



From Colonialism to Communion

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects not only on the 2008 Lambeth Conference itself, but also on some of the deeper issues that were both revealed and concealed there and at the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) meeting that preceded it. I do this as the General Secretary of one of the Communion's oldest mission agencies, finding common ground between the challenges we face and those that confront the Communion, in three respects. First, the need to move beyond the colonial inheritance to recognize both the independence of partners and the need for new patterns of inter-dependence. Secondly, the challenge to traditional understandings of belonging from a more self-select culture, most obvious in the consumerism of the North but also increasingly in global relationships. Thirdly, the danger of new colonialisms, in the kind of partnerships favoured by non-governmental organizations, from both conservatives and liberals in North America, but also emerging from some newly found powers in the South.

KEYWORDS: Anglican Communion, Canterbury, Colonialism, GAFCON, Lambeth Conference

Lambeth 1998 and 2008

Lambeth 2008, which I attended in a staff capacity, was my second Lambeth Conference. When, back in 1998, I signed up for the subsection on Human Sexuality, I had no idea what I was letting myself in for. Previous experience with the World Council of Churches, and then our Diocesan Companion Link with the Province of Uganda, had

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made me aware of the tensions between ecumenical rhetoric and the realities of cultural diversity. But nothing had prepared me for the vitriolic division and conspiratorial machinations, which led to the infamous resolution 1:10.² The central theme of the Conference, which was meant to be about economic justice and international debt, faded from sight. The hard-won unanimous report from our sub-section was soon forgotten, even though 1:10 began by accepting it. What was remembered was the statement that homosexual practice is 'incompatible with Scripture', as if this was now the touchstone of Anglicanism and had extended the Lambeth Quadrilateral³ to a Pentagon, in both the geometric and military senses! I went home and pondered on these things.⁴

Five years later, having completed ten years as (the first) Bishop of Swindon in the Diocese of Bristol, I was appointed General Secretary of United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (USPG), the mission agency founded in 1701 as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), to establish and improve the Church of England around the British Empire and beyond.⁵ In 1965, it had been joined by the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA), itself founded in 1859 in response to David Livingstone's call to take commerce and Christianity to Central Africa. Our new extended name, 'Anglicans in World Mission',⁶ hopefully shows that we have moved beyond those colonial days, embracing much more the spirit of 'mutual responsibility and inter-dependence' which emerged from the Anglican Congress in Toronto in 1963.⁷

Lambeth 2008 was not like its predecessor. The programme and the leadership style, not least from Archbishop Rowan himself, were very different. So was the membership: a decade of growing division led to a significant minority of bishops staying away and organizing their own conference (the Global Anglican Future Conference, GAFCON)

2. *The Official Report of the Lambeth Conference*, compiled by the Anglican Consultative Council (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999).

3. For the Lambeth Quadrilateral, see (e.g.) section 355, in G.R. Evans and J. Robert Wright (eds.), *The Anglican Tradition* (London: SPCK/Fortress Press, 1991).

4. Michael Doe, *Seeking the Truth in Love: The Church and Homosexuality* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2000).

5. Daniel O'Connor, *Three Centuries of Mission: The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, 1701-2000* (New York; London: Continuum, 2000).

6. See <http://uspg.org.uk>

7. See Stephen F. Bayne and Advisory Council on Missionary Strategy, *Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in the Body of Christ: With Related Background Documents* (London: SPCK, 1963).

the month before in Jerusalem.⁸ It may be significant, if one divides the Communion between those Provinces, which grew out of SPG/UMCA and those originating from the more evangelical Church Missionary Society (CMS), that none of our historic partners boycotted Lambeth, although some of them did go to GAFCON as well.

