

Unity and Diversity in the Lambeth Conference

by Christopher L. Webber

Note: In this essay, there are several quotations from the Lambeth Conference archives, which use “English” rather than “American” spelling (e.g., “recognise” rather than “recognize”). Rather than insert “sic” every time, the quotations are presented here as they appear in the originals.

Introduction

The Archbishop of Canterbury has sent out invitations to the bishops of the Anglican Communion to meet together at Lambeth this summer. It's the fourteenth time that has happened, and the second time that there has been a serious question as to who might come. The first time a bare majority arrived: 76 out of 144. Many of those absent in 1867, including the Archbishop of York, had serious questions as to whether it was a good idea. Would they be creating a new center of authority? Would they be setting something in motion that might have unforeseen consequences?

In 2008 over 800 invitations have been sent, but it seems likely that a significant number will choose not to attend. Be that as it may, it seems like a good time to ask how we got here. Where did Lambeth begin? What was the original purpose? What has it accomplished? Are we over-hyping this thing? What follows is one attempt to sum it up. It is not intended as a full history of Lambeth, but a summary of the origins and main developments that may be instructive today.

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This essay first appeared as a four-part series on the Web site of The Episcopal Majority (<http://episcopalmajority.blogspot.com>) between January 28 and February 4, 2008. This version was prepared on February 16, 2008.

Part I: The Beginning

- No binding decisions to be made
- Invitations to “all avowedly in communion”
- No defining of doctrine
- Respect for each other
- No ministry in another jurisdiction without consent

It was the Bishop of Vermont who first suggested a conference of Anglican bishops; but it was an appeal from the Canadian bishops, who saw the political unity between their country and England beginning to dissolve, that brought about the first gathering. The Archbishop of Canterbury was nervous about it. Who knew what might happen if you brought together so many bishops, or what the consequences might be for the powers of individual bishops and archbishops?

“It should be distinctly understood,” said Archbishop Longley, “that at this meeting no declaration of faith shall be made, and no decision come to which shall affect generally the interests of the Church, but that we shall meet together for brotherly counsel and encouragement. . . . I should refuse to convene any assembly which pretended to enact any canons, or affected to make any decisions binding on the Church.” Nonetheless, the Archbishop of York and several others from his province refused to come, and the Dean of Westminster refused to let the Abbey be used for the closing service, citing (among other reasons) “the presence of prelates not belonging to our Church.”

Hesitantly, however, Archbishop Longley sent out invitations to “all who are avowedly in communion with our Church,” assuring them that “such a meeting would not be competent to make declarations or lay down definitions on points of doctrine. But united worship and common counsels would,” he hoped, “tend to maintain the unity of the faith.” Seventy-six of the 144 bishops invited made their way to England in the autumn of 1867 and heard the Archbishop assure them that, “It has never been contemplated that we should assume the functions of a general synod of all the churches in full communion with the Church of England, and take upon ourselves to enact canons that should be binding upon those here represented. We merely propose to discuss matters of practical interest, and pronounce what we deem expedient in resolutions which may serve as safe guides to future action.”

In spite of all these protestations, when the bishops gathered, the Archbishop of Cape Town asked for a change in the program so that he could have advice on dealing with a bishop in his province who was accused of heresy. In spite of “the strenuous protest of several bishops,” the conference appointed a committee to look into the matter and report back. The suggestion that a “Court of Appeal” be created to deal with such matters was also referred to a committee. When the committees reported back three months later, the Lambeth archives states, fewer than twenty bishops were still available to deal with them, so the reports were “received” and referred to a future conference for action.

