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Reflections on The Lambeth Conference '98

Terence Kelshaw

This is a paraphrase of a presentation given by the Rt Revd Terence Kelshaw, Bishop of the Rio Grande, at Christ Church, Beckenham on 4 September 1998, shortly after the conclusion of the Lambeth Conference. It took the form of an address, followed by a question-and-answer session.

I suppose that many people would give different titles to the Lambeth Conference 1998. For me, it brought to mind Joshua's challenge: 'Choose you this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.' The challenge at Lambeth was no less than 'whom was the Anglican Communion going to serve?' It was an amazing occasion. I come from a troubled Province in the United States, from a church that is thoroughly enculturated and finds it difficult to separate itself from the culture. It has difficulty in deciding whether it is for the gospel or for the culture, for politics or for prayer. Inevitably, this makes life in the church difficult in many ways. Political correctness is far more significant than the gospel message, and it is more important not to upset anyone than to preach the Truth. I am sure there are many American bishops who would disagree whole-heartedly with me on this but that is how I, as a bishop in that church, perceive it.

I came to Lambeth knowing that the first Lambeth Conference was called to face issues remarkably similar to those now facing the Anglican Communion. It was called because of confusion in South Africa. Two separate churches were each claiming to be the legitimate Anglican Church. The Church of the Province was perceived to have developed in an ultra-liberal direction. The Church of England in South Africa refused to follow this example. Most of its clergy were ordained in Anglican Orders. All of its members were baptized and confirmed under Anglican tradition. The first Lambeth Conference had, therefore, to decide which was the true face of Anglicanism in South Africa. There were other difficulties also. The Archbishop of York refused to attend because he believed that the Lambeth Conference would become another Anglican legislative body and he thought this was unnecessary. The Bishop of London was not present because he thought that the Archbishop of Canterbury should simply tell South Africa which church represented true Anglicanism. However, the Archbishop decided that the bishops should decide as it was a moral issue

for the whole of Anglicanism.

The bishops met and they invited the bishops of the Church of the Province in South Africa, so indicating whom they accepted as the real Anglican presence in South Africa. Today, we in America face much the same dilemma. Because of the ultra-liberal stance that the Episcopal Church has taken, a body of clergy, bishops and lay people who feel that it no longer represents true Anglicanism has been formed. A number of us have formed a Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America (PECUSA). We felt that a situation was emerging in the USA where the Episcopal Church was clearly divided and we wanted to set up a body that would be the Anglican presence in the USA. Bishop Spong of Newark immediately challenged the legitimacy of the new body in the courts in his own diocese, but he lost his case because his own diocese is not incorporated and therefore did not legally exist. So the American bishops came to Lambeth already divided, realizing that God would have to deal with us.

There was a similar situation in the Canadian Church and also possibly in New Zealand. We expected, therefore, that there would be much tension at Lambeth but, in fact, there was remarkably little. I found the Conference a wonderful occasion, although I am glad I will not have to attend again. We worshipped in a variety of languages (a different language each morning) and it is a wonderful experience to be in a minority and to have to put on earphones because the worship is being conducted in Swahili. There were memorable moments such as when a Maori bishop decided to teach us the Peace. The English style is formal – but do you mean it? The American style is informal – but does it mean anything? The Maoris offer the Peace in a way that has to mean something because it involves rubbing noses. So we offered each other the Peace in the Maori style.

You cannot imagine this happening in a normal 1662 Church of England parish but it brought home to us the richness of the Anglican liturgy. It is a liturgy that sings out the saving grace of God as revealed in the Scriptures and wherever you are worshipping in the Anglican Communion, you are sharing the same liturgical movements and the same rich joy at the grace of God. Of course worship is more exuberant in some parts of the world than others, for example with the Maoris and in Nigeria, East Africa and Latin America. Not many people go home whistling the Magnificat but there are places where the people go home from worship whistling and dancing. This puts worship in a new perspective.

