

## **SUMMARY ARGUMENT FROM THE IATDC's 'COMMUNION STUDY'**

Anglicans value being part of a world Communion, but successive controversies have made it increasingly unclear what it is that they have in common. The contention of this document is that Anglican 'communion' will be maintained and nurtured, not just by preserving existing ecclesiastical structures but through a renewal of the theological tradition which brought the Communion into being.

### **A theological crisis**

Previous Doctrine Commissions have begun this task. *The Virginia Report* (1998) especially developed the notion of *koinonia* as an analogy of the Trinity. For various reasons the argument which TVR presented has not yet been absorbed into the way members of the Anglican Communion think about their relationships with each other. Further consideration needs to be given to two key points of the case which was made: the adequacy of the theological analogy itself, and its connection to the treatment of Anglican institutional order which it presented.

Regrettably, it has been the institutional section of the report which has been given most attention so far. Now, with a potential failure of 'the instruments of communion' to deal with disputes over homosexuality (among other things), it would seem that a significant change in the institutional arrangements of the Anglican Communion is likely. Theology, not just organisational considerations, must guide responses to this changing situation.

The argument which is being developed by the present Commission now supplements the Trinitarian model of communion with increased attention to the Christological, Pneumatological and eschatological elements of God's work of redemption. It does this by grounding the actual experience of 'communion' in the promise of covenant-love reiterated throughout the Hebrew/Christian scriptures, and (taking one example) from the Epistle to the Ephesians, describes the task of maintaining unity in the Church between the act of reconciliation at the cross and a vision of all things being restored at the end of the age. Ecclesiology, this offers a description of the church more ready to cope with the realities of struggle and growth, conflict and change in the life of the people of God. It was pointed out by the authors of *To Mend the Net* – among others – that too close an identification of the doctrine of the church with that of God in Trinity idealises institutional decisions made by particular ecclesial bodies. It runs the danger of confusing a theological *is* with an empirical *ought*. There is always a tendency for history to get lost in ideology, especially at times when the interpretation of a historical tradition is disputed.

Anglican ecclesiology has always been delineated in response to specific contingencies of history. It describes a theologically identifiable group of particular, regional churches which embody reformed, catholic faith, and trace their original existence and inspiration to the mission or ministry of the Church of England, or churches closely associated with it. The Anglican Communion developed as a fellowship of churches which recognised themselves in that description.

The diversity of cultures in which these churches are now found, and remoteness from the historical circumstances in which their fellowship was originally grounded, means that the tradition which drew them together in the first place is under severe strain, and at many points shows signs of breaking up. This situation is not only a result of particular ethical or doctrinal disputes, it also reflects major realignments which have taken place within world Christianity during the last decades of the twentieth century. The IATDC is undertaking a serious reflection on central elements of the Anglican tradition and the polarisation of opinion over key features within it. It especially notes changes which are taking place as a result of the shifting 'centre of gravity' in the Christian movement towards the global south.

## **The renewal of Anglican tradition**

The Communion Study, the Four Key Questions circulated to every diocese and theological centre in the Communion, and ensuing debate on The Six Propositions which developed from this process have revealed deep divisions in approaches to many of the features which have traditionally held Anglicans together.

- **The centrality of Scripture** – the controlling place of scripture in the reasoned development of Anglican tradition is generally acknowledged, but the role of the Bible in determining the outcome of specific controversies is unclear. Through the twentieth century processes of rapid social change from pre- to post-modernity have meant that Christians in the same church now find they are living in different cultural worlds, and the ways in which scripture is utilised in each of them appears to be different as well. Yet during the last decade a renewed emphasis on the unity as well as the diversity of scripture means that listening to the Bible together can be a restorative as well as disturbing experience for the Christian community. Reading ‘in communion’ is not simply a matter of sharing a common lectionary! Cranmer’s conviction that hearing scripture in the context of ordered worship permits (and indeed creates) an acceptable degree of diversity in the church is something that needs to be rediscovered at just the time when it is recognised that no contemporary ‘Act of Uniformity’ can achieve that end. Corporate reception of scripture is actually the way in which communion will be nurtured and sustained in the church, as well as described or defined as a theological concept.
- **Moral Theology** – Anglicans have repeatedly sought to link personal beliefs with public outcomes. Ongoing conversation (not always amicable) between church and state has been a feature of Anglican order from the earliest period of Christian faith and practice in Britain, but was exemplified in the seventeenth century by the way Richard Hooker sought to integrate the continuity of God’s purposes with radically changed intellectual, social and political circumstances. The Anglican tradition has always seen theology as an agent of moral transformation, and ethical assertions as requiring theological validation. The gospel is seen essentially as it confronts personal and corporate sin. This tradition continues today with important Anglican contributions to thinking about international debt, justice and peace issues, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. There is no reason why similar attention should not be given to issues of human sexuality, including homosexuality (which are intellectual, social and political as much as personal in origin) under the present circumstances in which the Communion finds itself. This will involve more than theoretical considerations. A holistic Anglican tradition will seek to combine the best elements of traditional moral philosophy with the practice of theological ethics, involving spiritual issues of vocation and discernment. This will need first, an appreciation of the interdependence of ‘command ethics’ and ‘human flourishing’ (the debate between so-called deontologists and consequentialists). Secondly, attention must be extended to the way in which innovations in Christian belief and practice can be understood, evaluated and judged within an Anglican fellowship. What is not possible is that the discussion of belief and practice, doctrine and ethics, should be carried on independently of each other.
- **Context and culture** – the historicity and particularity of Anglican understandings of the church means that it takes questions of context seriously. At its best – as in the 1978 Lambeth Conference treatment of ‘inculturation’ – context and culture are considered within the framework of catholicity. It involves a two-fold encounter, during which the church discovers something about its own inner reality as a community of the resurrection, and also discovers resources for attending to the needs of the world. Consequently Anglicans are always open to the possibilities of a ‘local option’ in the way they fulfil their calling, but will insist that the ‘local’ is held in a dialectic tension with