The issue raised by the Archbishop of Cape Town, however, has a special resonance on the eve of the 2008 Conference. One of his bishops, John William Colenso, had aroused a controversy by publishing books suggesting that the Books of the Pentateuch could not all be literal history or even written by Moses. Colenso had come to his views first on the basis of his study of geology and then as he struggled with the task of presenting the gospel to the Zulus. He had learned the language, compiled a dictionary, and translated the Bible into Zulu. He is honored today by the Zulus as the man who brought them the faith and who took their side against the Boers. But he had come reluctantly to believe that the Pentateuch “though imparting to us, as I fully believe it does, revelations of the Divine Will and Character, cannot be regarded as historically true.” Few would argue with that today, but in 1867 it was unthinkable. The Archbishop of Cape Town therefore deposed him and appointed a new bishop in his place. Since Colenso refused to leave his position and ministry, Cape Town wanted Lambeth to support him. The great majority of the bishops at Lambeth supported Cape Town but the Archbishop of Canterbury, who also held Colenso to be a heretic, was unsure that he or the Lambeth bishops generally had the authority to intervene. Thus the matter was referred to a committee and died. To put it in contemporary terms, the bishops at Lambeth refused to support the deposition of a liberal bishop serving effectively in his community or the creation of a rival bishop to serve the same community. Then it was the freedom from foreign interference of the African church that was at issue; today it is North American churches.

Colenso also upset many of his brother bishops by his willingness to accept polygamists for baptism. How, he asked is the immorality of polygamy resolved by the immorality of divorce? The potential convert, he wrote, “must be utterly bewildered between the sense of his duty to God (as taught by the missionary) and the dictates of his own heart and mind which tell him so truly, that whatever he may be willing to do to secure his own soul’s salvation, he has no right to sacrifice his wives, their feelings, their marriage bonds, their rights, and the rights of their children? For who shall marry them again? ... Is the husband to take possession of all the children?” Colenso agreed that polygamy in the long term, was unacceptable, but that in terms of short term missionary policy it was better to baptize the polygamists and bring them into the church than either to repel them or to force them to choose one wife and leave the other wives and children without support. Bitterly opposed at the time, it was a view that became acceptable to the Lambeth bishops in 1988. Such radical transformations in the statements issued by Lambeth would not be uncommon.

When the Canadian bishops asked for a second conference, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Archibald Campbell Tait, was clear that such problems should be avoided. “There is no intention whatever,” he said, “on the part of anybody to gather together the Bishops of the Anglican Church for the sake of defining any matter of doctrine. Our doctrines are contained in our formularies, and our formularies are interpreted by the proper judicial authorities, and there is no intention whatever at any such gathering that questions of doctrine should be submitted for interpretation in any future Lambeth Conference any more than they were at the previous Lambeth Conference.”

In spite of the difficulties that arose in the first Lambeth Conference, a second gathering was called for and convened in 1878. The Archbishop of York (William Thomson) preached a

sermon that is still relevant in 2008. He drew on the story in Acts of the way in which Peter and Paul had argued in the early days of the church, and said, “It may be permitted us reverently to question whether the pulse of divine life in the Church has been hastened by one beat, by the violence of the zealous, who have thought well to be angry for the cause of God. Through strife, but not by strife, the Church has passed upon her way.”

Also still relevant in 2008 were resolutions about unity within the Anglican Communion. It should be, the bishops said, “distinctly recognised and set forth, as of great importance for the maintenance of union among the Churches of our Communion” that “the duly certified action of every national or particular Church ... should be respected by all the other Churches, and by their individual members” and that “no bishop or other clergyman of any other Church should exercise his functions within [some other] diocese without the consent of the bishop thereof.”

Each member church should be free to govern its own life, but always remembering the other churches. That tension between freedom and unity was recognized early in relation to worship which, it was agreed, was central to the life of the Communion. While the bishops agreed that there should be great freedom for churches to revise the Book of Common Prayer, they also cautioned that too great variation would imperil the Communion’s unity.

The proposal made ten years before, for a “Court of Appeal,” was dealt with by a committee which announced that they were “not prepared to recommend that there should be any one central tribunal,” but rather that each province should deal with its own issues. Where a province was unable to do so, however, they agreed there might be a committee of five Archbishops, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, to review the case and offer an opinion. In keeping with the preliminary guidelines that ruled out doctrinal definitions, the report was not officially adopted, but rather incorporated in an encyclical letter approved by those in attendance.

Having weathered two conferences without committing themselves to much of anything, the bishops did, however, express “the hope that the problem, hitherto unsolved, of combining together for consultation representatives of Churches so differently situated and administered, may find, in the providential course of events, its own solution.” They therefore ventured to suggest that conferences might “be invested in future with somewhat larger liberty as to the initiation and selection of subjects for discussion.”

