

Reconstructing GC2006 for Communion Building: Further Comments on the Communion Sub-group Report

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I welcome Andrew Goddard's following assessment (in the Anglican Communion Institute and Fulcrum websites) of the Communion Sub-group Report:¹

“The real and serious danger is that the Sub-group is simply wrong in its account and assessment and is effectively telling TEC that it really said something that it did not say and ignoring the fact that it quite consciously chose not to say what it was asked to say. If major decisions are then made on this false basis the structures of the Communion are being built on a foundation of sand rather than rock and the consequences for such a construction are not promising.”

The Sub-group's brief was simple: Did the decisions at GC2006 meet the three specific Dromantine (Windsor) requests? ECUSA did not. That is clear, even to those who wrote in defence of Canterbury in the last few days. Instead of giving a straight answer to that, the Sub-group offered – in Goddard's words – “a hermeneutics of charity” to the GC2006 decisions – to the point of reconstructing what the Convention participants decided.

Why such complicity? Those who come to Canterbury's defence argue it is a strategy for continuing engagement with ECUSA. Sam Wells' strategy of “over-acceptance” comes into vogue. Dan Martins even optimistically concludes that “things are still breaking our [orthodox Anglicans?] way”!² The Report could serve to persuade those in ECUSA who belong to Group IV (anti-1.10 and anti-Windsor) of Bishop of Exeter's quadrant back to Group III (pro-Windsor).

Such lines of reasoning are problematic.

1. This would mean to imply the Sub-group's findings are governed by their perceived impact of their Report on the Communion. To them, the GC2006 decisions would lead to ECUSA's “expulsion” from the Communion. So, the Sub-group needs to reconstruct GC2006's decisions, so that the Communion hierarchies can continue to engage the process (and of course, to make sure the Communion would not break up during the present Canterbury's tenure). This tactic is disingenuous. It amounts to an abdication of responsibility as truth-bearers and move into mythologization.³ We see similar reconstruction of history and identity all too often in the present time. Reconstructing history for ideological education happen in many countries. To find this happening in an Anglican Communion Report that bears the name of one of the keenest theologians today is a moment of sadness for me as a historian.

¹ “Commentary on Sub-Committee Report”, Anglican Communion Institute, <http://www.anglicancommunioninstitute.org/articles/2006/CommentaryonTheReportoftheCommunionSub.htm>. The Report of the Communion Sub-group was release on February 15 2007 by the Anglican Communion Office, ANCS 4249: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/42/25/acns4249.cfm>

² “A Glass Half-Full”, Carioca, <http://cariocaconfessions.blogspot.com/search?q=a+glass+half>

³ Note Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys: the Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) for a penetrating study on how the Boxer Rebellion in China as lived experience, then as how historians presented it, and finally mythologised in later generations for nation-building projects.

2. By inventing a new history rather than speaking out the truth, the Sub-group would make reconciliation more difficult. Why assume the Global South would call for ECUSA's expulsion if truth is told? The Sub-group puts words in the mouth of the GC2006 participants that they never intended or used. By trying to manage and anticipate responses, the Sub-group does not allow room for God's grace to intervene and speak to the individual Primates in Tanzania.
3. Is the Sub-group trying to create tension in the Global South to save the Communion status quo? I suppose Exeter's quadrant model was sanctioned by Canterbury, and underpins how Canterbury and ACO see the Communion. I have expressed elsewhere my reservation on such model. Here, its failure is obvious. Goddard implies (quoting Exeter) that "probably nothing that happens is going to satisfy" those who are in Group I (pro 1.10 and anti-Windsor). He goes on to suggest the Sub-group Report may encourage those in *ECUSA* to move from group IV to III. So, does it boil down to this: after weighing the pros and cons, Canterbury has decided ECUSA's departure is too difficult fathom; sacrifice the incorrigible Global South instead?
4. If over-accepting becomes now the Communion ideology, does it mean all overtures from Canterbury, ACO and other informal contacts towards the Global South are part of such cynical strategy? Establish common ground with the moderates in the Global South, include them in the inner rings, and drive a wedge between them and those in Group IV. Would some now doubt whether the Anglican Covenant processes are a part of such over-accepting strategy for convening Lambeth 2008 at all cost? Would not this put those in the Global South on their guard? I think Global South leaders have no problem in seeing through such manipulation. After all, most of them have vast experience in dealing with such political tactics. They just do not think this ploy in secular authorities would happen in the Communion as well.

Earlier I commented the spotlight is the Canterbury: not only on his ability to hold the status quo, but on his integrity.⁴ We can of course see the church as a social institution. As such, church decisions may be carried with votes with "narrow margins" – as a commentator put it. Over-accepting strategies can become part of a church management and Christian counseling syllabus. (Let TEAC take note!) In any case, to reduce the church to be merely a human institution is wrong. Christian discipleship is not like that: To stand firmly alongside Jesus Christ the Crucified always require a fresh and personal decision: we need truth, that "truth will out".

It is not simply a matter of whether the Primates accept the Sub-group Report, or what we can make of it. As truth alone sets us free, let Canterbury withdraw his Report.

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at the verge of Ash Wednesday, 2007.

⁴ "A Confused Report: Initial comments on the Communion Sub-group Report", Global South Anglicans,
http://www.globalsouthanglican.org/index.php/comments/a_confused_report_initial_comments_on_the_communion_sub_group_report_michae/