Another major challenge to me was the small groups. These small groups and the similar ones for the wives of bishops were highlights for both my wife and for me. My wife commented that the spiritual element of

the programme was a shock to her. So many conventions turn into political battles and the spiritual element is submerged. Here in the small groups the Scriptures could be shared together and different experiences discussed. I was a member of a group of eight. Only three of us did not have to worry about personal safety when we preached the gospel. The others had serious concerns. The Bishop of Jos in Nigeria, 37 years old, a bishop for five years and with two young children, had had his house burned down five times by Muslims since he became a bishop. The daily harassment resulting from being a Christian in Nigeria is frightening and he explained to us that while Westerners argue about who has the right to be ordained, their concern is who has the courage to be a Christian. The West argues about dilettante behaviour but in Nigeria any deviation from normal convention would be a sentence of death. If he was to return to Jos and say that homosexual relationships were now acceptable to the church, half the church would be wiped out because it would offend the Muslim authorities who are the political power in the city.

I found myself on a steep learning curve when Third World debt was discussed. I knew that countries had borrowed millions of dollars from the World Bank but I had no idea that it took eleven dollars to repay each dollar borrowed. As a result poor countries are so busy building up their infrastructure to try to repay the eleven dollars for each dollar borrowed that they have no reserves to spend on their own people. They exist at a level of deprivation and poverty which we cannot imagine. There is no easy answer to this problem, but countries are reduced to trying to repay interest on the interest arising on the original loan. They do not even think about repaying the capital. There was a call from the bishops that AD 2000, the millennium year, should be a year of jubilee and that Third World debt should be retired. The President of the World Bank came to reassure us that the Bank is serious about trying to make the repayment of Third World debt possible and to reduce the pressure on borrowing nations. Considering the adverse publicity he had received, not least in a Christian Aid film about the problem, he showed great courage in attending. It was interesting that, although three days of the Conference were devoted to this topic, it attracted virtually no press coverage.

The ordination of women was a major topic. This is still an ongoing debate. There are many, many members of the Anglican Communion who, for good theological reasons, believe that the ordination of women is contrary to the best interests of the church. I am not going to argue one way or another. In America, a canon was passed last year saying that, if you do not agree with the ordination of women to the priesthood, there is no place for you in the church. Nobody who disagrees with the ordination of women may hold office, lay or ordained, in the church. Never previously has Anglicanism required a confession of faith, if you dare call this a

confession of faith, as a basis for belonging to the church. The Anglican Church has always harboured pagans, heretics and sinners and, in doing so, has made the Way of Salvation known and has been able to provide a loving community in which men and women can come to faith in Christ. Whatever their opinion on who should be ordained, the bishops at Lambeth made a bold statement which has thrown the American Church into confusion. It reads: 'Those who dissent from the Ordination of Women and those who assent to the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood are both loyal members of the same Anglican Communion and no prohibitive action may be taken against them.' No one can be made to accept the ordination of women or condemned if they do. In the words of Archbishop Robert Eames, 'it is an issue of reception'. We will see if it blesses the church and respond accordingly. The American bishops, especially the five women, went home disappointed because they had worked so hard to have the canon included in the system and were poised to bring action against four bishops who will not ordain women and to have their Orders removed – this while still talking about the church as the place of love, of grace and understanding, of acceptance and dialogue. The church has become so politicized that people look at it and are forced to ask what it is. Is this the people of God or is it a group of people with religious beliefs, with belief systems that can be traced to some kind of biblical history somewhere? Lambeth forced us to look clearly at that question.

Archbishop Carey was outstanding in his leadership of the Conference. Bishops who had attended previously said that they had never seen the Conference so peaceful or so well led. He was truly the first among equals rather than the 'set apart' leader and he stayed in the same accommodation as the rest of us, queuing for his meals like everyone else. He was easily accessible and very close to the rest of us. He deserves the deep love and respect of the people of God in the Anglican Communion and I believe that his and Eileen's mark on the Conference was enormous.

Of course, what was reported of Lambeth bore no resemblance to what we saw. I read the papers every day and wondered if I was at the same Conference. I noticed when I went to the meeting hall that there would be perhaps two people from the homosexual lobby holding up placards, usually cursing Archbishop Carey. As soon as the TV crews arrived, the cameras focused on these two posters so that what was seen on television was this huge display of protest. Eight hundred bishops met to pray but the television reporters were only interested in two people making a private protest. When people turned on their sets, this is what they saw and they believed that there had been a massive protest. The media always seem hungry for salacious news but have no space for good news.

