

1 **Text of reflection**

2 **The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today: A Reflection for the** 3 **Bishops, Clergy and Faithful of the Anglican Communion**

4 **The Anglican Communion: a Church in Crisis?**

5 What is the current tension in the Anglican Communion actually about? Plenty of people
6 are confident that they know the answer. It's about gay bishops, or possibly women
7 bishops. The American Church is in favour and others are against – and the Church of
8 England is not sure (as usual).

9 It's true that the election of a practising gay person as a bishop in the US in 2003 was
10 the trigger for much of the present conflict. It is doubtless also true that a lot of extra
11 heat is generated in the conflict by ingrained and ignorant prejudice in some quarters;
12 and that for many others, in and out of the Church, the issue seems to be a clear one
13 about human rights and dignity. But the debate in the Anglican Communion is not
14 essentially a debate about the human rights of homosexual people. It is possible –
15 indeed, it is imperative – to give the strongest support to the defence of homosexual
16 people against violence, bigotry and legal disadvantage, to appreciate the role played in
17 the life of the church by people of homosexual orientation, and still to believe that this
18 doesn't settle the question of whether the Christian Church has the freedom, on the
19 basis of the Bible, and its historic teachings, to bless homosexual partnerships as a
20 clear expression of God's will. That is disputed among Christians, and, as a bare matter
21 of fact, only a small minority would answer yes to the question.

22 Unless you think that social and legal considerations should be allowed to resolve
23 religious disputes – which is a highly risky assumption if you also believe in real
24 freedom of opinion in a diverse society – there has to be a recognition that religious
25 bodies have to deal with the question in their own terms. Arguments have to be drawn
26 up on the common basis of Bible and historic teaching. And, to make clear something
27 that can get very much obscured in the rhetoric about 'inclusion', this is not and should
28 never be a question about the contribution of gay and lesbian people as such to the
29 Church of God and its ministry, about the dignity and value of gay and lesbian people.
30 Instead it is a question, agonisingly difficult for many, as to what kinds of behaviour a
31 Church that seeks to be loyal to the Bible can bless, and what kinds of behaviour it must
32 warn against – and so it is a question about how we make decisions corporately with
33 other Christians, looking together for the mind of Christ as we share the study of the
34 Scriptures.

35 **Anglican Decision-Making**

36 And this is where the real issue for Anglicans arises. How do we as Anglicans deal with
37 this issue 'in our own terms'? And what most Anglicans worldwide have said is that it
38 doesn't help to behave as if the matter had been resolved when in fact it hasn't. It is true
39 that, in spite of resolutions and declarations of intent, the process of 'listening to the

40 experience' of homosexual people hasn't advanced very far in most of our churches,
41 and that discussion remains at a very basic level for many. But the decision of the
42 Episcopal Church to elect a practising gay man as a bishop was taken without even the
43 American church itself (which has had quite a bit of discussion of the matter) having
44 formally decided as a local Church what it thinks about blessing same-sex partnerships.

45 There are other fault lines of division, of course, including the legitimacy of ordaining
46 women as priests and bishops. But (as has often been forgotten) the Lambeth
47 Conference did resolve that for the time being those churches that did ordain women as
48 priests and bishops and those that did not had an equal place within the Anglican
49 spectrum. Women bishops attended the last Lambeth Conference. There is a fairly
50 general (though not universal) recognition that differences about this can still be
51 understood within the spectrum of manageable diversity about what the Bible and the
52 tradition make possible. On the issue of practising gay bishops, there has been no such
53 agreement, and it is not unreasonable to seek for a very much wider and deeper
54 consensus before any change is in view, let alone foreclosing the debate by ordaining
55 someone, whatever his personal merits, who was in a practising gay partnership. The
56 recent resolutions of the General Convention have not produced a complete response
57 to the challenges of the Windsor Report, but on this specific question there is at the very
58 least an acknowledgement of the gravity of the situation in the extremely hard work that
59 went into shaping the wording of the final formula.

