



**From the Editor**

**Primacy and Communion**

Andrew McGowan

*Communion and Committees*

Headlines are rarely the place to get a good grasp of a complex story, but after the gathering of Anglican Primates in January 2016 the *Washington Post* got it more wrong than most, proclaiming ‘Anglican Communion suspends the Episcopal Church after years of gay rights debates’.<sup>1</sup> The reality was not that the ‘Anglican Communion’ had done anything as such; rather a specific body, a gathering of Anglican Primates with clearer moral rather than statutory authority, had called for the participation of the Episcopal Church (TEC) in certain committees to be temporarily limited.<sup>2</sup> Neither the authority of the meeting nor the character of the sanction could reasonably allow this to be understood as a suspension from the Communion itself. And as one TEC commentator put it, ‘Only in the Anglican Communion is not serving on committees for a time considered a real punishment.’

There was more to this, however, than a sub-editor’s ham-fisted spin on the issue. Even some Anglicans, including American Episcopalians of both conservative and liberal stripe, were eager to see the results of the Canterbury gathering as more far-reaching or absolute than they were, as part of desired grand narratives either of oppression or of dissolution. These tendentious interpretations notwithstanding, the issues and the outcomes of the meeting were not trivial either. What they did reflect, however, was not in fact dissolution or suspension, but an evolving realignment of power and influence within the structures

1. ‘Anglican Communion suspends the Episcopal Church after years of gay rights debates’, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/01/14/anglican-communion-suspends-the-episcopal-church-for-3-years-from-committees/> (accessed 15 January 2016).

2. Primates’ Communiqué: see <http://www.primates2016.org/articles/2016/01/14/statement-primates-2016/> (accessed 10 February 2016).

of the 'instruments of unity' of the Anglican Communion. These events also testify just as surely, if less sensationally, to a remarkable underlying unity that subsists in the more fundamental and complex web of relationships that constitutes global Anglicanism, and of which the Primates and other Anglican leaders are not masters but stewards.

### *The Primates*

The idea that Anglican Primates speak together with some particular kind of authority is a quite recent one. The Lambeth Conferences of Bishops of the Anglican Communion have, since 1867, expressed and embodied a more characteristic and fundamental understanding of how local and catholic notions of episcopacy work. Despite the historic importance of the idea of a 'national' Church for Anglicanism, given its roots in the Church of England, the shape of the Lambeth Conferences implies that collegial exercise of the episcopate starts with diocesan authority and the office of bishop, rather than with primatial office. Archbishop Longley of course called the event, but did not summon primates; the Archbishop of Canterbury's role is unique enough for the incumbent to be considered one of the 'instruments'. Yet in attempts to consider their own identity, including the fact and shape of the Lambeth Conferences but also the influential formulation of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral,<sup>3</sup> Anglicans have made episcopacy itself a mark of Christian life and Church order, in ways that primacy has never seemed likely to be.

The well-known reticence of certain senior clerics to participate in the 1867 Lambeth Conference was also revealing then, and worth remembering now. Some feared any structure that might compromise the properly established structures to which they were accountable, including the emergent synodical bodies of that time.<sup>4</sup> Archbishop Longley offered assurances, which have never been abandoned, to the effect that such a meeting would not enact canons or make binding decisions.<sup>5</sup> What remains true of this most important gathering of Anglican bishops holds true all the more so of bodies without its authority.

3. J. Robert Wright, 'Heritage and Vision: The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral', in *Quadrilateral at One Hundred: Essays on the Centenary of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral 1886/88–1986/88* (ed. J. Robert Wright; London and Oxford: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1988), pp. 8–45.

4. Edward Carpenter, *Cantuar: The Archbishops in their Office* (London: A&C Black, 1997), pp. 312–34.

5. Carpenter, *Cantuar*, p. 326.

The idea of an Anglican Primates' meeting was formally initiated by Archbishop Donald Coggan and approved by the Lambeth Conference of 1978.<sup>6</sup> A decade before, the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) had also been formed at the impetus of the previous Lambeth Conference. Both these entities thus depended for their authority on that older, more fundamental, and more universal gathering of bishops. The ACC, however, was fairly quickly constituted with formal structures, and an obvious intent to provide representation something like the multi-cameral synods that had become characteristic around the Communion since the nineteenth century.

The minutes of the first Primates meeting stated clearly enough that 'The role of a Primates' meeting could not be, and was not desired as a higher synod'.<sup>7</sup> Yet over time the relationship between these two has shifted, if not altogether clearly, mostly in terms of how the Primates function. Together, the Primates when meeting formally are now seen as one of the 'instruments' of unity or communion for Anglicans – along with the person of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conferences, and the ACC. They cannot, however, collectively make decisions except for themselves, although they may exercise a significant if undefined moral authority.

