

Anguish and Amnesia: The Episcopal Church and Communion

The hurt

The sense of sorrow and sometimes indignation expressed by many TEC bishops over the Primates' meeting and its decisions is understandable.¹ The sentiment of grief comes in many forms. For some (e.g. Connecticut), "sadness" is marked by a warning against primatial overreach. For others (e.g. New Hampshire), TEC is experiencing pain because she is being persecuted like Jesus. For some (e.g. Western New York), the Primates gathering "fails" as an ecclesial council and is but a "clanging cymbal" in its understanding of communion. Some (e.g. California) went so far as to accuse the Primates, on this "sad day", of acting in a manner "antithetical to the way of Christ", and of being "dishonest", "devious", and "scapegoating".

Despite these strong notes of distress, TEC's episcopal responses are generally gracious. They also almost all assert the fact that nothing has changed, nothing will change, and that TEC's decisions regarding same-sex marriage are immovable. In this way, sadness is bound to a sense that the Primates' common counsel is mostly irrelevant.

It is true that the Primates' decisions mark a clear rejection of TEC's policies and decisions at its own General Convention. Nobody likes to have people forcefully disagree with them; and the matter of same-sex marriage is one of deep feeling and passion, and also irresolvable contradictions in presupposition and perspective among disputants. It is painfully grating when fellow Christians and thoughtful human beings insist they cannot agree with another's point of view.

I suppose it is also understandable that one might mourn the fact that such deep disagreements give rise to tangible estrangement. While the Primates insisted that TEC remains a beloved sister church in the Communion, they don't want TEC representing the Anglican Communion or voting at Communion councils on matters of doctrine and polity. That too is painful. It is hard to hold together talk of "love" and the imposition of disciplinary "consequences". All of us want voice and vote within our communities, and when these are restricted or taken away, we feel that our place in that community has itself been threatened or diminished.

So, I say, let the bishops vent. It's only natural. We have all been venting about these kinds of things, each from our own vantage of experienced threat and diminishment, over the past few years.

But we should beware of confusing our hurts with ecclesial realities. In this case, TEC bishops have, one after the other, insisted that the Primates have no "right" or "authority" to make the

¹ A set of responses can be found linked at: <http://www.episcopalcafe.com/episcopal-church-bishops-respond-to-primates/>. There are a few exceptions to the general attitudes addressed in this essay, and they range from the responses of same-sex affirming bishops like Thomas Breidenthal of S. Ohio, to Communion Partner bishops like Daniel Martins of Springfield.

decisions they have done, or to implement them. TEC bishops have said that the Anglican Communion has no means to shape their participation in its councils. They have said that the Communion itself has nothing to do with common teaching and an ordered common council. They have said, finally, that the Anglican Communion has historically been nothing like what the Primates have said it is. All of these claims are questionable, perhaps even false.

Historical Errors about the Communion

Let me take each of them in reverse order:

1. The nature of the Anglican Communion:

TEC bishops as a whole seem to have adopted the view that the Anglican Communion is a serenely immovable reality wherein independent churches around the world respect one another, enjoy each other's company, and let each other do as each pleases. This is normative, they say, and has always been thus. The Primates are innovators, they assert.

This characterization is a gross historical fabrication. Respect, personal interaction, and legal independence among Communion churches, yes: but these constitute the thinnest veneer of communion life imaginable, and do not begin to touch the historical reality of the Anglican Communion itself.

The Anglican Communion is an entity that is both the product of and the continued subject of dynamic evolution. There is no "always thus" in the Communion. This dynamism, furthermore, has not been haphazard. It has been consistently driven by three much more profound elements, which I list in order of historical importance: mission, catholicity, and the witness of ecumenical unity.

This is no place for a history lesson, although it seems that reminders remain necessary. We can outline, then, what such a lesson would involve and how it would turn up some key continuities. There has been a clear current in the Communion's emergence and evolution according to these elements of mission, catholicity, and witness to unity.

