

The Johannine Awakening: Stirrings for the Post-2008 Anglican Communion

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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. . . Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God (John 1:1, 12-13).

Before the Anglican Communion was, I am,” so Archbishop Bernard Ntahoturi of Burundi ended his homily during a morning Eucharist in the Lambeth Conference. The Archbishop of course was alluding to Jesus’ self-claim in John 8:58. At issue was the ground of Jesus’ authority. While the Jews traced their truth-claim along historical lines, Jesus asserted his claim on another plane: “Before Abraham was, I am.” Jesus of course was not dismissing altogether claims that arose from traditions. He would become an anarchist. He rather added depth and breath to such: towards a more profound source and a wider horizon on which such (inevitably conflictual) claims could be resolved and made intelligible.

Archbishop Bernard Ntahoturi’s closing words were greeted with chuckles from his audience. But his words are most profound. They cut into the heart matter of our self-understanding as a Christian community, and so also of the theological underpinnings of the Anglican Communion. My present purpose is to sketch out the need for such theological attentiveness amid the desperate scramble for political resolution to the Communion crisis.

John remarkably departed from Matthew’s and Luke’s presentation of the Gospel story. John offered no genealogy. Or in truth he traced it to the beginnings before time-space was constituted and reconstituted. “In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word became flesh.” Historical claims can no longer command absolute allegiance in the light of the Word Incarnate. The hour has come when the manner of discipleship no longer gravitates around historic monuments, however significant they once were (John 4: 21). Disciples in every age are summoned to set their faces to where their Lord calls them, and venture across unfamiliar terrains. There is no enduring city here on earth.

Such awakening to the divine (and so gracious) origin of our being opens the horizons by which the faithful in the Anglican Communion can approach this post-Lambeth time. For many, especially to the media, the immediate question is “Will the Anglican Communion survive?”, or “How will everything fall out?” But for each and all Anglicans, what is at stake is not merely an institutional matter – a remote matter that does not involve us. For being Anglican is something set in concrete terms for all of us. It is lived out in the parish churches we belong to, in the pledging of the baptismal and ordination vows, and in the reading of the Daily Office. It is also set in the situations we raise up our children, and in the ways we rediscover and widen our spiritual horizons through the meeting of fellow Anglicans from unfamiliar terrains. So the dissolution of the Anglican Communion does not merely involve institutional breakup and realignment. It amounts to the destruction of spiritual homes – yours, mine and ours. So, the crisis connects to our inner calling. “What should be my

character of obedience to Lord Jesus in this hour?” This question demands responsible and conscientious discerning from each and all the faithful in the Communion. It puts into relief all institutional questions and political solutions church leaders can offer in the present Communion crisis.

To be sure, the 2008 Lambeth Conference was productive. At least, quite aside from the formal programme, it created the much needed concrete opportunities for face-to-face encounter between bishops worldwide, who hitherto connect (or are disconnected) with one another mainly through the cyberspace. Archbishop Rowan Williams was instrumental to the Conference’s success. His personal warmth, intellectual integrity, generous affection to those who may disagree with him, and firm commitment to the practice and public doctrine of the Communion prevailed. All Anglicans should give every possible support to the proposals he outlined in his closing Presidential Address to the Conference: the Covenant process, the setting up of the Pastoral Forum, the convening of the Primates’ Meeting, and the preparation leading to the convening of ACC-14 next year.

It is however unclear whether the crisis can be resolved through these institutional means. The Archbishop of Canterbury is not unaware of this difficulty. How can the Anglican Communion solve an internal crisis through institutional means when its institutional character is called into question? For until recent decades the Anglican Communion has never understood itself as a Church. In the words of Bishop Stephen Neill:¹

The Anglican Communion is not a Church, but it is a closely knit fellowship of Churches. . . . The Anglican Churches have been the first in the world to consider soberly and seriously the possibility of their own demise. . . . [The 1948 Lambeth Conference holds out a vision that] the Anglican Communion would be merged in a much larger Communion of National or Regional Churches, in full communion with one another, united in all the terms of what is known as the Lambeth Quadrilateral. . . . It is well to keep this vision before us; but we are still far from its attainment, and until this larger Communion begins to take firmer shape, it would be only a weakening of the present strength and service of the Anglican Communion if parts of it were severed from it prematurely.