60 Very many in the Anglican Communion would want the debate on the substantive
61 ethical question to go on as part of a general process of theological discernment; but
62 they believe that the pre-emptive action taken in 2003 in the US has made such a
63 debate harder not easier, that it has reinforced the lines of division and led to enormous
64 amounts of energy going into 'political' struggle with and between churches in different
65 parts of the world. However, institutionally speaking, the Communion is an association
66 of local churches, not a single organisation with a controlling bureaucracy and a
67 universal system of law. So everything depends on what have generally been unspoken
68 conventions of mutual respect. Where these are felt to have been ignored, it is not
69 surprising that deep division results, with the politicisation of a theological dispute taking
70 the place of reasoned reflection.

71 Thus if other churches have said, in the wake of the events of 2003 that they cannot
72 remain fully in communion with the American Church, this should not be automatically
73 seen as some kind of blind bigotry against gay people. Where such bigotry does show
74 itself it needs to be made clear that it is unacceptable; and if this is not clear, it is not at
75 all surprising if the whole question is reduced in the eyes of many to a struggle between
76 justice and violent prejudice. It is saying that, whatever the presenting issue, no member
77 Church can make significant decisions unilaterally and still expect this to make no
78 difference to how it is regarded in the fellowship; this would be uncomfortably like saying
79 that every member could redefine the terms of belonging as and when it suited them.
80 Some actions – and sacramental actions in particular - just do have the effect of putting
81 a Church outside or even across the central stream of the life they have shared with
82 other Churches. It isn't a question of throwing people into outer darkness, but of

83 recognising that actions have consequences – and that actions believed in good faith to
84 be ‘prophetic’ in their radicalism are likely to have costly consequences.

85 **Truth and Unity**

86 It is true that witness to what is passionately believed to be the truth sometimes appears
87 a higher value than unity, and there are moving and inspiring examples in the twentieth
88 century. If someone genuinely thinks that a move like the ordination of a practising gay
89 bishop is that sort of thing, it is understandable that they are prepared to risk the
90 breakage of a unity they can only see as false or corrupt. But the risk is a real one; and
91 it is never easy to recognise when the moment of inevitable separation has arrived - to
92 recognise that this is the issue on which you stand or fall and that this is the great issue
93 of faithfulness to the gospel. The nature of prophetic action is that you do not have a
94 cast-iron guarantee that you’re right.

95 But let’s suppose that there isn’t that level of clarity about the significance of some
96 divisive issue. If we do still believe that unity is generally a way of coming closer to
97 revealed truth (‘only the whole Church knows the whole Truth’ as someone put it), we
98 now face some choices about what kind of Church we as Anglicans are or want to be.
99 Some speak as if it would be perfectly simple – and indeed desirable – to dissolve the
100 international relationships, so that every local Church could do what it thought right. This
101 may be tempting, but it ignores two things at least.

102 First, it fails to see that the same problems and the same principles apply within local
103 Churches as between Churches. The divisions don’t run just between national bodies at
104 a distance, they are at work in each locality, and pose the same question: are we
105 prepared to work at a common life which doesn’t just reflect the interests and beliefs of
106 one group but tries to find something that could be in everyone’s interest – recognising
107 that this involves different sorts of costs for everyone involved? It may be tempting to
108 say, ‘let each local church go its own way’; but once you’ve lost the idea that you need
109 to try to remain together in order to find the fullest possible truth, what do you appeal to
110 in the local situation when serious division threatens?

111 Second, it ignores the degree to which we are already bound in with each other’s life
112 through a vast network of informal contacts and exchanges. These are not the same as
113 the formal relations of ecclesiastical communion, but they are real and deep, and they
114 would be a lot weaker and a lot more casual without those more formal structures. They
115 mean that no local Church and no group within a local Church can just settle down
116 complacently with what it or its surrounding society finds comfortable. The Church
117 worldwide is not simply the sum total of local communities. It has a cross-cultural
118 dimension that is vital to its health and it is naïve to think that this can survive without
119 some structures to make it possible. An isolated local Church is less than a complete
120 Church.

