

Foundations of Anglican Unity

Rev. Michael Carney

The Immediate Question

In December, 2009 the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles elected two Suffragan (Assisting) Bishops, Rev. Diane Jardine Bruce and Rev. Mary Douglas Glasspool. Once a diocese (a regional jurisdiction, usually including part or all of a state) has elected a bishop, consent must be obtained from a majority of the other 100+ dioceses and their bishops. This process has been completed, and the consecration of Revs. Bruce and Glasspool will take place on May 15.

Rev. Bruce is well-known in her diocese as rector of St. Clements by the Sea in San Clemente, where she has served for ten years, and was the first candidate elected. Rev. Glasspool has been ordained since 1982, serving for the past eight years as canon (assistant) to the bishops of Maryland. Her election has been controversial due to her longstanding relationship with life partner Becki Sander.

Rev. Glasspool's resume makes it clear that she is very well-qualified to become a bishop, with decades of fruitful service and experience in diocesan administration. Yet the international reaction to the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson in New Hampshire is well known, and many concerns have been raised about the implications of this latest development.

Authority in the Anglican Communion has traditionally been very decentralized, with provinces (national or regional bodies) and individual dioceses maintaining a high degree of independence. In giving consent to past elections, it appears that bishops have often deferred to the decisions of other dioceses even when they may not personally agree or approve. The Archbishop of Canterbury has headed the communion in title only, without the decision-making authority of the Roman model.

I'm going to discuss the traditional foundations of unity in the Anglican Communion and briefly look at recent developments. It's a huge subject which can only be introduced in this article, and I encourage you to explore it in more detail if you are interested. An internet search will provide you with a variety of resources, varying widely in their perspectives and objectivity. I suggest that you look first at the Episcopal News Service (<http://www.episcopalchurch.org/ens/>) and the Anglican Communion home page (<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/>), then follow other searches as you may desire.

The Traditional Foundation of Unity

For more than a hundred years, Anglican unity has rested on a fourfold foundation known as the “Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral.” (*Book of Common Prayer* p. 876-878) Adopted by the Episcopal House of Bishops in 1886 and ratified by the Lambeth Conference (which will be described below) in 1888, it is an attempt to guide Anglicans toward the fulfillment of Jesus’ High Priestly prayer, that all who will believe in him will be one, as he and the Father are one. (*John 17:22*) These are the four elements of the quadrilateral:

1. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as “containing all things necessary to salvation: and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.”
2. The Apostles’ Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.
3. The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself—Baptism and the Supper of the Lord—ministered with unfailing use of Christ’s words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by him.
4. The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.

While there is nothing surprising in these foundational elements of unity, there are a number of points worth noting. The Holy Scriptures are identified as the “rule and ultimate standard of faith,” and it’s clear that the interpretation of scripture has become a central aspect of today’s controversies. Faithful Anglicans have different understandings of the Bible’s moral guidance.

The Nicene Creed is seen as “the sufficient statement of Christian faith.” While this may seem obvious, groups from both ends of the “political” spectrum often classify Anglicans by their positions on sexuality questions. Perhaps this is just human nature at work, but it bears noting that sex has not traditionally been seen as a defining element of faith. Belief in the Creed’s statements about the triune God have always characterized Christians.

The terrible conflicts in the early days of the Church of England led to bloodshed and division which we Americans can hardly imagine. The worship of the *Book of Common Prayer* came to be a crucial unifying element during the reign of Elizabeth I, and the quadrilateral observes that Baptism and Eucharist remain at the heart of the Anglican Communion. I think that most Episcopalians would agree that this holds true in their congregations and dioceses as well.

The fourth leg of the quadrilateral lifts up the office and ministry of bishops as a focus of unity for the church. In theory at least, the local unit of the Anglican church is the diocese, a community of congregations gathered around a bishop. They, in turn, represent local churches in wider associations, as expressed at the ordination of a bishop: “With your fellow bishops you will share in the leadership of the Church throughout the world.” (*BCP p. 517*) This is one reason we exercise special care in the choice of bishops.

It’s very interesting to observe that the underlying premise of this part of the quadrilateral is “unity in diversity.” It is assumed that the office of Bishop will be “locally adapted,” given the “varying needs of the nations and peoples.” According to this formulation, differences are to be expected among Anglicans from different parts of the world, but there has never been a mechanism to determine exactly what is acceptable.

Anglican churches grew up throughout the English empire and have been defined by being “in communion” with the Archbishop of Canterbury. Until recent years little thought was given to more specific theological statements or membership requirements than those provided by the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral. It’s clear that many of today’s Anglican leaders, especially in the global south, regard the quadrilateral as insufficient for the needs of our world.

But at this turning point in the history of our worldwide communion it is important to note that the Episcopal church has not rejected the traditional foundations of unity. We have adapted the historic episcopate, first by consecrating women as bishops, and now openly gay and lesbian Christians. All the clergy members involved, from candidates to consecrators, have affirmed the first three legs of the quadrilateral through promises made at ordination (*BCP p. 526*).