First, England Reformation had at its core a sense of catholicity; in part, this drove Cranmer to be one of the Church's first deliberate ecumenists, searching for council and unity in Europe. Then there were the complex and knotted politics of a divided realm – England, Scotland, and Ireland in the 17th century especially -- that forced the Church of England to reconsider its link to the apostolic mission of the Church catholic. Next came the impulses of those vibrant mission societies that, in the 18th century, moved from England into the wider world of Britain's colonial expansion, channeling the new pluralistic energies of the nation into a shared religious fervor for sharing the Gospel. By this point the missionary current had begun to flow deeply and strongly. It was linked to the earlier Reformation press for disseminating Scriptural knowledge. When the

Protestant Episcopal Church's late 18th- and early 19th-century life unfolded, concerns regarding the catholicity of Anglican witness took explicit hold in the face of vying Christian communities within America. (It was also a time when we see the first expressions of American Episcopalian exceptionalism – “we’re different”.) More missionary impulses flowed out from this period, and took form in a range elements that, after around 1850, became associated with something called “the Anglican Communion”: Canterbury, Lambeth Conferences, more mission, Anglican Congresses, more mission, formal ecumenical engagement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries especially, more and more mission, and then the cascading organizing symbols of the Communion Office, the Anglican Consultative Council, the Primates’ Meeting in the 1960’s and ‘70’s. Finally, in the early 21st century, emerged the rumbling flow of the Covenant Process. And yes, more mission – in Asia, Africa, South America, and beyond as the Christian Gospel offered from Anglican hands and voices took wing outside the fading religious precincts of the West.

Mission, catholicity, and unity have all driven the Communion’s emergence and formal articulation, as well as its developing order. What is more, American Episcopalians have, until recently, been at the forefront of this river of divine energy. This is all historically demonstrable, and TEC bishops today forget this at the risk of forgetting who they really are and why they are bishops at all. Saddened as I too am, in this case by TEC’s actions at Convention, I am grateful that I have been an Episcopalian: for because of this Communion dynamic that the Episcopal Church came out of and contributed to, I heard the Gospel of Christ Jesus, learned the faith, was caught up within the Scriptures, and drawn into the life of a world of unimagined yet holy believers from across the continents. It has been a foretaste of heaven in many ways, even with its all too this-worldly disappointments.

There has never been a stable or ideal “Anglican Communion”. It has always been “on the move”. Describing the Communion in such a dynamic way, of course, also includes contestation and debate: that too has always been a part of the flow of life that has moved evangelically around the globe since its first springs in early modernity. (The Anglican Communion is a quintessentially modern phenomenon, in the sense of it being a vessel of the one Gospel’s adaptation to this epoch of human history.) The role of the Primates is itself a part of this contestation. But there is a difference between debate that seeks to unleash the current of the Gospel and one that ends by stymying it. The last 15 years have seen a dam built up, through often intentionally stoked conflict, to block the Communion’s evangelical dynamism. Now that the Primates have sought to unblock it, they can hardly be called unfaithful to the Communion’s character.

For communion more broadly, and the Anglican Communion in particular is not a “thing”, but a movement in service of a divine gospel and evangelical imperative: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” and making us “ambassadors for Christ” who beseech the world for our Lord (2 Cor. 5:19, 20). The dynamic elements of Mission/Catholicity/Ecumenical Witness that mark the Anglican Communion are not theological criteria; rather they embody a divine vocation empowered by God’s own life. TEC can decide this vocation is not hers; or she

can dispute its articulation. But to press for that vocation's subversion as taken up by her sister churches is not only antagonistic, it has led her to embarrassing and shameful offenses, like the cultural racism² that, in TEC hands, now paints African and non-Western church leaders as socially primitive exemplars of an undeveloped religiosity. It is a divinely developing Communion, by contrast, upon which the Primates have in fact made their wager.

It is, in any case, interesting to see TEC bishops, who frequently applaud the Holy Spirit's progressive revelatory capacity in their own midst, assert an entity called "the Communion" in a way that is closer to the ahistorical and static platonic form of some imagined (and indeed, historically unreal) ideal that has never existed. It is a view that now strangely seeks to trump truths articulated in the process of catholic debate and discernment within the larger church.

