

Lambeth Conference 2008 and the ‘Anglican Communion Covenant’

By Stephen Laird

Most the dioceses of the Church of England, which is made up of the Anglican Provinces of Canterbury and York have, through their Diocesan Synods, voted to **reject** something called the ‘Anglican Communion Covenant’. This Covenant was something which arose out of the last Lambeth Conference in 2008. It was a document designed to increase mutual accountability between provinces and Dioceses of the Anglican Communion so that it would be a bit harder for different places to step out of line on issues morality, doctrine and Church Order.

It was envisaged that Provinces subscribing to the Covenant would be part of an ‘inner core’ of the Anglican Communion; with non-signatory provinces being part of a ‘second tier’ or fringe. The plan has badly backfired with the failure of the Church of England to give sufficient support to it. By implication the role and authority of the Archbishop and of the See of Canterbury has been diminished; and the status of Canterbury Cathedral as the ‘Mother Church’ has in many respects been made anachronistic. In practice, though, it probably means the whole idea of getting more cohesion through having a shared document has failed completely. Diarmaid MacCulloch, Professor of Church History at Oxford University has said, "It seems to me the scheme is dead in the water throughout the Anglican Communion. There really would be no point in other provinces signing up to it, since already some are most reluctant to do so."

As a veteran ‘fly on the wall’ at two Lambeth Conferences (1998 and 2008) I want to offer some of my personal insights.

1998 was dominated by the passing of Party-Conference style resolutions which were meant to unify the Bishops and their Provinces. Mountains of paperwork were generated, but, unfortunately, any disagreements which existed amongst the bishops were codified and crystallized: the process of ‘debate and resolution’ (which Archbishop Carey seemed to think would present an impression of unity in the Anglican Communion) actually did precisely the opposite: it produced winners and losers. The 1998 Conference laid the foundations for a decade of polarization and ill-feeling around, and between, many Provinces and Dioceses within the Communion. Not just a polarization of ‘the developed world versus the developing world’; but also inside some Provinces, especially Canada and the USA. We all know that the disagreements have been focussed around issues to do with same-sex agendas (gay bishops, same-sex unions and so on).

Yet more problems were then caused by bishops who (usually, but not always, as a consequence of these things) set up parallel jurisdictions in other bishops’ Provinces or Dioceses. We haven’t had that happening in England, but imagine what it would be like if a sub-Saharan Archbishop, say, suddenly assumed jurisdiction over a collection of parishes in our Diocese here, including some in the City of Canterbury, in our own Deanery. And then laid claim to Church property! And all this without bothering to consult our own Bishops! It’s and a recipe for chaos: we know, because it has happened a lot in North America.

So the more recent Lambeth Conference in 2008 was set up to be deliberately different. It was less like the 'Labour Party Conference'; it had fewer plenary sessions, no set-piece debates and no resolutions.

Instead, the bishops were given the time and space to *talk* to each other, daily in groups called 'Indaba Groups', each of about 40 members, and listen to what others had to say. (*Indaba* is a South African term, describing meetings of tribal elders when something really important needs properly thrashing out until everyone thinks the right outcome has been reached).

There were 15 or so of these groups in all. Bishops talked about things like what it means to be a bishop; about world poverty, the environment, how they got on with the non-Anglican Churches, how they got on with people from other faiths, and - of course - those sexuality issues.

They also talked about whether the Anglican Communion could agree a framework within which it could handle its disagreements so that the story which followed the 1998 Conference would not be repeated. Out of that came a qualified support for the idea of having an Anglican Communion Covenant, and this was sent out for debate around the individual dioceses worldwide.

Generally speaking the idea of giving all the bishops a decent amount of time to speak, and be heard, and to listen to one another really did work.

The 2008 Conference ended with a genuine feel-good factor, and on a serious but guardedly optimistic note. The bishops felt that they had shared in a significant journey; they wanted to do what they could to make sure that the Anglican Communion held together; and they were keen, in principle, to avoid doing things in their own Dioceses or Provinces which, for whatever reason, might cause offense in another's Diocese or Province.

