

Chapter 5:WHAT IS THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION?

by Wayne Brighton

The Anglican Communion is a federation of Churches nourished by the Holy Spirit and built up in love over centuries. It consists of 38 autonomous provinces who share a common ancestry having been planted by colonists and missionary organisations associated with the Church of England. Today, the Communion is a multi-cultural fellowship whose members are committed to God's mission in the nations where they live.

What is meant by Communion?

Communion is all about relationships. These relationships subsist "in visible unity, common confession of apostolic faith, common belief in scripture and the creeds, common baptism and shared eucharist, and a mutually recognised ministry." Community, equality, sharing, interdependence, mutual affection and respect are all expressed as part of these relationships. Financial assistance and skills development are also important expressions of communion.

Anglicans believe that each parish, diocese and province is part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church and that all have a share in God's mission. Furthermore, Anglicans believe that completeness is found only through our relationships with each other. It is a quality of life that needs to be continually nourished and reaffirmed.

Globally, Anglicans are committed to the authority of Scripture, the importance of prayer and tradition, episcopal leadership and synodical governance. Liturgical worship, discipleship, ecumenism and the environment are valued too because of the desire to see God's family walk together in truth and unity.

Each province of the Communion is autonomous. This means that each member church has the jurisdiction and responsibility to determine their own doctrine, practice and governance. Nevertheless, no province is entirely independent as every member church is affected by the decisions and actions of other constituent members.

The Instruments of Unity

The bonds of unity and affection between members of the Anglican Communion are many. Some are informal links forged through prayer, fellowship, study and cooperation in mission. Others are primarily Anglican organisations that work globally like the Mothers' Union and mission agencies such as the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, the Church Missionary Society and Church Army International.

A range of formal, representative institutions for communion have emerged as a complex network of interlocking groups over the past century. They have become known as the instruments of unity (see below). Their operations reflect the dispersed and largely national approach to authority adopted by member churches within the communion. The basis of our communion and the inter-relationship between these groups has been explored in:

- the *Virginia Report* (1996) produced by the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrine Commission; and

- the *Windsor Report* (2004) produced by the Lambeth Commission on Communion.

These bonds have been strained in recent years due to decisions made in The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada concerning same-sex unions. In response, some provinces and dioceses have declared a state of 'impaired' communion with them. The Communion is currently engaged in a process to clarify the nature and basis of communion in the Communion. Our Synod may be requested to consider a proposal in an effort to advance this international process.

The Archbishop of Canterbury

The first and most ancient bond of unity within the Communion is the ***Archbishop of Canterbury***, the Primate of All England. Historically, the office and person were of pivotal importance as Anglican churches were planted around the world by missionary organisations and clergy from the Church of England. This position once exercised authority for dioceses outside England until they became autonomous through self-governance. It is still central as being in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury is often definitive for membership of the Anglican Communion. As such, the Archbishop is the chairperson or president of each instrument of unity.

The Lambeth Conferences

Calls for bishops to meet together for friendship, prayer and mutual assistance echoed around the globe during the 1850s. As safe long distance travel became feasible, colonial Anglican diocesan bishops desired to meet together to discuss matters of faith, ministry, social concern and relations with other churches.

In 1867 the ***Lambeth Conference*** met for the first time with some 76 diocesan bishops attending. Uncertainty about the meeting's legal status meant that it was convened as Conference and not a synod of the church, as only princes could summon such decision making groups at that time (see Article XXI). The Conference was therefore born as a forum for consultation and consensus making with advisory power and moral authority for what was largely a colonial church. Legal jurisdiction remained solely with the provinces, a situation that suited the circumstances of not only the English but the Scots and the Americans as well.

From the outset, member churches were concerned about the principles for union amongst members of the Anglican Communion. The ***Lambeth Quadrilateral*** was adopted in 1888 and it pared Anglican essentials down to four simple points, namely: (1) the Bible as sufficient rule of faith; (2) the two creeds; (3) the two sacraments ordained by Christ; and (4) the historical episcopate, locally adapted to the varying needs of the nations.

The Conference meets every ten years or so at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Over 500 bishops attended in 1998 with assistant or suffragan bishops included for the first time. Clergy and laity do not attend. It will next meet in Canterbury from 16 July – 4 August 2008.

The Anglican Consultative Council

The 1897 Conference highlighted the need to improve communications between the provinces and a number of groups emerged to organise the Lambeth Conference and coordinate efforts in mission. By the early 1960s, the lack of integration and coordination was telling. Furthermore, many member churches had since adopted forms of synodical governance and so many argued that representation of clergy and laity was also needed in the communion's instruments.