I think the Conference spoke good news. It demonstrated to those who

listened the strength of the worship and prayer-life of the Anglican Communion which has grown nine per cent worldwide over the last five years. The church is now largely black, young, vibrant and modern, and we in the middle-aged West must fit in with this. Even if we waste away in our enculturated state, our African, Asian and Latin American brethren will keep alive the truth of our Anglican heritage to which they hold on with great faith and protect bravely as a great treasure. To us who are so used to it, it has become less of a treasure. Lambeth for me was a great experience, a great blessing.

(The meeting was then opened to questions.)

Q. What were your observations on the debate which took place between a Ugandan bishop and Richard Kirker, leader of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in the UK?

A. This was largely a 'put-up' job. The evening previous to the confrontation, there had been a private discussion at which Richard Kirker had goaded a number of African bishops about the issue in an insensitive manner. We must remember that there is nothing liberal about a liberal. They are the most fundamentalist and unbending people you can meet. Often what begins as a prophetic movement turns quickly into a policed movement and the whole homosexual issue is moving in that direction. The bishops were being given a 'reasonable' response. A BBC producer was urging a whole group of people to support Kirker who was prodding and pushing the Africans and trying to ridicule them. They were responding, as they do, with much passion but in a manner foreign to the Western way of debating. Because the bishops had another commitment, the BBC producer suggested that the discussions should continue the next day.

The next day the African bishops were queuing to be photographed. The BBC producer arranged a meeting between Kirker and the Archbishop of Uganda who happened to be the first African that he met who had been present at the earlier discussion. A group of people, largely BBC personnel, gathered round. The Archbishop became very passionate and in doing so raised his hand. He kept saying to Kirker: 'Where is that in your Bible? Where is that in your Bible? It is not in my Bible!' Kirker, being very cleverly trained, did not raise his voice. He remained very 'English' and impassive and continued to goad the Archbishop. Those in the queue turned round and became part of the issue. The whole scenario therefore came across as an unruly event and was televised as such. This is how the media work. They attempt to give the impression that they are with you and want to tell your story but in fact, as we see so often in the States, the media are dedicated to opposition to the church which stands for a

theology and morality which is against that which the media generally support. The sooner the church understands this, the better and safer we will be. The 'set up' described above is typical of media operators and values.

Q. What was your view of the seemingly open discussions between Peter Lee, a bishop in South Africa, and Jack Spong on the issue of homosexuality?

A. As it happens, Bishop Lee was in my small group and it seems to me that he shares bishop Spong's position on the homosexuality issue. Peter Lee presents himself as the 'Reasonable Evangelical', very open to discussion but in fact having already made up his mind. He attempts to portray the whole issue as normal behaviour and so carries Evangelicals with him. The hoary old chestnut of comparing our response to homosexuality with that of slavery or the ministry of women really does not wash any more. The Bible says nothing about the institution of slavery though it does describe how slaves should respond to their masters. This was in an age and generation when slavery was part of the structure of society. Whether it was acceptable or unacceptable it is hard to tell. It was Evangelicals who pointed out the evils of slavery. It was equally Evangelicals who saw the evils of closing the door to the ministry of women, and who first began to draw women into spiritual leadership in the deaconess/lady-worker model of 100 or so years ago and through the early missionaries. Perhaps it is an overstatement to say 'the early missionaries' but certainly among them were evangelical women who went abroad while the home church raised funds and provided the means for them so that they could minister in a manner very different from that in use in the churches that were sending them. I have heard Jack Spong argue this line now a thousand times. If I were a woman I would be offended by it because the issue of women's ordination is an issue of order in the church while the issue of ordaining homosexual persons is an issue of morality. It is not an immoral thing or contrary to God's will to be a woman. It is an immoral thing and contrary to God's will to act out homosexual behaviour. Frankly I think the two situations are apples and oranges. The argument they use is manipulative and, having discussed the issue for ten years or more, I am tired of the 'reasonableness' justification that is presented to us. This argument suggests that we are all prejudiced against those who are different from us. I do not think it is as simple as that. The same argument says that everybody who is against homosexual behaviour is a homophobe and this is clearly not true. But do not be misled by the Peter Lee/Jack Spong statement. They wrote a paper together. However, if that was a statement of evangelical faith from Peter Lee, it was certainly not the evangelical faith in which I have been nurtured for over 50 years. I do not believe that this faith is just prejudice. It has been mistaken many times but

not in this area. Right now there is a strong force to make the homosexual lifestyle appear 'reasonable' in order that somehow the church will affirm it. I am not sure the church can do so and therefore the harsh and violent harassment from the Gay Lobby will continue. I cannot imagine a bunch of heterosexuals climbing up into the pulpit in Canterbury Cathedral to jostle the Archbishop on the grounds of their heterosexual or even their adulterous lifestyle. We are not dealing with a calm and comfortable little problem here – it is a vicious kind of lifestyle and a very unhealthy one for us.