‘universal’ opinion, as far as that can be ascertained. This interplay between the one and the many follows directly from the theological model outlined earlier. Without it there is a further danger of confusing ‘is’ and ‘ought’. It emphasises the way in which the grace of the covenant is constant, yet renewed, restored and realised throughout the pilgrimage of God’s people as they move towards its completion. The once-for-all character of Christ’s coming must be appropriated by succeeding generations in each and every place. On this understanding the dominant theme of inculturation is not the *incarnation* (as is often assumed) but an implication of the *Pentecost* experience – hearing about the scandalously particular works of God in the mother tongue of new converts, who are thereby incorporated into membership of a single multi-cultural and cross-generational community. On that basis it might be argued that the Anglican experience of companionship links, partnerships in mission, inter-Anglican networks and religious orders (not to mention the availability of cheap air travel and the Internet) can all act as significant ‘instruments of communion’, almost irrespective of more formal ecclesial structures. Indeed the consultative, ‘bottom-up’ methodology adopted by the IATDC study is beginning to offer theological articulation to new dimensions of *koinonia* which are emerging in the new world (and church)-order.

- **Limits of diversity** — the existence of covenantal religion requires decision-making. Throughout the biblical narrative and the history of the church, decisive choices have been made about significant issues of Christian faith, order and practice. Such a demand means that there is always a possibility of serious disagreement in the church. Some disputes are peripheral, and differences of opinion about them can be accepted relatively easily, but some are crucial – and must in due course be decided upon, if the church is to retain its unity, holiness and claim of catholicity. In times of controversy, vital questions arise about how to tell the difference between peripheral or local disputes, and those which are crucial, normative and universal?

In the present debate on human sexuality many participants are looking for the a list of fundamental doctrines which guarantee Anglican identity, or a catalogue of acceptable practices, ‘lines in the sand’, which define the limits of Anglican fellowship.

- The Commission is persuaded that the while numerous attempts have been made by Anglican theologians to identify core doctrine or fundamental articles, that quest has never been settled beyond dispute. In the present intellectual climate it is even clearer that such a strategy will conceal even more foundational problems of authority. Who decides the content and extent of such doctrines? And how could they be used to resolve contentious issues in the life of the Communion? One suggestive analogy has been offered: the Anglican understanding of the church is not that it is like a balloon which deflate (or explodes) once its fabric is in any way punctured, it is more like a bird’s nest – which can consist of different numbers or arrangements of ecclesiological ‘twigs’ and still be fit for its purpose.
- The latter quest, for issues that can be excluded by definition from Anglican fellowship, appears to contradict the unconditional nature of the covenant. It is not possible to exclude any area of human life or behaviour from theological scrutiny: any issue can become crucial for the maintenance of the church’s faithfulness. The example of flags being displayed in the sanctuary of a church is an instructive case which has been considered by the Commission. Normally that would be regarded as a peripheral issue (*adiaphora*) – until such time as the flags bore a swastika and the churches concerned were in Nazi Germany. Some members have pointed to other situations when a flag can represent the threat of ‘unopposed Empire’ or xenophobic nationalism. Such examples illustrate the way in which previously unconsidered things, in a changed context, can present vital challenges to Christian confession. Key questions for the church’s faithfulness today have to do with human sexual activity, that of hetero- as well as homosexual orientation.

