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Conference Report: The Future of Anglicanism

For seven days over the last weekend in June and the opening days of July, Wycliffe Hall hosted a gathering of over seventy ordained and lay Anglicans from all over the world. They gathered, as Wycliffe celebrated its 125th anniversary, for an international consultation and a related larger conference at St Aldate's (advertised through *Anvil* earlier this year) on The Future of Anglicanism.

While there were a good number of familiar names and faces from the UK and North America (John Stott, Michael Green and Jim Packer all contributed at various points), most memorable was the great diversity and immense riches from cultures beyond the communion's historic homeland. Primates, theological college principals and numerous bishops, priests and theological educators came from around the communion. Together they represented congregations which worshipped in French, Spanish, Korean, Swahili, Arabic, Hindi, Mandarin, Yourba, and numerous other languages. Probably not since Lambeth 1998 had such an international gathering of Anglicans taken place in England.

The aims were to bring together church leaders and theological educators from both North and South, to establish networks of communication and resources across the Anglican Communion, and to dream dreams for the future. Rather than just discussing and attempting to predict the future of Anglicanism, the hope was to shape that future through renewing global Anglicanism as a witness to the grace of God in Christ. This we sought and, I believe, succeeded in doing, by strengthening a dynamic, biblical orthodoxy of faith and life and charting a way forward which focuses on Christ and brings together both biblical, theological truth and the worshipping and missionary life of the church.

As people gathered, the hot issue was undoubtedly the plan by New Westminster Diocese in Canada to approve a rite for the blessing of same sex unions. Although care was taken to avoid this dominating, it did seem providential that the important issues this raises for the future of the communion could be addressed by a global gathering of orthodox Anglicans. The visit by the Archbishop of Canterbury in the middle of the week provided further encouragement. He made clear, when speaking to the consultants and later to the wider conference, that he considered the issue 'a most serious one' and the New Westminster proposals as 'schismatic', dividing the Communion and ecumenically 'embarrassing'. The consultation's own significant response to that situation is discussed further at the end of this report.

Early in the consultation, Tom Wright's stimulating papers on Luke 24 and on Paul and the early church's struggles with unity, diversity and truth (subtitled 'From Corinth to Vancouver with Love') powerfully expounded God's word and related it

pertinently to the life of the worldwide church today. The Saturday afternoon then introduced two central themes intended to be long-term contributions of the consultation: the changing task of theological education and issues in global Anglicanism. After such a heavy day, Sunday was rightly a day of worship and rest (and watching the World Cup final). It culminated with a lively international act of worship in St Aldate's. Here Acts 2 provided a biblical focus to the launch of the larger conference which, with over 200 delegates, ran alongside the consultation throughout the week with a feast of international speakers and numerous seminars.

The next four and a half days seemed to be non-stop as the consultation and conference focused in turn on the task ahead, our gospel, our identity, our mission, and our future. The consultation's prepared papers, responses and plenary discussions provided high-octane theological teaching and debate with input from speakers such as John Webster, Christopher Seitz, Richard Bauckham, Esther Mombo, Ephraim Radner, John Chew, Edith Humphrey and others. It is hoped that some of these, along with the conference presentations by such people as Alister McGrath, Bishops James Jones and Mike Hill, Archbishop Donald Mtetemela (Tanzania) and Bishop Gideon Githiga (Kenya), will be published in the near future to benefit the wider church.

Perhaps the most important long-term impact of the consultation will be found, however, in the work of its study groups. These brought together consultants to consider areas of concern and interest for theological education in particular and the life and health of the Anglican Communion in general. Although this was not originally planned on the part of the consultation organizers, these generated so much of value during the week that the groups produced final reports (available from www.wycliffe.ox.ac.uk). These can be broadly summarized under three headings, reflecting some of the key commissions currently meeting in the formal structures of the Anglican Communion: mission, training and the nature of ecclesial communion.

First, the consultation as a whole placed mission central to the church's life and theology. It particularly recognized the urgency of listening to Anglicans in the two-thirds world whose help and wisdom is badly needed in much of the traditional heartlands of Anglicanism where the growth and spiritual vigour evident in Africa, Asia and Latin America are lacking (see for example Andrew Wheeler's 'But God is Not Defeated!' in *Anvil* 19.1 on learning from the Sudanese church).

The mission group, chaired by Tim Dakin (CMS) and Raphael Akiri, expressed concern that the evangelistic priority has been lost in mission and reaffirmed evangelism as both a logical priority arising from the Great Commission and a biblical priority that must express the full gospel. They highlighted that to put this into practice will require a willingness to review traditions of practice and evaluate new ways and means of mission and identified a number of key frontiers of mission (including war victims and refugees, victims of HIV/AIDS, children and the young) where faithful, applied biblical reflection and evangelistic action is required. Finally, and reflecting *Anvil's* recently-stated aims (19.1 editorial), the group encouraged the development of an Anglican mission ecclesiology drawing on both the Anglican tradition and the worldwide experience of mission.