These words written in 1958 may sound strangely out-dated to the present generation. Bishop Neill lived in a time when Anglican churches worldwide were still bound by doctrinal and liturgical unity. The Book of Common Prayer provided such tangible focus. The Communion was perhaps still beaming with optimism with the Church of South India church-union experiment. Then, “the instruments of unity” have not entered common currency. The Communion was not a Church, Bishop Neill insisted! It had a loftier ecumenical calling. Indeed, even earlier the Lambeth fathers in 1888 saw the Lambeth Quadrilaterals as providing a basis for reunification with other Christian churches. The four-point platform did not refer to *intra*-Communion relationships, as it has now become in the Saint Andrew’s Draft.

The new phase of ecclesiastical-building (on a scale that matches nation-building worldwide) changed all that. The Communion for the last fifty years has moved away from the classical understanding as Bishop Neill set out, and did exactly the opposite. With the rapid formation

¹ *Anglicanism* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1958), 428, 432-433.

of autonomous provinces, the Communion began in earnest from the first inception of ACC in 1970s to define itself as a "World Christian Body", in the same way confessional churches did. But it has not really clarified whether it is a single church entity at the international level, in the same way that other Protestant bodies and the Roman Catholics define themselves.

This explains the reservation of some towards the Anglican Covenant. Their reservation cannot be merely dismissed as liberal and pro-TEC. So the Statement from the Brazilian bishops (*Igreja Episcopal Anglicana do Brasil*) responded to the Saint Andrew's Draft of the Anglican Covenant in this way:²

We are fully convinced that the time in which we live is marked by symptoms that value highly the building up of networks and other manifestations of communion in a spontaneous way in the various aspects of human life. Insisting on a formal and juridical Covenant, with the logic of discipline and exercise of power, means to move in the opposite direction, thus returning to the days of Modernity, with its Confessions, Covenants, Diets and other rational instruments of theological consensus.

I have noted elsewhere Gregory Cameron's exposition of the Anglican Covenant shortly before the Lambeth Conference.³ He interpreted the Anglican Covenant along catechetical lines rather than within a canonical framework, as the Windsor Report has understood. In his Concluding Presidential Address to the Lambeth Conference,⁴ Archbishop Williams affirmed the place of the Anglican Covenant: it serves as an intensification and clarification of relationships: This is the Catholic Church; this is the Catholic faith -- a global vision for a global wound, a global claim on our serve", he asserted. But at the same time, the Archbishop recognised that there can be parallel initiatives in covenant-making. He told the Lambeth gathering:

And even here - what if we let the language of covenant develop in different ways? Dioceses and provinces may enter formal engagements. But is there anything to stop an individual bishop - whether or not committed to a Covenant for the Communion - making a particular covenant with a bishop elsewhere in the world, for prayer and support? it is a development of what I sketched in one of the retreat addresses, the idea of a shared rule of life might be adopted by bishops who have drawn close to each other in these days.

So, doesn't such sharing of "rule of life" (and indeed of the "Anglican Way" that the Theological Education for the Anglican Communion proposed) also serve as an intensification of relationship?⁵ What if such covenant-making extend from the personal to institutional levels? How would such pacts relate to the Anglican Covenant? Wouldn't they make the disciplinary measures in the Appendix of the Saint Andrew's Draft ineffectual? For in truth, unless "subscription" to the Anglican Covenant constitutes membership to the

² "Life in Communion and the Communion of Life – An Answer to the Anglican Covenant," Episcopal Anglican Church of Brazil, http://www.ieab.org.br/documentos/life_communion.pdf.

³ "A Brief Response to Gregory Cameron's Hellins Lecture on Anglicans and the Future of the Communion," Fulcrum, <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=326>.

⁴ ACNS 4511, <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2008/8/3/ACNS4511>.

⁵ TEAC, "The Anglican Way: Signposts on a Common Journey," The Anglican Communion Official Website, <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/signposts/english.cfm>.

Anglican Communion, it has no teeth at all. So the other “particular covenants” may blunt the cutting edge from *the* Covenant, and work against the purposes that the Windsor Report first intended.

