



the
LAMBETH
Conference

16 July – 3 August 2008

Report by Bishop Allan Ewing

Prelude

In 1965 American song writer Joe Darien wrote a song for the musical 'Man of La Mancha', based loosely on the novel 'Don Quixote' by Cervantes. The song, 'To Dream an Impossible Dream', is an articulation of Quixote's quest and his motivation. The lyrics include the following:

To dream the impossible dream,
To fight the unbeatable foe,
To bear with unbearable sorrow,
To run where the brave dare not go.

To right the unrightable wrong
To love pure and chaste from afar
To try when your arms are too weary
To reach the unreachable star.

This is my quest, to follow that star.
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far.

To fight for the right without question or pause.
To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause.

And I know if I'll only be true to this glorious quest
That my heart will be peaceful and calm when I'm laid to my rest.

And the world will be better for this,
That one man scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage.
To reach the unreachable stars.

It is unfair to cast Archbishop Rowan Williams as a latter-day romantic, tilting at windmills. However, there is in the lyrics something of the description of the task of a man who is called to love and care for that particular expression of God's Church which is the Anglican Communion.

The Anglican Communion is an impossibility

Having spent three weeks with leaders of the Anglican Communion from many different parts of the world it makes sense to conclude that something like the Anglican Communion is an impossibility.

This sense of the impossible comes from the complexity of culture and polity within the Communion. The task is to hold together churches in more than 160 countries across First, Second, Third and Fourth World cultures; churches that have profoundly different polity and origins, and to do this in a way that avoids having a magisterium that dictates the manner of how each component part of the Communion addresses the issues of faith and order in their own culture.

The differences in polity, the way in which a church organises itself and makes decisions, are great across the Communion. In some provinces there is a strong democratic and often egalitarian 'flavour' to decision making; in other Provinces Archbishop or Bishop appear to decide for the province on all matters of faith and order. How can a church which is organised around the personal direction of one person, an Archbishop, relate to other churches where houses of clergy and people dictate particular policies and actions? The clearest answer is 'not easily'!

Similarly, cultural issues create vast chasms of understanding within the Communion. In the same Communion we have a national church in some countries where to ignore the justice

issues relating to people in same sex relationships will bring broad community condemnation; and we have different national churches where to suggest there are justice issues relating to same sex relationships will bring community condemnation and invite personal physical attack. How do these individual churches explain locally the views and actions of other churches? The same clear answer is ‘not easily’!

The third impossibility is the range of views around the interpretation of Scripture. It would be completely wrong to suggest that particular scriptural interpretation was in alignment with either church polity or cultural base. This is particularly apparent in the different perspectives of churches in the United States, in England and Africa. There seem to be those who hold a view that so much of Scripture is culturally dictated that there is nothing left but vague generalisations about the possibility of a Son of God; and those who hold a view that that Scripture is entirely without cultural content, and that every aspect applies at all times in all places.

The positions described may be overdrawn but there can be no doubt of the deep suspicion with which interpreters of Scripture regard the views of others. The word ‘heresy’ may not be spoken, but it is not far from the lips of those at all extremes when the views of others are considered.

How can these people and churches of different Scriptural interpretation live in Communion together? The clear answer is, again, ‘not easily’!

A Church of the Centre

If the Anglican Communion is an impossibility, it is a human impossibility, and not an impossibility to God.

Archbishop Rowan Williams describes the Anglican Communion as a Church of the Centre. He is not intending to suggest a Church that sits complacently in a safe place of no opinion, embracing no extreme, and standing for nothing. Rather, he suggests that the Centre to which the Communion is drawn is the Centre which is Jesus Christ. That is, we are to understand Communion as being based on, fed by, and inspired by, the Son of God.

It is on the basis of a shared Centre that people of the Lambeth Conference met together. The intention of the Conference was not to make resolutions, but to create a space in which peoples of different churches, cultures, and interpretive traditions, might meet in deep encounter.

Through the addresses of the Retreat; the three plenary addresses and a final sermon, the Archbishop of Canterbury sought to create a space in which participants could be open to God and to each other. Rather than allowing the Conference to move quickly to resolution and fixed position, the Archbishop endeavoured to keep open dialogue and the possibility of encountering in the other a fellow disciple of Christ.

If the problems of the Anglican Communion can be likened to the ‘Gordian Knot’ Rowan Williams is showing no desire to slice through the strands; rather he continues to work to tease out the strands.

Structured to Listen

A typical day at the Conference had seven components; shared daily Eucharist, small group Bible study, larger group reflection on matters of concern, ‘Hearings’ which allowed participants to respond to the summarised reflections, Self-select groups around practical and critical matters of being church, Evening worship, and an evening plenary session.

Each component had an intention for community building and substantial opportunity for listening; opportunity for input varied enormously, with the bible study groups of eight people serving as effective small community for reflection and mutual support and discovery. At the other extreme Plenary Sessions often had limited opportunities for response. The 'Hearings' were, for many, the most frustrating aspects of the conference. With a time limit of two or three minutes any participant could speak either to the matter under consideration (the objective) or as a comment on whatever issue the person was most agitated about. Most days no more than 20 people were able to speak in the time allowed, and so most participants were silent during this process.

