

# Churchman

EDITORIAL

## A Canterbury Tale

GAFCON II has come and gone, and a great time was had by all 1300 participants, including over 300 bishops, who represented twenty-eight of the Anglican Communion's thirty-eight provinces. It sounds impressive and in many ways it was, but statistics of this kind conceal as much as they reveal. Many of the bigger African provinces turned out in force, but representation from the developed world was patchy and at the episcopal level almost non-existent. Much as it wants to be a movement for the renewal of worldwide Anglicanism, GAFCON is a bit like the curate's egg—good in parts. Its leadership is committed, its followers are loyal and expectant, but its influence remains limited to the sorts of people who would support its aims even if it did not exist. It has not yet reached out beyond its predictable support base, and unless it does so, the energy that has gone into it will be dissipated and it will go the way of other initiatives that never got anywhere.

Having said that, there is no denying that GAFCON has come a long way in a short time. The improvised character of GAFCON I has gone and in its place has come a much more sophisticated and responsible organisation. No other group of Anglicans could stage an event with as broad a participation, and that alone ought to persuade people to take it seriously.

Unfortunately, things do not work like that in the real Anglican world. The archbishop of Canterbury could not attend but he was good enough to find time in his diary to make a quick trip to Kenya just before it opened, and to send greetings to it on a video that was played to the assembled delegates. He meant well, and those who met him testified to the warm relations that they had with him. Unfortunately everything he said and did betrayed the fact that the English church establishment had been outflanked and had effectively missed the bus. The official communiqué from Lambeth Palace stated that the main reason for the archbishop's visit to Kenya was to express solidarity with the victims of the Westgate Shopping Centre atrocity the previous month, but laudable though sympathy for them was, it was an implausible excuse. The archbishop did not rush off to Peshawar to show his support for Christian victims of Muslim terrorism in Pakistan, nor would anyone have expected him to.

Unless of course, GAFCON had been meeting there at the same time... In the end things got so bad that Lambeth Palace was citing the baptism of Prince George as a reason for the archbishop's non-attendance, as if the royal family would not have been willing to find a more convenient date for the ceremony. The impression left is one of incompetence and dysfunctionality in which almost any excuse to downplay the significance of GAFCON has been eagerly seized on and exploited for far more than it is worth.

The archbishop of Canterbury means well and there is no doubt that his heart is with GAFCON in many ways. He told the delegates that he wants its aims to be those of the Communion as a whole and there is no reason not to believe him. But if he is going to occupy the place that the Anglican Communion assigns to him and exercise the kind of influence for good that he undoubtedly wants to, he will have to get with the programme, as the Americans say. GAFCON is not just one more Anglican organisation, like the Mothers' Union, that can be flattered and pacified by an occasional nod from the hierarchy. It is a renewal movement that wants to make its agenda that of the church as a whole, and it will expect Justin Welby to nail his colours to the mast. It is a wonderful opportunity for him to assume the leadership of the Communion and use the GAFCON base to bring about the kinds of changes that he wants to see, but will he take it? One is reminded of Louis XVI in the early years of the French Revolution. The Third Estate handed their much-needed reforms to him on a plate and begged him to be their leader, but Louis, good man that he was at heart and eager to please, lacked the vision and the courage to fulfil his historical destiny and so paid the price for misplaced loyalty to a lost cause. Will Justin Welby come to a similar end, and for the same reasons?

The stark nature of the problem can be seen by comparing Dr Welby's video message to GAFCON with the address given by its chairman, the archbishop of Kenya. Both speeches were positive and upbeat, but Canterbury's looks decidedly anaemic next to Kenya's. Dr Welby told the delegates that they must strive for holiness, which is true and encouraging. He mentioned that in many places there has been a sexual revolution in the last generation, but inexplicably failed to add that for Christians, holiness means confining sexual activity to what it is meant for—heterosexual monogamy. Coyness on so obvious a point as this is not a good sign. The archbishop of Canterbury wants to seek harmony and reconciliation among people who hold very different views, but there are limits to such a vision and in his address the archbishop of Kenya made it plain what those limits were.

It is obviously true, as Canterbury said, that Christians disagree about many things and that we have to live together. But it is also true that there is a core of beliefs that cannot be compromised, and as Kenya

did not hesitate to point out, it is there that the rub lies. What is dividing the Anglican Communion is not a disagreement between Christians who hold different opinions about secondary matters, but a titanic struggle between believers and apostates who want to call themselves 'Anglicans.' This is very hard for the English establishment to accept, but it is a fact that cannot be denied. The crisis is particularly acute in the Western provinces, where the corporate culture of the church reflects the prevailing trends in society. It is no secret that the advanced countries of the West have abandoned their inherited Christianity for atheism. The pride and arrogance that comes from economic success and technological progress has led many to adopt beliefs and practices that go completely against the teaching of the Bible, which is discounted and publicly derided, even by people who claim to be members of the church.