A special group was set up to address matters of Christianity and Islam. This emphasized the need to find creative ways of living together peacefully and respectfully and for Christians to be informed about Islam if they are to introduce the Christian faith to Muslims 'with integrity, humility and compassion'. Among its specific recommendations were that Islam be a core subject in Christian theological institutions and that resources be developed to support Christians facing difficulties in Islamic contexts.

Also under mission, perhaps surprisingly to some, should be classed the report of the ethics group chaired by Oliver O'Donovan. This not only stressed the need for Christian ethics to develop a biblical anthropology to clarify the norms of character and practice which ground our moral judgments, but highlighted the missionary aspect to ethics. Faced with less consensus on moral truths, it reminded us that the church holds out to the world the reality of life in Christ. She must stake out clearly the difference which a Christian life makes while simultaneously showing 'graced prudence' in pastoral care for those victims of the world's way of life who enter the church.

Turning, secondly, to theological education, the biblical studies group reaffirmed the authority of Scripture at the heart of Anglican belief and the importance of regular reading and study of both Old and New Testaments, expressing concern at selectivity in the use of Scripture and tendencies to regard interpretation as a matter of subjective truth and personal choice. The history and doctrine scholars, while recognizing the Anglican Communion is simply one Christian tradition among others, reaffirmed that the Communion's theology 'seeks to be nothing other than biblical Christian orthodox theology' and that this must therefore be the arbiter and judge of what is Anglican in theological debate. They were clear, however, that this core will develop and be expressed in a variety of contextually rooted and relevant ways in different parishes, dioceses and provinces. Commenting on the Primates' recent statement that 'the unity of the Communion as a whole still rests on the Lambeth Quadrilateral' (Scripture, creeds, dominical sacraments and historic episcopate) and that only formal and public repudiation of this would place a diocese or province outside the Communion, they have proposed a future conference to define more closely the commitments of the quadrilateral and what would be meant for its terms to be repudiated.

The largest study group comprised heads of theological colleges chaired by George Sumner of Wycliffe, Toronto. Its significant report reaffirmed the integral role of theological education in the growth of the global Anglican church and the need for that education to integrate 'heart, head and hands' and foster mature Christian disciples. Identifying a number of challenges – especially for theological education in the South – this group is committed to continue working together as 'a global network to promote creative and effective Anglican evangelical theological education' and will be one of many exciting and lasting effects of the week's work.

Finally, as already mentioned, the consultation met in the midst of considerable political upheaval. The Faith and Order group under the chairmanship of Bishops Maurice Sinclair and Robinson Cavalcanti produced two particularly significant outcomes. As part of their wider report they supported the exploration of a new

Anglican Catechism for the worldwide Anglican Communion. This would 'provide a contemporary resource for adult catechesis and group study at the parish level' and 'articulate and explain basic Christian beliefs and practices'. The project is being explored further by a team headed by Jeff Greenman and Michael Thompson. The group also drafted a statement which the whole consultation supported as 'The Oxford Declaration: A Statement on an Issue of Faith and Order'. This expressed the concerns of all those present at many developments in both New Westminster and parts of the Episcopal Church in the United States. Though focused on human sexuality and gospel standards of sexual behaviour, it discerned their underlying causes as deeper and wider theological and ethical issues. Speaking positively of recent action by Primates, the statement recognizes our own confusion and failure in witness, repudiates firmly 'the actions of bishops who have failed to guard essential aspects of Biblical and Anglican tradition' and renews commitment to the historic apostolic faith, which nurtures Christian marriage, affirms and supports the single life, and develops ministry to help all of us in our sexual confusion and brokenness. Addressing the specific crisis in New Westminster it affirmed those who opposed the Synod's decisions (some of whom addressed the consultation), called for emergency measures by the Primates to enable them to continue their ministry, and commended the early adoption of the 'To Mend the Net' proposals for a permanent way of ordering the Communion's shared life with genuine mutual accountability.

In seven days much was achieved both formally through the reports but also informally in renewing old friendships and building new ones. Even more exciting is that much was begun which will continue to shape the future of Anglicanism in the months and years ahead. Networks have been established around the whole communion among orthodox theological educators and between them and bishops and primates who will continue to resource and support each other in numerous ways. There is talk of another similar consultation in a few years time in Africa or Singapore. Above all, we knew God's presence with us and had our vision renewed of one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. In the closing words of the Oxford Declaration, everyone went back from the consultation 'grateful for our fellowship in our Lord Jesus Christ and remaining fully confident in our Lord's loving purposes for his Church and his world'.

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