

Synod Address 2025—on Communion, Province and Diocese

When I was in Hong Kong a few years ago, doing some teaching in the theological College there during a sabbatical, the Principal told me a funny story. It seems there was some discussion about how to translate ‘The Anglican Church’ into Cantonese. Since this title was not sufficiently descriptive for Chinese characters, they broke it down further into ‘Reformed Episcopal Church.’ This was fine but it seemed that their attempts to be so descriptive had backfired, because when they translated their efforts back into English from the Cantonese characters what they got was ‘Society of Dissenting Overseers.’

The Anglican Communion: a collection, a family, a federation of some 42 autonomous churches, churches that control their own affairs according to their own rules, in 165 different countries of the world, comprising an ever-growing number of members, currently around 85 million – on some counts the world’s third largest Church. Christianity has always been carried to the four corners of the earth by a combination of Empire, trade and migration. Anglicanism is no exception. It developed its particular societal response to the grace and call of God in a country called England, hence the name, but now as an Anglican Communion, it is not an English Church, or simply a Church for English speakers, or indeed a Church that is growing or thriving in England – in Hong Kong for example St John’s Cathedral hosts hundreds of people every Sunday. Hardly any are English by birth, few have English as a first language, and although the main service is in English others are offered in a variety of languages, ministered by a variety of nationalities. Today’s typical Anglican is someone under the age of thirty who lives in in Central Africa. But the link with England is very important in one special and distinctive way that points to its particular character, and I’d like to spell that out a little.

Now of course there has been a Christian Church in Britain since the 4th Century, and Christians in Britain since the 2nd. For the first thousand years of its life in fact there was just one Church, initially coextensive with the Roman Empire. This is what we know as the undivided Church: the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic church of our creeds. During that thousand years there were heresies to be overcome and even some relatively short-lived schisms. One notable schism lasted a couple of hundred years in fact, in north Africa and was occasioned when a bishop was appointed who the people thought was unworthy of the post because he was tainted as someone who had collaborated with a persecutor. They refused to take communion from him, would not be baptized by him and rejected his authority. They set up a separate jurisdiction. The issue was resolved by the intervention of none other than St Augustine, who established a principle which still obtains in the Church (*ex opere operato*) - that the validity or

efficacy of sacraments does not depend on any human agent. All humans are flawed in some respect. Absolute purity is unobtainable. With such bumps in the road – there were others associated with Councils in 431 and 451 concerned with a heresy called Nestorianism which affected particularly the church in the east -the Church maintained its fragile unity for around a thousand years. (incredible really).

Then there was a major split on cultural lines and with political overtones on an east west basis, giving us the parents of the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches as we have them today. England maintained its continuity with the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church through the Roman Catholic Church. That lasted for a further five hundred years or so, and then, in the western Church, the Roman Catholic Church, there was a complete explosion, brought about by many factors: corruption in the RC Church, dissatisfaction with the authority of the RC Church and its dependence on tradition rather than scripture. There were societal issues such as the rise of education and learning, the development of printing making texts in the vernacular more widely available, to mention just a few.

On the continent of Europe this led to lots of new churches and religious groups. Though called a Reformation for some it was more like a reinvention – and here is the important thing about England. England broke with Rome for largely political reasons but continued church life as part of and in continuity with, and in the tradition of, what it understood as the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. On the Continent some of the main new churches were named after people – theologians and scholars who had *doctrinal* differences with the RC Church; people like Luther and Calvin giving us Lutheran and Calvinist Churches. These Churches moved eventually to producing new statements of faith – Confessions as they are called – such as the Westminster confession adopted by many Presbyterians, the Augsburg Confession for Lutherans or the Savoy Declaration for Congregationalists. These Churches had new creeds, new orders of ministry, new architecture and ordering of church buildings. A Calvinist Chapel looks nothing like a Catholic church. None of this is true in England. In England the Church maintained the historic orders of ministry. It had no creeds of its own. It continued to use the creeds of the undivided Church; the Apostles, Nicaean and Athanasian creeds. It maintained the historic episcopate. It held to the eucharistic and monastic liturgies. It maintained the ordering of its buildings. Its spirituality tended to be conveyed by poetry rather than doctrinal statement.

