

REFLECTIONS ON THE LAMBETH CONFERENCE

The Rt. Rev. Edward S. Little II

On one level, you might conclude that nothing happened at the Lambeth Conference. The 650 bishops who gathered for nearly three weeks on the campus of the University of Kent in Canterbury issued no definitive pronouncement; nor did the Conference result, as some had predicted, in a deepening of Anglican divisions. The press lurked around the fringes of the Conference, hungry for a story; but no story – or at least no dramatic story – emerged. Perhaps, in the end, that’s what the Lord intended. I did sense throughout the Conference a deep yearning for the unity of the Anglican Communion, a yearning that penetrated every conversation, every public session, every worship service. We’re living through a strange, even dark time in the Communion; but I was hearted by the good will of my colleague bishops, and their willingness to invest themselves in the long and sometimes tortured processes of the Conference. Meanwhile, it will be for future generations of church historians to tell the tale of Lambeth 14, and draw their own conclusions. Here are some preliminary, perhaps premature, thoughts. As I write them, I recognize that I will may revise them in the course of pondering yet more deeply.

These reflections will fall into three parts:

- A word about the flow of the Lambeth Conference
- A description of the method that under girded the Conference’s work
- A report on the Conference’s reflection document and Archbishop Rowan Williams’ concluding remarks

I

The Conference broke down rather naturally into three parts. The bishops spent the first three days on retreat, primarily in Canterbury Cathedral, site of the martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket in 1170. It was particularly appropriate to begin in prayer, reflection, and silence, as Archbishop Rowan Williams helped us to ponder the depth of our call as bishops. I was especially struck by his assertion that bishops must be “multi-lingual,” able to speak the language of a variety of cultures and theological perspectives: no easy challenge, as our lives become increasingly complex.

Second, we spent about a week looking at a range of issues that impact the life of the church and the life and ministry of bishops – issues as varied as evangelism, Anglican identity, the Bible and how we discern its message, the environmental crisis, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), ecumenical relationships, interfaith dialogue, and (not surprisingly) the work of bishops in our own varied contexts. While these topics were serious and “meaty,” they did not generate a deep level of controversy. And so this section of the Conference allowed us to develop bonds of trust and friendship, and to prepare for the more difficult conversations that would inevitably follow.

Finally, during the last week of the Lambeth Conference, we tackled the big and potentially divisive issues: human sexuality (with a focus particularly on the church's ministry to gay and lesbian persons), the Windsor Report and its recommendations, and the proposed Anglican Covenant that stands among Windsor's highest priorities.

The three-part division isn't quite as neat as I've outlined. On July 24, for example, we participated in "London Day," which itself was divided into three sections. First, the bishops (dressed in purple cassock) and their spouses marched through central London in support of the MDGs, joined by leaders of other Christian churches and by representatives of the many faith communities found in Great Britain. It was an impressive sight, though I confess that I found myself wondering what the gawking tourists thought of this vast sea of purple people making their way down some of London's main streets. Then we heard stirring speeches at Lambeth Palace (the Archbishop's London residence) by Archbishop Rowan and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, with lunch following in an enormous tent on the Palace's spacious grounds. Finally, the bishops were bussed to Buckingham Palace for a garden party hosted by Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. (The most frequent question I'm asked, not surprisingly, is: Did you meet her? Sadly, we didn't. The Queen greeted as many people as possible, but clearly could not get everyone personally. Sylvia and I did, however, get within about eight feet of her, and were impressed by her personal warmth and engagement as she spoke with bishops and spouses.) We will never forget London Day and the privilege of taking part in such an amazing series of events.

Mid-way through the Conference's final week, we dedicated a day to the issue of family violence. The bishops and spouses spent an entire morning in the Big Top (the enormous tent set up on campus for plenary events) pondering the tragic story of the rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-22). This may be one of the most chilling passages in the scriptures, and the bishops and spouses struggled through this difficult passage and then looked at how the pattern depicted here is tragically reproduced in our own cultures. That led to an inevitable question: What can the Christian community do to combat family violence and to create a place of safety for everyone? Bishops and spouses encouraged one another, shared stories of how they've sought to deal with this painful reality in their own dioceses, and committed themselves to further work.

