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Instruments of Communion: Gifts, Signs and Stewardship

A working paper prepared by the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order

This paper builds upon *Towards a Symphony of Instruments*, a document on the four Instruments of Communion presented by IASCUFO to ACC-15 in Auckland, NZ, in 2013 (available at www.anglicancommunion.org/media/209979/Towards-a-Symphony-of-Instruments-Web-Version.pdf). The focus of this new paper is a positive approach to the Instruments as gifts for deepening the life of the Anglican Communion; and as signs of God's grace for the building up the fellowship of Anglican Churches as part of the world-wide body of Christ. The Instruments of Communion are made up of people with their gifts, graces and frailties. Because of this the Instruments require the care and attention of trusted servants who act as stewards of the Instruments of Communion. This aspect is developed in the last section of this paper.

The Instruments of Communion are designed to facilitate communication, conversation and consensus building among the fellowship of Anglican Churches. In short, the Instruments provide ways by which the Anglican Communion seeks the wisdom of the Spirit of God for a deeper communion and faithful witness to Christ in the world. This suggests that the Instruments may be more appropriately considered as gifts for deepening communion. This also points to the fact that the deepening of communion is connected to a vital mission in the world.

The Instruments are not states of affairs, static entities. Rather – because the people of God, in different and complementary ways constitute the Instruments – they belong to the rich communicative networks of Anglican life in the world. Their function and impact will inevitably become the focal point for change, controversy and new possibilities. This is all part of a dynamic catholicity. This does not diminish their gift-like character but simply witnesses to the way in which true gifts actually work in the world.

Concerns have often been expressed that the language of 'instruments' ignores the human and relational dimensions of the Instruments of Communion. Instrumental language can make it difficult to understand the Instruments as gifts for deepening communion. The Instruments operate best when they are integrated organically into the life of the Church. When the Instruments are treated as external objects they lose their human aspect and are prone to misuse and misunderstanding. Hence it is vital to remember that the Instruments of Communion are living gifts; that they can undergo development in response to new situations. Such gifts require responsible stewardship.

The gift-like character of the Instruments of Communion can be enhanced by the consistent use of the language of 'communion' rather than 'unity'. Interestingly

'communion' was the original term in relation to the Instruments and was only later replaced by the term 'unity'. Communion is a broader and richer term theologically than unity. Unity has unfortunately been too easily associated with structural and legal aspects of the Church. Such things are important but they are not the only or the most significant aspects of union with God and each other. The language of 'communion' offers a needed relational balance to the language of 'instruments'. The recovery of communion terminology is of a piece with the recovery of the role of human agency and theological focus on God that actually underlies the purpose of the Instruments of Communion. Language may not solve the problems but it has a part to play in changing expectations and attitudes.

The real challenge is to recover the priority of a gift-centred approach to the Instruments of Communion. The Instruments always remain vulnerable to distortion and misuse. For example, the objectification of instruments leaves them vulnerable for sectional interests to prosecute their own ideas of communion, its repair and/or progress. It also promotes false expectations of what is possible. A gift-centred approach to the structures of our polity is more resistant to them being dragooned into impossible problem-solving tasks. A gift-centred approach belongs to an environment that fosters consensus building, good quality communication and responsible and accountable engagement. The Anglican Communion of Churches is called to bear witness through common practice to the incarnate Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit. A gift-centred approach will encourage a re-conceiving of the Instruments as places of wisdom for the Anglican fellowship of Churches, for the strengthening of the witness to Christ in the world. The Instruments have to be reassessed, reshaped and reinvigorated against the horizon of the Churches' mission.

It is easily forgotten that the Instruments are inter-related. By treating each Instrument separately, or by failing to recognise their interconnectedness, we lose sight of our own essential connectedness and accountability to each other, and the value of the Instruments to deepen Anglican life. For example, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lambeth Conference have a natural reciprocity, as do the Primates' Meeting and the Anglican Consultative Council. Closer intentional cooperation between these different Instruments nurtures an Anglican ethos which is organic, conversational and conciliar. Tensions between these different bodies is natural and to be expected, and so not a reason for jettisoning, diminishing or exalting any of. That would not be the way of communion in the Instruments.

