
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Churchman

EDITORIAL

On this Rock

What is wrong with the Lambeth Conference? The months preceding this year's decennial gathering of the Anglican Communion's bishops, or as many of them as can come in good conscience, have been fraught with tensions of various kinds, but very few people seem to be asking the deeper questions about the event itself. What is the Lambeth Conference for and has the tradition of holding them outlived its usefulness?

Lambeth Conferences were set up in the late nineteenth century as a way of keeping the different parts of what was then the embryonic Anglican Communion in touch with each other. The Americans and Canadians were especially enthusiastic about them, and in the days when travel was difficult and expensive, sending bishops halfway across the world every ten years seemed to be one of the best and most appropriate ways of maintaining contact. Everyone understood that the Conference had no juridical authority over its member churches but as the bishops were often largely powerless to implement its decisions in any case, that did not matter all that much. More important was the desirability of maintaining a sense of common fellowship at a time when there was a real danger that newly-formed churches in far-flung parts of the world would lose touch with their roots and develop in ways which would be unrecognisable elsewhere as being authentically Anglican.

Given the parameters within which they had to operate, the early Lambeth Conferences were a reasonable success. They certainly contributed to a sense of what we now call 'globalisation' and they gave the member churches of the Anglican Communion the feeling of belonging to something bigger than themselves. They probably also facilitated all kinds of exchange and co-operation at many different levels, although in the nature of the case, that is much harder to document. There was, however, a less happy side to them as well. The Americans drew up the now famous 'Lambeth Quadrilateral', which they put forward as the basis of pan-Anglican identity, and although it was never formally adopted by any member church, it became an unofficial

touchstone for the Conferences over the years. Three of the four elements in the quadrilateral are unexceptional, but the fourth one, which posits the 'historic episcopate' as a fundamental benchmark of Anglicanism, is much more disputable, not least because it has been used at different times to exclude people and churches who, in the judgement of the Archbishop of Canterbury and his advisers, did not measure up to its requirements. This happened very early in the United States, where a breakaway group that started what is now the Reformed Episcopal Church was excluded from participation, even though its episcopal orders were valid. It was also used against the Church of England in South Africa, which was also seen as a breakaway body. In both those cases the move could be justified on the ground that if the Lambeth Conference recognised them, it would be condoning schism, but that excuse could not be applied to the Church of South India, which was formed by a merger of different Protestant churches in 1947.

To the shame of Anglicans worldwide, this successful ecumenical venture was kept out of the Anglican Communion for many years because the CSI contained ministers who had not been ordained by the 'historic episcopate'. This difficulty has now been overcome, but the church, along with other such ecumenical bodies in South Asia, has never been fully integrated into worldwide Anglicanism and similar ecumenical initiatives in other parts of the world have failed to establish themselves. At the present time there are nearly a thousand bishops worldwide who are invited to attend Lambeth, and in recent decades feelers have been put out to bodies like the Reformed Episcopal Church as well. The Conference has grown to an unmanageable size and because of that, a supplementary system of Primates' Meetings has been introduced to act as a kind of steering committee. Even that is not small, with thirty-eight member churches each sending its titular head, and its status is even more doubtful than that of the Lambeth Conference. In some countries the Primate is the head of the church, but in others (notably the USA) he (or she) is little more than a chief executive officer who has no real power. Who or what they represent varies enormously from one place to another and in the Western world at least, the 'comprehensive' nature of most of the churches means that a single Primate cannot easily reflect any views but his own.

Oddly enough, this problem is also present in the Lambeth Conference, which despite its enormous size, is less representative of grassroots Anglicanism than

it has ever been. One of the reasons for this is that although clergy and lay people play an important part in the affairs of most member churches, they are not represented at Lambeth. Another reason is that bishops are chosen in different ways across the Communion and there is no concept of proportional representation. To give an extreme example, the American Episcopal Church has about a million and a half communicant members, a number that is declining by the day, but more than 350 bishops. The Church of Nigeria, on the other hand, has nearly twenty million members and is mushrooming at a fantastic rate, but it manages with only about a third of the number of prelates. In other words, in Lambeth terms, one American represents about thirty to forty Nigerians, a preposterous distortion which would never be tolerated anywhere else. Presumably if a member church decided to consecrate all its clergy as bishops, they would all have to be invited to Lambeth, regardless of how big or small the church itself was!