Alongside that continuity it did incorporate some of the new continental ideas. It agreed that scripture should have the predominant place as a Christian authority and it encouraged the use of vernacular, but it had a different character from other Reformed Churches so called, because it

was not confessional, based on doctrine. As a national church, it encompassed and fairly successfully for the most part held together, a very wide range of theological views from almost Puritan to almost Roman – it reflected the practice of a *country*, not the views of an *individual*. As a result, diversity and inclusivity were part of its DNA. It managed what others could not. It was both catholic and reformed.

But there was one other important ingredient that was stressed by early Anglican writers – the importance of reason – which resonated with society at that time and indeed since. Anglicans believed that reason as a God given faculty, when used in a spirit filled and prayerful way should be used to interpret scripture. In other words, nothing was to be taken as authoritative simply because the Church said so. Rather, increasing numbers of educated people, able to read scripture in their own language, were able to begin to form their own theologies, their own interpretations of scripture which represented a new freedom. Scripture was supreme as authority, and the action of reason on scripture created tradition. Hence Anglicans were able to talk about a three-legged stool: scripture reason and tradition, as the basis of its *raison d'être* and authority. This was distinctly Anglican.

Clearly, when people are allowed to think for themselves, that will lead to greater diversity. Then, in subsequent centuries the expansion of Empire and beyond, to post-colonial times, has added international diversity. The incredible thing is that one family of churches, one communion, could actually live with that amount of diversity. The Church has not generally been torn apart historically with doctrinal issues, though there have always been some who have wished it to make more definite statements and to move in a more confessional direction. The most recent example of that was the attempt to adopt a so-called Anglican Covenant. It was rejected precisely on the grounds that we are not a confessional church. And there have been some issues on which there has been a fundamental disagreement, such as the ordination of women, which have led to some people leaving the church, but in that instance special provision was made for those who were unable to accept the decision of the majority. Critics have said that the church's ability to see every side of an issue and often take a middle way, a *via media*, is wishy washy and vague (no-one is quite clear what it stands for) and shows lack of commitment and faith. On the other hand, as I heard the Archbishop of Alexandria say recently, the church is able to achieve a great deal in diplomatic and reconciling roles in an *ecumenical* setting. He said Anglicans have something in their DNA that oils the ecumenical wheels.

As an aside we might say that the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf is the very epitome of Anglicanism at its best. Inclusivity and diversity involve other attitudes such as generosity,

welcome, mutual respect and those are surely characteristics of the church in this diocese that are difficult to find better examples of elsewhere. There is diversity of nationality and culture – the last time I attended a Confirmation in Jebel Ali there were eighteen candidates including representatives of every continent on earth except Antarctica. There is diversity of approach to the scriptures from conservative to radical and liberal. There is diversity in theological approach. On the one hand, people who are one step from Rome or Constantinople and on the other, people who are one step from being Plymouth Brethren. We continue to punch above our weight in ecumenical fora; we are encouragers of dialogue and are foremost in opening conversations with Islam. We are exiles, strangers and sojourners in a very practical sense who have learned to live with the risks that involves and able to generate a safe and respectful space for faith that is a coat of many colours; a truly Pentecostal church in the literal sense. That is no small achievement and is very much in keeping with our tradition, and in a sense our exemplary gift to the communion..

