

The Long Road to Full Inheritance: Anglican Communion, Anno Domini 2007¹

Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, Singapore

“Revival of church life always brings in its train a richer understanding of the Scriptures. Behind all the slogans and catchwords of ecclesiastical controversies, necessary though they are, there arises a more determined quest for him who is the sole object of it all, for Jesus Christ himself. . . . Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting to-day for costly grace (Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1937).”

It is not a time for elation for Global South Primates at Dar es Salaam in February 2007. If indeed what Global South churches have strived for all along is more than a mere demand for realignment of ecclesiastical power and inclusion in the inner circles, the present calls sober reflection and costly discipleship. This is no time for letting up. If the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the Anglican Communion is our chief concern, then as Bonhoeffer put it, ‘we are fighting to-day for costly grace’. Narrow and hard is the way ahead.

Inheriting our forebears’ tasks

Global South churches have indeed made significant progress since the Kigali Meeting in September 2006. Their inclusion and leadership in the Anglican Covenant processes is a case in point. There may even be signs of a growing cordial partnership between Global South leaders and Canterbury. These encouraging signs, however, should not distract us of a more fundamental revolution that must take place in world Christianity and in the Anglican Communion in particular.

The present struggle is neither merely about isolated issues (on sexuality and alternative primatial oversight), nor just about positions that individual provinces and personalities take vis-à-vis Canterbury and Lambeth 2008. Even if the Global South were to “have it their way” in the coming two years (which would be short of a miracle), such “victory” would still be superficial. No juggling of the Communion structure after Lambeth 2008 on its own can meet the demand for discipleship that is required of us all. Therefore here I take a different view from my good friend Graham Kings and others who continue to interpret and classify the diverse positions in the Communion according to their (purported) attitude to particular Communion *issues*.²

Contrary to the charge of schism and ultraconservatism, the crises over the past decade have awakened Global South churches to their calling as part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. They are increasingly confident in connecting their discipleship to the historic faith and in governing their churches according to the sociopolitical realities of their own nations.

Global South churches are in fact inheriting and continuing the tasks their forebears two generations ago left behind. Let me explain. The end of the Second World War was to usher a new era in world Christianity. Churches outside the Christendom were meant to emerge from their colonial and missionary past. During the early preparation of the

World Council of Churches in the late 1940s, national churches were to take centre stage. In the event, missionary societies and confessional groups (now called “World Christian Communion”) argued for their continued influence in world Christianity.³

The fallacy of *missio Dei*

The often unchallenged concept of *missio Dei* in present-day missiological discourses provides an intriguing instance of western Christianity’s attempt to keep their influence (and dominance) in the new world order after WWII. This idea supposedly serves as a reminder that mission is not merely a human and church-centric undertaking. Mission issues from the mission of the triune God. Karl Hartenstein put it this way: Mission is a “participation in the sending of the Son, in the *missio Dei*, with an inclusive aim of establishing the lordship of Christ over the whole redeemed creation”.⁴

The context of the above quotation is significant. It came out of Hartenstein’s report on the historic Willingen 1952 World Mission Conference convened by the International Missionary Council. Missionary societies urgently needed to reassess their positions and strategies amid radical political changes. The expulsion of missionaries from China and the Korean War highlighted the crisis at the time. In the event, *missio Dei* became the model and justification for continuing engagement for western churches in the wider world.

I shall argue elsewhere that the International Missionary Council rejected the more radical proposals from the younger churches in those confusing years in early 1950s. Note the two conceptual shifts in this *missio Dei* reorientation. There is first a shift from church to God; and secondly from church-centered activities (e.g. church planting, conversion, education and social services) to “establishing the lordship of Christ over the whole redeemed creation”. *Missio Dei* thus lends itself to abstract and ideological interpretation. Such became the case in the 1960s when churches in the West became embroiled in the social gospel and evangelism debate. The problem with *missio Dei* was that national churches and geopolitical realities are discounted. Any individual and group, (shaped by late-liberal vision of human rights, and armed with technological and financial might of America) can impose their agenda on the world. They do all these “in the name of God”, *missio Dei*!

