

# Churchman

EDITORIAL

## A future for Anglicans?

In October 2013 GAFCON II will meet in Nairobi. GAFCON (Global Anglican Futures Conference) might be described as the illegitimate brainchild of Rowan Williams when he was archbishop of Canterbury and it may yet turn out to be his most enduring legacy. The reason for this is that it emerged out of a series of so-called primates' meetings, chaired by Archbishop Williams, that culminated in the one held in Dar-es-Salaam in February 2007. There it was agreed that the American Episcopal Church and its allies would be given until 30 September 2007 to reverse their policies on homosexuality or else face 'serious consequences.' What those consequences might be was not spelled out, but since the only thing that the archbishop of Canterbury could do was to exclude them from the next Lambeth Conference (in 2008), it was generally assumed that they would not be invited if they failed to comply with the primates' demands. To the surprise of many, invitations went out to the American bishops in July 2007, inviting them to Lambeth before the deadline for compliance had passed and without any such commitment on their part. When a number of primates expressed their shock at what they saw as a betrayal, they were told that they had misunderstood the procedure and that they should accept the invitations as a *fait accompli*. Realising that there was no hope of disciplining the American liberals, the conservative ones withdrew and organised an alternative conference in Jerusalem. The prevarication and dishonesty of the archbishop of Canterbury had unexpectedly given birth to GAFCON and a new chapter in the history of global Anglicanism was begun.

GAFCON I suffered from short notice and a certain amount of confusion. A number of bishops who were sympathetic to its aims stayed away and attended Lambeth out of loyalty to Canterbury, while others felt that they could not be seen at GAFCON for political reasons. Some went to both. At the time, nobody knew whether GAFCON was a permanent innovation or a one-off protest, and so it is hardly surprising that reactions to it varied accordingly.

Five years later things have moved on. Not only does GAFCON still exist, but it has acquired a more permanent feel to it. The hesitation and even opposition that greeted its emergence among some who were

basically sympathetic to its position is gradually being overcome and there should be a broader representation this time round. The fact that there is no competition with a Lambeth Conference simplifies matters, and perhaps some bishops who felt that they could not attend in 2008 will turn up this time. On the other hand, GAFCON II will be more selective in whom it invites and it should have a greater sense of purpose. If it is to survive in the longer term it cannot afford to be seen as nothing but a protest group; it must have a strategy and programme of its own that it can offer to the wider Communion as a serious way forward for the future of the global church.

This time round we must hope that the organisers will have learned that some of their conservative American backers are just as wacky as the liberals in the Episcopal Church and not allow them to set the agenda. The last thing the Anglican Communion needs is a forum in which the internal battles of American Episcopalianism are played out on a world stage in front of an audience that has no idea what is going on and is not really sympathetic to either side.

Sydney Anglicans are another constituency that will play an important part at GAFCON II, and rightly so, but if they are to have real influence they will have to recognise that their extreme low-church ecclesiology is not typical of the Communion as a whole and may alienate people who have never understood it. Sydney's representatives may make a good case for their positions and even be right much of the time, but it would be a pity if they were to allow their particular shibboleths to discourage people who find them merely eccentric. There are more important issues than lay celebration of the eucharist (for example) and GAFCON needs to concentrate on them without falling into divisions over secondary matters like that.

The Africans are another group that will be prominent, and this must also be welcomed. The vibrancy of the Anglican (and other) churches in Africa cannot be ignored and it is essential that they should play their part on the world stage. African bishops are often forceful personalities with strong opinions that the politer Western world needs to hear, and their presence will ensure that the discussions are not merely platitudinous. Having said that, many African leaders behave like tribal chiefs, an approach that is accepted in their homelands but not elsewhere. If the archbishop of Kenya criticises the archbishop of Canterbury for not dealing with problems like homosexuality in the way an African archbishop would (as he recently did), misunderstanding is bound to result. The archbishop of Canterbury may share his Kenyan brother's views and wish that he could implement them, but he cannot do so because the constitution of the church is different and he has no power to impose his opinions on others.