At the same time there are things about us as a communion which would have been familiar to a Christian over a thousand years ago. We recite the same creeds, we have the same order of ministry, the same basic structures of liturgy. And that is a very attractive combination. (I can speak personally) Recently I was in Chad. Anglicanism is relatively new in Chad and people are very excited by it. Churches are growing at a rate. There will be thirty plus new churches formed this year. Some of those who are new members were formerly part of other **congregational** churches, some with a prosperity gospel message, some little more than an opportunity for some self-styled prophet to promulgate his ideas, enjoy a controlling authority and make quite a bit of money. I was interviewing some of these people who were exploring a vocation to Anglican ministry and it emerged that what appealed to them was being part of something bigger and reliable, having a definite structure but within which there was freedom of thought; and also perhaps surprisingly, our liturgy. So, Catholic and reformed: ancient and contemporary.

But amidst all this diversity and difference the question inevitably arises: how can we state what is truly common to all churches in the communion; where is the unity in all this diversity. Clearly Anglicanism cannot mean whatever we want it to mean (like Celtic religion). Remembering that some people have always seen diversity as a threat and a weakness as opposed to a gift and a strength, it is not surprising that that question has surfaced and persisted.

One early attempt at describing Anglican identity came from American bishops towards the end of the nineteenth century. Their statement of intent reflects what we have noted about the Anglican way. They said:

That this Church does not seek to absorb other [Communions](#), but rather, co-operating with them on the basis of a common Faith and Order, to discountenance [schism](#), to heal the wounds of the Body of Christ, and to promote the charity which is the chief of Christian graces and the visible manifestation of Christ to the world.

They came up with four marks of identity, later adopted by the newly formed Lambeth conference of Bishops in 1888. The first Lambeth conference had been held in 1867, a historical point at which, in effect the Anglican Communion came into being as a social entity. They were: the authority of scripture, the Nicene creed as a sufficient statement of faith, the sacraments of eucharist and baptism, and the historic episcopate; that is the idea that the bishops of the Church can trace their succession from the first apostles, or at least from the earliest church. (Those four marks are generally referred to as the Chicago-Lambeth quadrilateral).

The Lambeth Conference of 1930, associated particularly with Archbishop William Temple, focussed on Anglican identity and managed to articulate certain 'ideals,' which the Church had *always exemplified*. They included an open Bible, a pastoral priesthood, a common worship, a standard of conduct consistent with that worship and a fearless love of truth.

In more modern times the Communion has spoken of four instruments, that is instances which demonstrate the unity of the Church: places where its unity can be seen and experienced. They are the Lambeth Conference (every 10 years or so), The ACC (since 1968), the meeting of all the Archbishops of the different Provinces, and the Archbishop of Canterbury himself (ie his office). Even more recently, since the end of the last century, the ACC (8) decided to describe the church in terms of its **task** and devised the Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Church. A 2007 consultation expressed the communalities thus: formed by scripture, shaped through worship, ordered for communion and directed by God's mission

One definition of Anglicanism can be simply stated: an Anglican is anyone who is in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury (the office not the individual). This definition is appropriately relational and avoids questions about power. The archbishop of Canterbury is not the equivalent of a pope. The Communion is held together not by institutionally endorsed power but by bonds of affection. The Anglican group that deals with questions of faith and order, the acronym for which is IASCUFO, is currently suggesting that this definition be altered to allow churches to have a *connection* with the Archbishop that falls short of full communion, but the point is that the ABC is still the relational focus, and if in the future as seems possible the focus will not be the ABC, it will still be relational.

All this is interesting to students of Church history but what does it mean in Diocesan terms? What are the instruments of unity in our Diocese. Where are the guarantees of unity within our diversity? And where is that unity visible? Are there challenges for us?