Even within individual churches, distortions of this kind are possible. In Australia for example, Sydney diocese has about half the number of the country's weekly Anglican church attenders, but is only one diocese among thirty-three. Their representation in the Australian house of bishops and thus at Lambeth is totally out of line with their real importance in terms of the church as a whole. The archbishop of Sydney ought logically to be the Primate of Australia but he is not, and is unlikely ever to be, because the other dioceses do not want Sydney to have the kind of clout that its numbers warrant. That would not matter so much if the Primate were someone reasonably sympathetic to Sydney, but this has not been the case in recent years. The current Primate is the archbishop of Brisbane, a liberal Catholic who is doing his best to exclude Evangelicals from his diocese. His predecessor, the liberal Peter Carnley of Perth, even wrote a book denouncing Sydney when he was still in office. As a result, Australia has been represented at the Primates' meeting by men who are actively hostile to the majority of regular worshippers in that country, and the presence of the other non-Evangelical bishops at Lambeth does nothing to correct this. It is therefore probable that the Australian contingent this year will represent more than eighty percent of the episcopate but less than half the members of the church.

Thanks to such distortions, the liberal establishment in the Western churches is staggeringly over-represented at Lambeth and the conservative majority in

the Communion as a whole is made to appear like a defensive minority which is mounting a rearguard action against the inevitable progress of future developments. The structure is flawed, there is no effective mechanism for changing it and those who benefit from existing arrangements have every intention of keeping things the way they are. It will not bother them if bishops representing the majority of Anglicans worldwide do not turn up in July, as long as a clear majority of the episcopate is there—seventy-five percent or so probably, representing slightly less than half the churchgoing Anglicans worldwide!

It is in the context of this unreality that the emergence of the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) must be understood. The sponsors of GAFCON have been quick to insist that they have not organised an alternative Lambeth, but that is somewhat disingenuous. Admittedly, there is no suggestion that a bishop who goes to GAFCON should not go to Lambeth as well, and there will undoubtedly be considerable cross-representation, but it is also true that the leaders of GAFCON have declined to go to Lambeth and have encouraged others to examine their consciences in the hope that they will stay away too. GAFCON may not be an alternative Lambeth in the strict sense of the word, but it definitely is in other ways, some of which may not be immediately apparent.

Two things stand out about GAFCON which make it both different from Lambeth and potentially much more representative of Anglicanism as it really is. The first is that places at the conference have been allocated in proportion to the sizes of the churches represented, so that Uganda, for example, with its 8,000,000 active Anglicans will have more delegates than Canada (with only 800,000), instead of roughly the same number. The other is that GAFCON is not confined to bishops. The reality of Anglicanism is that although it has bishops, it is not an episcopal communion in the way that Rome and the Eastern Orthodox churches are. Other elements in the church have always played an important part in Anglican affairs, and even before the Reformation, England and Ireland were unique in Christendom in allowing the lower clergy and the religious orders to participate in diocesan and provincial synods. Lay involvement has been more patchy (although some people would argue that the royal and later parliamentary supremacy in the Church of England was a form of lay control) but it is now well-established in most places and cannot

be ignored. GAFCON has understood this and has appealed to a much wider constituency than Lambeth does or can. As a result, it is likely to be more influential at all levels of the church and give ordinary people a sense of ownership in a way that the Lambeth Conference is quite unable to do.

