

The Anglican Communion ‘post summit’

Anglicans have long prided themselves on their ‘Cyprianic ecclesiology’. St Cyprian, a Bishop of Carthage in the third century, asserted the autonomy of his North African province against the desire of some to take every appeal to Rome. For Cyprian, it was self-evident that some matters of discipline should be decided within a province itself. At the same time, Cyprian realised that there were some issues of faith and practice which needed a wider reference and which involved communion between local churches as well as communion with the See of Rome.

The last 150 years have seen the Anglican Communion struggle to achieve a balance between a proper autonomy and a necessary interdependence. In the middle of the 19th century, for example, it was the very emergence of provinces which led some, notably in the USA, Canada and South Africa, to call for a world-wide Anglican Council or Synod so that the different branches of the Anglican family could bear united witness to ‘the faith once delivered to the saints’ and against ‘every form of schism, of heresy and of infidelity’.

The desire for what came to be called ‘instruments of communion’ was under-girded by William Reed Huntington’s elaboration of the basis for ecumenical dialogue: Scripture as ‘containing all things necessary for salvation’ and as the rule and ultimate standard of faith, the Catholic Creeds, the sacraments instituted by Christ himself and the historic three-fold order of ministry. These were, in time, adopted by both the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in the USA and the Lambeth Conference of 1888, and they became known as the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral. In addition to their ecumenical significance, they have become important markers of Anglican identity.

Although the American, Canadian and South African bishops had asked for a ‘General Synod’ of the Anglican churches world-wide, this was opposed on the one side by Evangelical bishops in England, Wales and Ireland on the grounds that it would water down the Reformation inheritance of the Church of England, and, on the other, by the Broad Church bishops because it might pronounce on matters of faith. Some also felt that such a synod could compromise the Royal Supremacy. For those reasons, the Lambeth Conference of 1867 had a consultative status and this has been the character of such conferences since then. As the Primates have declared at their most recent meeting in Lambeth last week, such meetings have moral force and should command the respect of the Anglican Communion but they have no juridical status.

Some of those who had argued for an Anglican Synod wanted clergy and laity to participate in it. At first, this idea was embodied in the ‘Pan-Anglican Congresses’ of 1908, 1954 and 1964. Later on, however, it was to take form in the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) which first met in Limuru, Kenya in 1971. In the ACC, bishops, clergy and lay-people are represented according to the numerical strength of their churches. It is not, however, properly synodical because there are no ‘houses’ for laity, clergy and bishops to consider matters separately, as well as together. It is extremely important for the ACC to develop in a synodical direction; either within its own structure or in relation to the Lambeth Conference or the Meeting of Primates.

This last was, in the beginning, the Standing Committee of the Lambeth Conference but, as the Communion has grown and new issues have emerged, it has gained in prominence. One reason for its growing importance is precisely to find the balance between an autonomy of provinces and their inter-relatedness, especially where questions of faith, order and behaviour are concerned. If the Anglican Communion is to honour the ancient canonical principle that 'what touches everyone, should be approved by everyone', some such gathering will be increasingly necessary.

It is, of course, the Archbishop of Canterbury who, as President, gathers people together for these inter-Anglican meetings. In this sense, his primacy is not merely one of honour but of gathering, presiding and leading. For many Anglican provinces, communion with the See of Canterbury is the touchstone of being Anglican. In England, together with the Archbishop of York, he is responsible for deciding which churches are in communion with the Church of England and which overseas clergy, therefore, may be allowed to minister in the Church of England.

The Anglican Communion is not, of course, held together solely by these formal instruments of communion. There are, in addition, 'bonds of affection', a common liturgical tradition, similar approaches to theological study and an inter-changeable ministry (restricted, to some extent, since the ordination of women to the priesthood and, in a number of provinces, to the episcopate).

If a diocese or province steps out of line on a matter which is seen as being of fundamental importance and involves not only the clear teaching of the Bible but also of the church catholic, it is obvious that communion or fellowship with that diocese or province will be impaired or restricted. Depending on the decisions taken by the appropriate bodies, this may involve the inter-changeability of ministers, representation in the instruments of communion, and participation in ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue.

Even if, God forbid, such a situation arises, conversations, based on a common tradition, can continue. There can also be continuing exchange in the area of theological education and research, as well as co-operation in addressing issues of justice and peace in different parts of the world. Fair trade, arms control and the battle against HIV-Aids are just a few examples of areas where people with different opinions could work together.

The New Testament places a very high value on unity among Christians but it also recognises that there are circumstances in which such unity can be put under strain, or even fracture. In the early Church, communion or fellowship between churches and Christians was on the basis of a shared faith and a common moral vision. Let us pray that such fellowship will continue to exist among the provinces and dioceses of the Anglican Communion. The alternative is fragmentation, confusion and a sad witness to the world. It is an alternative which is too ghastly to contemplate.

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