

## **COMMISSIONING COMMISSIONS: a context for the work of the ABCC and IATDC?**

Archbishop Coggan highlighted the issue of authority in his notable intervention at the 1978 Lambeth Conference. Since then questions about structures for decision-making, unity and diversity, the boundaries and identity of Anglicanism have never been far from the Communion's agenda. The initial Primates' Meeting (1981) reviewed the subject, and the first report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission – instituted at the 1978 Conference – addressed itself to principles of cultural and theological pluralism. It is not clear that either initiative was able to advance the debate materially.

*For the Sake of the Kingdom* (1986) was produced by the IATDC as a resource for the 1988 Lambeth Conference. It did not find a place on the main agenda of the meeting, and was referred to only briefly in the footnotes of two Section reports. Ten years later, *The Virginia Report* (1996) featured more prominently in documentation of the 1998 Conference, and was 'welcomed as helpful' in one resolution (III.8), but the document itself was not considered by the whole assembly, there has been scant response to a 'decade of study' of its recommendations which was anticipated by the bishops, and there is little evidence that the thinking behind the report has so far entered the blood-stream of Anglican life.

Successive crises within the Anglican family confirm how little progress has been made over the past 25 years in clarifying ideas of authority within the Communion. Perhaps this indicates the first element of the context in which its theological commissions work: *there does not appear to be a mechanism whereby theological advice, no matter how judicious, can be 'received', evaluated, criticised or owned by Anglicans world-wide.*

Of course the validity of theological work is not limited to formal reports. Serious discussion has been undertaken at other levels too. ACC-7(1987) began a process which, with the Primates Meeting, produced 'The Anglican Communion: identity and authority' and while ACC-8(1990) considered its approach to be premature, it did provoke a significant consultation at Virginia Theological Seminary and the publication of a small but important booklet, *Belonging Together* (1992). This process has been rather overlooked, partly as a result of changing personnel (from the two current Commissions, only Bishops Stephen Sykes and Tom Wright were directly involved in that discussion), but more-so because the controversy over women in the episcopate re-directed attention towards the work of the *Eames Commission* and subsequently to the production by the IATDC (also chaired by Archbishop Eames) of *The Virginia Report*.

It in no way minimises the excellent work of these two bodies to express a degree of regret that pressure of circumstances focused their attention on structural and political dimensions of the exercise of authority, and to an extent, short-circuited the theological process from which it had begun. Neither *For the Sake of the Kingdom* nor *Belonging Together* ignored institutional expressions of unity, but both set them within a rich theological and spiritual framework of things which bind Anglicans together.

*For the Sake of the Kingdom* especially offered a subtle argument (is it fanciful to see the hand of a young Rowan Williams at work there?) which sets theological pluralism, but not relativism, within the yes and no, the even now and not yet of the reign of God. The Christian calling is to discern a 'transcendent horizon' in the midst of time and history, and Anglicanism's particular vocation is to do that within "a fellowship based in a common set of institutions ... through practical acts of sharing, through mutual consultation, through mutual admonition and criticism (and) through a common willingness to take up difficult – even divisive – issues for the sake of the truth of the Gospel." (p59-60)

It is not hard to see why a report like that, with its focus on repentance, faith, spiritual and cultural transformation, was not easily reduced to a set of conference resolutions. But this very fact identifies a second feature which determines the contribution that theological commissions can make. *For most readers the value of a report will be whether or not it supports their own opinion. If it does, then it will be accorded a status in future discussions which it is probably unable to bear, and if it does not, it will be ignored altogether.* In times of dispute, even within the church, most participants are not so much interested in understanding as winning. To often the issues are not about truth, but power.

For this reason special attention has to be given to the theological models which shape a commission's procedures. The notion of communion grounded in the doctrine of the Trinity which inspired *The Virginia Report* as well as the *Eames Commission* has been fruitful, ecumenically, in uniting groups of

churches which wish to grow together, but its resilience remains unproven for Anglicans who seem more intent on moving apart. Aware of this, the present IATDC is tentatively seeking an understanding of *koinonia* which will also incorporate themes of Christology – the interplay of the human and divine, into what Hooker identified as the realisation of the church as a society and a society supernatural. ‘The Communion Study’, with its four key questions and Six Propositions, is an attempt to engage both sides of the numerous arguments which threaten Anglican unity. It hopes that each will see this as a debate which deals with their own concerns, whether or not the eventual outcome is what they desire or expect.\*

This points towards the third aspect of the context in which we are working. When Archbishop Coggan put forward the idea of establishing a Doctrinal Commission he was careful to point out that it would be but one of the bodies advising the Communion. Doctrine was important, he said, but it needed to be interpreted in practise, and “pastoral and practical aspects are not its primary concern”. The first commission did not see its task as providing a final authority for doctrinal questions, nor being directly engaged in detailed controversies but, more modestly, as seeking to fashion “... a broad framework of theological understanding within which the answers to more specific questions can be developed”. But theological superstructure and the pastoral re-construction need to be planned together. In the context of our present perilous situation, *practical solutions need to arise from principled convictions; ecclesial structure must follow theological functions; canonical provision should mirror doctrinal clarity.*

The context in which the ABCC and the IATDC are presently called to work seems to demand that they pursue their tasks independently, but in the closest possible relationship to each other.

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\* An outline of the IATDC’s process and resources can be traced by referring to the Commission’s Bibliography and Archive, found on the Anglican Communion web-site.