2. Common teaching and ordered common council

TEC leaders like to describe this impassible Communion as something antithetical to shared teaching and decision-making. To be sure, these elements often seem in tension or even conflict with the dynamic character of the Anglican Communion. Common teaching and council was made difficult just at the moment when the Communion gained clear public profile in the late 19th century and beyond, due to a host of sociological changes: pluralizing indigenous leadership, the rise of the seminaries and their diverse formations, ideologies of debate and resistance that mimicked civil political attitudes, politics of individual choice. We see some of these social changes influencing debates already in England in the 17th century, in the Anglo-American world of the 18th-century, and in formal ecclesiastical party strife in the mid-19th century. By the 20th century, diversity and divergence became positive cultural values in the eyes of many Westerners especially. It is, in any case, a political reality out of which we do not seem able to move, and for which we have no obvious alternative. Nobody seems to agree on much of anything these days, and civil political life is more and more about managing disagreement, rather than shaping and enacting common vision.

Nonetheless, in the midst of these social developments, the press for alternatives to such degraded diversity has in fact been central to the Communion's life and for one main purpose: mission, catholicity, and ecumenical witness. Although hardly immune to the tensions and struggles of expanding diversity, the Anglican Communion has always sought for ways to overcome unchecked diversity's debilitating and dispiriting elements. Thus, mission societies aimed at common catechesis around the globe; the Lambeth Conferences were first convened and continued to search for ways of resolving conflicts and furthering mission on the basis of agreed-upon frameworks of teaching and witness; the amazingly rich array of ecumenical discussions and dialogues, set loose in the wake of Lambeth's Appeal for unity in 1920, were premised on the hard-won fruit of theological agreement. Other Christians were, for decades, astonished, not so much at the Communion's uniformity, but at its *thirst* for "agreement" and the

² "Cultural racism" is the application of a grid of cultural values to a particular group of people in a way that appropriates many of the prejudicial objectifications of that group that were used in earlier forms of biological racism.

work Anglicans were willing to put into this just in the midst of their own humanly typical conflicts. Common teaching and common council have never been finished products for Anglicans. They have been given in the mode of hope.

The ordering of the Communion, as it has taken shape over the last 150 years, underscores how historically false are TEC's claims regarding the way Anglican churches are "meant" to relate to one another. The fact that individual churches have chosen at this or that time – as TEC does today -- to ignore the shape of common teaching and the decisions of common council proves nothing about the Anglican Communion other than that some members sometimes reject commonality and the reasons given for it; perhaps they have even lost hope in such coming-together through sheer historical forgetfulness.

The notion, furthermore, that there have never been consequences for rejecting communion commonality is also false, however contested these consequences may have been: concrete examples in 19th- and 20th-century South Africa, in Rwanda in the 1990's and other smaller disputes are admittedly few and generally not that significant for the larger church. Where real consequences to a rejection of Communion teaching and council *have* been significant is found in the *ad hoc* and often more destructive realms of frayed relationships and their knock-on effects: estrangement, broken communion, the decoupling of missionary cooperation and material support, shameful discord in the face of a world in need of reconciliation. It is hard to argue that these informal and inescapable consequences, deriving simply from churches doing their own thing without formal pushback, are good ways of dealing with the rejection of common teaching. It is even harder to claim that they are better than a formal decision-making process that involves representatives from around the Communion. Only a glance at recent Anglican experience shows us how absurd such an argument would be: all around us in the Communion, and in the United States especially, we see the ugly consequences of *laissez faire* disunity scattered about in the form of rancor, lawsuits, and missionary drought. There are *always* "consequences" to disunity, most of them ugly and painful. The question is how we can faithfully redirect them towards the fulfillment of divine purpose.

What the Primates did, then, was to respond to a widespread desire for a deliberate rechanneling of the Anglican vocation. If TEC wants to resist this and reap yet more "informal" consequences, she is playing with the forces of her own demise.