Q. How will the American Anglicans react to the discovery that their viewpoint is not the mainstream, and that Evangelicals are not so un-Anglican as they have been accused of being?

A. If my e-mail is anything to go by, and I have my laptop open and look at it daily, they are pretty mad. They are accusing the conservatives of buying the African Church. They do not say how we are supposed to have achieved this. I think such a comment is insulting to the African Church. The assumption that African bishops have no way of making theological decisions because they are Africans is racist, and I think this Lambeth Conference will go down as one of the most racist. The clergy doing most of the talking on these issues believe that, somehow or other, the American Church (and these people see themselves as the American Church) represents the mainstream of Anglicanism. It is in touch with the world; it opens the door to people for whom the doors have been closed for centuries and it really presents the loving nature of the gospel; Episcopalian lay people have accepted this. They believe that what the presiding bishop and other bishops are saying must be true and at the local level our clergy have now for 40 years been schooled in the demythology of Bultmann. Throughout this time we have been a country governed by ultra left-wing politics. As a nation, politically, we have always been pushing our limits to see how far we can go before we fall off the edge. It is a great shock to the American bishops to discover that 536 bishops said 'homosexual behaviour is inconsistent with the Word of God' and only 70 disagreed. Many more said that whether you agreed with the ordination of women or disagreed with the ordination of women is not a major issue for Anglicans. God has ordained all people to be ministers in his church and not just one half of the race. It came as a great shock to them that they cannot act punitively on issues of gender and pretend that they are issues of doctrine. Some are in a great deal of confusion – a number of bishops in America have already started writing letters to their supposed offended brothers and sisters, led in this country by the Bishop of Edinburgh who served a great deal of his time as a clergyman in Boston, and was a well-respected Anglo-Catholic leader there. Yes, they are pretty confused. I will tell you if there is still a church when I get back in February.

Q. This Lambeth was reported as one where the shift of influence was from the West to the South. How true is this as a picture of Lambeth and how long will this position last?

A. I think leadership will remain significantly with the South because they see no reason why the largest and fastest growing part of Anglicanism should be dictated to by the dying end; they voiced this view at the recent Lambeth Conference. They are already the leaders of Anglicanism in terms of growing churches and of baptizing new believers, in terms of their evangelism and their social concern. Uganda, for example, has the largest AIDS programme anywhere in the world and has a tremendous social programme that has been well supported by liberal churches in America because of this. When the Archbishop of Uganda did not vote as the American liberals wanted, for their agenda, they threatened to cut off their funding for that programme. Your question is a difficult one because the pragmatic truth is that he who has the money has the power. When a local church wants to do something in faith, it is dependent upon the treasurer agreeing that it is worth spending the money. All it takes for a proposal to be rejected is for the treasurer to say, 'we do not have the money' or 'we will not have the money' or 'there is no way in which we should spend any money on this project'. That is why we always choose as treasurers, accountants and bank managers, people who are used to telling us what to do with our money. In that sense the West could keep the power but it would only be manipulative power, allowing them to decide whether or not to fund projects in the Southern world.

But the Southern leaders – people like Archbishop Tay of Singapore – will emerge as the Anglican leaders to which we will turn and seek advice. He is a man you must respect, I do not think he would know how to lose his temper or to shout. He is the calmest, quietest man I have ever met and a typical small Singaporean, but he was the man who, I think, was actually the most powerful man at Lambeth. He influenced other bishops and the whole of the Conference because of his clear thinking and his biblical and theological knowledge. With people like Moses Tay at the helm, I think you will see more and more dioceses bringing over teams from the Southern hemisphere to lead evangelistic missions in parishes and dioceses both here and in America.