The controversy regarding our faithfulness to unity centers on the interpretation of scripture, which is not a simple matter. Because biblical literalism is not a characteristic method for Episcopalians, we do not assume that answers are obvious. This perspective puts us at odds with many other Anglicans. In our view faithful Christians have different outlooks on the teachings of scripture on sexuality issues, just as we have disagreed on many other important questions in the past. Resolving this question is a central challenge as we seek to renew our bonds of unity.

Instruments of Unity

Lacking a central administrative structure with decision-making authority, four “Instruments of Unity” have evolved to bind together the worldwide Anglican Communion.

1. Archbishop of Canterbury

“The Archbishops of Canterbury are seen by the Anglican Communion of churches as their spiritual leader. He is primus inter pares, first among equals of the other Primate (Chief Archbishops, Presiding Bishops) of the various provinces. He is the Primate of All England and Diocesan of the Diocese of Canterbury. His ‘seat’ is in Canterbury Cathedral where there is also ‘St Augustine’s Chair’ that marks the significance of Canterbury to Anglicans.” (*Anglican Communion website*)

The authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury lies not in the power to enforce order, but rather is ascribed to him by members of the communion. Adherence to tradition and respect for personal qualities of spirituality and leadership appear to be significant factors in this recognition. Currently The Most Reverend Rowan Williams serves as the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, having been enthroned at Canterbury Cathedral in 2003.

In the past 150 years three other international bodies have grown up around the Archbishop: “The Archbishop of Canterbury is the Focus for Unity for the three Instruments of Communion of the Anglican Communion, and is therefore a unique focus for Anglican unity. He calls the once-a-decade Lambeth Conference, chairs the meeting of Primate, and is President of the Anglican Consultative Council.”

2. Lambeth Conferences

Assemblies of Anglican bishops from around the world meet at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury about every ten years. “After the original idea of a Council authorized to define doctrine had been abandoned owing to strenuous opposition, the first Conference, with 76 bishops, was held in 1867 by Archbishop C.T. Longley and issued an ‘Address to the Faithful.’” (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*)

Episcopal bishops have always been central participants in the Lambeth Conferences. In recent decades the phenomenal growth of Anglican churches in the global south has led to a shift in the composition of the Lambeth Conferences, a fact which was widely noticed in 1998. The 2008 conference began with a retreat for the bishops in Canterbury Cathedral, with a focus on Bible study and relationship building.

While numerous advisory resolutions had been made by past conferences, in 1998 the bishops broke new ground by declaring that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Holy Scripture.” While the majority of Anglican bishops agree, there has been much discussion and controversy since then about the nature of the statement’s authority.

3. Anglican Consultative Council

This instrument of unity was formed as a result of a resolution at the 1968 Lambeth Conference, in order to provide more frequent and more widely representative contact among Anglican churches than the meeting of bishops every ten years could provide. The Archbishop of Canterbury serves as President, and approximately forty-five other members—bishops, clergy, and lay people—are chosen by the provinces around the world. The group first met in 1971.

The Anglican Communion website observes that the ACC’s purpose is “to facilitate the co-operative work of the churches of the Anglican Communion, exchange information between the Provinces and churches, and help to co-ordinate common action. It advises on the organisation and structures of the Communion, and seeks to develop common policies with respect to the world mission of the Church ...” (*Anglican Communion website*)

The presence of priests, deacons, and especially lay leaders on the Anglican Consultative Council is unique among the four instruments of unity. While bishops have a special calling to work for the unity of the church, the ACC is an entry point for other perspectives into the inner circle of Anglican Communion leadership.

4. Primates Meetings

The national or regional Anglican bodies known as “provinces” are headed by Archbishops or Presiding Bishops, collectively known as “primates.” “The Primates’ Meeting was established in 1978 by Archbishop Donald Coggan as an opportunity for ‘leisurely thought, prayer and deep consultation’ and has met regularly since.” (*Anglican Communion website*)

The Primates Meetings periodically produce letters and communiqués for the worldwide church, and they have a central role in commissioning and reviewing study documents which help to chart future developments in the Communion. Because they have such great

authority in their provinces, the primates collectively have a huge influence on the handling of controversial issues.

Recent Developments

It's interesting to observe the evolution of the instruments of unity over the past 150 years in response to the needs of the times. While the emergence of the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates meetings has broadened worldwide participation in leadership, it is clear that there is still no central authority to enforce decisions on the Communion as a whole. The approach has been to engage wider and wider networks of consultation in the hope that consensus can be developed on central questions or at least that acceptable theological limits can be agreed upon.