The GAFCON event, and the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans (FCA) which has resulted from it, represent the institutionalization of the divisions that have grown since 1998, and which have coalesced in North America around the demand for a separate province to accommodate those offended by the alleged liberalism of the Episcopal Church. At the time of Lambeth, there was even talk of two parallel Communion emerging, but support for FCA has not been as uniform as some had wanted or feared: it is easier for a coalition of traditionalists, charismatics and fundamentalists to know what they are against than to work out a shared agenda for the future. Basing its secretariat in the Diocese of Sydney has caused some would-be supporters to be more cautious. It is evident that breaking historic and affectual ties with Canterbury may be, for many bishops, a step too far. It is also clear from Lambeth 2008 that there are many, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, who are willing to go a very long way to avoid such a split.

There are many questions to be asked of the content of the Conference. Its *contextual* bible study opened up for many of those who present a new and liberating way of reading Scripture, but is this an acceptable alternative to those who won the 'incompatibility' victory in 1998? Its *indaba* method of meeting and deliberating was a welcome rejection of the synodical, winner-takes-all method, which produced the 1:10 resolution, but at the end, there were still bishops wanting a clear statement to take back home, and who see the proposed Anglican Covenant as a way of fixing the boundaries and expelling the trespassers.

Above all, in the closing plenaries, Archbishop Rowan, using all his God-given spiritual authority, made clear in his three moratoriums⁹ that there will be limitations on what Provinces may do if they wish to stay in the Communion, or at least enjoy full membership of it. The first two moratoriums cannot be just temporary constraints, if the so-called Global South is to be persuaded to stay: their leaders will not tolerate the blessing of same-sex partnerships, nor the consecration of bishops found in such partnerships. But even if all of North America goes along with

8. For the Jerusalem Statement from the GAFCON, see <http://www.fca.net/decstat.html>

9. See <http://www.lambethconference.org/daily/news.cfm/2008/8/3/ACNS4511>

this – which seems increasingly unlikely – their churches will continue to experience the intrusions from bishops who belong elsewhere in the Communion, whatever the Archbishop's third moratorium may say, because these people believe it is their God-given duty to call the Episcopal Church to repentance and to care for those alienated from it.

I'm pleased to say that among the provinces with whom USPG is in historic relationship, we find both liberals and conservatives, from Brazil to Pakistan, from South Africa to the Caribbean. We have no policy on the ministry of women or on same-sex partnerships. This is not because our staff and Trustees do not have their own views on these issues, but because we believe that these are matters for each partner church to decide, as they respond, in mission and under God, to the needs of their situation. We recognize, however, that such openness, with its commitment to listening and hospitality, to travelling together and to 'unity in diversity', can be seen by some conservatives as very much taking a position.

Three Areas Of Concern

Looking more deeply at what was going on in and around GAFCON and Lambeth, I see three areas of concern which figure in the Anglican Communion as a whole and also in a mission agency like USPG, as we seek our own way forward within it.

First, there is the need to move beyond the colonial inheritance in order to recognize both the independence of partners and the need for new patterns of inter-dependence.

One of the things said at GAFCON was that Canterbury was no longer the heart of some Anglican empire. Indeed, one of the speakers dismissed its Archbishop as a 'historical relic'.¹⁰ Whilst for some of those who came to Lambeth it was very much like 'coming home' – and I remember one bishop entering the cathedral with tears welling up in his eyes – for others it speaks of a colonial control which has reached its sell-by date. I was at the first All-Africa conference of Anglican bishops in Lagos in 2004 when they were rightly celebrating 'Africa Come of Age': they are no longer offshoots of the Church of England.

Perhaps English Anglicans find this most difficult to accept. It is sometimes said that we lost interest in the Commonwealth when we stopped being able to run it. Some mission agencies have tried to reflect these changes by setting up regional organizations around the

10. Canon Vinay Samuel as reported in the (London) Daily Telegraph, 25th June 2008.

world, although, at least in the transition period, they can look more like franchises than inter-dependent operations. Since its tercentenary in 2001, USPG has been developing a different model in which all partners can be 'heirs together' of the Society, with an emphasis on relationships before the sharing of resources (hopefully, two-way), and increasingly decisions about priorities and budgets are being made by all the partners together.