The Instruments are God's gift for deepening Anglican communion and strengthening Anglican mission. As gifts, the Instruments have a sacramental character. It is in and through such relational church structures that the people of God may hear the voice of the Living God and discern signs of God's work in the world. Indeed the language of *sign* might be the best way to understand the Instruments. As the Church is a sign of the coming kingdom,[1] so too the Instruments of Communion can be understood as ecclesial signs enabling the Church to be a sign of God's grace and goodness. This sign-like character of the Instruments orientates them towards the future and draws

[1]The Church as sign of the kingdom is developed in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Faith and Order Paper no. 214, Geneva: WCC, 2013), §§ 25-27.

attention to their contingent and provisional nature. As a consequence they are signs that require the care and attention of trusted servants who act as stewards of communion.

This raises an important question: what responsibility do human agents have for the Instruments of Communion? If the Instruments are received as gifts and signs of communion, then clearly they have to be treated with respect and care. In this context those responsible for the exercise of the gifts do so as stewards and servants of the instruments. When this is undertaken well the Church's witness to the gospel of God in the world is enriched. In this sense stewardship is a broad ranging vocation set against the horizon of the mission of God in the world.

The concept of stewardship has been important when considering human responsibility for creation. The early chapters of the Book of Genesis point to creation as the gift of a good and caring God. The God of this remarkable and interdependent creation has the character of the benevolent care and kindly oversight of the ancient tradition of the shepherd King. Human beings, as created in the image of God, are given responsibility to care for the earth and its creatures. As such the human vocation is to follow the pattern of the care and delight in creation of the God whose image they bear. The human vocation as a steward of the garden of creation is a delegated responsibility from a good and kind God. Stewardship is an activity and calling that requires a close, respectful and responsible relationship with the earth and all living things.

This background of the stewardship of creation may be helpful when we deploy the idea of stewardship in relation to the Church. This involves a move from stewardship of creation to stewardship of the new creation; the Body of Christ. Christ is Head of the Body and bestows gifts on the people of the Church in order that through the Church the many riches of the wisdom of God might be shown to the world (Eph 3.10). Disciples of Christ, and in particular those called to care and exercise oversight of the Body of Christ, are called to tend the garden of the new creation, the household (*oikos*) of the Lord. And they are called to undertake this vocation after the manner of Christ in humble obedience to the Gospel. In this vein the Apostle Paul refers to himself and his fellow apostolic leaders as 'servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries' (1 Cor 4.1). The new household is the fellowship in the Spirit, the communion of the faithful in Christ. This household is the result of the revealing of God's mysteries, ie 'the secret knowledge of God's purposes, disclosed in the Gospel'. [2] Stewards have responsibility for the good ordering and common good of the household of faith. As in first creation, so in the new creation, stewardship is a delegated and representative responsibility. Moreover it is a delegation of trust (1 Cor 4.2). And this vocation mirrors the original creation, ie it requires a stewardship of the communion of the faithful after the pattern of Christ the Good Shepherd (John 10). Stewards of the mysteries of God, as is abundantly clear from Paul's many letters, exercise their calling on many fronts as ambassadors of Christ, pastoral carers of the churches, and as teachers of the spiritual truths of the gospel.

[2]See C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle of the Corinthians* (2nd edition, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1971), p. 100.

This move from stewardship of creation to stewardship of communion may be a helpful framework to reconsider the purpose of the Instruments of Communion. The Instruments are intended to strengthen and enhance the Anglican Communion. But to fulfil this the Instruments require the exercise of good stewardship. This provides a rich theological and missional horizon for the Instruments of Communion. It also draws attention to the great responsibility entrusted to the servants of God for the good functioning of the Instruments and the moral claim upon those called to fulfil this ministry of stewardship in the life of the Anglican Communion. The exercise of stewardship is undertaken by frail human beings, called to repentance and prayerfulness, subject to wilful blindness of many kinds especially when it comes to the exercise of power and authority. The servants and stewards of the Instruments of Communion are called to exercise this particular vocation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit together with openness to correction and challenge.

Consideration of personal agency and responsibility for the good operation of the Instruments highlights the importance of careful appointment and on-going education of all those called to high office in the Church of God. It also calls attention to the need for robust synodical processes for the appointment of bishops, and of members of the ACC. Issues to do with personal character and ecclesial intelligence (including appreciation of the nature of the Anglican Communion as part of the body of Christ), capacity to listen, spiritual and theological wisdom, communicative capabilities, to name but a few, are critical aspects of leadership. And these factors are especially important in appointments to leadership to balance the emphasis on management, political and partisan interests that infect the Churches and mimic their host cultures across the globe. Such considerations go to the heart of the capacity of the Instruments of Communion to function in the life of the Anglican fellowship of Churches as genuine gifts, signs and witnesses to the coming kingdom of God.