



Affirming Catholicism: Inspiration and Hope in the Anglican Communion

**An article taken from the Affirming Catholicism Newsletter
January 2016**

An initial reflection on the primates' meeting

The primates of the Anglican Communion met in Canterbury from 11 to 15 January. As has been widely reported (and is laid out in the [communiqué](#)) in view of the "recent change in marriage doctrine" by The Episcopal Church:

"for a period of three years The Episcopal Church no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee and that while participating in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, they will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity."

At the same time, the Primates also

"condemned homophobic prejudice and violence and resolved to work together to offer pastoral care and loving service irrespective of sexual orientation. This conviction arises out of our discipleship of Jesus Christ. The Primates reaffirmed their rejection of criminal sanctions against same-sex attracted people."

All the Primates attended, although the Archbishop of Uganda, Stanley Ntagali, left the meeting after two days, as he explained in [an open letter to his church](#). That all the Primates attended is an achievement worth commending, as are the anti-homophobic statements made in the communiqué. It is also important to emphasise that TEC is not being asked to leave the Communion, and will be fully represented at ACC 16 in Lusaka in April 2016, which will be exploring the theme "Intentional Discipleship in a World of Differences".

Reflecting on the recommendation of the Primates' Meeting, the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, [Michael Curry](#), emphasised that the Anglican Communion is rooted in relationships, relationships of mission. [Speaking to the other Primates](#), he explained the biblical foundation of the position taken by The Episcopal Church:

"Our commitment to be an inclusive church is not based on a social theory or capitulation to the ways of the culture, but on our belief that the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross are a sign of the very love of God reaching out to us all. While I understand that many disagree with us, our decision regarding marriage is based on the belief that the words of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians are true for the church today: All who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ.

For so many who are committed to following Jesus in the way of love and being a church that lives that love, this decision will bring real pain. For fellow

disciples of Jesus in our church who are gay or lesbian, this will bring more pain. For many who have felt and been rejected by the church because of who they are, for many who have felt and been rejected by families and communities, our church opening itself in love was a sign of hope. And this will add pain on top of pain.”

The Primate of the Anglican Episcopal Church of Brazil, [Francisco de Assis da Silva](#), commented that he expects his own church to be facing the same questions as TEC very shortly. Other churches, including the SEC and the Anglican Church in Canada, and indeed the Church of England itself, will be continually challenged by their own members to revisit their position on same-sex marriage. It is striking that the key question at the 2016 Primates’ meeting seems no longer to have been the appointment of gay bishops, but the question of same sex marriage.

A good many people have written about the Primates’ meeting, both in anticipation and in response. Several commentators have queried the legitimacy of the Primates’ recommendation: whether they have the power to make it at all and whether they are acting as if the Anglican Communion Covenant had been agreed (e.g. [Norman Doe](#)).

[Fred Hiltz](#), Primate of the Anglican Church in Canada, reflected:

“While the meeting of the Primates was particularly challenging with respect to relationships throughout the Communion, there was about midway through a declared unanimous commitment to continue to walk together and not apart. ... We were reminded once again of the principle named by the Windsor Continuation Group that ‘when the Primates speak collectively, or in a united or unanimous manner, their advice – while it is no more than advice – nevertheless needs to be received with a readiness to undertake reflection and accommodation’.”

He commented also “I am especially mindful of the pain the LGBTQ community within our Church is feeling. I am very sorry. I acknowledge their frustration and that of their supporters in being made to feel like the sacrificial offering on the altar of the Church’s unity. I recognize that many are angry and deeply disillusioned with the very Church in which they endeavour to live out their lives as disciples of Jesus. I know that for some it is in fact very difficult to remain within its fellowship, and that it will take a great resolve of will and courage to do so.”

There have been many theologically well-founded and thought-provoking contributions. A few are reproduced (with links to the complete text) here.

Before the meeting, [Mark Chapman](#), Professor of the History of Modern Theology in the University of Oxford, and Vice-Principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, recommended: “Try deep consultation, not rushed decisions.” [Martyn Percy](#), Dean of Christchurch Oxford, wrote: “no amount of well-intentioned epistemological Pelagianism (i.e., ‘we can fix this ourselves’) will be able to replace the need for some serious theological deliberation on the nature of humanity, grace and redemption. What was once a quiet, slightly suppressed ethical debate about alterity (i.e., sexuality) – a group of people somewhere out there, so to speak – has now become a much louder debate about the justice and integrity within our Communion, and concerns our own people. The key question just won’t go away. How exactly are we to regard and treat people who are not like us – in terms of their sexuality and gender identity – yet fully part of this body of Christ?”

In response to the Primates' meeting, [Bill Countryman](#), Episcopal priest and retired professor of Biblical Theology, writes: "The status of lesbians and gay men (still more of transexual persons) varies enormously from culture to culture. And it is part of the larger issue of gender, which also remains unresolved among us. It is no accident that many of the churches that are particularly angry about the embrace of homosexual persons are also opposed to the ordination of women. And it is no accident that the leadership of these groups is entirely male and presents itself as emphatically heterosexual.

"But the fact that the task is difficult does not mean that it can or should be lightly abandoned. The unity of the church is more than an institutional convenience, more than a theological premise, and more than a concern of professional ecumenists. It is a matter of deep spiritual value. God's creation of humanity in God's image and likeness, implies ... God's search for friends. And since God has created so many of us and of such different temperament, experience, and culture, it seems reasonable to infer that our very multiplicity is part of what we bring to God as God's friends. The great danger of Christians in any one place or time is that we shall begin to identify the gospel with the practices and prejudices of our particular time and place. Only a community of discourse that is large and varied enough to disrupt that kind of fossilization is ultimately adequate to the needs of our growing friendship with God, this friendship for which God created us and to which we are learning to respond through God's grace."

[Angus Ritchie](#), Executive Director of the Centre for Theology and Community and priest in Shadwell and Bethnal Green, reflects on the value of continuing to walk together: "The cost borne by the Episcopal Church of the United States for conducting same-sex marriages - being unable to represent the Communion at ecumenical and inter-faith gatherings - is of a rather different order to the cost LGBT Christians would bear in many other parts of the world if the Communion fell apart. That Anglicans across the world should keep talking, keep walking together and grow more open to one another's experiences - these are prizes for which it is worth making some compromises, for they increase the extent to which the churches in countries where LGBT people are persecuted will hear alternative perspectives."

[Mark Strange](#), Bishop of Moray, Ross and Caithness, where Samuel Seabury was consecrated first non-English Bishop for the American Church reflects: "Now I am confronted by a different situation, a Church which has followed its own accepted processes to bring about a change in its Canons, a change which it believes is done in response to the love revealed to us all by Jesus Christ. This Church has been reprimanded by those who see things differently. In the drive for unity in the Anglican Communion we risk removing our diversity and our ability to respond to the particular needs of mission in our own communities, the ability to hear the voice of God in our own situations."

What can we do? Pray for each other! And stay! There is much here, especially in the graciousness of Michael Curry's response and that of others who are directly affected, that should make us proud to be Anglican. Might your parish consider twinning with a TEC parish, or entering into a trilateral relationship with a parish in TEC and a parish in the global South?
