

Editorial

The Lambeth Conference opened in July under a cloud larger than any which has greeted it in its entire history. Not only was the question of the ordination of women entering a new phase, with the proposal to consecrate female bishops in the U.S.A., but the Church of England had not yet fully recovered from the recent Preface to its biennial directory, the famous Crockford's. The suicide of its author added a dramatic note to what was in any case a highly newsworthy piece of criticism.

The reaction of Church leaders to the Preface has been almost uniformly hostile, as one might expect, and a great deal of weight has been attached to the fact that its traditional anonymity could lead to irresponsibility on the part of its author, who would not have to account for his actions in public. That Dr. Gareth Bennett, on this occasion, paid the supreme penalty for his views is too easily overlooked. Criticism may be harsh and it is often unfair. Nobody would pretend that the views of a single individual will be balanced on every point, and when the issues raised are subjects of controversy in any case, a certain amount of disagreement is only to be expected.

That having been said, it must be asked whether the Church authorities have responded in the right way to the criticisms made of them. Impartial observers have not thought that the Preface was 'scurrilous, sour and vindictive' in the words of the Archbishop of York, and a few have even had the courage to suggest that these adjectives might more properly be assigned to the Archbishop's remarks than to the Preface. What is clear is that the Church's leadership is remarkably thin-skinned, which suggests that the pomp and ceremony in which it continues to live – and which it will manifest in a special degree at Lambeth – are a veneer with little of substance behind them.

Few would now doubt that the Church of England, and the wider Anglican Communion, have now reached a point where decisions will have to be made which will certainly cause division within its ranks. It is a pity that the ordination of women to the priesthood (and now to the episcopate) should be the focus for these tensions, since there are so many more important things – notably the continuing influence of liberal theology on the Church's leadership, in stark contrast to the views of most of the rank and file. The credibility of the Church is being sapped by those who are supposed to lead it, and the world looks on in wonder.

Of course it is true, as the defenders of the *Ecclesia Anglicana* will hasten to point out, that for every eccentric on the media, there are a

hundred faithful witnesses in the parishes. But what is forgotten is that the media reach the unchurched in a way which those in the parishes cannot. One episcopal sceptic can do much more harm than a local parish priest. More serious are the allegations that a third of the clergy are homosexuals. Even if we accept that this figure must be a gross exaggeration, the fact that it has been mentioned in the national press (and therefore that many uninformed people are likely to believe it) must give cause for alarm. The clergy are not perfect, but unless their doctrine and morals approach recognizably Biblical standards, the cause of the Gospel will be lost before we begin.

The Lambeth Conference, bringing together Anglicans from around the world, is a tribute to the vision of past generations which took the Gospel to the far-flung outposts of the British Empire, and in a few cases, even beyond. Today the churches which they founded are as independent as the countries to which they belong, though it is surprising how many of them cling to their English heritage. The *Book of Common Prayer* is more common in Uganda than in Britain, and the Thirty-Nine Articles are more widely known and studied in Canada or Australia than they are in the country of their origin.

Should this be regarded as backwoods conservatism, or is it possible that the outlying provinces of the Communion have preserved a sense of Anglican identity which is in desperate need of restoration here? The Episcopal Church of the U.S.A. has always been an exception to the rules, and is it not possible that future historians will come to see its current liberalism in that light? The Lambeth Conference is an opportunity to see which way the wind is blowing in the Anglican world. Let us hope that the Evangelical bishops present did not hesitate to speak out for Gospel teaching and principles, and that these have found an appropriate echo in the assembly as a whole. Let us also pray that the Preface to Crockford's may be proved wrong, and that far from issuing wholly unmemorable statements, Lambeth 1988 might actually be seen to have taken a stand for Christianity in its recognizably Anglican form!

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