My point is that since the Second World War churches and nations in the South and the East are far from living in a post-colonial and post-missionary era. The venerable Andrew Walls may be doing a disservice to world Christianity with his celebrated observation that the centre of gravity of world Christianity has moved southwards. Christian numerical strength and activities have indeed moved towards south. But northern hemisphere churches still pull the strings! It is intriguing to note how anti-Communist ideologies propagated in the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the Cold War shaped Christian mission strategies over the past sixty years. The present American hegemony still dictates the terms of Christian discourse in the world. Lest my friends in America and Australia see this as another instance of a supposed anti-American tirade from Southeast Asia, note this assessment from Adrian Hastings:

“What none of us anticipated at that time was that the gravest nationalist threat to Christianity by the late twentieth century might come from the United States, essentially a rehash of the traditional Christian imperialism of western European countries. It is just the latest example of a self-appointed ‘chosen people’

carrying forth a gospel message reshaped by its own values and bonded to its own political expansion.”⁵

The Way for Anglicans? The Anglican Way?

Returning to our present situation, Global South churches should not lose sight of their calling to take responsibility as full members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. This should be the unifying focus for Global South churches. The concrete forms of partnership and trust they have developed in the past decade should serve good stead in the present critical time. After all, we are in better positions than our forebears sixty years ago. Then, many new nations that were carved out hurriedly and arbitrarily by colonial powers were mired in ethnic conflicts. Stable government in many countries was a distant dream. Economic poverty and resultant social chaos drove them to their former colonial masters (or “mother churches”) for international intervention and material aids.

But times are changing. Many in the Global South now live in stable societies. We can now begin to speak of the nonWestern world in terms of regions (for example East Asia, Latin America, South Asia, and suchlike) and speak of intra- and inter-regional cooperation. Formerly “region” is not a viable concept outside the West. Nations that are geographically proximate to one another were too weak politically and economically to come together as a “region”.⁶ We are in changed times. Europe and America will soon be dwarfed by new economic blocs in the non-Western world. Churches outside the non-Western that now own material wealth may well be tempted to live like rich churches in the West. It is incumbent for them to blaze a new way: to forego empire-building ambitions, and learn to share materially with those who are in need, especially the household of faith (Galatians 6:10).⁷

I suggest the Way for Anglicans – and indeed the discipleship that is required of us all – must be connected to this birthing of the worldwide Christian community. The choice of the phrase “Way for Anglicans” is deliberate. The Anglican Way may well serve as a theological rationale for Anglicans in the West to justify their increasingly marginalized existence; it may serve as a Way for those who have conceded that Anglicans are merely a denominational church. However, it would not do for the rest of the Communion. For the Way for Anglicans is that of discipleship that binds us to the Cross of Jesus Christ. Such must involve a radical reexamination of the ecclesiastical and sociopolitical structures and see whether they are distracting us from progressing in the pilgrim way.

Clare Amos’ exposition of the Anglican Way is illustrative.⁸ Here, the Director of Theological Studies of the Communion spelled out a comprehensive list of Anglican attributes. And to prevent leaving anything out, she appealed to the readers “to write from a perspective which is not covered in the above list (33).”