The most obvious symbol of unity in a Diocese is its bishop. As the Lambeth quadrilateral attests, the historic episcopate is one of the marks of identity of the church. It provides both unity, communion and continuity. Priests or presbyters are equally with bishops, ministers of the word and sacraments. All bishops were once priests, and they do not abandon any of the pastoral requisites of the one post when appointed to the other. (They are still in a sense priests, still deacons and indeed still lay people in a sense). However, bishops have an authority that ultimately derives from their being **ministers of ordination**. They are responsible for deciding who shall and shall not be ordained, and what preparation and formation is necessary before ordination. That effectively gives them oversight of ministry and worship. Those so ordained swear an oath of canonical obedience to the bishop and his successors, which is reaffirmed whenever a new office is assumed or licence issued. Clearly there has to be a single arbiter of who can preach and administer sacraments, and what forms of service can be used, at least in the locality that the Diocese represents. If the bishop is to symbolise unity he or she has a responsibility to maintain the unity so represented. The bishop is the face of the Diocese within the Province and to the wider communion. He will pray for its well being and work to achieve that for which he prays. Throughout the ages, notable contributions to thinking about the role of bishops have come from many sources including St Ignatius, St Irenaeus and St Cyprian.

The other symbol of unity in the Diocese is Synod, and in terms of governance, authority resides with **the bishop in Synod**. That is, the bishop governs with the advice and consent of Synod (or Convention in the USA). It is Synod that is responsible for agreeing mission objectives and programmes, and their financing. It is Synod that agrees the Constitution of the Diocese and affirms the Diocesan strategy, and it is Synod that is responsible for what we might call Diocesan financial justice: making sure that resources are fairly gathered and apportioned and that each part of the Diocese is honoured.

It is this last which is often not well understood. Synod members return to their parishes only to find that their financial committees there disagree with what Synod has decided. At this stage parishes can forget they are Anglican and can become quite congregational. This is not a problem peculiar to this Diocese. I have served in just five Dioceses in my time. Each of them had rich and poor churches and each struggled with the Christian let alone Anglican

responsibilities of that. In the Diocese of St Davids there is a very attractive sea-side resort called Tenby with a beautiful old church. Both the town and the church attract many visitors. The Rector of Tenby used to live in a huge house with vast grounds in a prominent position overlooking one of the beautiful beaches. Some years ago that house was sold and the rector rehoused but the local church retained the land and turned it into a car park. It is an absolute gold mine and consequently the parish of Tenby can afford lots of things other churches cannot. Now, are the people of Tenby better Christians, more deserving of facilities, more responsible stewards because they are rich? Is their priest more assiduous than the Vicar of the old mining village of Brynaman where a few people still gather faithfully week by week in freezing cold with their leaking roof and their decaying organ whose organist only knows ten hymns. Of course not. Their riches are a simple consequence of luck beyond their control. It's all down to a car park. Does the PCC see it like that? No. The Diocese has an overview of this justice issue. Synod members are responsible for actioning it.

A third place where we can see the Diocese as a unity is in the learning community – that community of people intentionally discerning God's vocation for them, and as a result in many cases training for some form of ministry. Obviously, if only from the point of view of fellowship and support within a cohort, this is best organised on a Diocesan basis. If we think of a church as a gathering of those who are attempting to respond to God's grace and God's call, then surely this is an example to treasure and help develop. It is currently starved of money and in danger of collapse.

In parts of Africa the Mothers Union would be a great example. Last Easter I was in Kenya leading an ordination retreat in a centre donated by the Mothers Union. Whilst we were there, there was a one -day Diocesan Rally of the MU. It attracted 4,400 members, and I can tell you that seeing that number of people in their blue and white uniforms was a formidable and thought-provoking sight. It was an example of how Anglican churches in different parts of the Communion are responding to their own contexts. As I have said, in our Diocese we also do that in unique circumstances, and Synod is somewhere to celebrate and affirm that.

So: what does it mean to be an Anglican? At least the following.

- To be part of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and to value its traditions
- To be a member of a hugely diverse company of people trying in their own ways to be open to the grace of God and attentively responsive to the call of God.

- To have and enjoy a particular style of liturgy, a particular order of ministry, a particular structure to church life; and an openness to and tolerance of the spiritual preferences of others
- To recognise the church as existing outside our own parochial boundaries
- To accept the Bishop's oversight and the authority of the bishop in Synod
- To be allowed a reasoned faith

And to feel part of something that is difficult to describe in words – and not only into Chinese characters.