

Advent Letter from Archbishop Rowan to Primates of the Anglican Communion & Moderators of the United Churches – December 2007

Greetings in the name of the One 'who is and was and is to come, the Almighty', as we prepare in this Advent season to celebrate once more his first coming and pray for the grace to greet him when he comes in glory.

You will by now, I hope, have received my earlier letter summarising the responses from Primates to the Joint Standing Committee's analysis of the New Orleans statement from the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church. In that letter, I promised to write with some further reflections and proposals, and this is the purpose of the present communication. Although I am writing in the first instance to my fellow-primates, I hope you will share this letter widely with your bishops and people.

As I said in that earlier letter, the responses received from primates differed in their assessment of the situation. Slightly more than half of the replies received signalled a willingness to accept the Joint Standing Committee's analysis of the New Orleans statement, but the rest regarded both the statement and the Standing Committee's comments as an inadequate response to what had been requested by the primates in Dar-es-Salaam.

So we have no consensus about the New Orleans statement. It is also the case that some of the more negative assessments from primates were clearly influenced by the reported remarks of individual bishops in The Episcopal Church who either declared their unwillingness to abide by the terms of the statement or argued that it did not imply any change in current policies. It should be noted too that some of the positive responses reflected a deep desire to put the question decisively behind us as a Communion; some of these also expressed dissatisfaction with our present channels of discussion and communication.

2.

Where does this leave us as a Communion? Because we have no single central executive authority, the answer to this is not a simple one. However, it is important to try and state what common ground there is before we attempt to move forward; and it is historically an aspect of the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury to 'articulate the mind of the Communion' in moments of tension and controversy, as the Windsor Report puts it (para. 109). I do so out of the profound conviction that the existence of our Communion is truly a gift of God to the wholeness of Christ's Church and that all of us will be seriously wounded and diminished if our Communion fractures any further; but also out of the no less profound conviction that our identity as Anglicans is not something without boundaries. What I am writing here is an attempt to set out where some of those boundaries lie and why they matter for our witness to the world as well as for our own integrity and mutual respect.

The Communion is a voluntary association of provinces and dioceses; and so its unity depends not on a canon law that can be enforced but on the ability of each part of the family to recognise that other local churches have received the same faith from the apostles and are faithfully holding to it in loyalty to the One Lord incarnate who speaks in Scripture and bestows his grace in the sacraments. To put it in slightly different terms, local churches acknowledge the same 'constitutive elements' in one another. This means in turn that each local church receives from others and recognises in others the same good news and the same structure of ministry, and seeks to engage in mutual service for the sake of our common mission.

So a full relationship of communion will mean:

- i. *The common acknowledgment that we stand under the authority of Scripture as 'the rule and ultimate standard of faith', in the words of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral; as the gift shaped by the Holy Spirit which decisively interprets God to the community of believers and the community of believers to itself and opens our hearts to the living and eternal Word that is Christ.* Our obedience to the call of Christ the Word Incarnate is drawn out first and foremost by our listening to the Bible and conforming our lives to what God both offers and requires of us through the words and narratives of the Bible. We recognise each other in one fellowship when we see one another 'standing under' the word of Scripture. Because of this recognition, we are able to consult and reflect together on the interpretation of Scripture and to learn in that process. Understanding the Bible is not a private process or something to be undertaken in isolation by one part of the family. Radical change in the way we read cannot be determined by one group or tradition alone.
- ii. *The common acknowledgement of an authentic ministry of Word and Sacrament.* We remain in communion because we trust that the Lord who has called us by his Word also calls men and women in other contexts and raises up for them as for us a ministry which can be recognised as performing the same tasks – of teaching and pastoral care and admonition, of assembling God's people for worship, above all at the Holy Communion. The principle that one local church should not intervene in the life of another is simply a way of expressing this trust that the form of ministry is something we share and that God provides what is needed for each local community.
- iii. *The common acknowledgement that the first and great priority of each local Christian community is to communicate the Good News.* When we are able to recognise biblical faithfulness and authentic ministry in one another, the relation of communion pledges us to support each other's efforts to win people for Christ and to serve the world in his Name. Communion thus means the sharing of resources and skills in order to enable one another to proclaim and serve in this way.

It is in this context that we must think about the present crisis, which is in significant part a crisis about whether we can fully, honestly and gratefully recognise these gifts in each other.

The debates about sexuality, significant as they may be, are symptoms of our confusion about these basic principles of recognition. It is too easy to make the debate a standoff between those who are 'for' and those who are 'against' the welcoming of homosexual people in the Church. The Instruments of Communion have consistently and very strongly repeated that it is part of our Christian and Anglican discipleship to condemn homophobic prejudice and violence, to defend the human rights and civil liberties of homosexual people and to offer them the same pastoral care and loving service that we owe to all in Christ's name. But the deeper question is about what we believe we are free to do, if we seek to be recognisably faithful to Scripture and the moral tradition of the wider Church, with respect to blessing and sanctioning *in the name of the Church* certain personal decisions about what constitutes an acceptable Christian lifestyle. Insofar as there is currently any consensus in the Communion about this, it is not in favour of change in our discipline or our interpretation of the Bible.

