

Decision-making process in the communion of the Church

1. I was invited to talk about ‘Decision- making process in the Anglican Communion’. It’s important to remind myself that I’m talking about decision-making in the Church whose essential nature is *koinonia* (communion), and that communion is the gift of being drawn into the communion of God’s own life of love – the possibility of a life lived in Christ, and offered to the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Because of human frailty and sinfulness the Church’s life is always less than perfect; perfect communion, full communion, belongs to the consummation of the Kingdom. Nevertheless, the struggle for perfection is an absolute requirement of Christian obedience, the only fitting response to the gift of communion with God and with one another that we have already been given.
2. In the struggle for holiness we rely on God’s gracious gifts of Word and Sacrament, on wise leaders, in the apostolic ministry, in order to translate the gift of communion into faithful service and witness so that the gift of communion is seen and heard as possibility for all people. Structures and decision-making processes are not an optional extra, imposed to straight-jacket our life together. They help the Church to live in a dynamic communion in which diversity can flourish and Christians can respond together to new challenges, whether to the faith, order or moral life of the Church. In this sense they are structures of grace through which the Spirit works in us and among us. Getting structures right, therefore, can never be a matter of indifference, though I suspect that we need to discover a whole new vocabulary that can communicate better that structures and processes of decision-making are about graced belonging in the communion of the Church. Archbishop Rowan has recently written that ‘it is worth working at structures in Anglicanism that don’t either commit us to a meaningless structural uniformity or leave us in mutual isolation’. That seems to me to be what the Anglican way has, at its very best, to offer - neither structural uniformity nor mutual isolation but a way of holding together a rich diversity in dynamic communion, while we discern the mind of Christ for the Church. It is with the conviction that it is worth working at structures and understanding how they work together for the good of communion that I approach the subject of decision-making process in communion.
3. Last week I had the task of reviewing for the sub-committee of IARCCUM the matter of authority in the Anglican Communion, what Anglicans have explored in theory in reports on authority, stated in Lambeth Resolutions, as well as how they have exercised authority in practice. I was struck again, by the fact that in the handling of the question of women’s ordination it is possible to discern an emerging ‘credible’ process, an embryonic pattern of dynamic decision-making in communion. I think it is worth re-calling the story of the last 30 years. It may help you to understand something of the situation, the ‘crisis’, in which we are and also offer clues for what needs to be developed in the life of the Communion in future.

4. I shall tell the story, then draw from it some insights about decision making- process in communion, and finally suggest some things for the work of this Commission. I am conscious that in rehearsing the story I am telling a story in which some of you have been very involved, not least of all Archbishop Robin and Bishop Mark. I want to make it quite clear that in telling this story I am not concerned with the subject of women's ordination. I am telling the story simply to draw out what we might learn from it about a credible pattern of decision- making in communion.

I Telling the story

5. In 1968 Hong Kong brought the matter of the ordination of women to the Lambeth Conference. The Conference passed a Resolution affirming the opinion that the theological arguments were inconclusive and requesting every national and regional church or province to give the matter careful study and to report its findings to the newly established Anglican Consultative Council which would then make the views generally available. It also asked the ACC to consult other churches, both those who did, and those who did not, ordain women. The Conference went on to recommend that before any national or regional church, or province, made a final decision it should consider carefully the advice of the ACC.¹
6. Two years later, at the first meeting of the newly established Anglican Consultative Council, a specific request came from the Bishop of Hong Kong for advice on what to do because his diocesan synod had now approved, in principle, the ordination of women to the priesthood.² The ACC noted that only eight provinces had begun to study the matter but that no responses had yet been received by the ACC. Provinces were still studying the matter. It would therefore be improper if the ACC were to prejudge their findings or take it to itself to decide the matter. However, many members of the ACC suggested that it would also be improper to postpone whatever decision lay within the power of the Council to make. Resolution 28 called for all provinces to study the matter and went on:

In reply to the request of the Council of the Church of South-East Asia, this Council advises the Bishop of Hong Kong, acting with the approval of his Synod, and any other bishop of the Anglican Communion acting with the approval of his province, that, if he decides to ordain women to the priesthood, his action will be acceptable to this Council; and that this Council will use its good offices to encourage all provinces of the Anglican Communion to continue in communion with these dioceses.³

The Resolution was narrowly passed by 24-22 votes.