Where does this lead? In highlighting the ambiguities in the status of the Anglican Covenant above, I am not suggesting the proponents of the Anglican Covenant to be disingenuous.⁶ The ambiguities however show that the Communion has severely restricted the ways by which it deals with the present crisis. Well-meaning attempts defend the Communion primarily along institutional lines, as if the remedy lies in the rationalising of structures and in updating historical prerogatives and established practices. Such attempts are evident in the quadrant-analysis of the Communion, where all in the Communion are neatly placed along the vectors of two institutional decisions.⁷ Along similar lines, Bishop Tom Wright espouses the “authority-subsidiarity-adiaphoria” principle in the Windsor Report. Some take pains to defend –sometimes uncritically – the institution the Canterbury office and of the present incumbent, especially in the face of abusive personal attack against Archbishop Rowan Williams from left and right.⁸

“Our Communion longs to stay together”: the Archbishop of Canterbury emphatically underlined in his Concluding Presidential Address to the Lambeth Conference and in his 26 August 2008 Pastoral Letter to Bishops of the Communion. What is this *Communion* that longs to stay together? Archbishop Williams could have merely referred to the institutional apparatus. But that would be trite. If this were so, perhaps all the faithful in the Communion could have left all initiatives to the top clerics. In the same way, bishops and archbishops would perhaps greet any fresh and independent initiatives from unexpected quarters with dismay.⁹ I suggest the Archbishop has something more generous and expansive in mind. He

⁶ Quite aside from its content, the drafters of the Anglican Covenant should perhaps clarify the status of *the* Covenant in the Communion. What does it mean at concrete levels for provinces to accept or refuse the Anglican Covenant? For huge ramifications do follow for all the faithful at concrete levels. It affects how individuals, parishes, and dioceses relate to one another and to the wider web of existing relationships, both within the Christian circles and without. The Archbishop's reference to the Pastoral Forum in his Concluding Presidential Address is again revealing. To him, the Forum serves "to support minority". But was it meant to be so? The Windsor Continuation Group proposed the setting up of the Forum to deal with the “anomalities of pastoral care arising in the Communion against the recommendations of the Windsor Report”. The universalising of the particular case of Windsor compliance to “minority” perhaps is the inevitable outcome once the Covenant is in force. The stage is set for the emergence of countless Pastoral Forums to attend to the threatened minorities in every diocese and parish who can make a case of their grievance (on their particular attitude to homosexuality, on the Covenant, on the elevation of women to the episcopate, and other issues that we cannot now foresee).

⁷ See e.g. my essay “How much is the Global South Worth:” Global South Anglican, A Response to the ACI on GC 2006,” http://www.globalsouthanglican.org/index.php/weblog/comments/how_much_is_the_global_south_worth/, and “The Forgotten Third Voice: Generosity Rebuffed,” Fulcrum, <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=335>, and my good friend Graham King's comments, “Reading and Reshaping the Anglican Communion,” Fulcrum, <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=310>.

⁸ We note in this connection the claims of Archbishop of Canterbury (as focus of unity) and the Canterbury (as the Mother Church) over against the Communion. But wouldn't such claims open themselves to the criticism that they are historically untrue; in the same ways that Pope Leo's assertion of the authority and primacy of the Roman Church over the world was an attempt in consolidating Rome's position over Constantinople? St Dunstan's and St Thomas' Church along the road to the Canterbury Cathedral suggest alternative accounts and deeper traditions of mission and martyrdom in the birth of the Anglican genius. In truth, the Church Missionary Society's old headquarters at Salisbury Square, London – and missionary schools in Europe – could make a stronger case in asserting such claims to the mother-institution of the Anglican world. Their meticulously organised and structured archives -- that rivaled the Lambeth Palace records – testified to that!

⁹ I note in passing the Statement issued by several archbishops and bishops from the southern churches on the final day of the Lambeth Conference 2008. (“Statement at the Lambeth Conference,” Global South Anglican, http://www.globalsouthanglican.org/index.php/comments/statement_on_lambeth_conference_2008/.) The Statement was generous in its support for the Windsor processes (para. 5). However, perhaps paragraph 10 caused some apprehension

picked up the Johannine theme of abiding in Christ in his Presidential addresses. Our Communion above all should be centred “in Christ”, without which the “council and covenant” processes he equally insisted are unintelligible.

So, Archbishop Williams awakes us to a wider horizon. Such Johannine horizon stirs us to two tasks of love:

(1) The faithful should find practical ways in exercising their ownership of the Communion and of the future of their respective parishes and dioceses. They need to resist a defeatist outlook that they are powerless in the present crisis. To be sure, for centuries church leaders on their own were able to draw and redefine ecclesiastical maps. The Reformation was a case in point. It redefined the religion of the peoples according to their geographical location. But this should not do in today’s world and in today’s church. Globalisation has made all boundaries porous. It presents an opportunity for Christians not to dominate over others, but to realise how impoverished and parochial our understanding of reality has been. The faithful across the Communion should take fresh and independent initiatives to connect with one another for mutual ministry and common mission. After all, the present Anglican world came into being independently of institutional directives.