121 Both of these points are really grounded in the belief that our unity is something given to
122 us prior to our choices - let alone our votes. ‘You have not chosen me but I have chosen

123 you', says Jesus to his disciples; and when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we are
124 saying that we are all there as invited guests, not because of what we have done. The
125 basic challenge that practically all the churches worldwide, of whatever denomination,
126 so often have to struggle with is, 'Are we joining together in one act of Holy Communion,
127 one Eucharist, throughout the world, or are we just celebrating our local identities and
128 our personal preferences?'

129 **The Anglican Identity**

130 The reason Anglicanism is worth bothering with is because it has tried to find a way of
131 being a Church that is neither tightly centralised nor just a loose federation of essentially
132 independent bodies – a Church that is seeking to be a coherent family of communities
133 meeting to hear the Bible read, to break bread and share wine as guests of Jesus
134 Christ, and to celebrate a unity in worldwide mission and ministry. That is what the word
135 'Communion' means for Anglicans, and it is a vision that has taken clearer shape in
136 many of our ecumenical dialogues.

137 Of course it is possible to produce a self-deceiving, self-important account of our
138 worldwide identity, to pretend that we were a completely international and universal
139 institution like the Roman Catholic Church. We're not. But we have tried to be a family
140 of Churches willing to learn from each other across cultural divides, not assuming that
141 European (or American or African) wisdom is what settles everything, opening up the
142 lives of Christians here to the realities of Christian experience elsewhere. And we have
143 seen these links not primarily in a bureaucratic way but in relation to the common
144 patterns of ministry and worship – the community gathered around Scripture and
145 sacraments; a ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, a biblically-centred form of
146 common prayer, a focus on the Holy Communion. These are the signs that we are not
147 just a human organisation but a community trying to respond to the action and the
148 invitation of God that is made real for us in ministry and Bible and sacraments. We
149 believe we have useful and necessary questions to explore with Roman Catholicism
150 because of its centralised understanding of jurisdiction and some of its historic attitudes
151 to the Bible. We believe we have some equally necessary questions to propose to
152 classical European Protestantism, to fundamentalism, and to liberal Protestant
153 pluralism. There is an identity here, however fragile and however provisional.

154 But what our Communion lacks is a set of adequately developed structures which is
155 able to cope with the diversity of views that will inevitably arise in a world of rapid global
156 communication and huge cultural variety. The tacit conventions between us need
157 spelling out – not for the sake of some central mechanism of control but so that we have
158 ways of being sure we're still talking the same language, aware of belonging to the one,
159 holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ. It is becoming urgent to work at what
160 adequate structures for decision-making might look like. We need ways of translating
161 this underlying sacramental communion into a more effective institutional reality, so that
162 we don't compromise or embarrass each other in ways that get in the way of our local
163 and our universal mission, but learn how to share responsibility.

164 **Future Directions**

165 The idea of a 'covenant' between local Churches (developing alongside the existing
166 work being done on harmonising the church law of different local Churches) is one
167 method that has been suggested, and it seems to me the best way forward. It is
168 necessarily an 'opt-in' matter. Those Churches that were prepared to take this on as an
169 expression of their responsibility to each other would limit their local freedoms for the
170 sake of a wider witness; and some might not be willing to do this. We could arrive at a
171 situation where there were 'constituent' Churches in covenant in the Anglican
172 Communion and other 'churches in association', which were still bound by historic and
173 perhaps personal links, fed from many of the same sources, but not bound in a single
174 and unrestricted sacramental communion, and not sharing the same constitutional
175 structures. The relation would not be unlike that between the Church of England and the
176 Methodist Church, for example. The 'associated' Churches would have no direct part in
177 the decision making of the 'constituent' Churches, though they might well be observers
178 whose views were sought or whose expertise was shared from time to time, and with
179 whom significant areas of co-operation might be possible.