Amos ended her essay by suggesting that “there is something particularly ‘Anselmic’ about ‘the Anglican Way’ (34)”. What does she mean by Anselm’s “faith seeking understanding” approach? She points to Jeremy Worthen exposition.⁹ To him, faith is a “trust in the living God who meets us on our way”; at the same time, we need to understand God in whom we believe through “engagement with public and ultimately universal norms of rationality . . .(21)”

To Amos, trusting and understanding are open-ended processes of a “work in progress”. I am unclear however whether such open-ended processes lead to an overall

understanding. Understanding presumes an acknowledgment of authority. This does not occupy a central position in Amos' proposal. It is helpful to contrast Amos' and Worthen's exposition of Anselm with that of Karl Barth a century ago. Barth's study on Anselm led to his rediscovery of the centrality of God's self-revelation in all theological pursuits. Trust and understanding are not merely human exercises. Faith and understanding are intelligible and possible only because of God's initiative. Knowledge of God and man springs from faith in God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and rests upon the following sequence: revelation, faith, and then "ut intelligam" (in order to understand) – faith seeking understanding".¹⁰

The Anglican Way is in danger of becoming a brochure for tourists. The comprehensive list-all picture is indeed attractive to those who wish to sample Anglicanism. However, it cannot serve as a road map for pilgrims along the narrow way. The Anselmic approach is historicized. Shorn of the foundational mooring from God's revelation in the Holy Scriptures, Anglicans could well become unsure how to make sense of their heritage. We then are no longer able to embrace tradition as a coherent legacy from the past; we just pick, choose and improvise as we see fit.

Note Amos' revealing words on the Anglican Way:

"One of the interesting and slightly unexpected side-effect of the work of TEAC has been that this 'Anglican Way brief' (as we still call it) has begun to acquire a bit of a life of its own. Published on TEAC's website, and therefore fairly widely available, it has been read and shared by a number of people semi-independently of other TEAC documents and has a certain 'status' as a definition of what the Anglican Way is (31)."

It is indeed remarkable that a working document suddenly is declared to have "certain status" as a definition of what the Anglican Way is! Where is the accountability to the formal instruments? Does the website hit rate now become the new instrument for gauging the approval rating in the Communion? This shows the alarming way the Anglican Communion Office and any Communion Commission can effect change in the Communion ethos.

The above is not meant to assign anything sinister to TEAC's work. It serves as a wake-up call that Global South must urgently begin the hard work to work out their theologies and chart independent courses in theological formation and education. We can only work for the theological well-being of the Communion if we are able to offer our independent theological contribution. This calls for a more enduring struggle to battle against the ideological structures that has led the Communion astray.

The cost of being Anglican: To be Christians for the Common Good

I end by briefly proposing three questions for reflection as we continue the Way:

1. *What does it mean for us to continue to take responsibility for the spiritual welfare of our nations?* The "established church" and civic religion models had underpinned the ways in which Anglicans engage the wider public. The days of "established" and colonial churches however have gone. Far from then adopting a ghetto attitude, how should Anglicans carry out their prophetic ministry and watch over the welfare of their nations?

The prophetic call may well bind the church to speak against the key interpreters of the ethos of our nations, and reminded them of their true heritage.¹¹ Jeremiah's life was a most poignant exposition of the prophetic life. He was called to speak against the guardians of the three key foundations of God's people (the House of David, the Temple, and the [false] Prophets) who promised peace where there was no peace.

2. *How can the Church gain maturity in interpreting Christianity to their nations?* The Church is no longer the only interpreter of Christianity in today's world. Social scientists, journalists and novelists are fast replacing the Church as the chief interpreters of Christianity. Dan Brown's *The da Vinci Code* may well be the first introduction to Christianity in many places in the nonwestern world.

Further, the nature of religion itself is fast undergoing changes in the twenty-first centuries. National leaders are seeking to fit religion into their programmes of nation-building; while multinational corporations are refiguring and reinventing new theologies for a consumerist society.¹²

3. *How can we move beyond the multicultural and globalization visions in our life together in the Communion?* The multicultural vision in fact has come to mean different ethnic groups share (or compete) the same space but live their separate lives. St Paul in Romans 9-11 and Ephesians 2 offered a different view of the redeemed humanity, where paths do not merely intersect, but come together, and share in the same household of God. Can we (East and West, North and South) sharing a common history?