II

I should say a word about the *method* of the Lambeth Conference before I turn to the way that we crafted our response to the topics before us. Each bishop was assigned to a Bible study group, which met daily and worked through the "I am" sayings of the Gospel of John. This was a wonderfully enriching encounter with the scriptures and with fellow bishops who minister in very different and unique situations. My own Bible study group included one Scot, two bishops of the Church of England, two from the Church of North India, two from the Church of South India, and one American (yours truly). I found myself deeply grateful for my Indian colleagues, whose Christian communities represent a tiny minority in a predominantly Hindu context. My British and Scot colleagues, too, helped me to grapple more deeply with ministry in a strongly secular

society – a situation that increasingly we mirror in the United States. For me, the Bible studies represent the high point of the Lambeth Conference and indeed were worth the cost of the ticket.

In addition to the Bible studies, the bishops were also assigned to Indaba groups. “Indaba” is a Zulu word that means something like a consultation of elders, seeking consensus on difficult matters. Each Indaba consisted of about forty bishops (that is, five Bible study groups), and it was in the Indabas that we discussed the topics listed earlier in these reflections. Our conversations were frank, open, sometimes painful, often encouraging, but always in an atmosphere of respect and profoundly careful listening. A “listener” was chosen from each Indaba group; he or she carefully recorded all comments and reported them to the team of people tasked with drafting the Reflection that summarized the Conference’s work.

Over the course of the day, bishops also participated in open hearings (covering the Windsor Report and the evolving Reflection document); attended “self-select” groups (we’d probably call them workshops) on a host of topics, from mission to ecumenism to principles of scriptural interpretation to the specific areas where the Anglican Communion has experienced conflict in recent years. Then, in the evening, plenary sessions featured a variety of speakers (most moving to me was a session with Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sachs, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, on the subject of covenants). You can see from my description of the Conference activities that our days were challenging, exciting – and, not surprisingly, exhausting. I should add that the spouses had their own parallel conference, chaired by Jane Williams, wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The spouses’ conference included features similar to the bishops’ (Bible study, speakers, self-select groups), and recreation as well. At times, as Sylvia headed off for a field trip with other spouses to (for example) a quaint town on the English Channel, I felt just a bit jealous. Sylvia found the spouses’ conference to be spiritual enriching and filled with opportunities to build relationships with people from around the world. I’m deeply grateful that she was able to be a part of this important gathering.

While all this was going on, two important sub-groups were hard at work. The Windsor Continuation Group, a blue-ribbon panel appointed by Archbishop Rowan last spring, presented the fruit of its initial discussions and solicited input from the Conference. Among other things, the WCG noted the turmoil created in the Communion by the actions of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada. “This has led to internal fragmentation,” the WCG said in its first report to the bishops, “as well as to confusion among our ecumenical partners. . . . “[We need to recover] a common understanding of what it means to be a global communion [and] a common understanding of the place and role of the episcopal office within the *sensus fidelium* of the whole Church.” The Windsor Continuation Group went on to recommend that the three moratoria prescribed in the Windsor Report (on the consecration of further bishops in a same-sex partnership; on the authorization of liturgical forms for blessing same-sex unions; and on “border-crossings” in which bishops and primates from one diocese or province minister in another without appropriate permission) be faithfully observed. The WCG also recommended the creation of a Pastoral Forum, appointed by the Archbishop

of Canterbury, “to engage theologically and practically with situations of controversy as they arise or divisive actions that may be taken around the Communion.”

Meanwhile, the Covenant Design Group – which last spring had produced a second draft of an Anglican Covenant – held self-select sessions over several days, to solicit suggestions regarding further revisions and refinement of the Covenant. I attended these sessions and thus the Covenant became my own particular area of interest during the Conference. The most controversial section of the second draft has to do with the process by which the Anglican Communion responds when an individual province carries out actions that clearly contravene the teaching of the Communion and the express recommendations of the four Instruments of Unity (the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Primates’ Meeting). “Commitment to this covenant,” the St. Andrew’s Draft says (3.2.5.e), “entails an acknowledgement that in the most extreme circumstances, where a Church chooses not to adopt the request of the Instruments of Communion, that decision may be understood by the Church itself, or by the resolution of the Instruments of Communion, as a relinquishment by that Church of the force and meaning of the covenant’s purpose, until they re-establish their covenant relationship with other member Churches.” Many bishops – and I am among them – support the possibility of an accountability structure that might, in the most tragic and extreme cases, declare that a province has in effect surrendered the force of the covenant and thus its place in the Anglican Communion. Others passionately oppose such a possibility as an inappropriate interference in provincial autonomy, and expressed themselves most strongly in this regard.

