

## **What does the Communion mean for the world today? The Recovering of horizons for the Communion**

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Who is Christ for us today? This guiding question which Bonhoeffer wrestled throughout his life may be a fitting starting point for our reflections on the Anglican Communion today. To Bonhoeffer, the church's self-understanding is not simply an internal housekeeping matter; it has necessary implication for our perception of the political and social order of the world. What did Christ mean to say to us today? Behind all the slogans and catchwords of ecclesiastical controversies, does our deliberation lead us to a more determined quest for the sole object of it all, for Jesus Christ himself? (*Cost of Discipleship. Introduction*). In what ways can we carry through the insight that “the world has come of age”, and hence “the foundation is taken away from the whole of what has up to now been our ‘Christianity’” (30<sup>th</sup> April, 1944, *Letters and Papers from Prison*), into our discussion on the *structure* of Anglican Communion, at this juncture when members of the Communion have also come of age?

This detour to Bonhoeffer, perhaps unexpected for those who want to come immediately to grips with the burning issues on sexuality and episcopal jurisdiction, is deliberate. For it provides the necessary vantage point for us to survey the landscape of the issues raised in Eames' Commission, which was tasked to report on the nature, extent and consequences of Impaired Communion in the Anglican Communion as a result of recent developments in North America. Of the eight “key questions” set out by Commission (ACNS 3713), the first two deal with the theological implications of the actions taken by ECUSA and New Westminster, the third on canonical understanding of the Communion, and the last five are related to housekeeping attempts towards “mending the net” in keeping the family together.

The key questions, I do not believe, are able to open the way forward for the Communion. The agenda as perceived by the Commission is, unintentionally of course, very much Anglo-American centred. Imagine what the Commission would expect from reflection on the theological implications of the decisions in New Hampshire and New Westminster? Would that become another exercise of piling on of well worn arguments from liberal and conservative camps on sexuality and social concerns, that would lead the Communion nowhere? What canonical evidences can the Commission expect the Communion to produce which can go beyond internal constitutional discussion (in ECUSA and Church of England) and at least become morally persuasive to the rest of the Communion. And how can the stop gap practical measures proposed provide a holistic vision that can guide the Communion forward?

My disquiet arises from the Commission's lack of recognition of the changing times and political scenes which the Communion finds itself today. Successive MISAG and MISSIO Reports in the past twenty years and more had pointed this out, and appealed to the Communion to move from maintenance to mission model, with radical implications

for church structures. Successive Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) meetings at least paid lip service to such understanding. I do not, however, find such sustained convictions occupy any place in the present reflections on the nature of the Communion. For example, would it not be more fruitful, if the Commission guided us to think through the theological implications, not only the actions by ecclesiastical authorities in North America, but also on why there their actions provoke such intense reactions from the South and the East? For the reactions are not to be dismissed as those of the uncouth and primitive, which will fade away given they become more civilized in the years ahead (insomuch as it is unhelpful to demonize the bishops of New Hampshire and New Westminster!). Nor is it helpful to situate the conflict as between the liberals and the conservative camps, which does justice to no one. We need to recognize that the convictions of many from the South and the East are as much theological in nature as those from the West. Nor do we find in the key questions any signpost that would lead us, to use Bonhoeffer's terms, to a more determined quest for Jesus Christ, and a more sober re-examination of our structures. In other words, we have not given recognition to the missiological and theological dynamics in the Communion, without which the canonical and ecclesiastical structures become unintelligible and arbitrary.

Such line of exploration brings to sharper relief the political and social dynamics within the Communion. Imagine how the present shape of Christianity would be if Constantine did not embrace Christianity in the fourth century; or that clergy were not accorded access to Roman roads when the ecumenical councils were convened? And then imagine what the Communion would be like if British colonial expansion did not happen, what would the Communion be like? And imagine air transport, right to travel, and information technology, all of which are taken for granted by the West, were not open to many constituent members of the Communion, could the instruments of unity be effective? The truth is that we need to appreciate that structures are dependent on non-theological factors, and that our manner of discipleship should become different in new socio-political landscapes. (Here we refer to W.H.C. Frend's analysis of such non-theological factors in understanding the conflicts in the early church.)

Far from trying to deconstruct the Communion, I wish to suggest that the awareness of socio-political contexts should help us to identify what the theological considerations are, and rediscover the broader horizons which gave birth to the Communion in the first place. One crucial issue which may deserve closer scrutiny is the Lambeth Quadrilaterals, which is often recognized as cardinal to what traditional Anglicanism consists of, and is adopted in the constitutions of member provinces. But is it beyond challenge? The Quadrilaterals were framed in late nineteenth century, near the close of the colonial era, when the "Anglican world" as it exists today was to a great extent complete. The four cardinal elements: Scriptures, creeds, sacraments and historical episcopate became the cornerstone of the Communion. How are these interpreted in the West? We find that many would penetrate behind the formal wordings, and interpret them thus: the first three cardinal points, would mean that Anglicans would a) submit themselves to the authority of the Word of God (however we understand this); b) stand in continuity with the church fathers, and be engaged in historical and theological reflections within the framework they bequeathed to us; and c) continue to embody in our common life the gospel of Jesus

Christ through the sacraments. In true Anglican spirit, we draw out the theological intent of the statements. Many would not have any difficulty in accepting such comprehensive understanding of the Quadrilaterals. It is therefore very strange when we come to fourth criterion. I find it puzzling that those who would allow broad understanding for the first three cardinal points would then become rather "fundamentalist" in their dealing with the fourth criterion, and would not allow it further development. The understanding of historical episcopacy, and the paradigm of three-tier ministerial orders, and diocesan and parish jurisdictions as it existed in the Roman world and in rural Britain were left unquestioned.