3. Political means

TEC bishops tell us that the Communion has no legitimate means, in any case, to formalize the consequences of the Americans' resistance to the wider church's requests and witness. This too is false, and patently so. The Primates asked that TEC representatives no longer to serve on decision-making bodies of the Communion that either deal with matters of doctrine and polity, or represent the Communion in inter-church and inter-faith meetings. In fact, most Communion-wide commission-work and counsel is pursued via invitation. Invitation is made mostly through

Canterbury or the Anglican Communion Office, and it does not follow any rules of choice or representation. Sometimes nominations for such invitations are solicited, sometimes not. Why invitations might be issued or not is up to the inviter, as Archbishop Rowan Williams showed in 2010 (“the Pentecost Letter”), when he did something similar with respect to TEC representatives according to his own counsel. If the inviter is swayed by the arguments of this or that group, then that is all that is required to control who comes to represent and decide. If Lambeth or the Primates or the ACC or Canterbury itself publicly “decided” that so and so should not be invited to participate in this or that form of Communion counsel, or represent Communion churches because of a failure to embody common teaching and discipline, and if the inviters listened to such a decision, that is all it would take. There is no code of Communion canon law and no tribunal that makes any of this enforceable; there is only the collective of the Communion’s leaders themselves. But where else is communion’s Christian force humanly embodied? Participation in the Communion’s formal life is not a right, but a privilege, based on the movement that is the Communion’s own apostolic evangelical witness.

4. Primates’ place.

Over and over TEC bishops have decried what they see as the Primates’ usurpation of powers. In this, rightly or wrongly, our bishops are behind the curve. The Primates have, over time, been given a very prominent place in the evolution of the Communion’s life. Obviously, the very category of archbishop and primate could only come to be as Anglican churches could form their own integrities, become locally independent and finally move towards a fully indigenized ministry. Much of this was driven by the mission and the apostolic quest for catholicity itself. So it is no surprise that it waited until the post-colonial moment of the 1960’s for the very notion of a “Primates Meeting” to emerge. In the late 1970’s this took concrete form, first with the locating of the Primates as an important aspect of common teaching and council – the Primates’ Meeting itself was born – and then with recommendations for the Meeting to assume greater leadership. Three successive Lambeth Conferences tell the tale:

- The Lambeth Conference of 1978 passed Resolution 11 urging “member churches not to take action regarding issues which are of concern to the whole Anglican Communion without consultation with a Lambeth Conference or with *the episcopate through the Primates’ Committee* (emphasis added) and requests the Primates to initiate a study of the nature of authority within the Anglican Communion.”
- 1988 broadened the scope of the responsibilities assigned the Primates’ Meeting. Resolution 18.2 “Urges that encouragement be given to a developing role for the Primates Meeting under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury, so that the

Primates' Meeting is able to exercise *an enhanced responsibility in offering guidance on doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters* (emphasis added)."

- The 1998 Conference reaffirmed Resolution 18.2 (1988) noting that it "urges that encouragement be given to a developing collegial role for the Primates' Meeting under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury, so that the Primates' Meeting is able to exercise an *enhanced responsibility* (emphasis added) in offering guidance on doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters." The Conference further asked "that the Primates' Meeting, under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury, include among its responsibilities positive encouragement of mission, *intervention in cases of exceptional emergency which are incapable of internal resolution within provinces, and giving guidelines on the limits of Anglican diversity* (emphasis added) in submission to the sovereign authority of Holy Scripture and in loyalty to our Anglican tradition and formularies."

Since 1998, the Primates have been trying to follow these recommendations, albeit with some confusion at times, and certainly with some opposition. Their precise role and the form it takes are developing. That development is precisely how our Communion works as a Communion. The direction of the Primates' Meeting's emergence could be reversed, and TEC is free to argue (as some have) that it should be reversed. What TEC cannot argue persuasively is that the role of the Primates' Meeting has been appropriated by misdemeanor, hijacked, invented, and so on. Not so. The fact that the Covenant's first draft placed the Primates in the position they have recently assumed – a recommendation many supported even though it was later revised – was but a sign of this movement laid out by successive Communion recommendations.

Perhaps the argument made by some in TEC, that the Primates are, if not illegitimate in their actions, at least "unrepresentative" of the Communion, is a better line of attack. Yet this too would be a false assertion.. Short of universal franchise for every Anglican in the world (and we don't even know who they are in our own parishes!), "representativeness" is a conventional act, not a quantitative science. Within Anglicanism, since the 16th century and reaffirmed repeatedly, that convention has, rather decidedly, been ordered around the episcopacy in a primary way. To be sure, the Primates constitute a group of mostly old men. But then, so does the House of Bishops of TEC (plus a few old women), along with the leaders of TEC's General Convention as a whole. Come to think of it, it sounds like TEC all the way down.

