

The Anglican Communion and its future: a synopsis

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The ecclesial polity of the Anglican Communion today can be understood in terms of three main principles; Familial bonds of affection, Fractal ecclesial development and Federality in communion:

Familial bonds of affection:

The Anglican Communion began, exists and stays together because it chose and chooses to, out of bonds of affection derived from a common story, the story of the ancient faith of the English-speaking peoples. This story probably had its roots in the gospel sharing of Christian Roman soldiers in England in the first few centuries after Christ. By the third and fourth centuries there was a recognisable Anglo- Celtic Church of England which had bishops and contact with the continent. This church prospered through the courage and vision of monastic missionaries who grew the mission of Christ and his kingdom far and wide.

Eventually, this church came to an agreement at the Synod of Whitby to merge with the larger European Rome-based mission and so joined the Roman Catholic Church. During the Reformation the Church of England became independent again under the influence of Thomas Cranmer and the English reformers, without forsaking their early Celtic or catholic roots.

The essential energy for the split with Rome was the Reformation in England, which produced a church which had a reformed theological mentality as well as much of its essential catholic practice. This was particularly true of the first Church of England prayer book where matins and evensong are clearly derived from Benedictine monastic offices. Episcopacy and the two dominical sacraments also continued as essentials. Although the precipitant that finally provoked the split was political as well as religious, nevertheless the integrity of reformed principles were guiding events at the ecclesial level. This independent Church of England then spread out over most of the globe alongside the growth of British interests initially. This was not an explicitly colonial agenda so much as a desire to offer the best the Anglican Christianity had to offer in its global faith reach, sometimes even to challenge and reform the colonial process. Long after the colonial agenda was over and a sense of commonwealth emerged, the Anglican church found itself with 84 million members in many countries all over the world: A global Anglican communion.

Today the average Anglican is an African woman with a very strong post- colonial Christian agenda. What held and holds this diverse grouping of over 38 Anglican provinces together is a sense of bonding through time, a bond and a heritage born of the best of this long and adventurous pilgrimage into new forms of ministry and mission from an original catholic and reformed heritage. Anglicans see themselves as ecclesially provisional because we seek the full organic unity for which Christ prayed, "that we may all be one". We are not the one true church, we are part of the one holy, catholic and apostolic faith, and seek its full restoration in one body: a global unity with a global diversity. That is why we believe that reunification with Rome is crucial in God's good time, along with all the faithful who are recognised and spoken to in the papal Encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*.

Out of this long story, there has developed a sense of family and a recognition that we need each other still, because the affection we hold for each other is a bond that cannot be cast aside lightly and has been used by God for great good in the world in many places, past and present. This is our great strength and the source of our identity and purpose.

Fractal ecclesial development:

Scientific studies have identified a development known as fractal. This a repeating unfolding of infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales; however they are not always

exactly the same structure at all scales, even though they are of the same type. Developments occur on the edge of patterns like the way a cloud changes shape or a sponge or a crystal grow. There is no central hierarchical nervous system forcing the emerging patterns shape, but development at the edges which nevertheless retain a strong family resemblance to the centre and origin. This kind of phenomenon has been used as a model for describing Anglican ecclesial development. At its best Anglican ecclesial development across the globe has shaped itself according to its local cultural and missional environment yet retaining a strong family resemblance to its origin in terms of scripture tradition and reason, in terms of the Chicago Quadrilateral, in terms of a similar overall approach to pastoralia, liturgy and mission. This means that the future for Anglican Christianity is impossible to predict exactly; but that its development will be recognisable and yet diverse as a form, or as an adaptation of a form, at the edges. This appears to be most like the way the early church developed in the first century from its base in Jerusalem, Antioch and then Rome. Paul's letters reflect this polity to some extent.

