

An international overview

- *The Rev Canon Dr Chris Sugden, Anglican Network in Canada conference, November 23, 2007, Burlington, Ontario, Canada*

It is a great pleasure and privilege to be with you. I have been made to feel so at home and welcome. I have been especially pleased to meet so many of you who have roots in the United Kingdom, This partly explains the international nature of the Anglican Communion – in the Western hemisphere it is very much an Anglophile church. But the Lord is leading us to embrace the real theological and missiological basis for being Anglicans by conviction rather than by accident or by opportunity.

There are currently three groups of people in the current debate.

Some think that the approach of The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada is the way ahead for the Anglican Communion. These would include the Archbishops of Wales and Scotland, and since they are welcoming Gene Robinson to visit, the Primates of Hong Kong, New Zealand, Australia and Melanesia.

Some do not agree with The Episcopal Church in its teachings on doctrine and ethics. Bishop Jonathan Gledhill of Lichfield said he believed that 95% of the Anglican Communion would hold this view.

Of the second group, some no longer trust the Archbishop of Canterbury to deal adequately with the problem. Others still trust that the Archbishop of Canterbury is willing to address the problem as one charged with contending for the faith once delivered to the saints.

At the heart of the arguments in the Anglican Communion is the issue of what it is to be Anglican.

For some, being Anglican means belonging to a particular hierarchical Church organisation with a specific set of rules (canons). Those of “Anglo- or Liberal-Catholic” persuasion identify the church by the “Bishop at the altar”. The Bishop has a geographical jurisdiction. This Roman approach was settled at the Council of Whitby in 697. The Celtic Church “lost” the argument for having more flexible ways of working.

Since all Christians in a geographical area were presumed to be in fellowship with the Bishop round his altar, at the Reformation the Church of England accommodated those who took different views on matters that were not required by the scripture. It differed from some of the Reformation churches in distinguishing those matters required scripture, and those cultural matters which were allowable as long as they did not go against scripture. Elizabeth I insisted that she could not make windows into men’s souls. It was enough to subscribe to the articles of faith and the Book of Common Prayer.

But there is more to be said.

Anglican theologians defended their reformation against the Roman Catholic Church, by arguing that their calling was to interpret the scripture in the light of what God also revealed through the discoveries of the day. This was the time of global exploration, of founding new colonies, and discovering of more species of plants and animals. Anglican theologians argued that all truth was God’s truth and that the scripture while primary, should be interpreted in the light not of abstract and speculative philosophy, but in the light

of what God was showing to be true through human discovery. Anglican theology therefore engaged seriously with culture and pastoral concerns.

You are focused on being faithful to the teaching of the Anglican church as expressed in the Bible and reaffirmed in the Reformation. In that Reformation, Protestants rejected the idea that celibacy was possible for almost anyone through vows and the active aid of the Holy Spirit, the notion underpinning the Catholic approach to monks, nuns and celibate priests. Luther and the other reformers held that very few were so gifted and that the vast majority of people should marry. This resulted in the family being hugely elevated in status. The family of the pastor became the model for society, rather than like a priest being set off as different. Perhaps Luther and Cranmer were accused of being obsessed with sex.

The Church of England believed that the language of scripture, worship, prayer and theology should be in the mother tongue and culture of the people. It produced scripture in English and a book of prayer in the language of the common people.

Having scripture as supreme, interpreted in the light of culture and developing knowledge, but in continuity with the received teaching of the church has built a family of churches in many different nations. This is the fundamental way of being Anglican and the **real diversity** of the Anglican Communion – people of different races, cultures, economic realities, united in the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ as revealed in scripture, read in their own language, not different versions of that faith.

For some, the solely juridical approach is primary, whatever the heterodox teachings of some of the bishops. Others claim that the authority of scripture and the faith once delivered to the saints trumps church organization rules when those fail to discipline heterodox teachers. Evangelicals and orthodox are to be found on both sides of this debate.

Archbishop Jensen of Sydney is clear where he stands: “From now on there will inevitably be boundary crossing and the days of sacrosanct diocesan boundaries are over. Anglican episcopacy now includes overlapping jurisdictions and personal rather than merely geographical oversight. If the sexual revolution becomes more broadly accepted elsewhere, so other Bishops will be appointed as they have been in the USA. This is the new fact of Anglican polity. Hand-wringing is not the answer.”

Some would be quite happy to see the Anglican Communion break up or be such a loose federation that there is no sense of fellowship beyond that which we share with other Protestant denominations. This includes revisionists for whom it is embarrassing to be linked with African Christians and their orthodox views on sexuality. This is quite an extraordinary position for them to be in since they have promoted the cause of justice for the poor. However, when the views, concerns and stances of the poor conflict with their own enlightened views, the poor have to be discounted and discarded. After all they are poor.

We should be 150% committed to the Anglican Communion as part of our Christian convictions as a matter of principle. It is a wonderful expression of the way the Gospel breaks down barriers between rich and poor, black and white, north and south. It is a glorious demonstration that the Church of Jesus Christ is a universal church which includes people of every nation. It is a marvellous expression of Paul's words in Galatians 3.28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

The average Anglican is black, female, under 30, has 3 children, lives on 2 dollars a day, walks 3 km for water, is related to someone with HIV/Aids, and is evangelical, What an honour it is that this global expression of Christian faith, with scripture as supreme, engaged with culture, seeking transformation of the whole of society, with catholic order of bishops, a married priesthood, is so attractive to the poor of the earth.