The Covenant Design Group, having heard from the bishops over the course of the Lambeth Conference, will meet and revise the St. Andrew’s Draft. This revised Covenant will be presented in May to the Anglican Consultative Council, a body that consists of representatives (bishops, priests, and lay persons) from every province of the Communion. From there, the ACC will submit the final draft of the covenant to the provinces for ratification. It wasn’t clear to me how long this would take, or what it would mean if, for example, a province rejects the covenant but some dioceses within that provinces which to embrace it.

III

All of these discussions fed into the Conference’s final document, entitled “Lambeth Indaba: Capturing Conversations and Reflections from the Lambeth Conference 2008”. It’s important, I think, to have a firm grasp on what this document *isn’t*, as well as what it strives to be. Historically, the Anglican episcopate exercises its corporate teaching ministry through the medium of Lambeth Conference resolutions. The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral (see Book of Common Prayer, p. 876-78), a groundbreaking document on the irreducible essentials required for Christian unity, has its origins first in a resolution of the Episcopal Church’s House of Bishops, and then, two years later (1888) a resolution of the Lambeth Conference. Over the years, the Lambeth Conference has addressed a variety of concerns – from war and peace to international debt to interfaith dialogue to human sexuality – and in this way, our bishops have

expressed their mind on the application of Christian principles to the issues of our day. In 1998, this resolution process led to the passage of Lambeth I.10, which “upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage,” and goes on to commit the Communion to “listen to the experience of homosexual persons and . . . to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptized, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ.” The resolution also “calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialization and commercialization of sex,” even as it “cannot advise the legitimizing or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions.”

The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lambeth Design Group, as they planned Lambeth 2008, made the decision that this time around, the Conference would not deal with *any* resolutions. Archbishop Rowan made it clear that Lambeth I.10 remains the mind of the Communion on the subject of human sexuality and would not be re-visited in 2008; nor, in the process, would we take up any other subjects in a legislative mode. We would instead have a season of “fasting” in which we listen to each other, take counsel, pray and reflect together, but avoid any definitive actions that would further exacerbate the conflict that has engulfed the Anglican Communion particularly since the actions of the Episcopal Church’s General Convention in 2003. The decision to “fast” from resolutions was a controversial one, but in the end I’m convinced that it was wise, prudent, and courageous.

That means that “Lambeth Indaba” *isn’t* an authoritative teaching document; it doesn’t intend to be. Rather, it is a report of our conversations, a snapshot of the bishops in the midst of a long and ultimately productive time together. The document seeks to be faithful to the Gospel, faithful to the Indaba process, faithful to the bishops and their context, and faithful to the Communion (pp. 7-8). It goes on to describe conversations on mission and evangelism, the environment, ecumenism, relations with world religions, Anglican bishops and Anglican identity, human sexuality, the Bible, the Anglican Covenant, and the Windsor process. Necessarily, the document contains contradictory material. After all, it simply reports what we said to one another; and since we sometimes (often!) didn’t agree, “Lambeth Indaba” allows us a glimpse at the theological and pastoral diversity that characterizes the Anglican Communion. Don’t read the document looking for an authoritative pronouncement. You won’t find it; and I think it’s safe to say that this Lambeth Conference probably couldn’t have found a consensus on some of the difficult matters that continue to divide us. Yet, as I mentioned at the beginning of these reflections, the search for unity in the midst of significant conflict was a kind of subtext that permeated the whole Conference, from start to finish; you’ll find echoes of that yearning throughout “Lambeth Indaba”. I encourage you to download the document and to read it prayerfully and carefully, and in that way to pray with and for the bishops who spent nearly three weeks in Canterbury.

I should add a bittersweet footnote to the preceding paragraph. We weren't all there. Four provinces (Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya) declined the Archbishop's invitation to come to Lambeth (though in the end several Kenyan bishops did attend); several Australian and British bishops were also missing, as were a couple of Americans. Those who chose to say away did so in large part to protest the presence of the Episcopal Church, and in part as well because they disapproved of Lambeth's non-legislative format. Many, though not all, of these bishops had attended a meeting in Jerusalem entitled "Global Anglican Futures Conference" at the end of June, though some bishops were present both at Lambeth and at GAFCON. (Note the GAFCON website.) The absence of so many Christian friends from the Lambeth Conference was a grievous loss indeed. We needed their strong voices. The Conference was less robustly representative because of their absence.