¹ Resolutions 34-38 in *The Lambeth Conference 1968, Resolutions and Reports*, SPCK, (1968), pp. 39 and 40.

² *The Time is Now, Anglican Consultative Council First Meeting, Limuru, Kenya*, SPCK, (1970), p.34.

³ *Ibid*, p.38.

7. Reflecting on these events it is little wonder that questions have been raised about the authority of the newly constituted ACC to pass such a Resolution, the narrowness of the vote on such a crucial matter, as well as the credibility of a process that called for consultation and then went on to pass a decisive Resolution, before that consultative process had hardly been started. But, what is also clear is that Hong Kong did not understand itself as so autonomous that it might act on the matter without prior consultation with the fellowship of Anglican churches, first through the 1968 Lambeth Conference and then, two years later, on the suggestion of that Conference, with the ACC.
8. Eight years later the 1978 Lambeth Conference passed a similar Resolution to that of ACC I.⁴ The Conference noted that by this time Hong Kong, Canada, the Episcopal Church USA, and New Zealand had ordained women to the presbyterate, and that 8 other churches had approved the move in principle. It recognised 'the autonomy and legal right of each member Church to make its own decision but also the fact that such provincial action has consequences for the whole Communion'. The Conference encouraged all member churches to continue in communion with one another, not withstanding the ordination of women. It asked the ACC to promote dialogue between churches that do, and those that do not, ordain women, as well as dialogue with other Communion. The intention of the Resolution was quite clearly not to make a definitive judgement for the whole Communion on the validity, or otherwise, of women's ordination but to respect the position of both sides. It declared acceptance of member churches which do, and urged respect for provinces which do not, ordain women, and *vice versa*. The Resolution was passed with 316 for, 37 against, and 17 abstentions. As a result some bishops left the Lambeth Conference thinking that the question of the validity of women's ordination had been settled. Others were equally convinced that it had not been settled.
9. Whatever might be thought of what happened - not all provinces had yet expressed their mind, some had opposed the move, and there was no report from other Christian Communion - nevertheless, Hong Kong had not acted independently but had first consulted the Anglican fellowship. Moreover, there had been an expressed intention by those at ACC and at Lambeth to remain in communion in spite of difference on the matter.
10. In 1985 ECUSA, at its General Convention, expressed the intention not to withhold consent to the election of a bishop on the grounds of gender. But sensitive to the idea of interdependence within the world-wide Communion of Anglicans, ECUSA consulted the Communion, through the now newly established Primates' Meeting. The Primates welcomed the consultation, seeing it as a clear recognition on the part of ECUSA of the consequences that such action would have, not only in the United States, but on the wider Anglican family. The Primates did not understand the request as simply one for permission to proceed. They set up a working party, under the chairmanship of Archbishop Grindrod of Brisbane, to prepare a paper 'to aid

⁴ Resolution 21, in *The Report of the Lambeth Conference 1978*, CIO Publishing, (1978), pp. 45 and 46.

discussion in preparation for the Lambeth Conference'.⁵ It is significant that *The Grindrod Report* begins with a chapter called, 'Listening as a mark of communion; Voices from the Provinces', in which the responses of 17 (15 written and 2 verbal) out of the then 27 provinces were summarised. The working party was not invited to make a recommendation on the matter but to set out for the bishops coming to Lambeth the biblical, theological, ecumenical and practical issues involved. It was for the bishops at the Conference to express the mind of the Communion. In fact the Working Party did indicate that it believed that there were two options before the bishops. The first was to counsel restraint in the hope that the moral authority inherent in a gathering of all the bishops of the Communion would find its response at the provincial level. The other option suggested that, if a province went ahead, persuaded by compelling doctrinal reasons, by its experience of women in the presbyterate, by the demands of mission in its region, and with the overwhelming support of its dioceses, then such a step should be offered for reception in the Anglican Communion, and in the universal Church. There was a growing conviction that Anglicans ought not to act alone on a matter that concerned the ministry of the universal Church. The bishops resolved:

that each province respect the decision and attitudes of other provinces in the ordination or consecration of women to the episcopate, without such respect necessarily indicating acceptance of the principles involved, maintaining the highest possible degree of communion with the provinces which differ.⁶

The Resolution went on to invite the Archbishop of Canterbury to set up a Commission to aid the process of reception.