Federality in communion:

Globally, Anglicans belong to a 'Communion' rather than a federation; yet it exhibits behaviours that are federal in nature at times while retaining a sense of communion, which is more than federal. The radical doctrinal differences between provinces in some areas that we see at the moment, as well as the relative freedom with which provinces developed their own polity through their general synods from the beginning, while retaining a family likeness at their core, have given rise to federal behaviour to some extent. Yet the Communion keeps searching for the basis of a communion of churches in terms of common understandings of liturgy, the Bible and episcopacy for example, as well as international means of cohesion however fraught this process may be.

Two examples of current cohesion-seeking by the Communion are evidenced in the proposed Anglican Covenant and the report to the Anglican Consultative Council of "The Bible in the Life of the Church" project:

The Covenant:

The Anglican Covenant was presented to the Communion in four sections.

1. *Our Inheritance of Faith,*
2. *The life we share with others, our Anglican vocation,*
3. *Our Unity and common life, and*
4. *Our covenanted life together.*

Throughout the world, at each regional general synod it slowly became clear that the Communion could affirm the first three sections but not enough general synods could affirm section 4. Some felt section 4 was too stringent and others felt it was too weak. Some felt it was about right. This was described as the failure of the Covenant by some.

However the achievement of this process is that for the first time the Anglican Communion throughout the world could largely agree on how to describe its identity in terms of: Our inheritance of Faith, the Life we share with others, our Anglican vocation, and Our unity and common life. Effectively the Communion attempted four steps forward, and achieved three. It now lies with the Anglican Consultative Council, to determine what to do with the Covenant texts, but there are indications that the first three sections might be capable of being affirmed in time by the four instruments of Unity for the Communion: the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Primate's meeting, the Lambeth Conference and the Anglican Consultative Council. In an age where centrifugal forces abound in most voluntary global institutions we may well find that the first three sections of the

Covenant assist us to define our common ground in terms of core doctrine while allowing for diversity of expression.

The Bible in the Life of the Church Project:

The tensions which have tested the integrity and cohesion of the Communion the most have centred around sexuality, and these because they derive from a deep concern about the authority and use of the Bible. The Bible in the Life of the Church Project was initiated by the Anglican Consultative Council and met for three years, producing a report which offered the Communion a set of principles for guiding hermeneutics and exegesis of the Bible they were as follows:

- 1. Christ is the living Word of God.*
- 2. The Old testament is the foundational part of Christian scripture, its first testament.*
- 3. The Bible is to be taken as a whole and has within it great depths of spiritual meaning.*
- 4. There are many different literary genres in the Bible, which are to be distinguished carefully and consistently.*
- 5. An accurate reading of the Bible is informed, not threatened by sound scientific understanding: the God who inspires scripture as a true witness is the same god who created the world.*
- 6. The Bible must be seen in the contexts of the world in which it was written and also brought into conversation or confrontation with our worlds in order to discern Gods will for us today.*
- 7. We listen to the scriptures with open hearts and attentive minds accepting their authority for our lives and expecting that we will be transformed and renewed by the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.*

These principles were unanimously affirmed by the Anglican Consultative Council in 2013 and are the first example of a universally agreed guide to biblical interpretation. The Communion does not disagree over the essential authority of the Bible, but acknowledges its generic power at the centre of our life. There will be a variety of exegetical conclusions however, while using the same fundamental principles of interpretation. We are not about to divide over the authority of the Bible.

Conclusion:

It can be seen then that the Anglican Communion has an openness to diversity while seeking a sense of coherence about the basis of global unity at the fundamental level. It remains to be seen whether this ethos is able to hold the Communion together into the future. There is every indication that the overwhelming majority of Anglicans will recognise themselves in these realities, appreciate their imperfections, yet be prepared to live with them, work within them, and use them to progress the Kingdom of God in our world, as we all labour for the consummation of that kingdom on earth, together. This is very much the reality of the first century Church in the Mediterranean and the reality for St Paul as he sought to create a sense of unity in diversity there. That foundation was used by God to save, heal and bless the world.