

A Confused Report: Initial comments on the Communion Sub-group Report

Michael Nai-Chiu Poon

“There are enormous issues going forward in the Anglican Communion, and this document will not help us to address them, let alone solve them. Rather the reverse: it will polarize opinion in deeply unhelpful ways, leaving many in the church to suppose that ‘all evangelicals’ think like this, and so driving many in the centre ground, who properly should be allies in the larger battles we face, into the arms of the liberals and radicals. This document is not a ‘covenant’ in any meaningful sense, except perhaps a covenant with chaos. This is a dark time, and in this Advent season all we can do is wait in the dark in prayer and faith.” (Bishop Tom Wright, “A Confused ‘Covenant’—Initial comments on ‘A Covenant for the Church of England’”¹)

Borrowing Tom Wright’s words, this is a dark time indeed. And darker it is than in the Advent. Then, at least, the “upstarters” who dared to propose the Covenant got immediate and clear illumination from the learned Bishop. This time, I wonder if it would be all quiet at the establishment front. After all, the presenters of the Sub-group Report (ANCS 4249) are eminent people, led by Canterbury himself.

This is clear. The present crisis is no longer on ECUSA’s noncompliance. They have chosen to walk apart at GC2006. The Primates should simply follow up their earlier consensus at Dromantine. The spotlight is now on Canterbury. The present Primates’ Meeting is about his ability – and with this Church of England’s historic role – to lead the Communion. Is Archbishop Rowan Williams prepared to transform himself from a don whose horizons stayed in the trans-Atlantic, to turn his gaze to the Communion worldwide? To ponder, as some commentators did, that Canterbury can resign and return to (idyllic) academic life after Lambeth 2008 is nonsense. Those who have taken up the mantle and journeyed afar is no longer be at ease with the “old dispensation”, as T S Eliot put it in *the Journey of the Magi*. There is no return for Canterbury as he takes up his office. This is the cost of discipleship.

To begin, the Report is not an easy read. It contains 2,397 words and 40 passive verbs in 78 sentences. Average sentence length is 31 words. Most readers, especially those from the nonwestern world, would find the twisted arguments difficult to grasp. This is not because of any lack of language ability, but because readers today no longer communicate in such a way – except, of course, perhaps in Oxford Union debates, where the drafters may well have their skills honed.

In presenting the Report in such convoluted format, the Subgroup pays little attention to the faithful in the Communion worldwide. I wonder how the report will read when it is translated to different languages where there are major concentrations of Anglicans. How would those legal niceties and processes look after translation? Would they be still valid? Does not this expose the cultural bias and prejudice in the present Communion, that as I have argued, the Communion is structured to favour the Anglo-American alliance?

The Report conveys feelings rather than truth. Note the abuse of English. What do “extremely seriously”, “impressive majorities”, and “fully incorporated” mean? Why the adjectives? Proper English is never like that! How did the group judge the

response of GC2006 to “the Windsor Report as a whole” in its resolutions was “positive”? And how does this assessment fit with the conclusion that they group is “not at all clear whether, in fact, the Episcopal Church is living with the recommendations of the Windsor report on this matter [on public rites of blessings]”?

“Let what you say be simply “Yes” or “No”; anything more than this comes from evil Matthew 5:37).” God’s *torah* will break through the webs of interpretations!

The Report sadly may drive many “in the centre ground” – using Tom Wright’s phrase – to more radical actions. It is not merely a matter of whether Canterbury can convince his fellow Primates. He is equally accountable to the faithful. To insult their intelligence is a grave thing indeed. “Look not to Cantuar”, as a colleague put it, may prove to win the day. Such a bitter lesson for church history this would be.

February 2007, Singapore

¹ Fulcrum, <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2006/20061214wright.cfm?doc=171>.