Despite its reluctance, *a priori*, to exclude any opinion or practice, Anglicanism is not in principle unable or unwilling to make costly decisions. Indeed decisive points in the establishment of Anglican ‘communion’ presume that the discernment of God’s will and purposes is a constant and ongoing process. Thus the Lambeth Quadrilateral does not (as it is sometimes erroneously supposed) define the boundaries of Anglican fellowship, but it does commit Anglicanism to a series of normative practices: scripture is *read*, tradition *received*, sacramental worship is *offered*, and the historic character of apostolic leadership is *retained*. From this interplay the Anglican community is nurtured and sustained. Anglicans may be willing to extend the benefit of the doubt to disputed opinions, but only while genuine doubt remains. From such patient but determined approaches to resolving internal disputes, *The Virginia Report* derived a doctrine of ‘reception’. Like Newman’s idea of ‘development’, this notion cannot be limited to bureaucratic procedures, but is related more to the growth and vitality (even the survival) of the church. The one thing that Anglicans cannot permit in times of controversy, is for disputants to refuse to allow their opinion to be submitted to theological scrutiny. This means that those involved in disputes must not only listen to each other, but also attend to the wisdom of the wider Christian community.

- **Accountability and competence** – but who are the scrutineers? The Commission has already advocated the importance of mutual accountability (*paraklesis*) for the maintenance of communion in the church. This involves comfort, encouragement, exhortation and direction, as well as the word into which it is usually translated, ‘admonition’. It is something which should function at every level of church life, and there seems no reason why, in a fellowship of autonomous churches, such accountability should not be exercised between as well as within each of them. To the question of competence we have introduced the criteria of intensity, substance and extent: the more these characteristics feature in a controversy, the wider the scope for a ministry of mutual admonition. It is held that the current dispute deserves consideration at the level of the relationship between Provinces, at present embodied in the Primates’ Meeting. It must be clear that this is not to be seen as a bureaucratic or merely organisational response to resolving disputes. The process is theological throughout, and the ‘admonition’ should not be seen as a matter of institutional censure, but corporate submission to the gospel, in the pursuit of a common mind.

For various reasons, some participants in the present debates seem intent on reducing the Communion into something more like a confederation – becoming ‘cousins, not brothers and sisters’. Politically, this appears to amount to a refusal to accept the possibility of external criticism; theologically, it dilutes Anglican fellowship from something grounded in covenant love, to a matter of administrative convenience.

- **Structures for communion** – for Anglican unity to be maintained in this way, it will be necessary to overcome deep seated suspicions about centralising power in the Communion. *The Virginia Report* pointed to the need for greater clarity in the relationship between the instruments of communion. This can be achieved by clearly differentiating the roles of Lambeth Conference, Anglican Consultative Council and Primates’ Meeting as aspects of (respectively) collegial, communal and personal authority in the church. The Archbishop of Canterbury holds the unique office of gathering the Communion in its representative parts, and speaking for it while consensus is achieved. If it is urged that an ‘enhanced role’ be adopted by the Primates (a proposal which the IATDC has supported under certain circumstances) then this must be paralleled in additional responsibilities undertaken by each of the other instruments as well. What is essential is that the different charisms of guidance and discernment exercised by each of the instruments must deliberately and consistently act together. Too often meetings of the decision-making bodies appear, to outsiders, to be pre-occupied with their own, apparently unrelated, programme objectives; at worst, they may seem intent on merely

winning time, in the hope that seemingly intractable problems will go away. Mutual accountability and communication are needed for communion to function. The working of the whole body must amount to more than the sum of its separate parts. The purpose of ‘dispersed authority’ is to draw to itself the *consensus fidelium*.

### **Changing patterns of *koinonia***

It is much to be hoped that the Lambeth Commission, chaired by Archbishop Eames, will be successful in finding institutional or canonical ways to hold the Communion together at this time, even while significant differences over homosexuality exist within and between its churches. If that is possible, the future stability of that agreement will depend even more on a deepened sense of commonality, and this can only come from a theological renewal of the Anglican tradition, associated with the elements outlined above.

Part of the difficulty in sustaining that vision is derived from hierarchical views of power and authority, so prominent in social, managerial and political life, which are pressed on the decision-making bodies – both by an uncomprehending media, and by knowing manipulators of arguments within the church itself. An emphasis on covenant, Christology and the work of the Spirit seeks a different frame of reference. Attention is drawn to the classic discussions of the Anglican Communion at the 1920 and 1930 Lambeth Conferences. In the second of these, two prevailing types of ecclesiastical organisation were described: ‘that of centralised government, and that of regional autonomy within one fellowship’. It is the latter form which Anglicans share with Orthodox Churches and others. Self-governing churches of the Communion grew up ‘freely, in their own soil’. Even then the term ‘Anglican’ did not hold racial or geographical connections but was grounded in ‘the doctrines and ideals for which the Church of England has always stood’. The radical implications of this self-understanding need to be re-appropriated for an affirmation of Catholicity (and the claim to catholicity by a sub-tradition of Christianity) in the post-modern dilemma in which Anglicanism now finds itself.

