

The Forgotten Third Voice: Generosity Rebuffed?

An Observation on the Second Presidential Address of the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Lambeth Conference 2008

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Archbishop Rowan Williams' second presidential address, delivered near the mid-point of the Lambeth Conference, is most disappointing and worrying. The Archbishop calls for acts of generous initiatives from both the traditionalists and innovationists in the Communion. He ended his address with this plea: "Having heard the other person, the other group, as fully and fairly as I can, what generous initiative can I take to break through into a new and transformed relation of communion in Christ?"

Whether he correctly expressed the feelings and perceptions of the traditionalists and innovationists can best be decided by their respective proponents. Quite aside from this, it is unclear whether the indaba group discussions have contributed to the Archbishop's (and the bishops') understanding of the ground realities and perceptions. Canterbury's summary of the two positions could as well be read off web-blogs before the Conference. Nothing new is advanced; no fresh insight gained. That would be disastrous if genuine listening and sharing among the bishops did not take place in the much-vaunted indaba groups.

More seriously, this second Presidential Address showed a worrying misreading of the ground realities of the Communion. Together with many who come from churches outside the Anglo-American axis, I cannot identify myself with either side the Archbishop portrayed. It put me at a loss. What is the "generous initiative" am I supposed to take in the Communion? More poignantly, am I expected to take any generous initiative at all? Even more pointedly, has the Archbishop – with his best intents – completely ignored the realities outside the familiar Anglo-American perceptions? And so, the many generous acts of love from churches in the southern continents have been dismissed by the sense of "superiority and dependence" in the West, as Gregory Cameron has pointed out. This is to say, British academics and US financiers have the rest of the world all figured out and neatly configured from the vantage points of sanitised settings in the West.

For Canterbury does speak (unconsciously) from a centre: the centre of a domineering Western framework that has proved ineffective and burdensome to the rest of the Communion. The present crisis is not merely a clash of two opposing theological positions: liberal and conservative. The emerging voices from the South are stifled, misunderstood, and misrepresented by all sides in the West in the current debates. What has been expected of the rest of the world is often merely in conforming to set roles in screenplays that are scripted by (well-meaning!) westerners. What American and British Anglicans have often failed to appreciate is this: despite human folly and weakness, and often quite aside from institutional efforts, the Word of God has given birth to new spiritual movements in the wider world. God has kept for himself a people in the southern

continents, that they may be able to save the Anglican Communion in the present dark hour (alluding to Rabbi Jonathan Sack's exposition on Joseph in his plenary address to Lambeth).

Will Canterbury receive this generous act of love from fellow Anglicans in the South? We wish Canterbury will lead the Communion to take a genuinely new step towards embracing a new vision. The movements of generosity that is required of the Communion is to treat the churches from outside the British Isles and North America as fellow members in the Body of Christ, and partners together in the household of God. To receive love demands a new vision: in seeing the other as capable of independent actions. It is also costly. For that would involve seeing ecclesiastical leadership and focuses of unity in radical ways!

August 2008, Canterbury