The Gospel is Good News to the Poor. That means that the meaning of the Good News for those of us who are not poor, is defined by what it means to those who are poor who receive it. This is to prevent Christian faith and practice being subverted by elites and taken over by the prevailing culture. The preferences of the elite are always suspect in the Bible. Archbishop Orombi of Uganda writes: "We in the Church of Uganda are convinced that Scripture must be reasserted as the central authority in our communion. The basis of our commitment to Anglicanism is that it provides a wider forum for holding each other accountable to Scripture."

For our spiritual health we need to be in close touch with how the gospel is received and understood by the poor. And on this issue of human sexuality it is the poor Christians who are saying how important marriage and faithfulness are to bringing up people to be able to cope with and overcome poverty.

Many of us and our churches are well connected with Anglican churches in other parts of the world: through personal friendship, mission society and development agency link and visits of young people especially as volunteers. These links make up the warp and woof of the communion. They should be treasured and nurtured.

As new ways of being Anglican emerge we need to be very focused on our relationships with Anglicans in other cultures, and especially with those who are living in situations of poverty. How wonderful it is that God has so brought it about that for your ongoing Anglican identity you need the oversight of bishops from a diocese of the poor. I hope you will embrace your provincial obligations of fellowship warmly and particularly welcome and support the Diocese of Recife with Bishop Robinson Cavalcanti who were the first to seek protection from Presiding Bishop Greg Venables.

I hope that one of the factors of the decisions of your parishes to join with the Southern Cone will be that you want to develop your understanding of the gospel by building your relationships with the poor for whom the gospel is defined as good news. This relationship is one of God's methods for ensuring that you are not overwhelmed by the power of your surrounding culture, because you are in fellowship with and accountable to churches among poor Christians. Bishop Chuck Murphy has told how his relationship as Presiding Bishop of the Anglican Mission in America with the Province of Rwanda and Bishop Martyn Minns of the Convocation of Anglicans in North America has told how his relationship with the Church of Nigeria is that their archbishops sometimes say no. By the way I was speaking with Bishop Minns just before lunch and he sends you his warm greetings and support. Be prepared for Presiding Bishop Venables to say no.

Finally, a couple of news updates on the communion that have emerged today.

At least half the Anglicans in the world will not be represented at Lambeth.

Bishop Michael Nazir Ali has spelt out the reasons

“The Lambeth conference has been for 150 years where Bishops gather together to exercise their office as teachers of the faith for the worldwide communion. This time this is not what it will do. So what is it for and will it be worthwhile since it is a hugely costly exercise?”

There are churches and bishops who were requested, there were pleas to them by everyone from every quarter, not to do what the whole communion had said was contrary to God’s purpose. They went ahead and did it. Now the intention is to have those bishops at the Lambeth Conference and the person consecrated also. Under such circumstances, and as matters stand, I could not go.”

The Archbishop has also reportedly said he may disinvite those who threaten the unity of the Communion, which could equally include those who are unwilling to confirm they are Windsor compliant and Bishop Bob Duncan and Bishop Don Harvey and Archbishop Greg Venables. This all begins to look less like decisions on principle and more like Senior Common Room manoeuvring. He might exclude some, but it will be for being precipitate, because he does in fact agree with them in principle. If this happens Changing Attitude has said that will have also to disinvite every bishop who is a patron of Changing Attitude and every English bishop who has participated in the registration or celebration of a civil partnership for one of their clergy or who have accepted partnered gay clergy in their diocese. This includes the Archbishop of Wales and seven English bishops.

It had been announced in October that the Archbishop of Canterbury is also reported to be planning to preside at a service of Holy Communion at St Peter’s Eaton Square, London on **November 29 for gay clergy** and their partners, even though such clergy are living in defiance of the teaching of his own House of Bishops report: Further Issues in Human Sexuality. Last night at the London Diocesan Synod the Bishop of London said that he understood that no meeting will take place at St Peters Eaton Square.

What matters most at the moment and for the future is **relationships and trust**. That is why Bishop Harvey’s visits to take part in the consecrations in Uganda and Kenya, along with Bishop Colin Bazley from England have been so important. They have indicated that our orthodox Anglican networks are standing shoulder to shoulder in loyalty first to the confession of the faith once delivered to the saints.

A great work of God is going on. We have talked and prayed for many years that the Anglican Communion would be an effective instrument in the hands of God for winning the nations to Christ. God is clearly at work. This is a time of testing – of asking people to be clear about their commitment to the biblical Gospel and the faith of the church as expressed in its creeds and formularies. We have to be ready to make a clear witness, not to compromise what has been entrusted to us for the health and wholeness and salvation of men, women and children for the sake of career, supposed influence and convenience. We need to trust each other, and we need to support each other even when we might not agree with every last detail of action that someone has undertaken. What matters is the larger picture. We must put our hope in God, we must pray for his will to be done, we must be ready to be willing instruments of his purpose, and we must look for him to give the increase.