Two important elements are not dealt with in the Quadrilaterals. The first is recognition of the missionary initiatives, the human acts of discipleship, by individuals and societies, which evangelized the nations and peoples in the Anglican Communion today. The instruments of unity came much later. To a great extent, efforts from ACC, Lambeth Conference, Primates' Meeting, and Canterbury in the past four decades have not result in extending the geographical territory of the Communion, claiming new lands and peoples for Christ. And second, there is no reference to an enduring social vision – of holding onto the transforming power of the gospel in society, which distinguished Anglicans from many sectarian traditions. However, records in missionary journals and diocesan reports bore ample testimony to the fact that our forefathers from diverse traditions – whether evangelical, catholic, or liberal – grappled with the issue of connecting the church to the public welfare. How can we begin to think through structures and map ways forward without first a rediscovery of a social vision and the dynamics which makes effective missionary endeavours? It would be like children of a family gathering after a parent's funeral, trying to decide on protocols and legalities of holding family reunions in future and the legalities in executing the will of the dead. Would it not be better if grown-up children would reflect on the vision and bonds of love which has sustained them, without which the family would not have existed?

The Roman Catholics were more imaginative in approaching changes. *The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (Lumen Gentium)* in Vatican II was complemented by the publication of *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)* and *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (Apostolicam actuositatem)*. Can the Commission help the Communion to hold up a social vision before the 70-million strong lay people, to unite them, and inspire a new generation of young people to follow Jesus Christ and live out their Christian discipleship in today's world?

I believe that those from the South and East would set different priorities in the discussion of the future of the Communion.

The first is whether the Communion can encourage sustained theological reflection and learning within different regions. To a great extent, sisters and brothers in the Southern cone were the ones outside of the West to make significant theological contributions from the South. Asians and Africans still have a long way to go. Such should not be the case. Sacramental unity around the bishops should be vitalized by the maturing of theological traditions. What we look for there is not the continued subscription to the familiar battle

lines drawn by western theologians, but the emergence of new patterns of holiness and obedience in today's world. A concrete task is the encouragement of setting up centres of learning in the political centres around the world. Would there be such sustained efforts to build up such centres in Africa, Asia, and the Southern Cone, to enable reflection of issues which touch the hearts of local people and make theological contribution to public debates?

It may still be the case in Britain and the United States of America that we find theological centres, chaplaincy services, and chapels fully integrated with seats of highest learning. Such is seldom in many parts of the world, where Christianity is equated with what is superstitious, uneducated, and foreign. The establishing of centres of highest scholarship creates the social and public space for Christianity to engage the public.

The second is whether it is more helpful for the Anglican Communion to see itself as a dynamic rather than static entity; in other words, the Communion existed and should continue to be so only if it aligns itself within the dynamics of missionary initiatives. AC stands for "Apostolic Communities" as much as "Anglican Communion". It holds out the vision of a fellowship of national churches which has been brought to maturity by the apostolic witness. Such would include the Latin and Greek traditions that are more familiar to the west. But it should also embrace Christian communities that have grown out of the witness of those outside the Mediterranean world, of Thomas, of the Syrians, and Nestorians, who spread the gospel to cultures with ancient histories through the silk routes by land and by sea. The continuing designation of "Anglican", and reference to Canterbury as mother church, is a liability rather than an asset in the present political landscape. It implicates the Communion with the legacies of British colonial ambitions in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

C. Peter Williams in his study of Henry Venn of the Church Missionary Society in *The Ideal of the Self-Governing Church. A Study in Victorian Missionary Strategy* revealed that the Society for the main part of the nineteenth century never envisaged the planting of "Anglican" churches among the natives. Ministry to colonials and the mission to natives were separate. Only in late nineteenth century, under different leadership and changed circumstances, when the policy to enforce Anglican practices among native churches came to the fore. This conclusion is borne out in my study of the emergence of Chinese Church under the mission initiatives of the Church Missionary Society. When the Chinese Church came to organize itself as a Province in early twentieth century, it designated itself as "*Chung Hwa Sheng Kung Hui*" (Holy Catholic Church in China) rather than "*An li gan hui*" (Anglican Church). This designation (Holy Catholic Church) was generally adopted in East Asia. It is remarkable that there has not been much discussion of this important distinction within the Communion. The rest of the Communion still retain – with the exception of ECUSA – the designation of "Anglican" in their self understanding.