Within limits, I can tell you what went on at one of the *Indaba Groups* because I was sitting there, each day, taking notes at all 14 of its 2-hour sessions. My group, like the others, had just under 40 bishops in it. About 5 of my Bishops were Archbishops, mainly African ones. In fact calling these groups *Indaba Groups* was misleading because business was not really thrashed out in the same way that tribal chieftains might do it. Instead, the Indaba sessions used very western methods: there were daily session agendas; people were made to divide into small groups and discuss questions; they had to write things on bits of flipchart paper with thick pens; they had to do little presentations: all those kinds of things.

It occurred to me that Bishops are always getting their clergy to engage in this sort of exercise at meetings and training sessions. A lot of clergy hate these kinds of things, so it was quite amusing seeing the bishops getting a taste of their own medicine for a change.

Certainly a number of the Bishops really disliked discussing things in small groups, at least at first. Rather than reflect in sub-groups of 4 or 5 they wanted to 'hold forth' to the whole group of 40 or so. Well, they were bishops, so that was more what they were used to doing!

By the end of the first week there was a good deal of unease about that *Indaba* process: what was the point of it? When and how was the Conference going to 'make any pronouncements' (especially about the sexuality issues)? Where was this all leading? There was seemingly no 'end-product'.

Perhaps they didn't all realize that the value of this process was in **the process itself**, not so much in an 'end product'. Everyone was being given the chance to speak, and be heard (hence the small groups - in bigger groups even some bishops become wallflowers).

So, at the end of the first week, it almost seemed as though there was going to be a mutiny. Many bishops appeared to want to go back to the huge big-top tent and make great resolutions (or not-so-great resolutions), as they had in 1998.

But then a gradual change took hold. By the early part of the second week Bishops had started to get used to one another in their *Indaba* groups of 40 strong, and were happy to go on speaking and being heard. Some still liked to have the chance to 'hold forth' with their opinion to the whole group of 40, but increasingly bishops started asking whether it would be possible to spend more time in small subgroups of 4 or 5. So they were now embracing the process rather than rejecting it. So they must have felt that they were, indeed, being heard; and were listening well too.

I suppose a good thing about the *Indaba* groups was that the Bishops were telling each other 'their stories': in other words, basing their insights about a matter on real, lived-out experiences in their own patch, whether that was in the UK, the USA, India, Africa or wherever.

I was wondering whether or how often I would hear them sharing the theological insights they had gained from good theological writers or speakers. Interestingly they rarely or never did. So, *full marks* for sharing their experiences, but *no marks* for informed theological reflection: big names like Thomas Cranmer, Richard Hooker, William Law, William Temple or even Desmond Tutu were never mentioned. Strange thing, that.

As well as the *Indaba* groups the bishops had daily bible studies and worship, and afternoon self-select sessions they could attend as well as fringe events. There were some plenary sessions with well-known speakers and even an uplifting evening when the role of the youth stewards was celebrated. There was a lot going on and everyone got very tired and hot and 'took things a day at a time'.

As far as the outcome of the 2008 Conference was concerned, and in spite of what has happened since, there were one or two things that really should go down in history.

First of all, the outstanding ability of Archbishop Rowan as a leader. The fact that he is an intellectual did not seem to get in the way of the other qualities he needs for the job, and I would say the wisdom he drew on and the way he applied it was quite dazzling. His intellect led the way, and he did, at the time, succeed in getting a large and very varied bunch of bishops well and truly behind him. It's amazing that, at the time, some of the newspapers were grudging about his achievements (and some still are).

The other memorable impression was the very *diversity* of the Anglican Communion. This is clearly something to be celebrated, in spite of the problems it continues to cause. The fact is that we *gain* as a body of Christians because of our diversity, and need to know more about each other and where possible support one another. As Archbishop Rowan said on several occasions back in 2008, we are be diminished in all sorts of ways without the other bits of the Communion to which we are joined by faith, prayer and heritage.

This principle also applies to any individual church congregation. The congregation needs every member within it, in order to *be* what it is called to *be*, and each member has the capacity to thrive when properly encouraged and supported by all the others. We would be diminished by any loss of diversity, and we are more enriched as we seek to become more diverse.