The Primates, as presiding bishops of the various Anglican provinces – national or regional Churches – have leadership roles in their own settings, some with more authority than others. In general, they do not individually make decisions even for their own provinces, but exercise a variety of ministries of oversight, defined within their national structures, in association with various colleagues and synods. It is typical, however, if largely a customary rather than a legislative matter, that they speak individually with significant moral authority for their members, and often act as spokespersons for their national bodies.

Such authority is not juridical, depends on a different set of understandings about how episcopal leadership works in the collective sense; bishops speak together with authority, not because of their rights or formal powers, but because of their responsibilities to one another, to the Gospel, and to the Church. This authority then belongs to the realm of relationship and influence, and not to the constitutional formalities like those of the ACC, but to the more complex web of concrete relationships that constitute Communion.

6. *The Virginia Report: Report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 1997).

7. *Virginia Report* (1979 Primates' Meeting minutes quoted at 3.47).

*Canterbury 2016*

The January 2016 gathering of Primates stretched the limits of any authority they had, in ‘requiring [*sic*] that for a period of three years The Episcopal Church no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, [and] should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee’.<sup>8</sup> The Primates of course do not actually have control over the membership of such bodies, which typically relate to the more broadly constituted ACC.

The Primates’ statement went on to say ‘while participating in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, [TEC] will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity’. This implies of course that TEC would in fact be taking part in all these internal bodies as previously; simply put, it would have voice but not vote. In fact this is not so different from present practice; in a number of ecumenical conversations TEC has already not taken part because of sensitivities ranging from same-sex marriage, to ordination of persons in same-sex relationships, or simply to women’s ordination.

So this was at best rather curious, and the language of ‘requirement’ in particular was unfortunate. Yet the Primates’ statement could reflect more than just a misunderstanding of formal polity of the ‘instruments’, but also a perception of how starkly the expectation about some action with impact on TEC might have to be expressed, even if it were not technically accurate.

The hardly radical legal academic Norman Doe, arguably the intellectual architect of the proposal for an Anglican Covenant, was scathing about the presumption involved in all this, calling the Primates’ communiqué ‘completely unacceptable interference’ in the work of the bodies affected, and their action an ‘assumption of authority which has no basis in law’.<sup>9</sup> He went on, however, to renew his call for a structure that would allow such actions. On the other side, the President of the TEC House of Deputies responded to the Primates’ communiqué by pointing (correctly) to the same lack of authority, with more direct reference to the ACC of which she is a member.<sup>10</sup>

8. Primates’ Communiqué.

9. ‘Primates’ ruling is not binding, says canon lawyer’, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2016/22-january/news/uk/primates-ruling-is-not-binding-says-canon-lawyer> (accessed 10 February 2016).

10. ‘On the Primates Meeting: A Letter from President Jennings’, <http://houseofdeputies.org/on-the-primates-meeting-a-letter-from-president-jennings.html> (accessed 10 February 2016).

Yet the question of any ‘basis in law’ is not what most Anglicans will be concerned about. The Primates’ views will at least be taken seriously, and interpreted as though they had spoken with proper authority (‘urging’, ‘calling on’, etc.), not because of any juridical authority, but because of the relationships they have and which represent. More time will have to elapse to tell whether their speaking in terms that imply a new sort of authority proves to be a relational innovation, or just a constitutional mistake. Yet it remains true that the shape of this collective primatial authority cannot, *pace* Professor Doe, be determined by the non-existence of statutes that might confer it. Rather it evolves, just as the rest of global Anglican polity has, as much by practice and custom as by decree.

Nevertheless this outcome will have had positive importance, even for those dissatisfied with its treatment of the ‘instruments’ or of the substantive questions of human sexuality. The final outcome no doubt reflects serious efforts by numerous Primates to fend off worse outcomes for the Communion. It is a compromise, and should be read with a grain of salt; its unanimity covers a complexity of thought and purpose, even among the Primates themselves. And it doubtless reflects considerable skill, hard work, and personal authority on the part of Archbishop Justin Welby.

Most important in the Primates’ statement, if sometimes overlooked, is the commitment to continued fellowship:

the unanimous decision of the Primates was to walk together, however painful this is, and despite our differences, as a deep expression of our unity in the body of Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Given the ways some Primates and others associated with the ‘Global South’ group, and particularly with GAFCON, had commented before this meeting and in months and years prior, this is a most remarkable indication of positive intent. It seems to acknowledge that the Communion itself is a given with TEC in it, and that the role of the Primates must itself model a sort of willingness to continue engagement.