This is why the episcopal ordination of a person in a same-sex union or a claim to the freedom to make liturgical declarations about the character of same-sex unions inevitably raises the question of whether a local church is still fully recognisable within the one family of practice and reflection. Where one part of the family makes a decisive move that plainly implies a new understanding of Scripture that has not been received and agreed by the wider Church, it is not surprising that others find a problem in knowing how far they are still speaking the same language. And because what one local church says is naturally taken as representative of what others might say, we have the painful situation of some communities being associated with views and actions which they deplore or which they simply have not considered.

Where such a situation arises, it becomes important to clarify that the Communion as a whole is not committed to receiving the new interpretation and that there must be ways in which others can appropriately distance themselves from decisions and policies which they have not agreed. This is important in our relations with our own local contexts and equally in our ecumenical (and interfaith) encounters, to avoid confusion and deep misunderstanding.

The desire to establish this distance has led some to conclude that, since the first condition of recognisability (a common reading and understanding of Scripture) is not met, the whole structure of mission and ministry has failed in a local church that commits itself to a new reading of the Bible. Hence the willingness of some to provide supplementary ministerial care through the adoption of parishes in distant provinces or the ordination of ministers for distant provinces.

Successive Lambeth Conferences and Primates' Meetings have, however, cautioned very strongly against such provision. It creates a seriously anomalous position. It

does not appeal to a clear or universal principle by which it may be decided that a local church's ministry is completely defective. On the ground, it creates rivalry and confusion. It opens the door to complex and unedifying legal wrangles in civil courts. It creates a situation in which pastoral care and oversight have to be exercised at a great distance. The view that has been expressed by all the Instruments of Communion in recent years is that interventions are not to be sanctioned. It would seem reasonable to say that this principle should only be overridden when the Communion together had in some way concluded, *not only* that a province was behaving anomalously, but that this was so serious as to compromise the entire ministry and mission the province was undertaking. Without such a condition, the risk is magnified of smaller and smaller groups taking to themselves the authority to decide on the adequacy of a neighbour's ministerial life or spiritual authenticity. The gospels and the epistles of Paul alike warn us against a hasty final judgement on the spiritual state of our neighbours.

3.

While argument continues about exactly how much force is possessed by a Resolution of the Lambeth Conference such as the 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution on sexuality, it is true, as I have repeatedly said, that the 1998 Resolution is the only point of reference clearly agreed by the overwhelming majority of the Communion. This is the point where our common reading of Scripture stands, along with the common reading of the majority within the Christian churches worldwide and through the centuries.

Thus it is not surprising if some have concluded that the official organs of The Episcopal Church, in confirming the election of Gene Robinson and in giving what many regard as implicit sanction to same-sex blessings of a public nature have put in question the degree to which it can be recognised as belonging to the same family by deciding to act against the strong, reiterated and consistent advice of the Instruments of Communion. The repeated requests for clarification to The Episcopal Church, difficult and frustrating as they have proved for that province, have been an attempt by the Communion at large to deal with the many anxieties expressed in this regard. The matter is further complicated by the fact that several within The Episcopal Church, including a significant number of bishops and some diocesan conventions, have clearly distanced themselves from the prevailing view in their province as expressed in its public policies and declarations. This includes the bishops who have committed themselves to the proposals of the Windsor Report in their Camp Allen conference, as well as others who have looked for more radical solutions. Without elaborating on the practical implications of this or the complicated and diverse politics of the situation, it is obvious that such dioceses and bishops cannot be regarded as deficient in recognisable faithfulness to the common deposit and the common language and practice of the Communion. If their faith and practice are recognised by other churches in the Communion as representing the common mind of the Anglican Church, they are clearly in fellowship with the Communion. The practical

challenge then becomes to find ways of working out a fruitful, sustainable and honest relation for them both with their own province and with the wider Communion.

That challenge is not best addressed by a series of ad hoc arrangements with individual provinces elsewhere, as the Dar-es-Salaam communiqué made plain. The New Orleans statement, along with many individual statements by bishops in TEC, expresses the anger felt by many in the US – as also in Canada – about uncontrolled intervention, and it is evident that this is not doing anything to advance or assist local solutions that will have some theological and canonical solidity.