Students of history know that this cannot go on for ever—sooner or later there will be a reckoning, when the pride of man will be knocked low. Pontius Pilate no doubt thought that the Roman Empire would last for ever, but even as he passed judgment on Jesus the barbarians were beginning to stir and the seeds of ultimate collapse were being sown. Does anyone in Europe, America or Australia seriously think that China, India and Africa will subsidise a decadent and immoral West indefinitely? Can they not see the writing on the wall? And do Anglicans in particular not understand that GAFCON draws its strength from these modern 'barbarians' (pardon the term) who will eventually triumph? The African primates sense this, and with prophetic grace they are calling their erring brothers and sisters in the developed world to repent before it is too late. To their minds, the appearance of an archbishop of Canterbury who is on their spiritual wavelength is God's final call to the Western provinces to get on board before the catastrophe strikes, and they expect their warnings to be heeded.

Nobody should be in any doubt about this. If the Anglican Communion is to survive, and if its witness to the developed world is to be faithful to the Gospel, its Western branches will have to eat humble pie and conform to what GAFCON sees as necessary. If that does not happen, then GAFCON and its supporters will go their own way and the rest of the Communion will be left high and dry. This is what the archbishop of Canterbury needs to take on board as part of his own strategy for renewal. Trying to balance the orthodoxy of GAFCON with the heresies of those who disagree with it will not work. A choice must be made, and the GAFCON way, though not perfect, is still the only one that has anything to offer the church as a whole.

The GAFCON leadership, for its part, needs to take stock of its position and develop its own strategy for its dealings with the wider Communion. Here it can learn a lot from the failure of the evangelical wing of the Church of England to make any serious impression on either the

church or the nation, despite its numbers and enthusiasm. Like GAFCON, English Evangelicals have been great organisers. Between 1967 and 2003 they were able to gather four NEACs (National Evangelical Anglican Conferences or Congresses) which were well-attended and apparently successful. They also put together a Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC) and an Anglican Evangelical Assembly (AEA), producing a kind of shadow General Synod within the wider church. Unfortunately the only effect of this was to create an added layer of meetings where people have ended up discussing very little at great length. Those involved are fully occupied with this and think that what they are doing is important, but nobody else pays any attention. Meanwhile, the real government of the church has fallen into the hands of liberals who have used their influence to pass legislation that guarantees a permanent second-class status for Evangelicals, who now run the risk of being shut out of the church altogether. In particular, the liberals have ensured that nobody who opposes women's ordination (or especially their consecration to the episcopate) has any hope of entering the church's hierarchy, and that new ordinands may have trouble even finding a curacy. It is small consolation to be told that they can always be elected to CEEC instead.

This is the fate that GAFCON must avoid. It needs to broaden its base in the places where it is weak, and especially in the Church of England, which has effectively ignored it. Some GAFCON delegates were disappointed that the archbishop of Canterbury did not make it the priority that they thought it should have been, but they need to appreciate that Justin Welby was far keener on GAFCON than almost everyone he deals with on a day-to-day basis. It is this that must change, and Dr Welby ought to know that if he has any hope of realising his dream for a revitalised church, GAFCON can and should be his strongest ally. This is what the GAFCON leadership ought to be aiming for, and there are many ways that it can pursue its goals without tearing the Anglican house down.

One date that must concentrate everyone's minds is 2018—the year that the next Lambeth Conference is due and that another GAFCON might conceivably be held. The leaders of GAFCON II should be getting together with Canterbury *now* (not in four years' time) in order to prepare for that conjunction. The best outcome for everyone would be to turn the next Lambeth Conference into GAFCON III, using the Jerusalem Declaration and its successors as the new charter for the whole Anglican Communion. Promoting the gay agenda while fobbing the Africans off with seminars on AIDS and third-world development, as was tried in 2008, will not work next time, and the sooner everyone recognises that, the better. The Lambeth Conference will have to tackle GAFCON's priorities or it will not happen, but at the same time, GAFCON will have to engage the rest of the Communion or its *raison d'être* will disappear. The temptation to organise a parallel conference and boycott Lambeth must be resisted, not

only because it is pointless but because it will be counter-productive. If GAFCON really does represent the majority of the Anglican world then it must seize the initiative and challenge its opponents to respond, and not allow them to set the agenda.