A second notable feature is the theme of ‘consequences’ mentioned in the communiqué and emphasized in the Archbishop of Canterbury’s subsequent commentary.<sup>12</sup> While it may not be completely convincing

11. Primates’ Communiqué.

12. ‘US Episcopalians facing “not a sanction, but a consequence” says Welby’, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2016/22-january/news/uk/us-episcopalians-facing-not-a-sanction-but-a-consequence-says-welby> (accessed 10 February 2016).

for the Primates to point to external or objective consequences without acknowledging their own responsibilities and actions, TEC leaders and members and those in other Churches sympathetic to their cause cannot afford to ignore the reality of damaged relationships stemming not just from profound differences over sexuality but over unilateralism, real or perceived. The most sympathetic way to read the Primates' sanctions (to name them more frankly than as mere 'consequences') is to see them as a proportionate but limited response to the previous damage or the 'consequences' to relationships at the global level.

### *Real Communion*

Those who would take some pleasure in the primatial statement as a rebuke to TEC cannot, then, do so on the basis of some non-existent formal authority. The real significance of the Canterbury meeting's communiqué will have to be determined at the level of its authenticity – or, in language more in keeping with international ecclesial ponderings, in its 'reception' in the Churches. Its significance really lies not in the real or imagined exercise of formal power, but in the character and the quality of the relationships that exist at different places in the life of the Anglican Communion, and which the Primates may have hoped to model.

If the Primates' own declaration begs various questions regarding authority and its use, what the *Washington Post* got more completely wrong, but which some TEC members and other Anglicans may not get quite right either, is that none of the above has anything much to do with participation in or membership of the Anglican Communion as such. The Communion itself is constituted, not by the Primates or indeed by any of the 'instruments of unity', but by the set of relationships at all levels, including local and bilateral ones. Calling those committees in which the participation of TEC may be constrained 'the Anglican Communion' is like calling some committee in Washington 'the United States'.

In a blog post about the same meeting, TEC priest and Cambridge University scholar Jesse Zink suggested that the reality of the Communion may be constituted as much by small-scale interaction across geographical distance and cultural boundaries, citing his conversation with Anglicans in a small Nigerian Church:

Just as we were getting ready to say a concluding prayer, an older man who had not said much stood up. 'Sometimes, we are ashamed to be

Anglicans in this village,' he said. 'Other churches are much bigger and we only have this little room.' He paused, leaning on his cane and looking directly at me. 'But today you have come here. It is evangelism for you to come here. People in our village will be talking, "That man came all the way from America to go to that little Anglican church!"'<sup>13</sup>

This anecdote that joins the two poles of the Anglican divide (as it might seem) is not merely a warm personal insight, but reflects a quite fundamental aspect of Anglican polity. Anglicans relate to one another not only via their primatial or synodical proxies, but in a great variety of relationships that are more laterally than hierarchically constituted, involving parishes and dioceses, as well as individuals and agencies. The Primates at Canterbury did not seek to define the Communion any differently than this of course, but neither can they. It is one thing for them to get the polity of the 'instruments of unity' a bit wrong, perhaps even deliberately, but they know enough not to think they can define the extent of Anglicanism itself.

So the Episcopal Church was not suspended from or by the Anglican Communion. The fact that the Primates' declaration has been seen by many as flawed regarding issues of human sexuality is another matter. Yet these events did not make TEC 'second class Anglicans', let alone remove TEC members from the Communion in any way. They should have little impact on how members of TEC and other Churches see themselves as part of a wider Communion, a community of Churches with a common history and with an extraordinary scope and richness, unless to encourage all involved not to take these relationships for granted.

As far as Communion itself goes, the main message Anglicans may then take from the 2016 Primates' meeting is that Communion is what they themselves will make it, at whatever level. There will be different judgments, in the short and long term, about the wisdom and effectiveness of the Canterbury meeting, but the Primates took seriously their difficult work of fostering communion. How their own changing role plays out will be subject to considerable scrutiny in the short and long term. Other Anglican leaders and members now face their own versions of these dilemmas; what they purport to believe together, however, includes the affirmation that the curious and powerful gift of Communion is God's, not the Primates, to give.

13. 'On beyond Primates', <https://medium.com/@jessezink/on-beyond-primates-bf895fbb32c4#.izyvilnc> (accessed 10 February 2016).