Archbishop Rowan's concluding presidential address summarized our time together and gave what I believe to be an authoritative interpretation of the Lambeth Conference and its long-term effects. He said, "Person after person has said to me: 'There is no *desire* to separate.' When we have discussed – as we've had to – the possibilities of remaining divided or becoming more so, no-one has relished this thought or thought it a good outcome in terms of our mission. . . . So assuming we don't, indeed, want to separate, what's the unity we value so much? Is it only a sense of human loyalty or a warmth towards the people we've shared an experience with? If so, there is nothing distinctively Christian in it. It may be admirable and good, but other sorts of community might do it as well. And if we just 'tolerate' each other, that can in fact be an attitude well short of real respect or love. Beyond peaceful diversity lies Christian unity; and this is what should matter to us." And what is Christian unity? "First and above all, this is union with Jesus Christ; accepting his gift of grace and forgiveness, learning from him how to speak to his Father, standing where he stands by the power of the Spirit. We are one with one another because we are called into union with the one Christ."

He goes on in his address to outline what we need to do in order to maintain this distinctively Christian unity. Among other things, we must commit ourselves to the three moratoria recommended in the Windsor Report. It is equally important to honor the Communion's teaching on human sexuality (and thus to refrain from ordaining bishops in same-sex partnerships and from authorizing liturgies for blessing same-sex unions), and at the same time to avoid the kind of "boundary-crossing" (with bishops and primates intervening in other dioceses and provinces without permission) that has caused such chaos around the Communion. Archbishop Rowan also commended creation of the Pastoral Forum recommended by the Windsor Continuation Group – and, not surprisingly, the ongoing work of developing an Anglican Covenant. In the end, however, it is not the policies that will hold us together, but something much more profound. "This is the Catholic Church," Archbishop Rowan said; "this is the Catholic faith – a global vision for a global wound, a global claim on our service. None of it is intelligible without belief in the one divine Saviour, raised from the dead, pouring out the gifts of his Spirit."

The Archbishop of Canterbury is presenting us with a Catholic vision of the church, thoroughly supernatural. The church is not simply a fellowship of like-minded believers, nor is it merely a special interest group organized around a task. It is the Body of Christ. Jesus dwells in the church. We are his hands, his feet, his eyes and ears. His life flows in us, as surely as the branches draw life from the vine (John 15:1-7). We must “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3) not to preserve an organizational structure, but because the church is the divinely-indwelt body that mediates the very presence of Jesus himself. How we handle ourselves in this difficult season in the life of the Anglican Communion has profoundly important consequences – for the church, yes, but indeed for the Kingdom of God.

I came away from the Lambeth Conference at once encouraged and challenged. Archbishop Rowan provided calm, steady, focused, and Christ-centered leadership. He kept us on target, reminded us of our task, and helped us to see the way forward. My colleagues from around the world, too, put themselves heart and mind into the hard work of the Conference. Bishops cut one another a good deal of slack. We listened intensely and responded prayerfully. The long-predicted ecclesiastical “battle royal” never materialized, and in large part the bishops themselves provided their own solution. Certainly, some conversations were intense, even heated; the issues that separate us remain, as does the challenge to find the balance between provincial autonomy on the one hand and appropriate accountability on the other. We didn’t “fix” the Anglican Communion. We did, however, create a framework in which all of us – clergy and lay alike – can approach difficult issues and struggle together toward God’s future. I find myself thinking of an East African refrain. One Christian says, “God is good” – and another answers, “All the time!”

Resources:

Lambeth Bible Study Guide

http://www.lambethconference.org/lc2008/resources/pdf/signs_on_the_way_A4.pdf

St. Andrew’s Draft of the Anglican Covenant

http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/st_andrews/draft_text.cfm

Lambeth Indaba: Capturing Conversations and Reflections from the Lambeth Conference 2008

<http://www.lambethconference.org/reflections/document.cfm>

Archbishop Rowan Williams’ Concluding Presidential Address

<http://www.lambethconference.org/daily/news.cfm/2008/8/3/ACNS4511>