspect of Anglican history that has resisted mere federation. They seek structures that will express the need for mutual recognisability, mutual consultation and some shared processes of decision-making. They are emphatically not about centralisation but about mutual responsibility. They look to the possibility of a freely chosen commitment to sharing discernment (and also to a

mutual respect for the integrity of each province, which is the point of the current appeal for a moratorium on cross-provincial pastoral interventions). They remain the only proposals we are likely to see that address some of the risks and confusions already detailed, encouraging us to act and decide in ways that are not simply local.

21. They have been criticised as 'exclusive' in intent. But their aim is not to shut anyone out – rather, in words used last year at the Lambeth Conference, to intensify existing relationships.

22. It is possible that some will not choose this way of intensifying relationships, though I pray that it will be persuasive. It would be a mistake to act or speak now as if those decisions had already been made – and of course approval of the final Covenant text is still awaited. For those whose vision is not shaped by the desire to intensify relationships in this particular way, or whose vision of the Communion is different, there is no threat of being cast into outer darkness – existing relationships will not be destroyed that easily. But it means that there is at least the possibility of a twofold ecclesial reality in view in the middle distance: that is, a 'covenanted' Anglican global body, fully sharing certain aspects of a vision of how the Church should be and behave, able to take part as a body in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue; and, related to this body, but in less formal ways with fewer formal expectations, there may be associated local churches in various kinds of mutual partnership and solidarity with one another and with 'covenanted' provinces.

23. This has been called a 'two-tier' model, or, more disparagingly, a first- and second-class structure. But perhaps we are faced with the possibility rather of a 'two-track' model, two ways of witnessing to the Anglican heritage, one of which had decided that local autonomy had to be the prevailing value and so had in good faith declined a covenantal structure. If those who elect this model do not take official roles in the ecumenical interchanges and processes in which the 'covenanted' body participates, this is simply because within these processes there has to be clarity about who has the authority to speak for whom.

24. It helps to be clear about these possible futures, however much we think them less than ideal, and to speak about them not in apocalyptic terms of schism and excommunication but plainly as what they are – two styles of being Anglican, whose mutual relation will certainly need working out but which would not exclude co-operation in mission and service of the kind now shared in the Communion. It should not need to be said that a competitive hostility between the two would be one of the worst possible outcomes, and needs to be clearly repudiated. The ideal is that both 'tracks' should be able to pursue what they believe God is calling them to be as Church, with greater integrity and consistency. It is right to hope for and work for the best kinds of shared networks and institutions of common interest that could be maintained as between different visions of the Anglican heritage. And if the prospect of greater structural distance is unwelcome, we must look seriously at what might yet make it less likely.

25. It is my strong hope that all the provinces will respond favourably to the invitation to Covenant. But in the current context, the question is becoming more sharply defined of whether, if a province declines such an invitation, any elements within it will be free (granted the explicit provision that the Covenant does not purport to alter the Constitution or internal polity of any province) to adopt the Covenant as a sign of their wish to act in a certain level of mutuality with other parts of the Communion. It is important that there should be a clear answer to this question.

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26. All of this is to do with becoming the Church God wants us to be, for the better proclamation of the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ. It would be a great mistake to see the present situation as no more than an unhappy set of tensions within a global family struggling to find a coherence that not all its members actually want. Rather, it is an opportunity for clarity, renewal and deeper relation with one another – and so also with Our Lord and his Father, in the power of the Spirit. To recognise different futures for different groups must involve mutual respect for deeply held theological convictions. Thus far in Anglican history we have (remarkably) contained diverse convictions more or less within a unified structure. If the present structures that have safeguarded our unity turn out to need serious rethinking in the near future, this is not the end of the Anglican way and it may bring its own opportunities. Of course it is problematic; and no-one would say that new kinds of structural differentiation are desirable in their own right. But the different needs and priorities identified by different parts of our family, and in the long run the different emphases in what we want to say theologically about the Church itself, are bound to have consequences. We must hope that, in spite of the difficulties, this may yet be the beginning of a new era of mission and spiritual growth for all who value the Anglican name and heritage.

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