11. From now on the notion of reception became central in understanding what was happening. The matter of the consecration of women came to be understood as being in an 'open process of reception', in the discernment of individual provinces, in the communion of all the provinces, and in the fellowship of all the churches. The matter could not be said to be settled, beyond doubt, until it was received by the whole Church. It was the task of the Eames Commission to aid the reception process by explaining the notions of 'open reception' and 'provisionality'. It is interesting to read the testimony of some provinces that they were helped by the interpretation given by the Commission of what was happening. The Commission interpreted what 'living in the highest possible degree of communion' might mean. The Commission struggled to find the most appropriate language to express what had happened, referring to a restriction in ecclesial communion and using the terms of 'impairment', 'restricted communion', or 'incomplete communion'. I think we were aware that the way we talk about the situation, the language we use, shapes our understanding either for good or ill. The Commission provided practical guidelines on such matters as extended episcopal oversight, sacramental ministry, visits of women bishops to provinces that

⁵ *Report of the Working Party Appointed by the Primates of the Anglican Communion on Women and the Episcopate: To Aid Discussion in Preparation for the Lambeth Conference*, Chameleon Press, (1987).

⁶ Resolution 1, in *The Truth Shall Make You Free, The Lambeth Conference 1988*, CHP, (1988), p.201.

were opposed to women bishops. It was in conversation with individual provinces and reported back at intervals to the ACC and the Primates' Meeting. The Commission was also given the task of helping discussion among provinces that differed, as well as with ecumenical partners.

12. Between the 1988 and 1998 Lambeth Conferences the Commission produced 4 reports, the last of them summed up where the Communion was ten years on. This was all a part of the reception process. Resolution III. 4 I note called for 'continuing monitoring within the Communion with regular reporting to the Primates' Meeting. It would be interesting to know whether this is in fact happening.

II What can we learn from what has happened?

13. What then can we learn from the story of the Anglican Communion's struggle with a matter that touched a basic bond of communion? First, there was the realisation that **provincial autonomy is not the way of life in communion**. Although binding decisions can only be made at the level of province there was a prevailing 'sense' that matters that touch the faith, order or moral life of the Church should only be settled within the interdependent life of the whole Church – of the Anglican Communion and, in a divided Christendom, open to the rest of the Church. The 'shibboleth' of provincial autonomy as Robert Runcie called it is not the way of life in communion. Autonomy was already effectively challenged when Hong Kong brought its question of the ordination of women to the 1968 and 1978 Lambeth Conferences, and again when ECUSA brought the matter of the consecration of women first to the Primates' Meeting in 1986 and then to the Lambeth Conference in 1988. Anglicans were walking along a path of interdependence. The presidential speech of Archbishop Robert at the 1988 Lambeth Conference was an encouragement to face what was happening and continue along a path moving from independence to interdependence, a choice he saw as 'the choice between unity or gradual fragmentation'.⁷
14. What we were learning, as we struggled with the ordination of women, was that **interdependence requires decisions to be taken in communion** and that decision-making in communion is a lengthy, dynamic, dialogical, and Spirit led process. It requires careful articulation of the matter, the local church has to show why what it proposes is Gospel news. The challenge has to be brought to others to whom one belongs in the communion. Those opposed have to show why it is Gospel news that they oppose the action. There needs to be consultation, open debate, discernment together, moments of articulation of decision, and beyond that reception. The decision-making process is hardly likely to be swift when it touches matters of faith, order or moral life. It requires careful directing and oversight. It is not a legalistic process but a spiritual process. It matters that we do believe together that the Spirit leads the Church into all truth and that to believe this divine possibility requires on the part of all of us a willingness to be led together by the Spirit.

⁷ R.Runcie, Presidential Address, *ibid*, pp. 16 and 17.