(2) In as much as the faithful should take up personal initiatives, bishops should take the lead in encouraging informed theological reflection and learning in their dioceses and parishes.

Theological discussion has not been the priority in the Anglican world over the past fifty years. At most it has become the preserve of the professional theologians. The Global South Anglican Theological Formation and Education Task Force noted in their Report *Anglican Catechism in Outline* that the Communion on the whole has not given due attention to its catechetical tasks. Different sorts of working theologies now exist across the Communion, with no clear guidance to what the Communion teaches and how it should be taught. No agreed framework exists in initiation processes and in clerical formation. At present, no agreed platform exists by which we can recognise one another as Anglican! There isn’t any common liturgical tradition to which all can appeal together. As such, the authority of primates’ communiqués (and of the Anglican Covenant) rest only on conciliar authority. But how can conciliar decisions be binding and intelligible without the deeper liturgical traditions that inform them?¹⁰ Primates would then conduct themselves as if they were heads of independent nation-states in a reconfigured world in post-colonial times!

even among Windsor compliant bishops in the United Kingdom and America: “We are committed to work together with one another in the Global South and with all orthodox groups in the United States of America and Canada: to listen together to what Lord Jesus says to his church today, to draw strength and insights from one another, and to *take fresh initiatives* in upholding and passing on the faith once delivered to the saints (italics mine).” Wouldn’t such fresh initiative undermine the centrally controlled Windsor processes? See my comments in “A Personal Observation of the Statement at the Lambeth Conference 2008,” The Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia, <http://www.ttc.edu.sg/csca/poon/observation2008.pdf>. “The Statement supports the Covenant and Windsor Continuation Group processes as the best ways forward if Anglican Communion is to remain as a communion of ordered churches. At the same time it recognises that the ways forward cannot merely depend on centralised processes of formal Communion apparatus. Global South churches will take complementary and yet independent and fresh initiatives for upholding the faith, and for pastoring the faithful in the Communion. Paragraphs 9 and 10 of the Statement spell out such initiatives.”

¹⁰ So again the Communion may find itself in a strange situation. Provinces that sign the Anglican Covenant may in practice do not subscribe to historic Anglican liturgical traditions in their public worship. Some may not even have a Book of Common Prayer in place. And some parishes and dioceses that do adhere to the Prayer Book traditions may have conscientious objection to subscribing to the Anglican Covenant. So oddly they find themselves institutionally out-of-Communion.

Sadly theological reflection and learning are not evident in discussions surrounding the Communion crisis. People are caricaturised according to their supposed political and ecclesiastical affiliation. To be sure, stakeholders from all sides now attach importance to primates from the southern churches. Yet these global South leaders are often valued because of their political role in solving the present crisis, rather than for their theological insight. The Communion on the whole has lost sight that present-day Christianity can no longer be understood primarily along historical trajectories. Christians in the south can offer fresh insights in understanding the Gospel. And sadly, churches in the global South are at risk in abdicating their own theological responsibility. They may be satisfied in merely being sounding boards for familiar doctrinal positions from the West. Theological forums have still to emerge in the global South for sustained theological work in building up the intellectual structure for long-term engagement in an increasingly hostile world.

Even more sadly, a church that is seen to be merely engrossed in internal church squabbles cannot capture the imagination of the best minds in the younger generations. This can only lead to future generations of theologically inarticulate and insecure clergy and people, who merely sway in unison with the dictates of their particular bishop and archbishop

I end with a confession. To rephrase Bishop Stephen Neill,

Anglicans do not belong to a denomination, but they are a closely knit apostolic fellowship bound together for mission and ministry in this gifted and broken world. Anglicans have been the first in the world to consider soberly and seriously the possibility of dying to their historic prerogatives, that those whom they serve might thrive. Our forebears have held out the vision of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Upon this basis we seek to be merged in a much larger fellowship of peoples and nations who are born of the living Word, in full communion with one another, attentive to what Lord Jesus shall continue to speak to us all. It is well to keep this vision before us; but we are still far from its attainment, and until this larger Communion begins to take firmer shape, it would be only a weakening of the present strength and service of the Anglican Communion if parts of it were severed from it prematurely, through a crusading spirit for perfection (whether in seeing ourselves as vanguards of the new, or in creating a doctrinal tidiness while losing touch with the wideness of God's mercy.)

September 2008, Singapore