It is for historical reasons, the formative experiences of the Church of England, rather than institutional order that ‘communion with the See of Canterbury’ is significant for Anglican provinces today. Attention to this history, with its associated doctrines and ideals, along with a re-consideration of the comparison drawn from Orthodox ideas of autocephalicity and communion, informs the IATDC’s thinking at this stage of its study. Orthodoxy offers a way of deepening understanding of what Anglicans have learned to call, somewhat unsatisfactorily, ‘impaired communion’. Theological tradition, Orthodoxy, not any form of institutional unity is what gives the Eastern churches their identity. Orthodox churches can be notably contentious. Severed relationships and even an excommunication of the Oecumenical Patriarch – Orthodoxy’s first among equals – have all been known in recent years. Yet the impulse towards unity within the tradition also holds out the possibility of the restoration of communion after a period in which it has been breached. It is the existence or non-existence of communion which is crucial for Anglicans. More is involved than establishing minimal conditions for a fraternal relationship.

### **‘The highest possible degree of communion’?**

While the rhetoric of schism should be avoided during the present tensions, the possibility of serious disruption to the Anglican Communion has to be contemplated. The existing ‘instruments of unity’ are capable of theological (not just managerial) development and as such should be utilised more effectively to address questions about legitimate diversity. But if there is not the time or *will* to achieve this, it appears that Anglicans will become increasingly marginalised and fragmented as a movement within world-Christianity.

Even if the worst fears of Anglicans who value their fellowship and solidarity are realised, the Anglican tradition will not disappear. Communion functions at a number of different levels. The IATDC has identified theology, canon law, history and culture, communication, and voluntary commitment rather than coercion, as essential aspects of communion. Yet real communion can exist in many of the elements separately. The Commission is persuaded that ‘thick’ ecclesiology, concrete experience of the reconciling and healing work of God in Christ, should take priority over ‘thin’, abstract and idealised descriptions of the church. Communion ‘from below’, is real communion – arguably the most vital aspect of *koinonia* with God and neighbour, and it is from ‘below’ that the Commission has worked in its conversations with the churches, and in the theological construction it is developing now.

What is needed next is a clearer understanding of how these different aspects of communion exist at different levels or horizons of the church’s experience. The obligation to seek ‘the highest degree of communion possible’ within the Church is a laudable ambition, a vocation even. Yet without specifying what sort of communion is anticipated for congregational, local, regional or global fellowship, the terminology can be used merely to justify higher level organisational arrangements without ever analysing how they contribute to communion itself.

If Anglican fellowship at the level of shared doctrines and ideals or common participation in mission is unable to sustain the support of coherent, structural communion ‘from above’, then it will be a weaker and more fragile thing as a global fellowship than might otherwise have been the case. In the light of the gospel weak and fragile things are not to be despised. But the Anglican theological tradition cannot be content with any claim to communion which separates the gospel of Christ from the reality of his Church.

### **Summary recommendations**

1. The nature and maintenance of communion between Anglican churches is primarily theological rather than organisational in character.
2. Concentration on the Anglican theological tradition should be the strategic priority in the present situation in which the Anglican Communion finds itself.
3. Serious attention needs to be given to the way in which the traditional ‘instruments of communion’ act together and are mutually accountable to each other.
4. The consultative, ‘bottom up’ method of the IATDC’s study should be extended for its ‘communion building’ potential to other Anglican institutions – especially in relation to the Primates’ theological education initiative, IASCOME’s ‘Communion in Mission’ project, missiological and companionship links between Anglican churches, and other ecumenical relationships and theological studies.
5. The IATDC report to be completed in 2006 will include recommendations for its promulgation and implementation. It should be incorporated in preparations for the 2008 Anglican Gathering and Lambeth Conference including, at the Archbishop of Canterbury’s suggestion, a formal relationship with the design group for those meetings.

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*This document represents a statement of progress on the IATDC’s Communion Study. It was originally intended as a working paper to assist the production of an Interim Report at the meeting of the Commission which had been anticipated in 2004. It has been reworked after circulation among members of the IATDC as a basis for further consultation, conversation with the LCC, and probably, more widely throughout the Communion.*

*Dr Katherine Grieb, as a theologian in the US in the present context, dissents from one example given: “In my view the question of the display of national flags is the exact opposite of ‘adiaphora’ since in Paul’s language ‘the truth of the gospel’ is at stake”. Otherwise she supports this working document.*