In theory, the structures of the Anglican Communion embody the change from colonial paternalism to independence, mutuality and inter-dependence. Archbishop Rowan would prefer not to be seen as one of the Instruments of Unity but more as a spiritual focus. Provinces meet on equal grounds in the Anglican Consultative Council. However, the Communion may not be perceived like this when the head office is in London and Church of England is still felt to be in control, or when new colonial powers (see below) are seen to be running the show.

Secondly, is the challenge to traditional understandings of belonging from a more self-select culture, most obvious in the consumerism of the North but also increasingly in global relationships.

Mission agencies like USPG grew up in a culture where institutions like the Church were strong, and where there were established patterns of belonging and obligation. There was a time when each parish made an annual gift to 'overseas mission', usually through USPG or CMS, and often to both. But what post-modernism has done to Christian truth, consumerism has done to Christian giving. Today, in the North, we live in a donor culture where church members as much as any other charitably inclined people give to what they like, and often only to what they can see. Believe it or not, there was a time when USPG refused to tell people where their money was going – they were to trust the Church! Today, while we still hold out against support being led by the donor – in effect, taking the decision-making away from the partner church and returning it to the UK – we increasingly have to package each of our partner church's nominations into something which will attract potential donors.

Something similar is happening in the way we relate to each other more widely. What was once the glory of Anglicanism, which we could hold together in one family and around one table such a wide diversity of Christian truth and practice, has allowed different groups to take just one part and seek to exclude the rest. It may have been Tudor power that enabled the Elizabethan Settlement, as it may have been Imperial power which led to the Anglican Communion, but the good which God brought out of these is now being put at risk.

This is not just an organizational problem; it is deeply theological and spiritual. In a world where, despite its technological universalism,

or perhaps in reaction to it, there is every temptation to carve out one's own life, and income, and pleasure, as if no-one else mattered, our Communion was a sign of something very different. If now we simply choose our own way, and sit at table only with those with whom we agree, we spurn the very communion which God has given us.

Thirdly, the danger of new colonialisms, in the kind of partnerships favoured by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), from both conservatives and liberals in North America, and emerging from some newly found powers in the South.

If Britain is finally coming to terms with our loss of Empire, and its mission agencies are taking that to heart as we find new, less colonial ways to join with others in God's global mission, there is no lack of others wanting to repeat our mistakes. I name three.

First, the NGOs, and some Christian Development Agencies amongst them. As I travel the Communion I sense the historic ambivalence to the 'Brits' – they brought good things like health care and education, they often did it with kindness and integrity, but they were divided from the people and they created divisions among the people. Much the same can be said about the NGOs today. Mission agencies can offer nothing like their scale of largesse, and when we toy with accessing their kind of funding we find our own values put to the test. Yet we also find our partners deeply committed to the kind of relationships we want to form, and often feeling compromised by the funding arrangements which Northern NGOs, usually reflecting a much more secularized culture, impose upon them.

Secondly, North America. I know that America is an easy target because they're now the only imperial power around – apart, of course, from the Trans-national Companies, but then most of them are based, insofar as they're accountable to anyone, in the United States.

What we saw in the decade between the last two Lambeth Conferences was both American liberals and conservatives courting and seeking to control other parts of the Communion, and often, sadly, this was not unconnected with material support. To criticize the first group may sound strange coming from a self-confessed liberal, but there is an arrogance in believing that the 'post-Enlightenment Project' is inevitable and that everyone else will soon grow up and accept it. The tragedy of 9/11 should have put a stop to that. But, to nail my colours even more strongly to the mast, the conservatives have done the greater damage in the alliances they have forged with other parts of the Communion, and they have not lacked the dollars to make themselves more endearing. Time will tell whether the coming together of Traditionalist Societies (in Africa) and the Religious Right

(in America) has been a meeting of souls or the seeking of pragmatic advantage, on both sides.