I believe that we as a Communion must recognise two things in respect of the current position in TEC. First: most if not all of the bishops present in New Orleans were seeking in all honesty to find a way of meeting the requests of the primates and to express a sense of responsibility towards the Communion and their concern for and loyalty to it. It is of enormous importance that the Communion overall does not forget its responsibility to and for that large body of prayerful opinion in The Episcopal Church which sincerely desires to work in full harmony with others, particularly those bishops who have clearly expressed their desire to work within the framework both of the Windsor Report and the Lambeth Resolutions, and that it does not give way to the temptation to view The Episcopal Church as a monochrome body. Second: it is practically impossible to imagine any further elucidation or elaboration coming from TEC after the successive statements and resolutions from last year's General Convention onwards. A good deal of time and effort has gone into the responses they have already produced, and it is extremely unlikely that further meetings will produce any more substantial consensus than that which is now before us.

The exact interpretation of the New Orleans statements, as the responses from around the Communion indicate, is disputable. I do not see how the commitment not to confirm any election to the episcopate of a partnered gay or lesbian person can mean anything other than what it says. But the declaration on same-sex blessings is in effect a reiteration of the position taken in previous statements from TEC, and has clearly not satisfied many in the Communion any more than these earlier statements. There is obviously a significant and serious gap between what TEC understands and what others assume as to what constitutes a liturgical provision in the name of the Church at large.

A scheme has been outlined for the pastoral care of those who do not accept the majority view in TEC, but the detail of any consultation or involvement with other provinces as to how this might best work remains to be filled out and what has been proposed does not so far seem to have commanded the full confidence of those most affected. Furthermore, serious concerns remain about the risks of spiralling disputes before the secular courts, although the Dar-es-Salaam communiqué expressed profound disquiet on this matter, addressed to all parties.

A somewhat complicating factor in the New Orleans statement has been the provision that any kind of moratorium is in place until General Convention provides

otherwise. Since the matters at issue are those in which the bishops have a decisive voice as a House of Bishops in General Convention, puzzlement has been expressed as to why the House should apparently bind itself to future direction from the Convention. If that is indeed what this means, it is in itself a decision of some significance. It raises a major ecclesiological issue, not about some sort of autocratic episcopal privilege but about the understanding in The Episcopal Church of the distinctive charism of bishops as an order and their responsibility for sustaining doctrinal standards. Once again, there seems to be a gap between what some in The Episcopal Church understand about the ministry of bishops and what is held elsewhere in the Communion, and this needs to be addressed.

The exchange between TEC and the wider Communion has now been continuing for some four years, and it would be unrealistic and ungrateful to expect more from TEC in terms of clarification. Whatever our individual perspectives, I think we need to honour the intentions and the hard work done by the bishops of TEC. For many of them, this has been a very costly and demanding experience, testing both heart and conscience. But now we need to determine a way forward.

4.

The whole of this discussion is naturally affected by what people are thinking about the character and scope of the Lambeth Conference, and I need to say a word about this here. Thus far, invitations have been issued with two considerations in mind.

First: I have not felt able to invite those whose episcopal ordination was carried through against the counsel of the Instruments of Communion, and I have not seen any reason to revisit this (the reference in the New Orleans statement to the Archbishop of Canterbury's 'expressed desire' to invite the Bishop of New Hampshire misunderstands what was said earlier this year, when the question was left open as to whether the Bishop, as a non-participant, could conceivably be present as a guest at some point or at some optional event). And while (as I have said above) I understand and respect the good faith of those who have felt called to provide additional episcopal oversight in the USA, there can be no doubt that these ordinations have not been encouraged or legitimised by the Communion overall.

I acknowledge that this limitation on invitations will pose problems for some in its outworking. But I would strongly urge those whose strong commitments create such problems to ask what they are prepared to offer for the sake of a Conference that will have some general credibility in and for the Communion overall.

Second: I have underlined in my letter of invitation that acceptance of the invitation *must be taken as implying willingness to work with those aspects of the Conference's agenda that relate to implementing the recommendations of Windsor, including the development of a Covenant*. The Conference needs of course to be a place where diversity of opinion can be expressed, and there is no intention to foreclose the discussion – for example – of what sort of Covenant document is needed. But I

believe we need to be able to take for granted a certain level of willingness to follow through the question of how we avoid the present degree of damaging and draining tension arising again. I intend to be in direct contact with those who have expressed unease about this, so as to try and clarify how deep their difficulties go with accepting or adopting the Conference's agenda.

How then should the Lambeth Conference be viewed? It is not a canonical tribunal, but neither is it merely a general consultation. It is a meeting of the chief pastors and teachers of the Communion, seeking an authoritative common voice. It is also a meeting designed to strengthen and deepen the sense of what the episcopal vocation is.

