

Reaffirming our vows and rekindling our first love: for the sanctification of the Anglican Communion

A response to my fellow Anglican presbyter Andrew Goddard

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I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-control. (2 Timothy 1:6-7)

Sanctify then by the truth; your word is truth. . . . I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. (John 17:17, 22)

The walls of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (Revelation 21:14)

I thank Dr Andrew Goddard for his [response](#) to [Anglican Mainstream](#) on The Advent Letter 2008 of the Archbishop of Canterbury,¹ not the least because AM's convictions precipitated – astonishingly within two weeks of the issuing of the Letter – the calling for the Global Anglican Future Conference in June 2008. Andrew Goddard's considered response merits wide discussion by fellow Anglican presbyters and parishes in the Southern Hemisphere.

My aim in this brief response is to take up Goddard's invitation at the end of his essay: to encourage "serious discussion" and "common discernment" together. He noted:

A great deal of the language that is around in the Communion at present seems to presuppose that any change from our current deadlock is impossible, that division is unavoidable and that any such division represents so radical a difference in fundamental faith that no recognition and future co-operation can be imagined. I cannot accept these assumptions, and I do not believe that as Christians we should see them as beyond challenge, least of all as we think and pray our way through Advent.

The challenge in the months leading up to GAFCON and Lambeth is whether those who share AM's concerns about the Advent letter will accept and act on the basis of these assumptions or whether there is room for serious discussion about the important issues AM raises and a common discernment together as to the way forward for the Communion as a whole.

¹ Andrew Goddard, "A Response to Anglican mainstream on the Advent Letter 2008 of the Archbishop of Canterbury," Fulcrum, <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=264>; Anglican Mainstream, "Anglican Mainstream responds to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Advent Letter," Anglican Mainstream, <http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/index.php/2008/01/10/anglican-mainstream-responds-to-the-archbishop-of-canterburys-advent-letter>.

In making this public support, I ask fellow presbyters across the Communion to join in to reaffirm the responsibilities we received at our ordination and rekindle the gift the Holy Spirit has endowed us, that we may find refreshed vision to labour for the sake of the Communion at this finest hour in our Communion's history. We can be confident in this undertaking because our Lord Jesus Christ has sanctified us with his Word and has called us to communion with the triune God. This offers us the secure basis on which we can engage in "serious discussion" and "common discernment" together. God's Word sanctifies human speech, and makes truth-speaking possible. We thus believe, and so we boldly speak; and in so doing share in the divine calling to effect the sanctification of the Communion and of the wider world that God has redeemed in Christ.

Significant shifts from classical understanding of Anglican traditions in worship and theology are taking place in the Anglican Communion. I am not merely referring to the question on sexuality, important though it is; but to perhaps wider and deeper shifts that are changing the character of our fellowship within the Communion that mitigated against open discussion and discernment. Such calls for a renewed dedication among ourselves.

Reaffirming the parish as the heart of our vocation

Are we on the way of dispossessing a spiritual home for our congregations? The historic formularies – the Book of Common Prayer (1662), the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, and the Ordinal – are foundational to the Communion because they cohere together to promote a godly order for England's society. The provision of the Bible in vernacular language and the compilation of the Homilies were the hallmark in the English Reformation. The doctrinal and liturgical reforms had in mind the revitalisation of the parish life – where ordinary people worship, live and build their homes, raise their families, and pass on their faith to their children's generation. The Second Collect in Advent underlines this spirituality: "Grant that we may in such wise hear [the Holy Scriptures], read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them; that by patience and comfort of thy Holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life." The central calling for presbyters is for parish ministry (cf. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*).

We witness however in the present-day a growing reliance on institutional and clerical powers to chart the future of the Communion. For the past sixty years, we see a series of rapid increase of ecclesiastical structures. New dioceses, provinces, and national churches appear. New instruments of unity and new expressions by which bishops and primates exercise their ministries surface, together with the setting up of the Anglican Communion Office. All these have drained much energy from church leaders from devoting themselves to their central calling in their own churches and parishes. A whole new web of communication and authority-relationships emerge internationally that have little bearing on the diocesan and parish life – the concrete realities of the Communion.

The Communion map is astonishingly drawn and divided according to positions that top church leaders assume. The Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church and the Bishop of

New Westminster at least can appeal to synod decisions for their controversial decisions. The Communion reaches a new level of incomprehensibility when primates – one of which is even the Chair of the Communion’s theological education commission, a centerpiece of Canterbury’s policy – make plans for holding a Conference on the Communion’s future and ordaining bishops to regions outside their proper jurisdictional boundaries, without even consulting all their fellow primates. Such actions undermine their own authority and any appeal to Lambeth Resolutions and primatial communiqués, and leave the Communion in confused state.

So supposedly the decisions of top clerics dictate whether parishes and presbyters can relate in or out of communion with others in the same city, across the nation, and with churches in the wider world. This is fratricide. Some may be astonished that I seem to succumb to a liberal position. I am not. The freedom we defend here is that which is purchased by the blood of Christ. The communion that Lord Jesus Christ give us – in discerning and working together – has been replaced by a communion propped by ecclesiastical decisions. Truth has turned into ideology; theology into partisan positions. Speech no longer sanctifies and has become rhetoric. Sadly, top clerics then also see every honest but inconvenient question as a challenge to their authority.