More generally, we need to watch our language, especially when talking about 'overseas mission'. It is, after all, God who has the mission, not the Church, and joining in this mission is the responsibility of the Church in each place where God has called it into being.¹¹ This raises fundamental questions about the kind of imperialism that shaped mission in the colonial age, where mission was about moving from the world that immediately surrounded the Church to beyond the frontiers of the empire(s) of Christendom. For any church to claim an 'overseas' mission today – as the Episcopal Church often still does – is to risk returning to the kind of colonialism from which UK mission agencies like USPG have been struggling to escape.

Thirdly, and here again I risk offending some good friends, there is the danger that leaders in 'the South' will also repeat our mistakes. There is a disturbing tone in some of the statements from churches, which, partly because they are growing at a time when religion in the North may be more in decline, claim some superior authority to truth and to leadership of the Communion. The last thing our world needs is the re-invention of Christendom, based now not in Rome or England but in Nigeria or Uganda.

All of us also need to examine how power is exercised within our churches. In places like Britain, and in those parts of the world, where we exported our models of feudalism and colonialism, it became all too easy for bishops to become part of the powerful elites who dominate the lives of others. Bishops around the Anglican Communion need to watch this temptation. At a Communion-wide consultation for women theological educators in Canterbury earlier this year, I was proudly explaining how USPG no longer makes decisions in London but trusts the local bishop, only to be told by those present that this is of little help when these bishops consistently ignore them! Those of us who believe in episcopacy as a God-given way of focusing the Church need to take extra care that it is a leadership which releases the whole People of God, rather than buying into an unjust social structure which adds to the power (and wealth) of those who already benefit from it, but does little to announce the good news of the Kingdom and its liberation of the poor.

The Primates can set us a good example. If there was one thing on which all the bishops in my *indaba* group at Lambeth agreed, it was that the Primates Meeting has amassed far too much power to itself,

11. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991).

and has failed to show in its meetings the servant leadership, sometimes even the Christian charity, which the Communion needs. As one of them joked to me during the conference, 'I went into my first Primates' Meeting feeling like a curate, and I came out feeling like a Cardinal!'. Thankfully, the evidence from the most recent Primates' Meeting has been much more positive. We need to model, at all levels, what 'being in communion' really means.

Conclusion

Like so many others whom I meet on my travels, I believe in the Anglican Communion. We may be compromised by our history and diluted by our current problems, but we stand for something that our world so desperately needs. At our best we show how we can build on the past without being subject to it. We engage each other in the dynamic interplay between Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. We struggle with others against injustice, but do not surrender to a shallow secularist understanding of humanity or creation. Above all, we find our identity in the worship of God, and we proclaim what that means for us and for the world in the celebration of the Eucharist.

In my job, people are always asking, what's going on in the Anglican Communion? I say to them, forget the ecclesiastical politics, and look at how our sisters and brothers all around the world are engaging in God's mission.¹² And if we could learn, as I believe a mission agency like USPG has learned, that it is this mission which is central, and supporting each other in this mission is what God calls the Anglican Communion to be about, then the future, if not always clearer, will certainly be more likely to serve the Kingdom of God.

And on a more personal note, the most moving part of Lambeth 2008 for me was the daily Eucharist, and how, when it came to the Lord's Prayer, we were encouraged to say it each in our own language. A subdued huddle ensued, as we prayed the same prayer but out of so many different cultures and conditions. It had much in common with Pentecost where what happened was not that they spoke the same language, but that somehow despite all their different languages they were able to listen and hear each other. Surely, when we speak of 'unity in diversity' and 'being in communion', it is this which we seek and for which we must continue to struggle.

12. Michael Doe, 'Anglicans Around the World', in D. Mark Chapman (ed.), *Living the Magnificat: Affirming Catholicism in a Broken World* (London; New York: Mowbray, 2007).