

# The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today: A Reflection for the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful of the Anglican Communion



Excerpts from this weeks text prepared by the  
Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams

## The Anglican Communion: a Church in Crisis?

What is the current tension in the Anglican Communion actually about? Plenty of people are confident that they know the answer. It's about gay bishops, or possibly women bishops. The American Church is in favour and others are against – and the Church of England is not sure (as usual). It's true that the election of a practising gay person as a bishop in the US in 2003 was the trigger for much of the present conflict. It is doubtless also true that a lot of extra heat is generated in the conflict by ingrained and ignorant prejudice in some quarters; and that for many others, in and out of the Church, the issue seems to be a clear one about human rights and dignity. **But the debate in the Anglican Communion is not essentially a debate about the human rights of homosexual people.** It is possible – indeed, it is imperative – to give the strongest support to the defence of homosexual people against violence, bigotry and legal disadvantage, to appreciate the role played in the life of the church by people of homosexual orientation, and still to believe that this doesn't settle the question of whether the Christian Church has the freedom, on the basis of the Bible, and its historic teachings, to bless homosexual partnerships as a clear expression of God's will. That is disputed among Christians, and, as a bare matter of fact, **only a small minority** would answer yes to the question. Unless you think that social and legal considerations should be allowed to resolve religious disputes – which is a highly risky assumption if you also believe in real freedom of opinion in a diverse society – there has to be a recognition that **religious bodies have to deal with the question in their own terms. Arguments have to be drawn up on the common basis of Bible and historic teaching.** And, to make clear something that can get very much obscured in the rhetoric about 'inclusion', **this is not and should never be a question about the contribution of gay and lesbian people as such to the Church of God and its ministry, about the dignity and value of gay and lesbian people. Instead it is a question, agonisingly difficult for many, as to what kinds of behaviour a Church that seeks to be loyal to the Bible can bless, and what kinds of behaviour it must warn against – and so it is a question about how we make decisions corporately with other Christians, looking together for the mind of Christ as we share the study of the Scriptures.**

## Anglican Decision-Making

And this is where the real issue for Anglicans arises. How do we as Anglicans deal with this issue 'in our own terms'? And what most Anglicans worldwide have said is that it doesn't help to behave as if the matter had been resolved when in fact it hasn't. It is true that, in spite of resolutions and declarations of intent, the process of 'listening to the experience' of homosexual people hasn't advanced very far in most of our churches, and that discussion remains at a very basic level for many. But the decision of the Episcopal Church to elect a practising gay man as a bishop was taken without even the American church itself having formally

decided as a local Church what it thinks about blessing same-sex partnerships ... The recent resolutions of the General Convention have not produced a complete response to the challenges of the Windsor Report, but on this specific question there is at the very least an acknowledgement of the gravity of the situation ... Very many in the Anglican Communion would want the debate on the substantive ethical question to go on as part of a general process of theological discernment; but they believe that the pre-emptive action taken in 2003 in the US has made such a debate harder not easier, that it has reinforced the lines of division and led to enormous amounts of energy going into 'political' struggle with and between churches in different parts of the world ... If other churches have said, in the wake of the events of 2003 that they cannot remain fully in communion with the American Church, this should not be automatically seen as some kind of blind bigotry against gay people. Where such bigotry does show itself it needs to be made clear that it is unacceptable; and if this is not clear, it is not at all surprising if the whole question is reduced in the eyes of many to a struggle between justice and violent prejudice. It is saying that, whatever the presenting issue, **no member Church can make significant decisions unilaterally and still expect this to make no difference to how it is regarded in the fellowship; this would be uncomfortably like saying that every member could redefine the terms of belonging as and when it suited them.** Some actions – and sacramental actions in particular - just do have the effect of putting a Church outside or even across the central stream of the life they have shared with other Churches. It isn't a question of throwing people into outer darkness, but of recognising that **actions have consequences – and that actions believed in good faith to be 'prophetic' in their radicalism are likely to have costly consequences.**

## **Truth and Unity**

It is true that witness to what is passionately believed to be the truth sometimes appears a higher value than unity, and there are moving and inspiring examples in the twentieth century. If someone genuinely thinks that a move like the ordination of a practising gay bishop is that sort of thing, it is understandable that they are prepared to risk the breakage of a unity they can only see as false or corrupt. But the risk is a real one; and it is never easy to recognise when the moment of inevitable separation has arrived - to recognise that this is the issue on which you stand or fall and that this is the great issue of faithfulness to the gospel. The nature of prophetic action is that you do not have a cast-iron guarantee that you're right.