“Differently situated and administered” though the dioceses were from which the bishops came, it was still assumed that they had something in common besides Anglicanism: the Archbishop of Canterbury greeted them as coming “from all continents, and seas, and shores, where the English tongue is spoken.” Yet even then, such a greeting might have been questioned since the Bishops of Shanghai and Haiti were among those present, to say nothing of bishops from Wales and India. Overlooking that fact, the conference arranged for its encyclical letter to be translated only into Latin and Greek!

Part II: Broader Agendas

- Resolutions adopted on church and social issues
- Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral adopted
- Definitions of “full communion” and “essentials of faith” not adopted
- Sexual issues raised: divorce and contraception condemned
- Women to be admitted to all lay ministries

1888

By the time a third Lambeth Conference was called for, the idea of such meetings had become a tradition. Therefore, the agenda in 1888 was much bolder than that of the first two conferences, ranging from socialism to polygamy and including “Authoritative standards of Doctrine and Worship” as well as “Mutual relations of Dioceses and Branches of the Anglican Communion.” Now, for the first time, resolutions were brought before the bishops and officially adopted. The bishops acted not only upon resolutions having to do with the life of the church, but also with the civil societies in which they functioned.

“Intemperance” had become an issue in the growing cities of England and America, and the bishops suggested that governments could help by restricting the number of places where alcohol could be drunk and the hours when such places were open. In the Anglican spirit of balance, they also condemned the fanaticism of many prohibitionists as sometimes “uncharitable and presumptuous.” Now that resolutions were being adopted officially, disagreement became visible. Resolutions on not admitting polygamists to baptism found from 20% to 40% of the bishops in opposition.

The life and unity of the church were a primary concern. The principles laid down ten years earlier, that each national church should respect the work of the others and that bishops should not enter the dioceses of others without permission, were said to have been “neglected,” and therefore were reaffirmed. Statements had been made in the past about not “defining any matter of doctrine,” but it was this conference that accepted the principles known now as “The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral” as a sufficient basis for Christian unity.

The conference also suggested that it would be useful for the Archbishop of Canterbury to appoint a small committee to draw up a simple statement of the teaching of the Anglican Communion on such subjects as the Catholic Faith, the Holy Scriptures, the Sacraments, the Forms of Prayer and Liturgy in use in the Anglican Churches, the relation of the Anglican Churches to the Church of Rome, the Churches of the East, and other Christian Churches and Societies, and the relation of the teaching of the Church of Christ to human knowledge.

The conference agreed that the 39 Articles could well be amended in some particulars. Such a statement surely went well beyond the limits laid down for the first two conferences.

The conference also stated its opinion via reports received and included by reference in an encyclical letter on divorce and polygamy, among other things, in spite of the fact that there was considerable dissent on both matters, ranging from almost a quarter to well over a third of the bishops present. A long report on “purity” was adopted, calling on bishops and churches to work for a reformation of manners in relation to marriage and sexual matters. The bishops were concerned, they said, to “guard the innocent, to punish the guilty, to rescue the fallen, to suppress the haunts of vice, and to remove temptation from our thoroughfares.”

1897

In 1897, at the fourth Lambeth Conference, the bishops set out to define themselves by referring to letters of the earlier conferences which had been addressed to “Archbishops, Bishops Metropolitan, and other Bishops of the Holy Catholic Church, in full communion with the Church of England, one hundred in number, all exercising superintendence over Dioceses, or lawfully commissioned to exercise Episcopal functions” The issue of freedom and unity was addressed again in the statement that: “it is important that, so far as possible, the Church should be adapted to local circumstances, and the people brought to feel in all ways that no burdens in the way of foreign customs are laid upon them, and nothing is required of them but what is of the essence of the faith, and belongs to the due order of the Catholic Church.” The first of these statements, of course, left undefined what was meant by being “in full communion with the Church of England,” and the second left open “what is of the essence of the faith, and belongs to the due order of the Catholic Church.” Over a century later, these questions remain unanswered.