These are structural matters, but they address real problems which the Anglican Communion has shirked for too long and which cannot be resolved within the existing framework. But more important than these is the fact that GAFCON is visibly and explicitly a communion of faith, not a cabal of those who happen to possess the same ecclesiastical order. It has become painfully obvious in recent months (though it has always been true) that it does not matter what a bishop believes, as long as he (or occasionally she) is in canonically good standing. This may yet cause some embarrassment in the USA, where the bishop of Pittsburgh has been threatened with deposition by his primate, although he has already been invited to Lambeth. Will he still be welcome if the deposition goes through before the Conference opens in July? That is an open question, but it has nothing to do with the man's beliefs. Robert Duncan is impeccably orthodox and on that score is much more entitled to be at Lambeth than many of his colleagues, but that is not how these things are decided.

GAFCON is a world away from this. Nobody who is not an orthodox Christian believer will be welcome there, nor is there any sign that people of that kind will want to attend. Indeed, one of the more remarkable things about GAFCON is that the unbelievers in the Anglican Communion have practically disinvited themselves, which is much more satisfactory than if they turned up and had to be thrown out. In church political terms, there is nothing to be gained by attending GAFCON and perhaps a good deal to lose, especially if those who go find that they are then unwelcome in their home dioceses or churches. The fact that pseudo-Evangelicals (of the kind who fill the ranks of Fulcrum in England) are among GAFCON's loudest critics is a sure indication that it is on the right track here, because for all their blindness in other respects, such critics retain a lingering sense of the importance of faith over structures. The fact that they see GAFCON as a threat is therefore a testimony to the soundness of its basic instincts and a reassurance that it is heading in the right direction. GAFCON has seen what Lambeth will never see, which is that the church is built on the faith by which its members have been justified by the

grace of Christ. That is what gives it its identity and sets its boundaries by providing it with a sure foundation on which to stand and proclaim the gospel to the world.

Has GAFCON a future? That remains to be seen. There is some chance that the wider structures of the Anglican Communion night be revised along GAFCON lines, by including clergy and lay representatives and restricting the numbers from each church in a way that reflects their true size. That may still not ensure an adequate representation of the various groups within particular churches, but it would certainly be an improvement on the current situation. What will be more difficult is to ensure that future Lambeth Conferences are rooted in a common basis of faith. They have singularly failed in this respect so far, but GAFCON is not immune to the danger of wandering away from its foundations either. Already there are signs that it may be opening the door too widely by inviting all those who are opposed to the current liberalism that is dominating official Anglican circles. That is a politically strategic move in the present crisis, but as several observers have pointed out, it ignores other important differences which are bound to resurface sooner or later. Take the liberal enemy away and it is hard to see how Anglo-Catholics, Evangelicals and charismatics will make common cause for long. At some point GAFCON or whatever successor it creates is going to have to produce a statement of faith not unlike the Lambeth Quadrilateral if it expects to stay together and remain coherent. It may even be possible that a revamped form of Lambeth Conference can do this, and ensure that the central core of Christian orthodoxy remains the basis of communion and that traditional Anglican expressions of that are given adequate recognition, though they should not be allowed to create barriers to ecumenical understanding and co-operation.

The agenda is long and the way ahead remains unclear. But what is certain is that if the Anglican Communion does not remain loyal to the faith once delivered to the saints and passed down to us in the tradition which is Holy Scripture, it will have no future at all. It may be a pure coincidence that the two archbishops spearheading GAFCON are both called Peter (Akinola of Nigeria and Jensen of Sydney) and of course, neither man would want to put the weight on that name which is common in other parts of the Christian world. But God has used names as signs before and perhaps the apparent coincidence is a sign that he is doing so again. When Simon Bar-Jona confessed

that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus made a play on his name: "You are Peter, and on this rock I shall build my church." The rock was not the man but the confession of faith, and in that sense surely both of our current GAFCON Peters would accept that there is some resemblance between them and the chief disciple. Certainly they would both say that if Anglicanism has a global future, it will only be because it is firmly anchored on this rock, which is the faith confessed by all true followers of Christ. Let us pray that those who go to GAFCON, as well as those who attend Lambeth, will realise this and make sure that whatever they plan to build for the future is well and truly grounded on the only foundation which will stand the test of time.

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