



Authority

in the Anglican
Communion



Diocese of Toronto
Anglican Church of Canada

AUTHORITY IN THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION

by The Rev. Canon Dr. Alyson Barnett-Cowan

For the purposes of this article, I am going to speak about how the churches of the Anglican Communion try to come to a common mind. This is a discussion of structures for discernment in one family of the universal Church, and will only touch on deeper questions about how authority in the Body of Christ is exercised theologically, guided by the Holy Spirit.

There have been many books and articles on the subject of authority in the Anglican Communion, and I will not attempt to address all the relevant questions. Rather, I will try to state where I believe we are at the moment, after a long process of struggle on the part of Anglicans everywhere to try to formulate a common understanding of how our family works, or how it should work.



First, it is crucial to state that every church which is a member of the Anglican Communion is autonomous. We are a very loose collection of churches, often founded by missionaries from quite different agencies and perspectives; many but not all were shaped by the British colonial project. In a legal sense, each church is governed by its own constitution and canon law; chooses its own chief bishop variously called 'Primate', 'Presiding Bishop', 'Primus', or 'Moderator'; sets up bodies for decision-making comprised of bishops, clergy and laity; discerns matters of doctrine; authorizes forms and norms for worship and discipline; manages its own financial affairs; and structures itself for the work of mission in its territory.

Autonomous bodies can delegate their authority to a wider body if they choose to. The history of Anglicanism has been of attempts to have member churches delegate some of their authority to one or more international bodies, and of these attempts never succeeding.

Thus the Anglican Communion has no central decision-making body. Instead, it has what have commonly come to be called Four Instruments of Communion (originally called 'Instruments of Unity'). These, in order of development, are the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Primates' Meeting.

- I. We accord the Archbishop of Canterbury, as the bishop of the See of Canterbury with which Anglicans have historically been in communion, a primacy of honour and respect among the college of bishops in the Anglican Communion as first among equals (*primus inter pares*). As a focus and means of unity, the Archbishop gathers and works with the Lambeth Conference and Primates' Meeting, and presides in the Anglican Consultative Council.
- II. The Lambeth Conference expresses episcopal collegiality worldwide, and brings together the bishops for common worship, counsel, consultation and encouragement in their ministry of guarding the faith and unity of the Communion and equipping the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4.12) and mission.
- III. The Anglican Consultative Council is comprised of lay, clerical and episcopal representatives from our Churches. It facilitates the co-operative work of the Churches of the Anglican Communion, co-ordinates aspects of international Anglican ecumenical and mission work, calls the Churches into mutual responsibility and interdependence, and advises on developing provincial structures.
- IV. The Primates' Meeting is convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury for mutual support, prayer and counsel. The authority that primates bring to the meeting arises from their own positions as the senior bishops of their

Provinces, and the fact that they are in conversation with their own Houses of Bishops and located within their own synodical structures. In the Primates' Meeting, the Primates and Moderators are called to work as representatives of their Provinces in collaboration with one another in mission and in doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters that have Communion-wide implications.

Note that of the Four Instruments, one is a person and the other three are meetings. They are places for persons with their own authority within their churches (whether as bishops or clergy or lay delegates) to confer with one another. All of the meetings are based in life of common Eucharistic worship, prayer and Bible study, and are thus the churches gathered as the Church always gathers. However, international Anglicanism is not a 'church', but a communion of churches. Thus it is always consultative, not deliberative.

This is not to say that there is no value to the resolutions of Lambeth Conferences or the meetings of the Anglican Consultative Council, or to the communiqués and statements from the Primates' Meetings. It is said that the Lambeth Conference has 'moral authority' as it is the gathering of all Anglican bishops. The Anglican Consultative Council, as the only one of the Instruments which has lay participation, is valued by a Communion which has always insisted on the participation of laity in governance. The results of discernment by these Instruments are offered as guidance to the churches on matters that affect the common life of all, and they are to be respected.

Changes in Anglican teaching and practice often come about when the guidance offered by one or more of these bodies is taken up into the life of the member churches. This process is called 'reception'. A member church duly considers the resolution and may either adopt it formally into their own canon law or pass a synodical resolution, or it may simply begin to live in accordance with the spirit of the resolution. Thus, for example, the Lambeth Conference's ecumenical resolutions often guide the ecumenical practice of member churches, even if they are not formally adopted. Reception, not just legislation, is a vital part of discernment.

Legally, however, such resolutions and statements have no effect unless they are adopted by the synodical systems of the member churches themselves.

The Instrument who is a person, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has very limited powers outside of his proper jurisdiction in the Diocese and Province of Canterbury, and in the Church of England. There have been calls, from time to time, for these powers to be enhanced, as when, for example, there are divisions within Provinces of the Communion

that seemingly cannot be resolved internally. However, such powers as the Archbishop might have in such a situation are limited to powers of diplomacy and persuasion.

While it may have seemed odd to some, when The Episcopal Church was deemed to have stepped outside the parameters of Anglican tradition in consecrating a second out gay person, the 'penalty' was the withdrawal of Episcopal members of international commissions and ecumenical dialogues and commissions. The Archbishop's argument was that persons from such a church could not represent the heart of Anglicanism, but it was also the case that the naming of persons to such bodies is one of the few powers which the Archbishop has in the Communion. Recently, the Primates supported the Archbishop in asking members of the Scottish Episcopal Church to withdraw from such bodies for three years, following that church's endorsement of gay marriage.