1908

The first conference of the 20th century, in 1908, found sexual matters claiming a central place on the agenda. The sanctity of marriage was seen to be threatened, and the bishops called on all “right-thinking and clean-living men and women” to defend the institution. Divorce, except for adultery and fornication, was not to be tolerated. The bishops declared that those who were divorced, even if “innocent,” could not marry again in the church. That resolution was carried by a vote of 87–84. They declared, though, that the “innocent party,” if re-married in a civil ceremony, might be re-admitted to communion. Birth control and abortion were condemned as well.

The 1908 Lambeth Conference agreed that the “ministry of the laity requires to be more widely recognised.” However, when they came to deal with the creation of a consultative council (called for by the previous conference), they resolved that such a council should be composed of 18 bishops chosen by the various provinces.

[Sidenote: The idea of a “consultative council” appears as early as the call at the 1867 gathering for a “Spiritual Court of Appeal,” but no such “court” was created. In 1878, there was a suggestion of a “Voluntary Board of Arbitration,” but again no such board seems to have been put in place. There was a call in 1897 for the Archbishop of Canterbury to create a “consultative council,” but still there is no evidence that it was done. It seems there was some continuing interest in having a tool available to resolve disputes, not a body meeting at regular intervals; but

no such group was created, and apparently no disputes were referred. All these proposals, of course, were to include only bishops and usually archbishops. The distinguished American Bishop of Olympia, Stephen Bayne, who became the first Anglican Executive Officer, created what he called an Anglican Consultative Council after the 1958 Lambeth Conference to work with him, but there is no indication that such a group was formally constituted as an authorized gathering until 1968.]

1920

The First World War made it necessary to postpone the next Lambeth Conference until 1920, and the war had begun to change settled views on a number of issues. Women, said the 1920 conference, should be admitted to all councils in the church in which lay men served. Here the conference was, indeed, staking out new territory. It took the Episcopal Church in the U.S. another fifty years to get itself in line with Lambeth and admit women as deputies to its General Convention.

On other matters of gender, however, the bishops at Lambeth were much more hesitant. The use of contraception was seen as a “grave danger—physical, moral and religious,” and the distribution of prophylactics was seen as “an invitation to vice.” The bishops believed that the use of such materials “threatens the race.” An echo of this viewpoint might be found in the response of the Church in Nigeria to the request of the 1998 Lambeth Conference that the Communion should listen to homosexuals as the Nigerian Church stated that such practice “threatens ... the continuation of the race.” The bishops called on Christians everywhere to bring pressure on governments to end “the open or secret sale of contraceptives, and the continued existence of brothels.”

Part III: Coming to Grips with Unity and Diversity

- Defining the Anglican Communion (1930)
- Grappling with human relationships (1948)
- Growth in understanding of marriage (1958)
- Consultative Council given broader membership and mission

1930

When the bishops next gathered at Lambeth Palace, in 1930, their views on marriage remained those of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, which was still the standard book in most parts of the Communion. That book stated, and the bishops re-affirmed, that “the primary purpose for which marriage exists is the procreation of children.” If parents were no longer enthusiastic about large families, the bishops called for “deliberate and thoughtful self-control ... in intercourse.” At this conference, there was no condemnation of prophylactics, although the bishops still believed that limiting or avoiding parenthood should be effected primarily by abstinence. Now, however, they resolved that “where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence ... other methods may be used”—though not for selfishness or mere convenience. What those other methods might be—when the use and sale of prophylactics was condemned—was left unclear, but at least the bishops seemed to recognize that the world was changing and the 1662 Prayer Book might not be the last word on the purposes of marriage. But there was strong opposition to this statement and, though it was approved by a 3-1 margin, 67 bishops voted against.

In the face of American rejection of the League of Nations and a rising tide of international tensions, the bishops set out to offer another model of human relationships by providing the first attempt at a definition of the Anglican Communion:

The Anglican Communion is a fellowship, within the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, of those duly constituted dioceses, provinces or regional Churches in communion with the See of Canterbury, which have the following characteristics in common:

1. they uphold and propagate the Catholic and Apostolic faith and order as they are generally set forth in the Book of Common Prayer as authorised in their several Churches;
2. they are particular or national Churches, and, as such, promote within each of their territories a national expression of Christian faith, life and worship; and
3. they are bound together not by a central legislative and executive authority, but by mutual loyalty sustained through the common counsel of the bishops in conference.