In the run-up to this, there are a number of things that can be done by people on the ground. In England, for example, the synodical elections in 2015 can be contested by candidates who make support for GAFCON and its aims part of their programme. The emphasis on spiritual renewal and mission should be positive—people will not vote for candidates who come across as negative, however worthy they may be in other ways. The middle ground, which does not understand what is really going on and does not want to be associated with anything that appears to be factional and divisive, must be won over. This can only be done by patient, hard work at grassroots level. It is scandalous that a fringe group like WATCH (Women and the Church) can determine the church's priorities and get everyone worked up over secondary issues, when the central purpose for which it exists is ignored and those who object are brushed aside. It is here that the archbishop of Canterbury can lend his weight to GAFCON and where GAFCON's supporters can back him. We must strive to put first things first in the life of the church, a task that in itself is liable to prove difficult and contentious.

The hardest thing for some to swallow will be the fact that if the right priorities are re-established in the Anglican Communion, some of its branches are liable to break away. The most obvious one of these is the American Episcopal Church (TEC), whose leadership is so far gone in apostasy that it is hard to believe that it could ever return to anything resembling biblical Christianity. But there are still many in that church who have not bowed the knee to Baal, and it is just possible that if they are given the right encouragement they might rise to the surface and reclaim their church. GAFCON needs to connect with these people and support them, while at the same time giving help to those who have left or been forced out of TEC. This is not an either-or situation but a both-and one. In Australia, GAFCON must break out of its stronghold in Sydney and establish itself elsewhere as well. Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth contain many ordinary people and parishes that ought to be susceptible to its appeal, and every effort must be made to achieve a meaningful presence there and elsewhere. The disparate conservative elements in New Zealand need to be brought together and encouraged to exert what influence they can beyond the confines of the Nelson diocese, and the same is true of Canada. In both those countries there is a great deal of sympathy for the developing world, and it should be possible for GAFCON dominated provinces to establish links (or exploit the ones they already have) with those churches. That way the GAFCON vision can be introduced from

the outside, by people who already attract a listening ear, and not appear like the knee-jerk reaction of a disgruntled fringe.

What is needed is flexibility, enterprise and a global vision. GAFCON has a real chance of increasing its support in the Church of Ireland, and it should be doing so. In Southern Africa there is a great deal of sympathy for its aims and the Anglican churches there ought to be cultivated for support. All over the world, GAFCON's leaders need to make a cool and realistic assessment of what the possibilities are and take advantage of every door that opens to them.

Another important aspect of GAFCON that is easily overlooked is that it is not a movement confined to bishops and clergy. The fact that the Lambeth Conference is exclusively episcopal is now a real weakness, and this lopsidedness needs to be challenged. Why should only bishops attend a worldwide gathering of Anglicans? Instead of inviting them (and having to decide which ones to recognise) could the archbishop of Canterbury not issue an open invitation to the different provinces to send whomever they want? The presence of delegates from their clergy, and especially from their laity, might have a sobering effect on first-world prelates that nobody from the majority world could match. What bishop would want to be embarrassed by members of his own diocese who appear to be more in tune with the renewal agenda than he is? Some of them might well be renewed themselves if presented with such a challenge, and that would be the best outcome of all.

Whatever else GAFCON does, it must not appear to be nothing but a heresy-hunting organisation that is more intent on rooting out those whom it finds unacceptable than on preaching the Word of God. If it can ensure that those who take the platform at the next Lambeth Conference share its spirit and its goals, then those who cannot hear its message will either depart of their own accord or be outvoted by the faithful majority. But in doing this, the primary aim must always be to win souls, including those of church leaders who have gone astray. That will not be easy, but carrying the cross never is. This is the challenge that faces us over the next five years, and it is one for which the present archbishop of Canterbury is uniquely well-equipped. He must seize the leadership role that the Communion expects from him, stop trying to please everybody with false appeals to 'reconciliation,' and exercise the authority that has been delegated to him by the church. If he stands up to be counted, then others will stand up behind him—he does not have to worry about that. His declared opposition to gay marriage in the House of Lords' debate in June 2013 was not popular in liberal circles, but the media were much gentler on him than they might have been. They knew that he was only putting forward standard Christian teaching on the subject, which is what he was expected to do, and they respected him for it. Justin Welby is a man like the rest of us, and he needs our prayers and our encouragement. In

many ways he is in the position of Esther—an alien spiritual presence in a hostile environment. But just as Mordechai saw that she had been called to the kingdom for such a time as that and told her that she must do her duty, so we must see that Justin Welby has been called to the church for such a time as this. Like Esther, he too must do his duty, and if he puts his trust in God he need have no fear of what man can do to him.

Let us hope and pray that the long-term outcome of GAFCON II will be a reconciliation between its majority provinces and the see of Canterbury (in particular) and that in the wake of that, the Anglican Communion will be truly regenerated according to the principles of the Bible and in the power of the Holy Spirit who alone can bring the Word of God to life.

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