The third is whether there would be more profound reflection on ministerial order, to move the Communities from the existing model of governance and jurisdiction, to effective ways of guarding the faith, and of equipping the saints in the post-Christendom contexts. It is very sobering to note that the Church in China would likely be unable to break away from the missionary (and fragmented) past and became a "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" without the political support of the new Chinese government in 1949. Post-denominationalism in China was effected by a political act as well as ecclesiastical decisions. In the years ahead, external socio-political considerations may

demand some members of the Communion to become part of post-denominational national bodies. The Church of South India, and the China Christian Council, rather than as exceptions, may become indicators of the normative mode for participation within the Communion. What are the essential elements in the ministerial order that we wish to hold onto in the future church?

Some in the west may be disturbed by the recent efforts in theological reconstruction in China, which include the “fading away of the doctrine of justification by faith” and rejection of the missionary past. Others may find it equally disturbing that China Christian Council holds a different understanding of episcopal oversight (bishop with no jurisdictional authority). I have in a recent article attempted to situate these efforts within the context of a quest for a relevant ministerial order in the Chinese Church.

Churches in the South and East, I believe, would want a more profound reflection on the place of the laity. Discussion on ministerial order must connect with the building up and maturing of the whole people of God. To date, it is very difficult for Anglican lay people to make significant contributions to the Communion. As a case in point, how many lay theologians are there in the Communion? We are still guided by Cyprian's understanding of the church, and confine our search for solutions within institutional structures. Again, as cases in point, seldom do we find in the discussion on authority and jurisdiction in the Communion any place for the lay people? I am far from advocating that the bishop's authority and custodian responsibility should be limited to his "*clergy cum employees*". We no longer live in a world where there was one society and one church, and excommunication from church implied expulsion from community. Lay people can "vote with their feet", cross boundaries and change affiliation whether bishops like it or not. At the same time, the inability in upholding ecclesiastical discipline outside the clerical circles is the very evidence of our inability to help the lay people to understand how they should live their lives under the authority of Christ.

After all, ecclesiastical boundary as it stands is *de facto* irrelevant. We have moved away from agricultural societies. People in America are driving long distance in attending churches which they feel at home with. Parish priests in neighbourhood churches are struggling to make do with dwindling and ageing worshippers on Sundays. Surely there are mega-churches and individual success stories, but for many ordinary faithful within our Communion, we are a Communion bereft of vitality, able to hang on only with endowment income from the past, and unable to connect with peoples living with high cultures (e.g. North East Asia) and material affluence (e.g. countries in the liberal West).

The strength of the Houses of Laity often reflects the health of dioceses and provinces. Effective synods presuppose the presence of a confident House of Laity which is able to work with clergy and bishops in forming policies. Otherwise, they are simply turned into rubber-stamping devices, subject to the dictates of the clerics. More especially in newly formed provinces where Anglicans are a small minority, the lay people may easily find themselves at the receiving end of a top-heavy superstructure imposed by the Anglican ministerial order.

The fourth is whether the Communion can discover again a social vision, and offer fresh hope (*Gaudium et spes*) for the laity in engaging the world, other than the issue-oriented and piecemeal approach to world crises. The resolutions on social concerns which successive ACC meetings and international commissions manage to pass are unimaginative, which often are empty because – well meaning though they are – they

existed in vacuum. Oliver O'Donovan's critique of western idealism is most helpful for churches in the South and East, which often have to struggle to find social space to live out their Christian discipleship. He offers them a vision in how to obey Christ in the public square. (See *The Desire of the Nations. Rediscovering the roots of Political Theology*, and *Common Object of Love. Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community*). We are eager that the Lambeth Fathers would engage in similarly profound theological reflections in what it means for the whole laity to obey Christ in today's world, as the Archbishop of Canterbury is surely well equipped to lead the Primates to do! One practical outcome of this would be the publication of a new catechism for Christians now living in the post Christendom world. Again, in line with O'Donovan's plea, the catechism would be a welcomed means for building up the laity, in guiding them "how to think" as well as "how to act" in the new contexts the people of God find themselves: E.g. How to use the Bible, and how to interpret moral issues (yes, even in sexuality!). This would go some way in building up a new generation of new Christians – many in isolated and hostile contexts -- confident in their *apostolate* identity, and see their pattern of discipleship and worship as authorized by the Word of God.

One final word. It is often forgotten, as we explore the implications of actions taken by ecclesiastics, and devise practical solutions for the Communion, that those who are most hurt in the controversies are the lay people, those who have remained faithful in the church. Sunday after Sunday, they hear the Bible read out to them, and they try faithfully to do what the Bible teaches, and pass on their moral convictions to their children. This is the mode of Christian life for most of the 70-million Anglicans around the world. And I speak as one who grew up in a rather ordinary Anglican church that is now involved in the controversy in New Westminster. If the Communion decided that the plain reading of the Holy Scriptures is an embarrassment, then let us make it plain to the lay people, change the ordinal and the rubrics of the Sunday services, substitute Bible readings by commentary and stories, and put a warning sign that the Bible should only be read through the lens of American liberalism. Would this amount to a betrayal to the faithful by the Communion? God forbid if we forget this human factor as we answer the key questions.

January 2004 Macao