Secular governments, however, were pursuing a different vision. Ten years later, international conflict had boiled over and, though the United States was not yet officially involved, war was raging in Europe and Asia. No conference could be held in 1940. It would be eighteen years before the bishops could meet again.

1948

As the hot war cooled in 1948 and the Cold War began, the bishops met again and issued a series of resolutions designed to offer a different vision of human relationships. A Christian doctrine of humanity was central to that vision:

The Conference, believing that man's disorders and conflicts are primarily due to ignorance or rejection of the true understanding of his nature and destiny as revealed by God in Jesus Christ, affirms that man has a spiritual as well as a material nature, and that he can attain full stature only as he recognises and yields to the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and to the influence of his Holy Spirit.

The bishops went on to affirm "that war as a method of settling international disputes is incompatible with the teaching and example of our Lord Jesus Christ." They spoke of the need for nations to "yield some ... sovereignty" but, being Anglicans, they recognized, even though nuclear weapons were now available, "that there are occasions when both nations and individuals are obliged to resort to war as the lesser of two evils."

Realists in political matters, the bishops were not yet ready to yield the Christian vision of marriage to the reality of a rising divorce rate. They affirmed "that the marriage of one whose former partner is still living may not be celebrated according to the rites of the Church, unless it has been established that there exists no marriage bond recognised by the Church."

At the first Lambeth Conference the question of creating a "Spiritual Court of Appeal" was raised, and the next conference suggested creating Voluntary Boards of Arbitration for Churches to which such an arrangement may be applicable, but nothing was done. The 1897 Conference called on the Archbishop of Canterbury to institute a "consultative body" to provide information and advice on request, but nothing seems to have been done as result of that call. The 1948 meeting finally defined a Consultative Council made up of bishops that would serve as the continuation committee of the conference and empowered it to deal with any matters referred to it by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

1958

By 1958, the Lambeth Conference was ready to look at marriage in a much more positive way and rooted its statements carefully in a positive theology. Marriage, they said, is a "vocation to holiness" and the idea of the family is "rooted in the Godhead." "Consequently," the bishops agreed, "all problems of sex relations, the procreation of children, and the organisation of family life must be related, consciously and directly, to the creative, redemptive, and sanctifying power of God." Family planning, they now agreed, is "a right and important factor in Christian family life and should be the result of positive choice before God." Instead of condemning contraception, they now believed that methods "mutually acceptable to husband and wife in Christian conscience" were acceptable.

Concentrating as they were on the family, the bishops had little to say about women's ministry outside the home except to say that "fuller use should be made of trained and qualified women, and that spheres of progressive responsibility and greater security should be planned for them."

1968

But women were planning for themselves, and when the bishops met again, in 1968, the issue of women's ordination was upon them and they were not ready. The Lambeth Conference expressed the opinion that the theological arguments for and against the ordination of women to the priesthood were "inconclusive," and asked that the member churches study the matter carefully and seek advice from the Consultative Council before doing anything rash.

The bishops also took note of the recent papal statement condemning all methods of birth control except abstinence and the so-called "rhythm" method. The bishops at Lambeth agreed that the pope was in error on this subject. Of course, that meant the bishops themselves had been in error in 1920; but Anglican bishops can change their minds, and popes find it difficult to do that.

The bishops had always been reluctant to exercise leadership, but now they were willing to share it. The 1968 conference made radical changes in the Anglican Consultative Council, ordering it to include equal numbers of bishops, priests, and lay people from the five largest provinces and a priest or lay person as well as a bishop from the others. The Council could also select six other individuals to serve with them, of whom two must be women and two less than 28 years old. Now, for the first time, there would be an official body created to help build relationships between the member churches of the Communion. A Communion that had been held together simply by "mutual affection," a Prayer Book tradition, and occasional meetings of bishops would now have a representative body meeting every two years. Communion would be expressed through a committee.

Part IV: Living Together as a Truly Global Community

- Ordination of women a central and divisive issue
- Study of homosexuality called for (1978)
- “Impaired communion” recognized (1988)
- Role of primates discussed

1978

When the bishops met again, in 1978, women were already being ordained to the priesthood, not only in the Episcopal Church (U.S.), but also in Hong Kong, New Zealand, and Canada.