Some reactions to my original invitation have implied that meeting for prayer, mutual spiritual enrichment and development of ministry is somehow a way of avoiding difficult issues. On the contrary: I would insist that *only* in such a context can we usefully address divisive issues. If, as the opening section of this letter claimed, our difficulties have their root in whether or how far we can recognise the same gospel and ministry in diverse places and policies, we need to engage more not less directly with each other. This is why I have repeatedly said that an invitation to Lambeth does not constitute a certificate of orthodoxy but simply a challenge to pray seriously together and to seek a resolution that will be as widely owned as may be.

And this is also why I have said that the refusal to meet can be a refusal of the cross – and so of the resurrection. We are being asked to see our handling of conflict and potential division as part of our maturing both as pastors and as disciples. I do not think this is either an incidental matter or an evasion of more basic questions.

This means some hard reflective work in preparation for the Conference - including pursuing conversations with each other across the current divisions. There will also be a number of documents circulating which will feed into the Conference's discussions, in particular the work of the Covenant Design Group, the resources available from the dialogues with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, the Report of the Doctrinal commission and the papers coming from IASCER. Also significant will be the papers on the core elements of Anglican ministerial education and formation prepared by the group advising the Primates on Theological Education in the Anglican Communion, and the paper on the theology of inter faith relations prepared by the Network for Inter Faith Concerns (NIFCON), *Generous Love*.

But direct contact and open exchange of convictions will be crucial. Whatever happens, we are bound to seek for fruitful ways of carrying forward liaison with provinces whose policies cause scandal or difficulty to others. Whatever happens, certain aspects of our 'relational' communion will continue independently of the debates and decisions at the level of canons and hierarchies.

Given the differences in response to The Episcopal Church revealed in the responses of the primates, we simply cannot pretend that there is now a ready-made

consensus on the future of relationships between TEC and other provinces. Much work remains to be done. But – once again, I refer back to my introductory thoughts – that work is about some basic questions of fidelity to Scripture and identity in ministry and mission, not only about the one issue of sexuality. It is about what it means for the Anglican Communion to behave with a consistency that allows us to face, both honestly and charitably, the deeply painful question of who we can and cannot recognise as sharing the same calling and task.

5.

Finally, what specific recommendations emerge from these thoughts?

I propose two different but related courses of action during the months ahead. I wish to pursue some professionally facilitated conversations between the leadership of The Episcopal Church and those with whom they are most in dispute, internally and externally, to see if we can generate any better level of mutual understanding. Such meetings will not seek any predetermined outcome but will attempt to ease tensions and clarify options. They may also clarify ideas about the future pattern of liaison between TEC and other parts of the Communion. I have already identified resources and people who will assist in this.

I also intend to convene a small group of primates and others, whose task will be, in close collaboration with the primates, the Joint Standing Committee, the Covenant Design Group and the Lambeth Conference Design Group, to work on the unanswered questions arising from the inconclusive evaluation of the primates to New Orleans and to take certain issues forward to Lambeth. This will feed in to the discussions at Lambeth about Anglican identity and the Covenant process; I suggest that it will also have to consider whether in the present circumstances it is possible for provinces or individual bishops at odds with the expressed mind of the Communion to participate fully in representative Communion agencies, including ecumenical bodies. Its responsibility will be to weigh current developments in the light of the clear recommendations of Windsor and of the subsequent statements from the ACC and the Primates' Meeting; it will thus also be bound to consider the exact status of bishops ordained by one province for ministry in another. At the moment, the question of 'who speaks for the Communion?' is surrounded by much unclarity and urgently needs resolution; the people of the Communion need to be sure that they are not placed in unsustainable and damaging positions by any vagueness as to what the Communion as a whole believes and endorses, and so the issue of who represents the Communion cannot be evaded. The principles set out at the beginning of this letter will, I hope, assist in clarifying what needs to be said about this. Not everyone carrying the name of Anglican can claim to speak authentically for the identity we share as a global fellowship. I continue to hope that the discussion of the Covenant before, during and beyond Lambeth will give us a positive rallying-point.

6.

A great deal of the language that is around in the Communion at present seems to presuppose that any change from our current deadlock is impossible, that division is unavoidable and that any such division represents so radical a difference in fundamental faith that no recognition and future co-operation can be imagined. I cannot accept these assumptions, and I do not believe that as Christians we should see them as beyond challenge, least of all as we think and pray our way through Advent.

The coming of Christ in the flesh and the declaration of the good news of his saving purpose was not a matter of human planning and ingenuity, nor was it frustrated by human resistance and sin. It was a gift whose reception was made possible by the prayerful obedience of Mary and whose effect was to create a new community of God's sons and daughters. As we look forward, what is there for us to do but pray, obey and be ready for God's re-creating work through the eternal and unchanging Saviour, Jesus Christ?

'The Spirit and the bride say, "Come"... Amen. Come Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen' (Rev.22.17, 20-21).