

Alexander Ross, *A Still More Excellent Way: Authority and Polity in the Anglican Communion* (London: SCM Press, 2020), pp. ix + 227. ISBN 978-0-334-05932-5
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What is the Anglican Communion? How does it work, and with whom does institutional authority abide? *A Still More Excellent Way*, rooted in Alexander Ross's doctoral work at Cambridge University under Rowan Williams, tackles the puzzle from historical, theological, canonical and practical perspectives. The claim is that polity is 'the outworking of applied ecclesiology' (p. 3) and this approach to polity is necessary to avoid the centrifugal forces of autonomy and fragmentation. Specifically, Ross proposes that the most authentic and viable structures will be found in the flourishing of two frameworks: metropolitical authority (episcopal leadership beyond the diocese) and provincial polity. The author suggests these two aspects of vertical and horizontal authority are more indigenous to Anglicanism than many presume and provide a correction to the contemporary overemphasis on the national church model and the rise of primatial authority.

The book begins with a dense and multi-faceted 'Methodological Introduction' in which these multiple strands are introduced, including the recurring themes of Anglican identity and the essentiality of eschatological ecclesiology. The argument then unfolds in four parts: three chapters on provincial polity; two chapters on the national church; two chapters on the rise of the primates; and, finally, a case study on the Anglican Church of Australia.

Part 1, 'The Pedigree of a Polity', presents the arguments of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Church of England that provincial polity was rooted in the canons of the early church, before moving to the tensions that arise when the Church of England expands beyond England. In the third of the three chapters, the packed historical and political presentation moves to include the inherited challenge of colonialism, recognizing that in Britain's nineteenth-century expansion the result was, on the one hand, 'a more coherent provincial and metropolitical structure' in these 'new colonial lands' (p. 51), and on the other hand, a new set of challenges and questions for the church and its teaching.

If the reader is already familiar with the history, definitions of provincial polity, and politics of the Church of England, the tightly packed presentations in Part 1 will serve as a helpful introduction to the next section on the national church. For those readers who may have been a bit lost in the first three chapters, with the absence of specific definitions and a reliance on footnotes for foundational explanations, they will be relieved to arrive at Part 2. The concept of the 'national church' is a more accessible manifestation of contemporary member churches, particularly in the parallels to nation-states. What Ross does with the development and articulation of the national church understanding is extremely helpful, moving from pope to sovereign, then to the key concept that sovereignty of state is granted to others through recognition, 'rather than being an intrinsic quality of statehood itself' (p. 81). The problem for ecclesial identity is that a human creation is given an autonomy which challenges communion. Here is one of the first ecclesiological clarities – the mutuality of relationships in the economic Trinity should be reflected in the intersubjectivity and self-sacrifice of individual geographical churches.

The author then draws from several contemporary ‘national’ constitutions to discern how member churches understand ‘being in full communion with the Anglican Communion’ (p. 96). Here Ross makes his first clear insistence that a corrective to the national church vision is metropolitan authority, a ‘basic concept of Anglican Church structure’ (p. 103). But before that unfolds, he takes on the rise of primates and the associated problem of vague authority.

The concern to support the national church model beginning in the 1970s was in part to establish autonomy as a corrective to the earlier ‘colonial attitudes and frameworks’ (p. 109). But what binds the communion together in this reassertion of autonomy? Part of the solution was the rise of primates, which Ross argues threatens the ‘more primitive understanding of metropolitan authority and provincial polity’ (p. 110). Tracing the history of patriarchal structures in the early church to the late medieval struggle between York and Canterbury, Ross argues that the ‘primal office has come to personify the sovereignty of the national church’ (p. 120) rather than work to offset that monopoly. Chapter 7 then traces the growing influence of primates in addressing divisive global issues with the associated problems of the authority of their decision-making and subsequent communiques and the usurping of the role of bishops and the Lambeth Conference.

Finally, the problems of the national church model and the rise of the primates is brought home to the author’s native Australia, in which the oddity of Australian Anglican ‘diocesanism’ (p. 161) rooted in colonial history and warring theologies represents a type of ‘super-autonomy’. In the midst of this chapter, Ross moves to a defence of how provincial polity can demonstrate the four marks of the church, the ecclesiology of one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Here the theology of the church is most clearly presented, although woven together with the particularities of the Province of Victoria.

While the complexity of the first section may be challenging for some readers, I have to celebrate how much I learned from reading this book (including the helpful footnotes). I will use it with seminarians and graduate students in and beyond the Anglican Communion, *but* I will have them read the six-page conclusions first. In the last few pages, Ross clearly presents the problems with the national church model and the ‘Age of Primates’, why Anglicanism must be grounded in metropolitan authority and provincial polity, a clear and brief presentation of how polity shifts came about. Finally, there is a wonderful image of the Anglican Communion in the vaulted ceiling of King’s College Chapel in Cambridge. Start there, go back to the beginning, and inwardly digest a most helpful study on how Anglicanism is a communion.

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With the publication of *A Life-Long Springtime*, the Cowley Trilogy is now complete, following the previous publications in 2019 of Serenhedd James’s *History*