The 1968 Lambeth Conference, with its 20 member Churches, agreed to the formation of the **Anglican Consultative Council (ACC)**, which met for the first time in 1971. The Archbishop of Canterbury presides over the Council, whose membership comprises three provincial representatives including a bishop, clergy and laity.

The Council allows member churches in the Communion to consult, consider and coordinate Anglican affairs concerning matters of mission, liturgy, social concern and its relationship with other churches. As a consultative it does not possess legislative capacity nor is it a body with central authority. Australia contributes financially to the work of ACC through the Special Fund.

Some provinces elect their Primates as the episcopal representative while other provinces do not. Australia is represented on the Council by Bishop John Noble (to be replaced due to retirement), the Revd Kay Goldsworthy and Mr Robert Fordham. The Primate, the Most Revd Dr Phillip Aspinall is an ex officio member also.

It meets every three years or so with ACC-14 being held most recently in Nottingham during 2005. ACC-14 proposed a significant change to the Council's constitution, which may need to be considered by our Synod in October.

The Primates Meeting

For much of the 20th Century, the primates of member churches met together occasionally. Many saw the need for regular meetings of primatial representatives due to the rapid growth of churches achieving autonomy throughout the Communion and that not every primate was a member of the ACC. In 1978, the Lambeth Conference, consisting of 25 member Churches, called for a fourth instrument of unity, the **Primates Meeting**.

The Primates Meeting is held every two or three years for consultation on theological, social and international issues. Like other instruments, the meeting plays a consultative and advisory role only. In recent years there have been calls from some parts of the communion for the primates to have an enhanced responsibility concerning doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters.

The Australian Primate, the Most Revd Dr Phillip Aspinall is a member of its Standing Committee and was the spokesman at its meeting in Tanzania during February 2007.

The Anglican Communion Office

The Archbishop of Canterbury's international responsibilities, the Lambeth Conference, the ACC and the Primate's Meeting and are all coordinated by a

small secretariat known as the **Anglican Communion Office**. Based in London and led by the Revd Canon Kenneth Kearon, the Secretary General, it provides support for a range of groups determined either by Lambeth, the ACC or the Primates Meeting.

Financial contributions to the ACC are used to fund two important centres and a variety of commissions or standing groups that work on matters of long-term significance to the Communion. Participation in these forums is largely by invitation. Australians have been active in many but not all of these forums. The range of groups, date of establishment and Australians involved (past and present) include:

- the Anglican Centre in Rome, 1966
- the Anglican Communion Observer at the United Nations, 1991 (Ms Ann Skamp)
- the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations, 1998 including associated dialogue commissions with international representatives from the Baptist, Methodist, Old Catholic, Oriental Orthodox, the Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Churches (Abp Peter Carnley, Bp John Stewart, The Revd Dr Cathy Thomson are a few recent members of various groups)
- the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Mission and Evangelism, 1999 (Ms Lynlea Rodger)
- the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, 2001 (The Revd Dr Bruce Kaye and Bp Stephen Pickard)

- the Lambeth Commission on Communion, 2003 which produced the *Windsor Report*, and augmented by groups that included
 - the Windsor Reception Reference Group, 2005-06
 - the Panel of Reference, 2005 (Abp Peter Carnley and Mr Robert Tong)
 - the Listening Process, 2006 and
 - the Covenant Design Group, 2006
- Ethics and Technology, 1999

The Anglican Communion Office also supports a range of networks where participation and representation is self-funded by interested member churches. Representation in these forums is generally determined by the General Synod Standing Committee and include:

- the Anglican Indigenous Network, 1991
- the Anglican Peace and Justice Network, 1985 (Canon Chris Jones)
- the Anglican Communion Environmental Network, 2002 (Bp George Browning as convenor)
- the International Anglican Family Network, 1992
- International Anglican Women's Network, 1996 (Ms Ann Skamp)
- International Anglican Youth Network, 2004 (The Revd Steven Schwartzrock)
- the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, 1983 (members of the Liturgy Commission from time to time)
- Network for Inter-Faith Concerns, 1998 (the Revd Dr Ruwan Palapathwala)
- Theological Education for the Anglican Communion, 2003 (Canon Colleen O'Reilly, Mrs Elizabeth Appleby)
- the Council of Anglican Provinces in Africa HIV/AIDS, TB and Malaria Network, 2001.

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