Will one of those bishops ever be Archbishop of Canterbury? I do not think that will happen while the Archbishop of Canterbury is also Bishop of Canterbury with local responsibility, because of the limits on the way people become bishops in this country and because of the Oaths of Allegiance that they are required to make to the Queen and to the nation – I do not think that anybody other than a Briton could be the Archbishop of Canterbury. Otherwise you would have to create a kind of papal role totally

independent of the English Church. I do not know how the Anglican Communion could do that because our strength as Anglicans has been that we have not had a kind of papal magisterium. We have not had a kind of papal authority which tells us what we should believe and what we must not believe. Anglicanism's strength (and maybe its weakness) has been its freedom from crushing authoritarianism – that is why a lot of people are Anglicans.

Q. We have heard about the liberals and conservatives at Lambeth. How about the Catholic wing of the church?

A. Let me unpack 'liberal' and 'conservative' first. 'Liberal' in theological terms through to the 1960s was a highly respectable way of doing theology. A person who questioned the text, even challenged it, even outrageously challenged it and was not afraid to do that, was labelled a 'liberal'. Not all liberals were unspiritual, not all liberals were unbelievers. There were some pretty wild liberals in the '60s whose spiritual life would put many an Evangelical to shame. However, in the last 20 years liberalism has become politicized so that it is now agenda-driven rather than scholarship-driven. All the demythology of the late 1800s and early 1900s has been taken on board as if it were the truth about God. All conservatives by the same token are not just entrenched traditionalists, which is the way in which we have been seen, and has often been the way we have presented ourselves. That we have been called 'conservatives' was often because we would not embrace change. We would not embrace new forms of worship, we would not embrace new ways of praising God and we would not embrace some of the serious questions that were raised by the liberal theologians. So it looked as if the liberals were the scholastics in the church and the conservatives were the entrenched. We have often been called 'fundamentalists' for that reason. It is unfair for liberals to paint conservatives like that or vice versa. You cannot get a more liberal-thinking scholar than John Stott, a man who has grappled with some of the hardest questions of biblical interpretation in a way that others have not. N T Wright is the current so-called 'conservative theologian' – nobody in this generation understands the search for the historical Jesus theology better than Tom Wright – that is right at the heart of liberal theology. I notice a new book by Alistair McGrath who is another conservative who is a broad-thinking, liberal-minded person who is rooted in the Scriptures and rooted in the history of Jesus.

What do you do with Anglo-catholics? Anglo-catholics tend to represent a particular liturgical position. They might be very liberal Anglo-catholics – all the colour and none of the discipline as it used to be said – or they could be very strict Anglo-catholics – great discipline of life and spirituality and a great tradition of scholarship. Many of the great scholars

of Anglicanism have come out of the Anglo-catholic tradition. What has happened with the present turmoil – and I am giving you my personal view now – is that the walls that separated Anglo-catholics and Evangelicals are coming down and both parties are discovering that they share and proclaim the same gospel. Anglo-catholics still tend to be nervous about the ordination of women to the priesthood: they have a strong ecclesiological position about it which they regard as a theological position. I would differ from them on that but among my friends and colleagues in the States, bishops, clergy and lay people, we have found that we have had to ‘beat the swords into ploughshares’ in terms of the differences between Anglo-catholics and Evangelicals. Indeed in my own diocese if you go into some of the churches, you would think you had walked into Westminster Cathedral considering the number of candles, lace skirts, vestments, incense and such like. I think I have grown to realize that while these things are important to the worship and devotion of that congregation, when the vicar stands up to preach you get a roaring biblical sermon that is as evangelical and as orthodox as anything you will ever hear. When you talk to the people, you find a congregation with a deep prayer life. A number of congregations in my diocese are almost religious communities in themselves. I have one that is actually led by a very liberal priest but he runs his congregation on the Benedictine model. Everybody who belongs to his congregation has to sign up to the Benedictine discipline of prayer, study and work. They agree to be at the church for daily prayer, attend the weekly study together and to be at the church on Sunday for worship. If you are not at church on Sunday, somebody watches for you and will visit you to find out why you missed.