Eight other provinces had agreed to do so or saw no objection. The bishops, faced with deep divisions on the issue, saw their role as pastoral care, not leadership; rather than take a potentially divisive stand, they pleaded for patience and unity. In an awkward sentence, unworthy of Cranmer’s heirs, they expressed the hope

(a) that Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches would see the holding together of diversity within a unity of faith and worship is part of the Anglican heritage; (b) that those who have taken part in ordinations of women to the priesthood believe that these ordinations have been into the historic ministry of the Church as the Anglican Communion has received it; and (c) that we hope the dialogue between these other Churches and the member Churches of our Communion will continue because we believe that we still have understanding of the truth of God and his will to learn from them as together we all move towards a fuller catholicity and a deeper fellowship in the Holy Spirit.

Matters of gender had not disappeared from the 1978 agenda, and the bishops reported that they viewed the issues surrounding human sexuality as being “complex.” There was a need, they said, “for theological study of sexuality in such a way as to relate sexual relationships to that wholeness of human life which itself derives from God, who is the source of masculinity and femininity.” In particular, while they “reaffirm[ed] heterosexuality as the scriptural norm,” they recognized “the need for deep and dispassionate study of the question of homosexuality, which would take seriously both the teaching of Scripture and the results of scientific and medical research.” They recognized as well a need for pastoral concern and dialogue. Such dialogue had already begun in some places, but not enough. Twenty years later, it would cause angry debate. Thirty years later, it would be dividing the Communion and calling the very continuance of the Lambeth Conference and even the Anglican Communion into question.

Perhaps “dispassionate study” of homosexuality was still possible, but the issue of women’s ordination was beginning to cause serious divisions. Fifty-eight years after the conference had said that women might be ordained only as deaconesses, the conference was asking for patience and sensitivity and the possible provision of alternative ministry for those unwilling to accept women as priests and bishops.

1988

Resolution #1 of the 1988 Lambeth Conference revealed the depth of the divisions that were occurring. The bishops could speak openly of “the present impaired nature of communion.” If women were ordained as bishops, this would throw the problem into “sharper focus.” They asked that provinces respect the decisions of other provinces, whether they accepted them or not, and maintain “the highest possible degree of communion with the provinces which differ.” The Archbishop of Canterbury was asked to appoint a commission to keep track of developments. Meanwhile, all were told of the need “to exercise sensitivity, patience and pastoral care towards all concerned.” But bishops facing intractable divisions were “encouraged to seek continuing dialogue with, and make pastoral provision for, those clergy and congregations whose opinions differ from those of the bishop, in order to maintain the unity of the diocese.” How separate pastoral provision would maintain unity was not explained.

Polygamy continued to present a problem. The bishops were less ready to restrict the access of polygamists to the sacraments than their predecessors a century earlier who had been willing to baptize only wives of polygamists and even those only “in some cases.” Now the bishops felt that “a polygamist who responds to the Gospel and wishes to join the Anglican Church may be baptized and confirmed with his believing wives and children” if they promise not to marry again so long as any of his wives were alive and if the local community were agreeable.

As the Anglican Communion became more truly a global community, the conference found itself asked to express opinions on the situations in Namibia, Lebanon, Palestine, Northern Ireland, military governments in Latin America, and Sharia Law in the Sudan. Naturally, also, as ecumenical relationships grew, the conference needed to express its opinion of relationships with Baptist, Orthodox, Roman, Pentecostal, Methodist, Reformed, United, and Lutheran Churches. Small wonder, then, that in spite of the request made by the previous conference for “dispassionate study” of homosexuality, there was no resolution on that subject in 1988.

1998

By 1998, the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate was a fait accompli.

And small wonder, then, that the Lambeth Conference of 1998 found itself involved in prolonged and angry debate on the subject of sexuality. As to homosexuals, the bishops committed themselves “to listen to the experience of homosexual persons” and “assure them that they are loved by God and ... full members of the Body of Christ.” Homosexual practice was rejected “as incompatible with Scripture,” but “irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex” was condemned. Was it implied that there could be rational fear of homosexuals? A resolution referring to homosexuality as a “kind of sexual brokenness” and calling on bishops who ordain homosexual persons to repent was defeated. However, the bishops found that they could not “advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions.”