180 This leaves many unanswered questions, I know, given that lines of division run within
181 local Churches as well as between them - and not only on one issue (we might note the
182 continuing debates on the legitimacy of lay presidency at the Eucharist). It could mean
183 the need for local Churches to work at ordered and mutually respectful separation
184 between 'constituent' and 'associated' elements; but it could also mean a positive
185 challenge for Churches to work out what they believed to be involved in belonging in a
186 global sacramental fellowship, a chance to rediscover a positive common obedience to
187 the mystery of God's gift that was not a matter of coercion from above but of that
188 'waiting for each other' that St Paul commends to the Corinthians.

189 There is no way in which the Anglican Communion can remain unchanged by what is
190 happening at the moment. Neither the liberal nor the conservative can simply appeal to
191 a historic identity that doesn't correspond with where we now are. We do have a
192 distinctive historic tradition – a reformed commitment to the absolute priority of the Bible
193 for deciding doctrine, a catholic loyalty to the sacraments and the threefold ministry of
194 bishops, priests and deacons, and a habit of cultural sensitivity and intellectual flexibility
195 that does not seek to close down unexpected questions too quickly. But for this to
196 survive with all its aspects intact, we need closer and more visible formal commitments
197 to each other. And it is not going to look exactly like anything we have known so far.
198 Some may find this unfamiliar future conscientiously unacceptable, and that view
199 deserves respect. But if we are to continue to be any sort of 'Catholic' church, if we
200 believe that we are answerable to something more than our immediate environment and
201 its priorities and are held in unity by something more than just the consensus of the
202 moment, we have some very hard work to do to embody this more clearly. The next
203 Lambeth Conference ought to address this matter directly and fully as part of its
204 agenda.

205 The different components in our heritage can, up to a point, flourish in isolation from
206 each other. But any one of them pursued on its own would lead in a direction ultimately
207 outside historic Anglicanism. The reformed concern may lead towards a looser form of
208 ministerial order and a stronger emphasis on the sole, unmediated authority of the
209 Bible. The catholic concern may lead to a high doctrine of visible and structural
210 unification of the ordained ministry around a focal point. The cultural and intellectual
211 concern may lead to a style of Christian life aimed at giving spiritual depth to the general
212 shape of the culture around and de-emphasising revelation and history. Pursued far
213 enough in isolation, each of these would lead to a different place – to strict evangelical
214 Protestantism, to Roman Catholicism, to religious liberalism. To accept that each of
215 these has a place in the church's life and that they need each other means that the
216 enthusiasts for each aspect have to be prepared to live with certain tensions or even
217 sacrifices – with a tradition of being positive about a responsible critical approach to
218 Scripture, with the anomalies of a historic ministry not universally recognised in the
219 Catholic world, with limits on the degree of adjustment to the culture and its habits that
220 is thought possible or acceptable.

221 **Conclusion**

222 The only reason for being an Anglican is that this balance seems to you to be healthy
223 for the Church Catholic overall, and that it helps people grow in discernment and
224 holiness. Being an Anglican in the way I have sketched involves certain concessions
225 and unclarity but provides at least for ways of sharing responsibility and making
226 decisions that will hold and that will be mutually intelligible. No-one can impose the
227 canonical and structural changes that will be necessary. All that I have said above
228 should make it clear that the idea of an Archbishop of Canterbury resolving any of this
229 by decree is misplaced, however tempting for many. The Archbishop of Canterbury
230 presides and convenes in the Communion, and may do what this document attempts to
231 do, which is to outline the theological framework in which a problem should be
232 addressed; but he must always act collegially, with the bishops of his own local Church
233 and with the primates and the other instruments of communion.

234 That is why the process currently going forward of assessing our situation in the wake of
235 the General Convention is a shared one. But it is nonetheless possible for the Churches
236 of the Communion to decide that this is indeed the identity, the living tradition – and by
237 God's grace, the gift - we want to share with the rest of the Christian world in the coming
238 generation; more importantly still, that this is a valid and vital way of presenting the
239 Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. My hope is that the period ahead - of detailed
240 response to the work of General Convention, exploration of new structures, and further
241 refinement of the covenant model - will renew our positive appreciation of the
242 possibilities of our heritage so that we can pursue our mission with deeper confidence
243 and harmony.

244 **ENDS**

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