Conclusion: What TEC leaders need to decide

It is worth bringing up the Anglican Covenant here, not to make any argument about it specifically, but simply to point to the way that the dynamics at work in the Primates' directives are just those that the Covenant attempted to address. The notion that "the Covenant is Dead In the Water", repeated by many TEC leaders and their allies, is wishful thinking at least when it comes to underlying substance: the Primates are trying to do what the Covenant itself is far

more systematically laid out to do. They are doing so because Anglican churches have, thus far, failed to engage what they need to engage if they are to be truly Anglican Communion churches. Thus, in one form or another, the Covenant by some name or other, is not going away: what pressed for its articulation continues to press us. Instead of continuing to dig their heels into the ruts of rejection, TEC leaders should try to contribute to the creative ordering of the Communion as it really is.

The current discussion around the Primates' directives has failed to substantiate TEC claims. Just the opposite: that discussion now only underscores the vanity of all those accusations regarding Communion "coercion" of member churches. Just as TEC is free to ignore any other church in the prosecution of its own affairs, so the Communion does not constrict the internal workings of this or that church. Today's requests and "consequences", just as the Covenant's relational expectations, have always been framed by the inherent freedoms of local Anglican churches to determine their own way forward. One of those ways is "communion", and its historically vibrant form in the Anglican Communion. Another way involves the rejection of communion altogether. TEC is free to be a part of communion or not. There are no legal compulsions in this regard.

But TEC leaders need to be clearer in their own mind as to what is at stake here. Some might feel that ecclesial discussions like those above are all beside the point. Some have, in fact, insisted that the matter of same-sex marriage for same-sex attracted persons is one of fundamental human dignity and justice; the ecclesial issues of Communion are irrelevant to its affirmation by this or any other church. That may be the case so far as TEC wishes to claim, according to its own special view. And the hurt some Episcopalians have strenuously voiced surely derives from their sense of indignation that justice, as they perceive it, is being denied.

Nonetheless, as long as the matter of same-sex attracted behavior is legitimately discussed and debated within the Church – and most TEC bishops still tell their conservative colleagues, priests and laypeople that such debate and diversity *is* legitimate – then the Communion can discuss and debate it, as they have. In doing so, the Communion's leaders can claim, as did the Primates, that human dignity attaches to persons, not to internal feelings or behaviors, which are to be otherwise evaluated theologically; hence it is necessary to repudiate homophobia and civil penalties against same-sex attracted persons, even while insisting on the divinely created norm of heterosexual marriage. Furthermore, just as TEC's General Convention has moved ahead to decide the issue for itself, so too can the Communion move ahead within the realm of its competencies to decide this or any other issue on the basis of Communion-wide counsel.

If, on the other hand, TEC leaders want to say that there is no longer any room for diverse perspectives and practical decisions to be made on the matter, the Communion's life is indeed irrelevant to TEC's life. But then why bemoan what the Communion's Primates have decided on the basis of common discernment? TEC leaders would have already judged common discernment and decision-making as retrograde.

What TEC leaders *cannot* reasonably say is that the choice for Communion does *not* involve the commitments, responsibilities, and consequences tied up with Communion life – with common mission, catholic identity, and ecumenical witness. Hurt feelings are not a substitute for any of these realities. The next three years will require of TEC clarity and hard decisions about this. Without that, “safe distance” will become simply “distance”, and new and fuller tears will then be shed, and deservedly so.

Let TEC then be clear about the character of its independent life vis-à-vis a bona fide historical reality called the Anglican Communion. Let it seek to clarify its present self-understanding. Let it speak this out clearly so that the larger Communion can hear and understand who TEC now wants to be, and in just this way, how it wants to differentiate itself vis-à-vis the historical Communion’s evolution and present life. There is no need for too much sensitivity, but only clarity about its new self-understanding.