15. What we can also see in the story is the way in which the different and still **embryonic international structures or instruments of Anglican unity** had different, but complementary roles, to play. Moreover, they reflect what Anglicans believe about the role of episcopacy within the synodality of the whole Church. They embody fundamental truths about the nature of the Church. They reflect what ecumenical convergence was beginning to call the personal, collegial and communal dimensions of oversight. The Primates' Meeting came to play an important part in directing the handling of the issue of women and the episcopate, not in giving answers, but in guiding the pattern of consultation and discernment process. The Anglican Consultative Council too played a part in reflecting at its meetings on the issue of women's ordination. Although the appropriateness of the ACC passing a Resolution, like the one it did at its first meeting in Limuru, is rightly questioned, the ACC is an important international instrument of Anglican communion. It played a role both before and in the discussion at the Lambeth Conference. The role of the ACC was not minimal and it represented something deep within Anglican conviction about the place of the laity, reminding us and our ecumenical partners, that a decision of the Church is an articulation of the whole Church, the *sensus fidelium*. But it was the bishops at the Lambeth Conference that spoke the mind of the Communion. The Lambeth Conference of bishops, by virtue of being an episcopal gathering, has a decisive role to play. The episcopate has an authority *de jure divino*, an authority not given by delegation from the Church, but given by Christ, in and through the Church. In articulating the mind of the Communion the bishops did not act alone. To help them they had the results of consultation with the provinces, as well as the explication and reflection on the theological and ecclesiological issues. They rehearsed much of the arguments in lengthy presentations at the Conference where all side of the argument were presented. And the bishops were reminded of the advice of ecumenical partners in the addresses of Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Methodist and Reformed observers.
16. In the move to ordain women great stress came to be placed on the final part of the lengthy decision-making process, **the place of reception**. ? It is crucial that Anglicans continue to stress the need for the process of reception. For, without the possibility of reception, infallibility seems to be attributed to a Conference Resolution. There was insistence that space for reception must follow and that the reception process be monitored for another decade. It was understood that sensitive and clearly expressed dissent can be creative in the continuing forming of the mind of the whole Church. The Commission had to struggle with what dissent meant when the matter was not a disembodied doctrine but there was a facticity in the lives of women who were ordained. What did dissent mean then?
17. The story of the Anglican Communion's struggle with the ordination of women is important for this Commission, not because of the decision taken about the matter itself but because it shows a Communion moving along a trajectory from autonomy to interdependence. It reveals a process of decision-making in communion which is at its best dynamic, inclusive, dialogical, open to the Spirit's leading, in which those with a ministry of memory play a special role within the symphony of the whole people of

God, and in which the different and developing instruments of Anglican Communion were coming to be seen as having a distinctive role to play.

18. But, at the same time the story also raises **sharp questions about the role of each of the instruments of communion and their relation to one another** in the decision-making process. These sharp questions were put in the *Virginia Report*. One of the most disappointing aspects of the story is the failure of the Lambeth Conference in 1998 to respond either to the Eames reports, or to the sharp questions put in the *Virginia Report*. But Resolution III.6, of the Conference, on Instruments of the Anglican Communion, did highlight the need to strengthen mutual accountability and interdependence among provinces and to that end encouraged reflection on the instruments of Communion and the inter-relation between them.⁸ We Anglicans in recent years have a good track record for identifying what is needed we are less good at responding.
19. The story of the move to ordain women raises one particularly sharp question identified in the *Virginia Report* of special relevance for this Commission - what is **the authority of a Resolution of a Lambeth Conference**? Owen Chadwick's reflections on Lambeth Resolutions are worth recalling. In his introduction to the collection of Lambeth Resolutions from 1867-1988 he writes 'it was impossible that the leaders of the Anglican Communion should meet every ten years and not start to gather respect: and to gather respect is slowly to gather influence, and to gather influence is on the way to authority'. He goes on to suggest that the Resolutions:

... might only be advice, by the law of the land or even by the customs of the local Church, but they were of such weight that they were more than 'not binding'. The consciences of many bishops felt the resolution to lay down a decision which they ought to follow or at least try to follow. It was a resolution taken after due debate and after prayer by the ministers who represented the apostles to their churches....That did not mean that the resolution was infallible, because none of them believed in the infallibility of bishops, singly or taken together. They were all agreed that wrong or out of date decisions could be reversed without qualm.⁹

Chadwick gives a 'strong' rather than 'weak' interpretation of Lambeth Resolutions. Anglicans in an episcopal church ought not lightly to disregard the moral authority of the world-wide episcopate. Anglicans are not likely to welcome a central authority structure that could command compliance. But if the understanding of Lambeth Conference Resolutions that Chadwick gives were acceptable to all Anglicans, then they might think it wise to incorporate in provincial documents an agreement to abide by Lambeth Resolutions, even when actively trying to change them. If provinces were to agree to such a strong understanding of Lambeth Resolutions then there would

⁸ Resolution II.6, in *The Official Report of the Lambeth Conference 1998*, Morehouse Publishing, (1999), pp. 396 and 397.