In March of 2012 something very significant happened to international Anglicanism that, while it certainly garnered some attention at the time, did not really begin to sink in. That was when it was determined that not enough dioceses of the Church of England had agreed that the Anglican Communion Covenant could come back to the General Synod for a second reading. The news certainly took many people by surprise, as they had not noticed how formidable the opposition to the Covenant had become. After all, this was to many the 'mother church', containing the Province and See of Canterbury, the base from which missionaries had gone throughout the British Empire to make disciples and obedient servants of all nations. It was a shock that England did not agree to the very solution to the current problems of Anglicanism that its own Archbishop had enthusiastically proposed to the world.

This decision – or, really, non-decision – by English dioceses in my view marked the end of a very long period of trying to establish institutions for international Anglicanism that would to some degree be binding upon the churches of the Anglican Communion.

It can be argued that the development of each Instrument of Communion came about because some churches were upset with decisions of other churches and wanted to find a way to bring them into line. There was an Anglican church whose bishops were so upset by the biblical and sexual views of a bishop from another Anglican church that they persuaded the Archbishop of Canterbury to hold an extraordinary meeting in order to deal with the problem. The bishops who were upset were from Canada, and the meeting was the first Lambeth Conference of 1867. What prompted this indignation was that a local bishop in South Africa, Bishop Colenso of Natal, chose to take actions that he thought

were appropriate responses to the Gospel for his local context, but others disagreed. The Lambeth Conference found itself unable to resolve the situation, but the experience of having bishops from around the world meet to pray and discuss and discern together proved so valuable that the Conference has continued since then, roughly every ten years.

The Anglican Consultative Council arose in part from the Anglican Congress that met in Toronto in 1963. That gathering was made up of bishops, clergy and laity from the whole Anglican world, and it met at the time when many British colonies were gaining independence. The challenge for the Anglican Communion was how to undertake mutually accountable mission together in this changed contest. The slogan that came from the Congress was 'mutual responsibility and interdependence in the Body of Christ'. In order to facilitate ongoing support for this mutuality in mission, the Anglican Consultative Council was established. It has met roughly every 3 years, and takes its title 'consultative' very seriously.

The Primates' Meeting was established in 1978 also for mutual consultation. Over recent decades of debate about the ordination of women and issues in sexuality, the Pri-

mates have met more and more often, and have often issued pastoral statements which some Anglicans have seen as imperative. Since the Primates have not been delegated legislative powers, they cannot have this authority. Moreover, the powers that Primates have within their own churches vary widely. Some can 'speak for' their churches, but some can only speak for them on the basis of policy developed by their churches.

Through the 1990s there were a number of consultations which led to two reports on how authority within the Communion could be understood. These were 'Belonging Together' (1992) and 'The Virginia Report' (1997). Both were sent by the Anglican Consultative Council to the member churches, and neither one of them received much response. Only two churches responded to Virginia, Ireland and Canada, and they raised a number of concerns about the move toward centralization. The theology that underpinned Virginia was very influenced by ecumenical theology of the time, the theology of communion, or *koinonia* (the Greek term for communion). This theology was influential in the way that Anglicans talked with Roman Catholics and with Orthodox in their international ecumenical dialogues. From such dialogues, Anglican theologians were convinced



that Anglicans needed a coherent ecclesiology (teaching about the nature of the Church) for the Communion. It was this theological need, plus the emerging crises that led to the breakdown of mutual trust among some churches, that led to the development of the Anglican Communion Covenant, which was finalized in 2009 and sent to the churches for decision.

The failure of the Covenant to gain buy-in from enough churches of the Communion means that for some time Anglicans will live with institutions that cannot be binding, but which will help them to listen deeply to one another

So where does this leave us? Just about where we have always been, ministering the Gospel of grace as we have received it in our tradition, in the local contexts in which we are rooted, seeking through our synodical processes and prayer to discern what the Spirit is saying to us. We will have disagreements, and it is incumbent on us to explain ourselves to one another, because we were all called into communion by the God of love.

All the while this high level negotiation has been going on, Anglicans have been doing all sorts of things together. There are Anglican Communion networks on the environment, on peace and justice, on health care, on women, on refugees and migrants, on the family and on gender based violence. We have staff who represent us at the United Nations in New York and Geneva. We have lively ecumenical dialogues with 7 international partners. We have had Continuing Indaba and Bishops in Dialogue, bringing leaders from different parts of the world to talk about mission and

leadership. We have an Anglican Communion Legal Advisors Network, which discerned amongst all the official canon law of the member churches 104 common principles of canon law operative across the whole Communion (Principles of Canon Law, 2008).

We have the Anglican Alliance, which coordinates relief and development work and which is able to deliver directly to churches on the ground when disasters strike. People still pray the Anglican Cycle of Prayer. The Anglican Consultative Council in 2016 called for a 'Season of Intentional Discipleship' for all Anglicans, with resources to equip and enable the whole church to be effective in making new disciples of Jesus Christ. We are partners in the Gospel and partners in mission despite the background noise and the really severe differences of opinion.

Even though we do not have a common legislative framework, we are obliged by our love for one another to live out our mutual responsibility and interdependence in the Body of Christ to the fullest extent that we can, always trusting with enough humility that each of us alone does not know the whole truth. The motto of the Anglican Communion is 'you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free'. The truth that sets us free is in the One whom we serve, who alone is truth, and that One has promised us the Spirit to lead us into all truth. That is a common journey in communion. †