This fact is a reminder to us that in many ways, GAFCON's greatest challenge is to find common ground among the different Anglican bodies present at it. What works in Ghana may be impossible in New Zealand, not because of ill-will but because the circumstances and opportunities in the two countries are totally different. This is bound to make church discipline a more complicated matter than it might otherwise be, and here the Africans will have to show greater understanding of the problems their Western counterparts face. What they can achieve by fiat requires patient negotiation in places that are synodically governed and often controlled by people who are not sympathetic to GAFCON.

This is especially true of the Church of England, which occupies a central place in the Anglican Communion but is in many ways the hardest local church to deal with. For example, although there will be a sizable contingent from England at GAFCON II, what authority will they have and who will they represent? It is a virtual certainty that none of the English diocesan bishops will be there, which will make it very difficult for the archbishop of Canterbury to attend on his own, even if he is invited. This is ironic, because the new archbishop is far more sympathetic to GAFCON than his predecessor was, and more in tune with it than most of his episcopal colleagues are. That of course, is a large part of his problem. Even if he wanted to, Justin Welby cannot dismiss the bench of bishops and appoint men more in tune with his own way of thinking, and everyone knows that his eventual successor is almost certain to be of a very different persuasion. Banking on Canterbury's support is therefore not a good long-term strategy for GAFCON, even if the present incumbent of the see is essentially on its side.

The way the Church of England works, it is impossible to rely on any diocesan bishop for very long because when he goes, he is likely to be replaced by someone of contrasting opinions. This is possible because the Church of England is not really diocesan or episcopalian in nature, despite the formal existence of bishops and dioceses. Its bishops do not dominate their dioceses in the way that they often do elsewhere and they have no power to ensure the succession. What permanence there is located elsewhere—in parishes, in theological colleges and in independent societies that maintain a specific theological outlook. This system functions reasonably well in England, but it does not fit the global model. In England it helps preserve variety and balance in the national church, so that no one group can take it over, but it also means that nobody can safely speak on its behalf. The many English representatives at GAFCON II will probably make important contributions to it, but none of them will have any impact on the Church of England. Those in the English Church who want to ignore GAFCON (and they include the vast majority of those who are in control of it) will do so and the few who take GAFCON

seriously will have no way of implementing its decisions or policies, so the overall effect will be zero.

To say this is not to be critical of those involved, who are doubtless sincere and will do their best. The problem lies not with them but with structures and processes that were not designed to deal with worldwide church and that cannot be translated into a different context. Delegates from other Anglican churches must be aware of this, because they may be inclined to think that if the English representatives agree with their decisions, that will have a direct effect on the policy of the Church of England. There may of course be an indirect, long-term influence which must not be forgotten or dismissed as insignificant, but immediate results are not to be expected and it is as well for everyone to recognise this from the start.

The reality is that GAFCON has no presence or standing in the Church of England that would make people pay attention to what it says. This is not something peculiar to it—exactly the same is true of the Lambeth Conferences. Some will remember that when the 1998 Lambeth Conference issued a strongly-worded declaration against homosexual practice there were no fewer than forty-six English bishops (many of them suffragans) who publicly dissented from it, and nobody could do anything to stop them from doing so. They were not in breach of any rule and from a legal point of view, they could rightly claim that they were not bound to accept a decision made by such an unofficial body. Unfortunately, considerations of this kind are unlikely to impress many GAFCON delegates from the developing world, where it is generally expected that what the primate says will be what the province does and dissent on the part of individual bishops, while not unknown, is a marginal phenomenon at best.

It is important for us to understand this because if we do not, the high hopes that many have for GAFCON are liable to be cruelly disappointed. Delegates from the English Church have to recognise (and if necessary point out to others) that they face hostility from the Lambeth bureaucracy, which sees GAFCON as a kind of colonial revolt, and indifference from the English General Synod which imagines that it exercises a kind of parliamentary sovereignty over the church. As we have just seen in the debates over women bishops, the majority in the English Synod assumes that what it wants is the will of God and brooks no opposition, so the idea that it might be swayed by people from around the globe can be dismissed before we start.