I think there was a strong influence from Anglo-catholic leaders at Lambeth. For example the Bishop of Edinburgh, the Primate of Scotland is a strong Anglo-catholic. He was Rector of the Church of the Advent in Boston for a number of years and then returned to be Rector of St Mary Magdalene in Oxford. You cannot belong to a higher church than either of these unless it is All Saints, Margaret Street. The position that Richard Holloway takes, I would see as being quite liberal and he would see as being quite loving. On the other side is the Bishop of San Joachim from America, whose election to bishop was challenged on the grounds that while he was a parish priest he was also chaplain of a Roman Catholic lay order. However he is very evangelical in matters of biblical truth and was also at Lambeth. There is no doubt that he takes what we would call an evangelical or conservative direction. At Lambeth the Anglo-catholics provided daily holy space from seven o'clock in the morning to midnight. Anybody in the Conference grounds could go and spend time at the Franciscan centre. They took the Senate House and they turned it into a chapel. One of the Anglo-catholic chaplains, man or woman (there were a number of Sisters there) was on duty to keep it open and to pray with you.

Yes they were present and they were very popular.

Q. The question is about the international debt and the need of the American Church to become more involved in these kinds of issues.

A. The Evening News on television where I live in America will give you a clue. It lasts for about ten minutes. It starts with local news and moves on to international news which tells you that a shop on the High Street, New Jersey was robbed; that is international news – what happens the other side of the country. Remember that it would take me five hours to fly from where I live to New York and I am still on the same land mass. There is a tendency not to look beyond our shores. However, I need to be fair to the American Church and particularly to that part of the church that we label ‘liberal’, because they have a very strong social conscience. I do not think they are always very good at social ministry but they are very good at talking about it. They are activists, they will allow themselves to be tied to railings to object to dogs having their legs amputated. There has long been strong objection from many Americans to the large amounts of money the American Government puts into aid grants to other countries but the liberals have been screaming for the amount to be increased. Many of them were as shocked as I was, and I say that to my own shame, that World Debt has never been on our agenda. Somehow or other I had never engaged with it as an issue or a problem. One of the demands that Lambeth made was that there should be better safeguards about how money is loaned and to whom and when it should be paid back. The injustice of the cost of paying back also came home to me. The poor countries are not asking for their debts to be forgiven, they are simply asking for the burden of repayment to be reduced.

But to get back to your original question, are Americans insular? The answer is ‘yes’, yes we are. That is why you get the ugly American phenomenon that when we come to another country we assume that everybody knows how to live. We find they do not, not by our reckoning anyway and we do not understand. I do not understand, and I have been here nine weeks and I still do not understand, why I pay so much for coffee and I do not get refills, because in any civilized country that is what happens! But we are insular and there is an enormous amount of poverty alongside areas of great prosperity. My diocese for example has in it the Star Wars city, the city that has more PhDs per square inch than any other part of America and also the fourth poorest town in the whole of America. These two towns are 300 miles apart. I can one day be swimming in a heated pool under alpine trees on the edge of Santa Fe having thermal therapy which is the new spiritual therapy for unbelievers, very costly and very smelly; the next day I can be 300 miles away in my diocese on the rubbish tips where five-year-old kids pick at the garbage for whatever food

they can get. I can have breakfast in a three million dollar home in the north of the State and I can have tea in a packing-box which is home for a man and wife and two children on the edge of El Paso. Even in my State there does not seem to be a realization of that wide diversity. We are not only insular internationally, we are pretty insular locally. There is an enormous poverty problem. We have just cut down on welfare rights by saying they are no longer rights and that if you do not work you should not receive welfare money. Instead of taking a sniper's gun to the situation we have taken a blunderbuss. We are assuming that because there are a few people who misuse the welfare system, everybody on welfare is misusing it. It is also still true in America to this day that you can die on the steps of a hospital because you do not have medical cover and the hospital will not bring you in and treat you. So we are insular, we do not even see the problem. Does that answer what you are asking?

Well, I think that is a fair challenge for us as we come to the Millennium. Will the church make a stand against poverty wherever it is to be found? You have to remember that the American Church pays for its own clergy. It pays the full cost of having a rector, so if you have a staff as well you are faced not only with paying your rector and all benefits, health fees and the cost of an office but also his house and the church building. The church must raise all of that itself. Very often the American Christian is so busy maintaining that tradition, that we have not been as good at mission. We have not been good at saying 'let us stand in the gap' for the poor of the world wherever those poor have been found. Yes, I think that is a fair challenge.

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