

# Accountability and Unity

*The Archbishop of Sydney responds to the Archbishop of Canterbury*

EVERYONE who knows the Archbishop of Canterbury personally testifies to his deep commitment to the unity of the Anglican Communion. It is also recognized that he is going to need all that commitment and his theological skills to hinder it from self-destructing in what he himself acknowledges to be a time of crisis.

He writes in *New Directions*, 'I suspect that those who speak of new alignments and new patterns, of the weakening of territorial jurisdiction and the like, are seeing the situation pretty accurately.' In itself this sentence was not central to his argument, but it helped 'earth' his discussion and invites us to test what he is saying against the situation we now find ourselves in.

Developments in the Diocese of New Westminster provide a useful template for the future of the Communion and the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury. If we can see the significance of events in this diocese, and work out what needs to happen there, it will help us develop an approach when the crisis spreads, as it has done in ECUSA and as it almost did in Oxford.

## A drastic step

The situation in New Westminster as I understand it is that, following a vote in favour of the blessing of same sex-unions by a considerable number in the Synod, Bishop Ingham agreed to make provision for such services. As soon as the vote was taken, representatives of about nine parishes withdrew from the Synod. These parishes have since that time refused to support the diocese financially, and have in essence attempted to withdraw from the jurisdiction of the Bishop. Appealing to the rest of the Anglican Communion for support, they have named themselves 'The Anglican Communion in New Westminster'.

Why have they taken such a drastic step? To be in structural communion with other Christians is usually a great blessing and a testimony to the world of the mutual regard which we have in Christ. It is not to be abandoned lightly. For most of us, most of the time, we are content to have the positive benefits, despite the inconveniences or even the downright disagreements we have about the faith. Most of these can be tolerated or even enjoyed.

But the blessings of such communion also create the conditions for grave difficulty. Where those with whom I am known to be in association choose a course of action which at a fundamental level denies what I stand for, the continued association is put at risk. Our very communion gives the other parties a share in the credit which accrues

to our joint name, access to our people and standing in the community. It is legitimately believed that if we continue to be united we must endorse their activities. The blessing of same-sex unions involved the nine parishes, by association, in an immoral activity which in their view is specifically forbidden by the Bible. They had no choice but to withdraw.

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In the following months, the parishes have secured the oversight of the Bishop of the Yukon and the recognition of some other Canadian and international bishops. Such developments have, of course, been contested by Bishop Ingham. For their part, they have appealed to the Archbishop of Canterbury for his recognition that they are authentically Anglican, and continue to be part of the Anglican Communion. Can they be part of the Communion if they have broken with their own (territorial) bishop?

## Three options

The role of the Archbishop in answering this question is crucial though not utterly decisive. Clearly, his word matters a great deal to all involved and all will be urging him to support them. At stake are such issues as property and the succession of ministry. He is faced with extremely painful choices. They amount, I think, to three options.

First, he could do nothing. He would not recognize the dissenters as other than a break-away group who should revert to the diocese and simply continue to recognize the Diocese of New Westminster as the only authentic Anglicans. The dissenters would be treated as akin to the many splinter groups who have broken from ECUSA over the years. This would be tantamount to saying that as far as disciplinary matters are concerned, it is entirely a matter for the Canadian Church and the diocese to work out. As long as the legalities are in order the diocese is authentic – the passage to the next Lambeth conference (thought of by many as a test of membership in the Communion) is secure.

Secondly, he could recognize both the dissenters (especially since they have received

the protection of the Bishop of the Yukon and various international Bishops) and the Diocese of New Westminster. The fact that the two groups are structurally out of communion with each other for the time being is not something which should trouble the Archbishop. His role is to take the long view and hold them together. This would amount to a recognition that the Anglican Communion is a federation or network of local churches (dioceses), in varying relation to one another, but held together by history and respect for Canterbury.

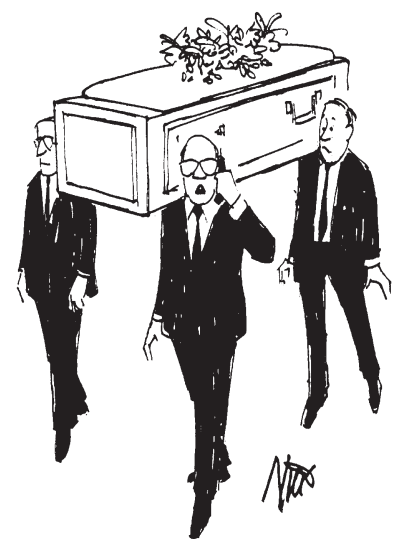
Thirdly, he could take the view that Bishop Ingham has in fact broken unity by his action and that it is an action so much at odds with the mind of the Communion and the teaching of scripture, that he can no longer have whatever benefits are conferred by the recognition of the See of Canterbury. There are, of course, various ways in which that withdrawal of recognition may be worked out, some more drastic than others.

How can we assess the different options?

## What matters

There is something to be said for first approach, of doing nothing. It recognizes that the Communion is a loose one, based more on history and structure than we had realized. It does not exaggerate the role of the Archbishop. It allows local people to deal with local problems, as have occurred and will continue to occur all over the world.

However, the problem for the Archbishop is that so many people in the Communion



*'No, I'm not on a train.'*

see the particular issue of homosexuality as having high moral and spiritual importance, and requiring a firm and clear decision by him. In his article, he raises the question of whether we are in fact dealing with a matter of such significance. He suggests that we ought to see ourselves as uniting on a fundamental theological consensus – endorsing a Primates' *communiqué* which, in Dr William's words, said that 'breaking communion should be restricted to cases where the basic "grammar" of the faith and practice had been altered and (which) proposed the Lambeth Quadrilateral as a rule of thumb for identifying that grammar.'