In the same way, globalization promises wealth and plenty to peoples and nations who adopt the consumerist ethos. The world is configured to serve the needs of the rich. Christianity points to a vision where all are restored to be fellow inheritors of God's good earth. Can our Communion imagine new ways of engagement (aka instruments of communion) that has fettered the Communion to American money and the Church of England's history? What opportunities are open to us in the Anglican Communion?

I end with this quotation from Oliver O'Donovan:

“We speak now of possession rather than tradition. In the fragmented cities of this history, possession of political identity arises only through the act of tradition, the transmission of the common goods of the society from one generation to the next. Yet even in this history tradition goes beyond mere diachronous transmission, and takes on the character of a synchronous sharing, a passing-round of goods among contemporaries rather than a handling-on. The final realisation of a civic identity can occur only as past generations, who have handed on their goods and identity to later generations, are restored to be hill sharers again. The monstrous inequity of generational succession is that all our possession becomes a kind of robbery, something we have taken from those who shared it with us but with whom we cannot share in return. . . . The secret guilt which infects every culture's thoughts about its ancestors, and which in ours has fuelled the famous 'quarrel' of the moderns with the ancients – and now (good Lord!) produces 'post'-modernity – must be overcome. The resurrection of the dead makes equal and reciprocal sharing. It is the condition of true politics.”¹³

The long road to full possession lies in rediscovering the roots of our beliefs. The makeshift artifices that the Communion devised especially in the past sixty years have to be reexamined and sometimes dismantled to allow true reciprocity to flourish in the Communion. The discipleship that is required of us *anno domini* 2007 is nothing less than that in the times of the Reformation.

February 2007, Singapore

¹ Part of the content of this paper was presented in the Province of South East Asia Provincial Gathering in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, 5-8 February 2007.

² See e.g. Graham King's latest categorization of positions in America and the Global South in "To cleave or not to cleave: the Primates' Meeting in Tanzania", Fulcrum Newsletter, February 2007, <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2007/newsletter13.cfm?doc=188>.

³ See Harold Fey, "Confessional Families and the Ecumenical Movement" in *The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement Volume 2, 1948-1968*, ed. Harold Fey (London; SPCK, 1970), 115-142; Harding Meyer, "Christian World Communion" in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, Volume 3, 1968-2000*, eds. John Briggs, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Georges Tsetsis (Geneva: WCC, 2004), 103-124.

⁴ Quoted in Tormod Engelsen, "Missio Dei: the Understanding and Misunderstanding of a Theological Concept in European Churches and Missiology", *International Review of Mission* 92 (2003):482.

⁵ Adrian Hastings, "The Clash of Nationalism and Universalism within Twentieth-Century Missionary Christianity" in *Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empires*, ed. Brian Stanley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 32).

⁶ See e.g. the discussion in Samuel S. Kim, "Regionalization and Regionalism in East Asia", *Journal of East Asian Studies* 4 (2004): 39-67.

⁷ See my discussion in "Till they have homes: Christian responsibilities in the twenty-first century", CSCA, Trinity Theological College, <http://www.ttc.edu.sg/csc/poon/homes2006.pdf>.

⁸ "Anglican theological Education What next?", *ANITEPAM Journal* (November 2006): 28-35. See <http://www.anitepam.org/documents/ANITEPAM%20Journal%202006.pdf>.

⁹ See "Theological Education and Anselm: Faith seeking understanding", *Anglican World*, 122 (Trinitytide, 2006): 20-22.

¹⁰ See Arthur Cochrane, "Preface to the Reprint Edition" in Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (Pittsburg: Pickwick Press, 1975), 12A-B.

¹¹ See Oliver O'Donovan's exposition of the prophetic ministry in *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 76-81.

¹² See Robert W Heffner's discussion in his "Multiple Modernities: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in a Globalizing Age", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27 (1998): 83-104.

¹³ *Desire of the Nations*, 287-288.