But how was unity to be preserved where such divisions existed—or how might it be regained? The resolutions concerning respect for diocesan boundaries first adopted over a century earlier were reaffirmed. Bishops could not be a sign of unity while encouraging division. But the bishops seemed to be looking for stronger leadership and central authority. The conference noted that the primates had begun to meet separately and expressed the hope that the primates might “exercise an enhanced responsibility in offering guidance on doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters.” The primates should meet more regularly, the bishops believed, but the Anglican Consultative Council was fine as it was and should not be asked to do more. The bishops seemed to defer to the primates, whose meetings “should carry moral authority calling for ready acceptance throughout the Communion.”

Summary

A summary of such a tumultuous history is all too likely to reflect the concerns of the moment and the viewpoint of the individual historian. This review has focused on two central issues: changing understandings of gender and sexuality, and the balance between diversity and unity. In recent years the emergence of new “instruments of unity” has raised new questions as to the relative significance of Lambeth, primates, and the Consultative Council with a critical underlying issue of the relative power of clergy and lay people. [Sidenote: We have also published Archbishop Peers’ comments on the first meeting of the primates in 1978. Archbishop Daniel Coggan presided both at the Lambeth Conference and the 1978 primates meeting.] In regard to the concerns of the moment, the initial hesitancy of the bishops meeting at Lambeth to pronounce on anything at all rapidly shifted until, in the latter part of the 20th century, there were few things on which the conference did not have an opinion. The initial insistence on dispersed authority left a vacuum which the primates now seem determined to fill.

In regard to gender and sexuality, it is remarkable to observe the radical change in the positions the bishops have taken. In 1888, polygamists were not generally to be baptized; in 1988, they could be. In 1920, prophylactics were an “invitation to vice”; by 1958 they were “acceptable.” Until 1948, divorced persons were never to be remarried in church and those who remarried in civil ceremonies were not to be admitted to communion; by 1958 this frequently stated position had been replaced by the suggestion that a procedure for defining marital status was needed and the separate churches and provinces should work on it. No more has been heard of that, and the Anglican provinces have found ways not only to give communion to the divorced and remarried, but also to perform second and even third marriages in the church.

All this seems to raise again the central question of the Anglican ethos: Can a Christian community exist without a central authority and narrow definitions of doctrine? For centuries, royal authority and unquestioned cultural traditions enabled Anglicanism to survive and even thrive without such authority and definition. A world-wide community, existing in widely different cultures, no longer has these built-in supports. This might be an advantage if Anglicans were prepared to accept the variety of styles, theologies, liturgies, and politics that have resulted. One might imagine a community in which Christians were willing to accept strong episcopal authority in some places and strong lay leadership in others, narrow interpretation of the Bible in some societies and a more liberal interpretation in others. Why should African bishops have to

dress like Victorian prelates and Japanese Christians be required to worship in Gothic buildings? Yet these cultural trappings have been accepted and the more significant differences that might reflect a truly encultured gospel have left us badly divided and on the verge of dissolution.

A careful review of our history, even one narrowly focused on some aspects of the Lambeth Conference, might lead us to be less sure of ourselves, more ready to listen, and more willing to leave a generous room for difference. If so many definitive statements of Lambeth have proved so subject to change, how sure should we be of our own current pronouncements? Might it be better to recognize that we might be wrong again and that we have yet to succeed in striking a proper balance between Biblical authority and cultural conditioning? Is it possible that we serve God's church best when we do least to divide ourselves and do most to center our common life on a pattern of worship that draws us closer to the redeeming love of God?

These questions, it would seem, ought to be asked and should have been asked long ago.

About the Sources: Quotations here have been drawn from two websites and a book:

- The Lambeth conferences of 1867, 1878, and 1888: with the official reports and resolutions, together with the sermons preached at the conferences
- The Lambeth Conference Official Website - Archives
- *The Lambeth Conference 1958: The Encyclical Letter from the Bishops together with the Resolutions and Reports* (New York: Seabury Press, 1958)