The Bible Study was a great gift in encountering people with similar roles and quite different worlds. In the small group of eight a relationship of trust developed by many and much was learnt. It was a frustration that the study itself was more in the nature of an invitation to reflect on the 'I am' sayings of Jesus in John's gospel rather than a genuine Bible Study designed to bring out biblical interpretation. For some this was a sign of a missed opportunity and a reflection of a desire to avoid hard conversations. However, the quality of discussion and the depth of sharing made this group strong and valuable.

The larger group was constructed around what was called an 'Indaba' process. In concept an 'Indaba' is a meeting where people meet together and talk through an issue until a decision is made. The talk is frank and uncompromising, but held in the context of trust and mutual respect. Between forty and fifty people met in each Indaba, and there were sixteen Indaba groups in all.

The Indaba process was frustrating and difficult for many. There were several reasons for this; the first was that what was presented was not true to the origins of the concept. The organisers had taken an African concept and modified it to a more Western structure of Agenda and direction of discussion. In addition, the structure was often deflating in nature, moving away from large group discussion and possible conflict, into smaller groups where 'disruption' could be minimal. A further concern was that the agenda within the process delayed conversation on key matters of interpretation of Scripture, sexuality, and a Covenant to the very last days of the Conference.

However, in many places, and despite the hindrances of the process, people did speak deep truth and were heard. The complexity of issues and pain and cost of being faithful disciples of Christ were part of the conversation in the group in which I participated. Positions were challenged, but people were honoured.

At the end of each day the summarised reflections of each group were passed to a reflections group comprising one representative from each group plus a small staff. It was the task of the reflections group to produce a document that fairly summarised the reflections of the Conference as a whole on key issues. This document, now published, has much that is valuable in it. It serves as a document of its time and place, but seeks to address key concerns of the people of God. As a basis for conversation and exploration it is excellent, as a basis for decisions that will be endorsed by all members of the Conference it has little currency.

Abundant Shared Life – In Worship, Plenary and Action

The richness of worship, both morning and evening, was a great gift. Different Provinces of the Communion offered leadership for services, introducing a great variety of new music and giving insight into the life of Anglicans in many different parts of the world.

Of the Evening Plenary sessions two stand out: Brian McLaren, an American evangelical (identified by *Time* magazine as one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in the USA) and Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. These gifted speakers brought insight and challenge.

The following part summary of Brian McLaren's address emphasises the challenge of personal commitment that came as an integral part of evangelism.

In his challenge to the bishops the American speaker who had been invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury urged them to get away from institutional maintenance and internal debate and concentrate on forming disciples. He said there was no need for committees and programmes but just a passion of example of bishops and spouses who really care about this issue.

He stressed the importance of the Church's outward focus such as campaigning for social justice. On Thursday the bishops and spouses will march across London in support of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (to halve world poverty by 2015) part of the Conference agenda.

Using different examples from around the world he told the bishops there were many reasons to compare their churches to an old male tortoise. He described how an orphaned baby hippo had been washed up on a Kenyan beach after the Tsunami. It was placed in a zoo with an old male tortoise who refused to bond; every time the hippo came near the tortoise walked away. He compared the hippo to the emerging global culture and the tortoise to the church but added there was great hope as the tortoise eventually recognized the importance of the hippo.

Rabbi Sacks presented what was perhaps the most sustained biblical analysis of the Conference. He identified in the early books of the Hebrew Scriptures two types of Covenants with God; a Covenant of Fate – when people came together through circumstance (Noah and his family, the people of Israel in Egypt) and a Covenant of Faith (Abraham, and the Sinai Covenant); and he argued that a Covenant of Fate proceeds that of Faith. In his concluding words he suggested how we might understand these Covenants in today's world.

“We are living through one of the most fateful ages of change since Homo sapiens first set foot on earth. Globalisation and the new information technologies are changing everything in our world in ways we cannot possibly predict but we can say what they are doing already. They are doing two things simultaneously. Number One: they are fragmenting our world into ever smaller pieces into ever smaller sects of the like minded. And Number Two: In the opposite direction globalisation is also thrusting us together as never before in history. The destruction of a rainforests there adds to global warming everywhere. Political conflict in one place can create a terrorist incident thousands of miles away. Poverty there moves consciences here. At the very moment that covenants of faith are breaking apart, the covenant of fate is forcing us together -- and we have not yet proved equal to it.