⁹ O. Chadwick, Introduction, in *Resolutions of the Twelve Lambeth Conferences 1867-1988*, ed, R.Coleman, Toronto (1992), p.xvii.

need to be clarity about what subject matter is appropriate for such binding Resolutions, the sort of consultative process required before a Resolution could be responsibly put, and the appropriate majorities required for passing a Resolution before it could be deemed to be 'the mind of the Communion'. At the same time it should be clear that a Resolution could call for restraint.

20. The story of the struggle with the ordination of women, whatever any of us may feel about the outcome, does tell us something about an emerging credible pattern of discernment and decision-making in communion and about the role and interplay of the different instruments of Anglican communion. It is also clear that right structures and right processes are of no avail without **right attitudes**. In a life of communion the personal and relational are always prior to the institutional and structural. The institutional and structural are there to serve and support the personal and the relational life of communion. In communion we belong to one another because we belong to God, and belonging to one another means being accountable to one another now, and to our Christian brothers and sisters through the ages.¹⁰ It means listening attentively to one another, forbearing one another in love, deferring to one another, thinking the best of one another, bearing the pain of difference, and, as Elizabeth Templeton said so powerfully to the bishops at the 1988 Lambeth Conference, even entering each other's pain'.¹¹ Without attitudes expressive of communion no instruments of communion, no helpful processes, will work effectively in the service of communion.

III Implications for the Commission

21. What then might all of this suggest for the work of this Commission? **First** I hope that one of your tasks will be simply educational, helping Anglicans to understand the crisis they are in. In the present situation few people, even clergy, understand the present crisis as anything other than a clash of apparently irreconcilable responses to the issue of homosexuality. In the same way as the first Eames Commission had to interpret 'reception' and 'provisionality' in dialogue with the provinces, by letters and visits, this Commission needs to help Anglicans understand this is, at least in part, a crisis of authority and decision-making in communion.
22. A Lambeth Resolution has been passed, one that does not uphold diversity on this issue. The decision process that led to its being passed was, on any reckoning, very much less satisfactory than the very lengthy consultation, listening in communion, discernment, exploration of the issues together and decision-taking that went into responding to the issue of women's ordination. Bishop Mark Santer is not alone in maintaining that the process at Lambeth 1998 was 'wholly unacceptable' since the issue had only been discussed in detail by a quarter of the delegates, and it had taken them a full fortnight to really start listening to one another.¹² But the Resolution was

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, *The Structures of Unity*, in *New Directions*, September 2003, p.5.

¹¹ *The Truth Shall Set You Free*, p. 292.

¹² M. Santer quoted in *Rowan Williams*, R. Short, Darton, Longman and Todd, (2003), pp. 65 and 66.

passed. Anglicans cannot both agree the importance of a Lambeth Resolution in the overall process of decision-making and then act contrary to it.