But let's suppose that there isn't that level of clarity about the significance of some divisive issue. If we do still believe that unity is generally a way of coming closer to revealed truth ('only the whole Church knows the whole Truth' as someone put it), we now face some choices about what kind of Church we as Anglicans are or want to be ...

## **The Anglican Identity**

**The reason Anglicanism is worth bothering with is** because it has tried to find a way of being a Church that is neither tightly centralised nor just a loose federation of essentially independent bodies – a Church that is seeking to be a coherent family of communities meeting to hear the Bible read, to break bread and share wine as guests of Jesus Christ, and to celebrate a unity in worldwide mission and ministry. That is what the word 'Communion' means for Anglicans ...



## Future Directions

The idea of a 'covenant' between local Churches is one method that has been suggested, and it seems to me the best way forward ... Those Churches that were prepared to take this on as an expression of their responsibility to each other would limit their local freedoms for the sake of a wider witness; and some might not be willing to do this. We could arrive at a situation where there were 'constituent' Churches in covenant in the Anglican Communion and other 'churches in association', which were still bound by historic and perhaps personal links, fed from many of the same sources, but not bound in a single and unrestricted sacramental communion, and not sharing the same constitutional structures ... **It could mean the need for local Churches to work at ordered and mutually respectful separation between 'constituent' and 'associated' elements; but it could also mean a positive challenge for Churches to work out what they believed** to be involved in belonging in a global sacramental fellowship, a chance to rediscover a positive common obedience to the mystery of God's gift ... **There is no way in which the Anglican Communion can remain unchanged by what is happening at the moment.** Neither the liberal nor the conservative can simply appeal to a historic identity that doesn't correspond with where we now are. **We do have a distinctive historic tradition – a reformed commitment to the absolute priority of the Bible for deciding doctrine, a catholic loyalty to the sacraments and the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, and a habit of cultural sensitivity and intellectual flexibility that does not seek to close down unexpected questions too quickly. But for this to survive with all its aspects intact, we need closer and more visible formal commitments to each other.** And it is not going to look exactly like anything we have known so far. Some may find this unfamiliar future conscientiously unacceptable, and that view deserves respect. **But if we are to continue to be any sort of 'Catholic' church, if we believe that we are answerable to something more than our immediate environment and its priorities and are held in unity by something more than just the consensus of the moment, we have some very hard work to do to embody this more clearly.** The next Lambeth Conference [in 2008] ought to address this matter directly and fully as part of its agenda. The different components in our heritage can, up to a point, flourish in isolation from each other. But any one of them pursued on its own would lead in a direction ultimately outside historic Anglicanism ...

## Conclusion

The only reason for being an Anglican is that this balance seems to you to be healthy for the Church Catholic overall, and that it helps people grow in discernment and holiness ... No-one can impose the canonical and structural changes that will be necessary. All that I have said above should make it clear that the idea of an Archbishop of Canterbury resolving any of this by decree is misplaced, however tempting for many. The Archbishop of Canterbury presides and convenes in the Communion, and may do what this document attempts to do, which is to outline the theological framework in which a problem should be addressed; but he must always act collegially, with the bishops of his own local Church and with the primates and the other instruments of communion ... It is nonetheless possible for the Churches of the Communion to decide that this is indeed the identity, the living tradition – and by God's grace, the gift - we want to share with the rest of the Christian world in the coming generation; more importantly still, that this is a valid and vital way of presenting the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. My hope is that the period ahead - of detailed response to the work of General Convention, exploration of new structures, and further refinement of the covenant model - will renew our positive appreciation of the possibilities of our heritage so that we can pursue our mission with deeper confidence and harmony.