Rekindling the zeal for faithful teaching in our churches

Are we on the way of abandoning proper ministerial formation for our clergy? Part of the difficulty in the present Communion crisis is that – as Presiding Bishop of Jerusalem and the Middle East observed – people across the divides may be speaking different (theological) languages. The difficulty does not lie in the multi-ethnic and socio-political contexts we are in. (Missionaries in the past were among the best cross-cultural interpreters.) Perhaps the problem is more basic. Anglican clergy from a few generations ago would have undergone a more or less standard path of ministerial formation. Though they might be nurtured in different theological tradition, they would have covered a more or less same syllabus. In other words, they should all be familiar with the great themes in the Bible and in the Christian tradition. It is however unclear whether this is so in today’s world. Most clergy outside the United Kingdom and America receive their initial ministerial formation in union/ecumenical colleges. More importantly, often no clear and agreed process in ministerial formation exists by which a person is ordained and advanced into higher offices. The process in initial formation may have little bearing on the canonical vows that clergy take upon their ordination. With the tendency in abandoning canonical examinations, congregations are left unclear what their vicars believe in and whether their priests are properly trained to carry out their teaching responsibilities. If churches in the Communion continues to ignore this problem, we are entrusting the Communion’s future to top clerics who themselves have little idea in what Anglican traditions are about, let alone to cherish and defend them. It would be better if the defence of biblical orthodoxy and sexual morality can be translated into intentional teaching programmes for parishes. Sadly, this is not the case. Ordinary Anglicans in the Southern Hemisphere are as ignorant of the Bible as perhaps of those in the North America.

The Roman Catholics since Vatican II have made great strides in equipping their priests in fulfilling their catechetical responsibilities. John Paul II's two Pastoral Exhortations *Catechesis in our Time* and *On Priestly Formation* summarised the sustained reflections in synodical deliberations and culminated in the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, and the revisions of *Programme for Priestly Formation*. Today when we meet a Roman Catholic and a catholic priest, we know what they stand for, and the training (human, spiritual, pastoral, and intellectual development) they have received. I am not sure we can make similar claims for Anglicans. Priests are made and Anglicans added to our fold without intentional programme of initiation and on-going formation.

Here I warmly appreciate Canterbury's focus in making theological education a top priority in his tenure. At the same time, without a clear understanding of what Anglicans stand for (that is, a catechesis), I am unclear what the Anglican Way leads to. I am also unclear whether the central issue is not merely theological education, but ministerial formation. In today's world, "theology" is often taken to be merely one discipline that stands alongside others in a liberal arts programme; "education" is similarly regarded as technical training for the sake of self-improvement. This is why I suggest ministerial formation (the forming of properly equipped lay and clergy for ministries in the parish) to be a central task for the Communion today. The resources that churches in the Communion urgently need are basic: the *Book of Common Prayer*, a *Hymnal*, a *catechism*, and perhaps thoughtful pastoral letters that bishops and priests today would find time to compose for their faithful.

Reclaiming our common heritage

Are we removing landmarks from our apostolic heritage? St John unfolded the vision that in the glorious coming of Jesus Christ, the names of the twelve apostles (even those who are not well known—would all be engraved on the walls of the new Jerusalem. Earlier in the *Book of Revelation* he recounted the twelve tribes of Israel as among those who received the seal of the living God (*Revelation 7:1-8*). The lots of the twelve tribes – and of the twelve apostles as they are sent out to the four corners of the world – worked out differently in God's redemptive purposes in history. But no one is forgotten; all will be remembered. All find their vocations cohere together at the end.

Isaiah also pointed to the remnant of God – written off by earthly powers – to be the carriers of God's promise. The righteous will live by faith! (*Habakkuk 2:4*). It is remarkable that numerical strength between churches in the Communion suddenly takes on such importance in recent discussions on the Communion's future (for example the rationale that underlies the calling for GAFCON by numerically-strong churches). To decide the Communion's future without regard for vulnerable churches is to deny the apostolic origin of such churches. St Paul – the apostle to the Gentiles – could have all the reasons to abandon the Jewish Christians and turn his attention to the Gentile world. He never did. The material offering to the saints in Jerusalem was a tangible way to recognise the oneness in Christ. Looking back to our Communion's mission history, were not missionaries sent to far-flung places for the sake of Christ? Are not fellow Anglicans still standing up for the faith in challenging situations in remote places? Do we not have

a vision of common possession in the Lord? Yet sadly, churches in struggling situations are forced to make immediate choices and take stance on Communion issues. Their own integrity and identity are threatened and swept away in the new Cold War waged by power-brokers in the Communion.

What does it mean for us to be fellow Anglican presbyters today? To take up our vows and to rekindle the charism God has given us, we need to enter into “serious discussion” and “common discernment” that Dr Goddard reminded us. Such take place not only in the safe havens of blogspheres, but in our own parishes, in the pulpit, in clergy meetings, in synods, in our classrooms – in short, where discipleship is set in concrete and costly terms. In all circumstances we need to continue to engage and support one another to speak the truth with love in our own churches, refusing to let ourselves become isolated by the ideological divides. The Word of God assumes concrete form and sanctifies the world. Truth alone can bring about the sanctification of our Communion.

I end with the Biblical passage John Paul II cited at the beginning of his Exhortation on Priestly Formation: “I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding” (Jeremiah 3:15).

May every congregation find this promise answered in the parish priests the Great Shepherd has entrusted to their care.

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