

TUNING UP THE INSTRUMENTS OF UNITY: structures for Anglican decision-making

What is actually going on when one of the central bodies of the Anglican community meets, or when the Archbishop of Canterbury gets out his address book?

Failure to answer that question is a major cause of the present uncertainty about the whole exercise of authority within the Anglican Communion. *The Virginia Report* concluded its treatment of Anglican interdependence and coherence with the acknowledgement, “A deeper understanding of the instruments of communion at a world-wide level, their relationship one to another and to the other levels of the Church’s life should lead to a more coherent and inclusive functioning of oversight in the service of the *koinonia* of the Church”(p63). A resolution of the 1998 Lambeth Conference looked for specific recommendations about future development of the instruments over the next decade(III.8i), although another expressed rather less patience, believing “the instruments of unity ... need to work much more closely together and to review their mutual accountability”(II,2b).

To outward appearance, meetings of the Anglican bodies look straight forward enough. They might be likened to the organisational structure of an international charity, or a slightly unwieldy political system – with an upper and lower house, legislature and a titular head of state, or worse, as a multi-national business chain – with the bishops as shareholders, the ACC non-executive directors, the Primates, a Board of Governors, with the Archbishop of Canterbury hovering uncertainly between the role of a Managing Director or a Colonel Sanders-like symbol of brand-identity. Nearly 150 years of history makes it plain that the Anglican Communion cannot to be understood in terms of the hierarchies that these pictures suggest, yet neither can it be the case that the existence of separate organs will be justified merely because some are easier (or cheaper) than others to get together. The deeper understanding which *TVR* – and others – has sought, must be theological in its origin, giving articulation and mobility to the body of Christ.

At a crucial point in the present discussion of the instruments of communion, Robert Runcie (seen by some as the instigator of moves towards more centralised Anglican organisation, and certainly the first object of that phrase, now so beloved of the media, ‘spiritual leader of 70million Anglicans’) set the tone of the debate. “The Archbishop of Canterbury is often described – inaccurately – as head of the Anglican Communion I do not rule. I serve the Communion, not only by crisis management, but by gathering it and sometimes speaking for it. I am only a senior bishop with a diocese like other bishops. I believe that should remain the case.”(ACC-8,p26) He went on to explore the tension that inevitably exists in episcopally led, synodically governed churches, and the way this is magnified in a world-wide community made up of autonomous Provinces. The reality of community must be expressed through organisational, structural, even canonical and juridical arrangements. Yet the community comes first. Structures and canons are secondary. They do not convey authority, but are means by which the community comes to recognise the latent authority of baptism and orders. Synods do not derive their efficacy from formally delegated powers, administrative effectiveness or even ideals of democracy, but ultimately from the call of God and the gift of the Spirit(p34).

It is that sort of vision which needs to be realised as the role of the instruments of communion is clarified and developed. *The Virginia Report* identified such a development with the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*(1982) statement about uniting personal, collegial and communal authority for ‘effective participation in the discovery of God’s will and the guidance of the Spirit’(p26). In fact every Christian community participates to some degree in that experience, and it is an easy first step to identify how, for Anglican decision-making, the Archbishop with the Primates embody personal authority, the Lambeth Conferences demonstrates collegiality, and the ACC, with its representative membership, gives access to the communal life of the global family. When these bodies meet (or pick up their address book), they are potentially tapping-in to different charisms of guidance and discernment. What becomes critical at that point is the second step, that of recognising how the different instruments inter-relate, the way in which such ‘dispersed authority’ points towards the *consensus fidelium*.

Without any such inner coherence, the sequence of meetings of the Lambeth Conference, ACC, the Primates, can (and sometimes does) look like a mechanism for delay, of buying time and hoping that problems will go away, of waiting for someone else to act. At worst, they can appear to be engaged in a struggle for power, of simply checking and balancing each other, or of being solely concerned with their own programmatic agendas. It was presumably impressions like that which fuelled the exasperation vented in the resolution from Section II at the 1998 Lambeth Conference, cited previously.

In a paper utilising the same title as that given above, which was read and discussed by the IATDC at its 2002 meeting, I tried to illustrate how a better understanding of the roles of the instruments – which are distinct but not independent of each other, overlapping but not co-terminal, held together by bonds that are neither linear nor cumulative but, in the best sense of the word, charismatic – how such an organic view of Anglican authority might have addressed the question of homosexuality and ministry.

It regretted the situation in which Anglican gatherings turned into a media-fest of assertions and denunciations, with associated accusations of lobbying and recriminations over presumed attitudes of cultural superiority. It fantasised over a situation in which at Lambeth, instead of feeling obliged to pass decisive resolutions on every conceivable topic, the bishops had spent more time openly facing threats to their collegiality – and seriously listening to the *best* cases that could be put on both sides of the questions that divided them. Such a principled approach to unity in diversity could have provided a mandate to the Anglican Consultative Council, in its representative and communal role, to institute communion-wide dialogue on the subject and begin a process of listening for consensus – at least for a consensus on the nature of the division itself and what it means for a fellowship of churches seeking to maintain unity in mission and ministry together. On that basis the Primates, bearing in their persons authentic marks of where their churches stood on the matter could eventually have faced each other with equanimity – and in due course the Archbishop of Canterbury (who had ‘gathered’ the Communion at each point in the process) could also have ‘spoken’ for them too.

It will of course be argued that this sort of vision is impractical, that the administration of the Anglican Communion is already seriously under-funded for its existing functions, and this sort of co-ordinating and collating on behalf of the Council is beyond its resources. Others may suspect that in fact the ACC or the Primates are just not up to it, are actually not sufficiently trusted – or do not sufficiently trust each other – to perform such a task. To some parts of the Communion the problem appears to be that of *control* rather than just capacity.

But time alone will not heal divisions. For that, a determination under God to maintain communication and dialogue with those with whom we disagree is needed. I concluded my paper with a reflection on the nature of instruments. Ours are not instruments of government, nor legal instruments as commonly understood. Our theological tradition means it is unlikely that they will be surgical instruments, sharpened for cutting out heresy and schism. The instruments that Anglicanism is most likely to develop are those for creating the music of praise. And this means that when central bodies of the Anglican Communion meet, they know what part they are called on to play, they are in their different ways all tuned to a note of the same pitch – and they are learning to play, together.

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