The issue of the ordination of openly gay and lesbian bishops has stirred up reactions around the world and prompted a variety of attempts to establish boundaries for member provinces. The resolution on this subject by the Lambeth Conference in 1998, while lacking clear legislative authority, is seen by many Anglican churches as establishing a framework for future decision-making. Two other recent developments have also had a significant impact on this question.

After the 1998 Lambeth Conference the Archbishop of Canterbury commissioned a group, chaired by Irish Archbishop Robin Eames, to produce a report on the Communion's response to two controversial actions: the Episcopal church's consecration of Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire, and the formal approval of same gender relationship blessings in the Diocese of New Westminster of the Anglican Church of Canada.

After years of study and consultation, the "**Windsor Report**" was released in 2004. It is a lengthy and complex document to which I can hardly do justice in this article. (Going to the Anglican Communion website is a good way to begin additional study.) Nevertheless, I'll discuss a few key points with the hope that they represent the heart of the document.

The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada were called upon to express repentance for the divisive effects of the actions described above. After a period of study the Episcopal Church offered statements making it clear how highly we regard our membership in the Communion and that we regret the hurtful impact of our actions on other Anglican churches. This statement was acknowledged and accepted by the Instruments of Communion, but questions still remain about past actions and future intentions.

Among its many recommendations, the Windsor Report called upon all the members of the Anglican Communion to respond in a number of ways. The North American churches were called to “exercise restraint” from consecrating openly gay and lesbian bishops and from formally approving rites of blessing for same gender relationships. Churches of the global south were asked to enter into a “listening process” which would provide a personal encounter for their leaders with gay and lesbian Christians. In addition, they were directed to respect the integrity of other provinces and dioceses and to refrain from intervening in their affairs.

It appears at this point that the Windsor Report has failed to achieve these aims in any significant way. No meaningful listening process has occurred in the global south, and interventions within the Episcopal Church have been frequent and vigorous. While formal approval of same-gender blessings are at least some years off, the impending consecration of Mary Glasspool as Suffragan Bishop of Los Angeles marks a major turning point for the future of the Episcopal Church.

One proposal remaining from the Windsor Report is the development of an “**Anglican Covenant**,” which would define membership in the worldwide Communion. Once again groups have been convened to consult with member churches, produce drafts of a Covenant, and chart a course for its adoption.

The “Ridley-Cambridge text” of 2009 represents the latest product of this process, but at my last reading it was still being revised. It is worthy of more careful study and analysis than I can provide here, beyond making a few comments. In many ways the foundations of unity have not changed from those identified in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral. But as we know, the ways in which Scripture is interpreted make a huge difference in laying theological foundations. Finding an appropriate balance which clarifies central understandings but allows individual variations among faithful Anglicans is extraordinarily difficult. Once that is done, acceptable enforcement mechanisms must be established, after which Anglican provinces will be given the opportunity to choose whether to enroll in the Covenant community.

Final Words

It’s important not to overlook the big event in recent decades in the Anglican Communion: the explosive growth of the churches of the global south. Faced with widespread poverty, corrupt governments, and frightening violence, Anglican churches have helped people to find the spiritual strength to endure

terrible hardships. Their vitality should be an inspiration for first-world Anglicans and indeed all Christians.

Nevertheless, our context is different. The struggle faced by the Episcopal church is to help people living comfortably to rediscover the central importance of God in their lives, while sharing our resources and personal gifts with those in need. The vast gulf between our cultures sometimes makes it seem that we have little in common. Yet the biblical foundations of our faith (for example, the High Priestly prayer in the Gospel of John and Paul's images of the Body of Christ) insistently proclaim that we all need each other.

In a sense the Episcopal Church was the originating member of the Anglican Communion, as we were the first daughter church to become independent from the Church of England. Formed in Philadelphia in 1789, at the same time as the U.S. Constitutional Convention, we were one of the first religious bodies in the world to embrace representative governance. Many other Anglicans overlook the fact that we don't make decisions in the hierarchical way to which they are accustomed. We take pride in the uniquely American polity of our church.

The current crisis in the Anglican Communion raises two challenging questions related to our integrity. First, are we really looking to Scripture as the foundation of our moral decision-making? Or have we made up our minds on the basis of reason/experience and then found justification in the Bible? If we can demonstrate that we truly approach the Scriptures with open hearts, ready to be led by God's will, it may seem more plausible to others that our recent innovations (e.g. consecrating women and gay/lesbian people as bishops) are based on Anglican tradition as expressed in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral.

The second challenge involves our mission as a church. The congregation I lead is not alone in feeling financially stretched, anxious about falling behind in meeting our "needs." But compared to most of the world's people, we're blessed with an abundance of resources. As Anglicans we need to focus on the opportunities to serve others presented by connections which transcend political boundaries.

If we can live with integrity into our engagement with Scripture and our mission as a church, I'm confident that the relationships of the Episcopal Church with the churches of the Anglican Communion will work themselves out. God has a great sense of humor: working with people like us to bring the kingdom to birth in our midst.