From the English point of view, GAFCON's influence can only be indirect. The godly members of the Church of England who support it and who are inspired by the witness of the majority Anglican world can take heart from it and point out that if the General Synod or the house of bishops were to adopt policies contrary to its wishes they would split the

Anglican Communion irrevocably and any prestige remaining in the see of Canterbury would be lost for good. This, the bureaucrats of Lambeth would prefer to avoid if possible, and the more that GAFCON supporters can make a plausible case for that scenario the more they are likely to be listened to within the wider Church.

As everybody knows, the presenting issue at the moment is the nature of the tolerance that the Church should extend to homosexual practice, and here GAFCON would be wise to adopt an incremental approach in its dealings with the Western churches generally, and with the Church of England in particular. A broadside attack against episcopal support for civil partnerships in England will have no effect and in the current circumstances it is an irrelevance. A better target is the tolerance that has been extended to the clergy of the Church, who have been allowed to enter into such partnerships as long as they assure their bishops that they will remain celibate. This is an unworkable policy, and some bishops have stated that they have no intention of trying to apply it. It is inconsistent, because the clergy cannot preside at civil partnership ceremonies nor can these take place on church premises, so why should those in holy orders be allowed to contract them? Yet there are proposals that those who are in such relationships should not be automatically barred from episcopal office, and some people seem to think that there is a realistic possibility that men (and women?) in such partnerships will actually be appointed. Here a good case can be mounted for asking the Church of England to make sure that this cannot happen, and the clear hostility of GAFCON can be cited as one of the reasons (though by no means the only one) for opposing such a development.

Much the same can be said for the approach that should be taken towards the Church's refusal to countenance same-sex marriage. It is enshrined in law that such marriages cannot be performed by the Church, and presumably any cleric who contracts one will be forced to resign. That needs to be made clear, however, and the bishops should be told that if they cannot accept that discipline they ought to leave office. The antics of the bishop of Salisbury, for example, who claims to uphold the official policy but then openly dissents from it in the media, make the Church a laughing stock and provide ammunition for those in GAFCON who are convinced that the Church of England has become apostate. It is very much in the interests of the Church and of the Anglican Communion generally that episcopal indiscipline of this kind should be stopped, and the English delegates to GAFCON ought to be pressing for that when they get back home. The archbishop of Canterbury and a substantial number of the bishops will probably support them on these particular questions but would not want to give them a blank cheque for reform of the Church as a whole. This is not an ideal situation, but in the Church of England the ideal is unattainable and we must take one step at a time.

In the longer term, the English delegates to GAFCON must face the fact that they have far less influence on their Church than their numbers warrant, and that unless they take serious action that situation will continue, and almost certainly get worse. The impending advent of women bishops is a guarantee that liberalism will govern the Church indefinitely, because those who oppose them will be marginalised and probably be treated with hostility because of their views. To be fair, this opposition may not come so much from the women bishops as from others lower down the ranks—archdeacons and diocesan directors of ordinands, for example—who will filter out those whom they regard as awkward and make it clear that no orthodox dissenter has any hope of promotion within the system. In this way those who preach the Gospel will be gradually strangled and excluded from any position where they might have some influence on policy.

Church politics can be a nasty business and we must sympathise with those who would rather spend their time winning others for Christ and building them up in their faith. But such people must be made aware that organisations like WATCH (Women and the Church) have a power over the Church's administration that may well be used to silence their ministry in the name of tolerance and inclusivity. Like it or not, we must resist this danger by doing what we can to ensure that the Church remains the home for orthodox believers that it is meant to be. If GAFCON can help us do that, then so much the better. In other parts of the Anglican Communion, GAFCON and its decisions will be taken as the norm and we must rejoice in that. Some in England will think that the same should apply here, and that too is good sign. But for the views of GAFCON to influence the Church of England a more subtle and long-term approach will be needed. Let us hope and pray that those with the GAFCON vision will understand this and act accordingly, for the spread of the Gospel, the good of the Church, and the future of the Anglican Communion as a whole.

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