At one level, we ought to be grateful for a mood of peaceableness which accompanies this suggestion. The Archbishop does not want us to dramatize our situation, but to think carefully about what really matters and why. He points out that some people have seen the ordination of women as a communion-breaking issue, while others who object to same-sex unions accept the ordination of women.

In my judgment, however, he has misjudged the present situation and his peaceable approach has run out of time. There are several reasons for this. First, although we may want to regard issues of human sexuality as of the second order, they are in fact so prominent in the Bible and the moral tradition is so clear that the 'time for listening' beloved of liberal thinkers is not available.

### Intercontinental drift

Second, many people regard the matter of homosexuality as the last point of a drift which has been occurring for several decades. It is the final moment for the Communion. Interestingly, those who have accepted the ordination of women are now being told by both sides of the debate that their hermeneutical method has led inexorably to this moment. It does not necessarily make them happy to accept it. In fact it is interesting to see how strongly negative many such Christians are to the practice of homosexuality. May it be that they will now reconsider their earlier commitment?

Third, the offence caused to churches in the global south by the maverick western decision-making which has badly affected them has been seriously underestimated. There is deep hurt, and the Communion has been destabilized. The way in which the first blessing of same-sex unions occurred so soon after the last Primates meeting, when it was thought that assurances had been made, has caused added offence. It should be noted here that there is a moral strength in the position of the so-called traditionalists. It is the innovators who are the threat to unity, not those who have remained exactly as they are, and hold the views of the vast majority of Christians throughout the world.

Fourth, the Archbishop's own writings on human sexuality have made the situation more awkward. It is true that he has made

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clear his intention of working within the mind of the church on this matter. But what if the next Lambeth, or the one after that should vote in a different way? As well, the Reading *imbroglio* has shaken some of the hopes that people had in the possibilities for this walking along the fence.

In short, it is going to be difficult for the Archbishop not to act. His moral authority is on the line. Even if he cannot accept that the blessing of same-sex unions and the endorsement of a gay bishop are wrong in themselves, it will be expected that he can see that faithful Anglicans have been disenfranchised for no other sin than holding on the majority traditional view. Not to act will invite others to act in support of the traditionalists.

What of the second option, the way of recognizing both parties? Such a route would not please many people, but it may actually create time for the Communion to settle. It is also less draconian than the expulsions and suspensions being spoken of under the third option. On the other hand, it is a frank recognition, perhaps foreshadowed by the Archbishop already, that we are going to see 'new alignments and new patterns'.

### No compromise

Indeed, this route raises important theological questions about what makes a church a church. The Communion would begin to look more like a network of interconnecting churches, some of whom would be out of fellowship with the others. It is by no means certain that Canterbury would remain in any sense the focus for all this, especially as there would be those who would take the view that this represents a compromise where no compromise is possible.

Lastly, the third option requires disciplining the erring churches in the only realistic way possible, namely withdrawing recognition. This, of course, is the way of greatest risk and requires the greatest courage. It would mean a belated recognition of the distance we have already come along a liberal path, and the need for decisive action. It would send a powerful moral and spiritual message to the churches of the west, that our flirtation with secularism has gone too far and we are in real danger of losing the moral and spiritual imperatives of the gospel. Of

course, it would lead to the alienation of many and the withdrawal from the Communion of a significant number of players.

'Accountability' is a key word in the Archbishop's article. He has in mind both accountability to one another and accountability to the past. Given his doctrine of the Church, that it finds its source in the act of God in calling forth a people, I missed a clearer statement of our accountability to God as he has spoken in scripture. I wonder whether there is a hidden hermeneutical problem at this point, involving the move from scripture to understanding the will of God. At stake, in my view, is the doctrine of the clarity of scripture.

It is true that the Archbishop counts the use of scripture along with the creeds and the sacraments more or less as the boundary markers of the Church. The difficulty is that the authority of scripture needs to be asserted and defended precisely where the argument is occurring – in today's world, over homosexuality. Dr Williams wonders whether this will turn out to be a marginal issue: I believe it is the latest version of a conflict over major issues which the Communion cannot and must not evade. Beneath the presenting problem of homosexuality there are bound to be issues of Christology and the nature of God.

### Real Unity

One more thing. The Archbishop raises the danger that the new alignment may lead to the entire end of a communion of churches in favour of 'non-communicating and competing entities', a situation which he describes as 'untheological pluralism'. This would indeed be grievous. It may be helpful, however, for us all to be more precise about what we mean by church and what we mean by communion.

The Church of Jesus Christ is one. All Christians are in communion with it and with each other. The churches of Jesus Christ struggle to make that unity visible both within their lives and between themselves. The churches come in all shapes and sizes – we should value and strengthen our communion with as many as we can. Structural communion, such as we have enjoyed for so long in the Anglican Communion is reflection of that gift.

But the blessing of structural communion becomes a curse when it involves us in partnerning those who endorse major doctrinal or moral deviance from the scriptural norms. As the parishes in New Westminster testify, there is a limit to communion. It comes where souls are put at risk by sustained institutional disobedience to the word of God in scripture. For myself, I believe that they were right to say that in the blessing of same-sex unions (and the endorsement of a gay bishop) the limit has been reached.

*Peter Jensen is the 11th Archbishop of Sydney.*