23. **Secondly**, because the Resolution was passed and re-affirmed by the Primates' Meeting there will need to be some response both to ECUSA and to those who are actively opposed to ECUSA. It will be a struggle to see how to produce a map for Anglican living into the future in which the presently warring groups, some of whom hardly seem to be able to hear one another, or to want to hear one another, but rather to live together with those who are like minded, can remain in some degree of communion which is not so minimal that it denies the fact of God's gift to us of the possibility of living together visibly in the orbit of his own life, and yet is true at the same time to the major difference that exists on a matter that touches a bond of communion.
24. **Thirdly**, what is clear is that the issue of homosexuality will not go away. Whatever side we are on we have to be prepared to go on talking together, not saying I have no need of you. It is important that we can reflect together on whether this particular development is authentic or not. Even after a Lambeth Conference decision is taken there has to be room for dissent in conversation, if not in action. We have to go on asking whether the action of ECUSA is authentic or not and evaluate its particular place in the total life of the Church. 'Does it enhance the fidelity of that particular church to the Gospel? Does it enable that church to fulfil its mission more faithfully in its own cultural context? Does the development affect the holiness of life, both for individuals and for communities? Does the church continue to be seen as the Body of Christ, where the Gospel is proclaimed and believers are nurtured in fellowship and truth? And are there necessary elements of continuity with the Church in other ages and different cultures?'¹³ These are the sort of questions that we began to see we needed to ask of each other in responding to the demands to ordain women. As a Communion we have not begun to unpack together the biblical, theological or anthropological issues raised. Nor have we begun to listen to the experience of homosexual persons as the Lambeth Resolution called for. When they are invited to the table the discussion becomes not one of those outside but of those among us. It becomes our issue in a new way
25. **Fourthly**, my hope is that this Commission might challenge Anglicans to engage more intentionally with some of the questions raised in the *Virginia Report*. We do need to be able to give a more coherent account together of the instruments of communion- the Lambeth Conference, the ACC, the Primates' Meeting as well as the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the relation between them. We need to be able to explain to ourselves, and to our ecumenical partners, what is the authority and role of each, and what part each has to play in a lengthy process of decision-making. Our continued failure to agree what authorities bind us has led in part to the present confusion.¹⁴ And we need agreement on whether Resolutions of a Lambeth

¹³ *Women in the Anglican Episcopate*, The Eames Commission and Monitoring Group Reports, ACC, (1998), pp.27 and 28.

¹⁴ John Hind, Halting Ecumenism, in *New Directions* 5, January, 2004.

Conference are statements of mere opinion or, if not, then in what way they are binding on us. It is obvious that a Lambeth Conference takes too many Resolutions with little or no distinction between them. There ought at least to be a clear distinction between those that touch a matter of faith, order or moral life and in these there should be a proper reticence. In matters of faith, order or moral life that touch the communion of the Church, ‘the basic grammar of faith’ as Archbishop Rowan calls it, ought we not to be prepared to stay where we are until we can show that to move from the traditional teaching of the Church is consonant with Scripture and Tradition, and required for faithful ‘proclaiming afresh’ today of the faith of the Church through the ages? Ought we not to err on the side of caution while at the same time not being afraid to explore new challenges together? And when such questions are raised, and we know there will be others, then there ought to be a clear, thorough, transparent, inclusive, managed process of decision making in which the instruments of Anglican belonging each plays its part.

26. **Fifthly**, as part of this, the Commission might encourage Anglicans to ask again whether we do not now need an agreed Common Statement which re-affirms our commitment to the faith of the Church as normatively revealed in Holy Scripture, set forth in the catholic Creeds, to the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, and to the historic episcopate and to which is now added an affirmation of those structures of grace that hold us in dynamic communion. The Lambeth Quadrilateral is not a check list of separable items for Anglican belonging but a skeleton frame of the interconnected, inseparable life of faith, sacraments and ministry that hold us in unity, in communion. If we could add to that what we have come to see about the bonds of structured communion that enable us to discern and decide together and commit ourselves to it province by province, that might go some way to helping us to agree in the future the appropriate way to face new challenges to communion. An expanded Quadrilateral might become a part of the canonical law of every province. This is no new suggestion it was there in Lambeth 1988 and in the ecumenical section’s report of the last Lambeth Conference.

27. I’ve strayed a long way from my brief. I do believe we have lessons to learn from the story of our response to the ordination of women, both positive and negative. I keep hearing the question that Robert Runcie put to the bishops in 1988, ‘Do we want unity?’ His answer to his own question was:

I do, because our Lord prayed for it in the context of mission – ‘That they all may be one...that the world may believe’. I do, because neither conflicting Churches, nor competitive Churches, nor co-existing Churches, will be able to embody effectively the Gospel of reconciliation while the Churches themselves remain unreconciled. Do we Anglicans *really* want unity (and communion)? We must do if we are to be instruments of unity and communion to a divided world.¹⁵

Mary Tanner, February 2004-02-10

¹⁵ *The Truth Shall Set You Free*, p.21.