All three elements of the global covenant are in danger. The sanctity of human life is being ravaged by political oppression and by terror. The integrity of creation is being threatened by environmental catastrophe. And the respect for diversity is imperilled by what one writer has called a clash of civilisations. And to repeat -- the covenant of fate precedes the covenant of faith. Because before we can live any faith we have to be able to live. And we have to have to honour our covenant with future generations so that they will be able to live. And that is the call of God in our times.” (Rabbi Sacks)

The Thursday of the second week of the Conference brought an opportunity to march through the centre of London declaring support for the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations. For many at the conference, particularly those from developing nations, these were the issues of mission and evangelism, not sexuality or the interpretation of Scripture. There is, within the invitation to protest, also an invitation to accept the personal challenge that the Millennium Development Goals bring with them.

- Goal 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Goal 2. Achieve universal primary education
- Goal 3. Promote gender equality and empower women
- Goal 4. Reduce child mortality
- Goal 5. Improve maternal health
- Goal 6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Goal 7. Ensure environmental sustainability
- Goal 8. Develop a global partnership for development

Personal Witness

Perhaps one of the greatest impacts that a Conference can have is on the life of the participant. This personal component was articulated movingly in the final service, where after Communion there was a liturgical recognition of the martyrdom of the Melanesian Brothers who were murdered in the Solomon Islands. Their names were read out as an act of recognition and then there was a liturgical procession from the Nave Altar to the Chapel of Current Day Martyrs at the highest and most Eastern part of the Cathedral.

As we remained in the Nave the voices of Melanesian Brothers and Sisters singing a Melanesian Litany slowly softened as they moved solemnly through the Cathedral. Here was a personal challenge for each of us. When the time came could we stand between warring parties and stand for peace? And at the cost of our very lives?

Lambeth 2008 – Was there any outcome at all?

Many observers have found it difficult to identify outcomes from Conference. There were no resolutions, no expulsions, no agreed statements, however, it is possible to point to some signs for the future.

The most apparent is that the Conference has enabled the concept of a Covenant to gain far more credibility within the Communion. Great reservations were stated by a number of participants at the beginning of the Conference, but people were openly saying that their mind had changed and that they could see real value in such a commitment. The first part of the Covenant is becoming well accepted, descriptions of what it might be to be an Anglican in Communion have broad acceptance. Where there is far more concern is the way in which breaches of the Covenant might be addressed. There is a desire that the objective of addressing breaches should be reconciliation and not punishment and expulsion.

A second sign is that the moratoria identified in the Windsor Continuation Process continue to have widespread support. Representatives from both Canada and the USA spoke in nuanced terms of local pastoral response and commitment not to authorise actions or liturgies at diocesan levels. For others such nuances were not acceptable, suggesting that it was possible to prevent any priest from offering any kind of blessing.

There was great distress expressed by people from the USA and Canada about the extent and destructive nature of cross-Province interventions, and a desire from these breaches of the moratoria to be respected as well. However, there was no general unilateral abandonment of the moratoria.

Archbishop Rowan said early in the Conference that he did not believe that there was any energy to revisit Resolution 1:10 of Lambeth 1998 and this view appears to be strongly supported. In many ways it can be seen that Lambeth 2008 has been a major aspect of the listening process described in 1998. As an aside it is helpful to note that at the time of Gene Robinson's consecration in 2003, 40% of the bishops in the USA had NOT attended the 1998 Conference.

The Instruments of Communion, The Archbishop of Canterbury, The Lambeth Conference, The Primates Meeting, and the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) were each examined in discussions during the Conference. There was great affection and support for the Archbishop of Canterbury; his addresses gave significant leadership to the Conference, and he achieved his desired outcome of broad acceptance for a Covenant. Before his first Plenary Address delegates gave a standing ovation which continued for some minutes.

The same support and affection could not be attributed to the Primates Meeting – there is broad suspicion of a small group who cannot hold discipline within themselves exercising any kind of authority across the Communion; but there is acceptance that to place all responsibility in some areas upon the Archbishop of Canterbury is to demand an impossible role.

The ACC is well regarded and is seen by some at least to be the an Instrument of Communion of which more can be asked.

The Lambeth Conference itself presents a fascinating conundrum. A Conference which is unable to legislate or bind any members should be completely irrelevant; a kind of 'junket' every ten years. Yet the individual experiences of such a Conference inform the nature of the whole Communion for years after each event.

The messages of 2008 will include a desire to continue to be Anglican, and of the depth and value of Christianity expressed within the Anglican tradition; the diversity of culture and mission of individual participants; the life and death issues of HIV/Aids, climate change, malaria, poverty, which are the daily challenges of mission for most in the Communion; the recognition that mission starts with personal conversion, and of the need to be constantly open to new insights and perspectives.

For the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn there are perhaps no headline actions that will flow from this Conference. The great conflicts of other parts of the Communion are less urgent and pressing here; yet the most compelling challenges of the Conference were ultimately those which related to how we speak of the God of life to our own culture and our own neighbours.

For each participant there was far more time spent in worship, in prayer and in conversation about what it means to be a Christian leader, and on the importance of proclaiming the Gospel in ways that are relevant, than there was in managing the affairs of the Communion. Whilst I would not want to diminish the importance of the Communion, I suspect that the balance was the right one!

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