

**NOTES OF THE ADDRESS BY THE RT REV PROFESSOR STEPHEN SYKES,
Given to the initial meeting of the Lambeth Commission, 9 February, 2004**

For nearly three years now, the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, which I have the privilege of chairing, has been working on a study of Communion – what it is, what sustains it, nurtures it, threatens it. We have tried to develop our work from first principles, and to avoid the temptation – which has increased with the growth of the current crisis which the Anglican Communion is now facing – of allowing the Commission to become simply an agency for crisis management.

There are members of the IATDC on this present commission, but I would like to take this opportunity to remind others here of the way in which our Commission has been working; then make two or three observations about how I see the situation in the Communion developing; and finally to indicate at least some of the ways in which the work we are doing is closely connected with the task you have been asked to undertake.

The IATDC Study and its methodology

At its first meeting the Commission made a decision to establish as widespread a communication network as possible, and to carry out its investigation in conversation with as many of the churches and institutions of the Communion as we could. This was partly a result of circumstances. Our first meeting was disrupted by the terrorist attacks of September 11 (2001), and several of our number were stranded on their way to the Commission meeting. Those of us who were able to assemble in London communicated with them as best we could be e-mail, and this I suppose was what suggested the idea of pursuing that approach more widely. Following that meeting we circulated The Four Key Questions – about the nature of communion, and things which could threaten it. We have not been fixated by the issue of homosexuality, but certainly the questions raised by the Righter judgement about whether or not agreement in moral teachings was a condition of communion was in our minds when we sent out that enquiry. These questions were sent to every diocesan bishop, as many theological education institutions that we were able to contact, to the Primates (and subsequently to members of the ACC), Provincial Secretaries, and through them, to church newspapers and communication departments. We received somewhere over 130 replies to that initial mailing and while we were disappointed not to receive more (although staff at the ACO assured us that this was a comparatively good response to such requests for information) most of the responses were extremely helpful and at times, quite inspiring. From consideration of replies to those questions – along with some 40 substantial papers which have been written for or by members of the Commission – we formulated Six Propositions

which were circulated again to the same group for discussion. Somewhat fewer responses were received on this occasion – partly, I suspect, because the questions were longer and more difficult – but again the content of many of the replies was significant. I should stress that our method has not been that of an opinion poll or survey. We have not sought just to discover the current state of affairs in the communion, but much more to identify the sort of arguments that are being employed by Anglicans in discussing the issues which concern them.

Although our methodology was initially suggested by circumstances, we have continued (and will continue) to use it quite intentionally. By involving as many partners in the study as we already have (we estimate that somewhere over 600 separate theologians, church leaders or concerned individuals have been involved so far) we hope to avoid the fate of *The Virginia Report* which was welcomed when it was published, but very little read since then. We think that the dialogue we have established is important in itself, and hope that when a report is made on our study it might be part of an ongoing debate which might ensure that it does not sink without trace – as so many worthwhile church reports seem to do!

At our meeting last year, when it had become clear that ECUSA was going to ordain a non-abstinent gay priest to the episcopate and it was known that the Archbishop of Canterbury was calling the primates together for the October meeting, we felt it appropriate to respond to the Archbishop's invitation to offer our comment on the situation. Much of the last meeting was given to preparing an advisory document – which you have as Document 42 (and it is also available on the IATDC pages of the www.anglicancommunion.org web-site) – to which I will return later.

The Commission looks forward to meeting in Nairobi during August, and we are working towards resourcing the discussions leading up to the next (hypothetical) Lambeth Conference. We would like to come to some preliminary conclusions, perhaps issuing an interim report early in 2005 – and using it for further consultation in 2006-7 and, we have suggested to the Archbishop, in the preparation and design of the Lambeth agenda.

Future developments and some implications for the theology of communion

Of course all such timetables are tentative, and will depend on the actual course of events over the next few months. Reluctantly, I think that it is likely that when the Archbishop of Canterbury issues invitations to Lambeth, the refusal of a considerable number of bishops to attend will formally mark a schism in the Communion. That situation will be fore-shadowed in the reactions given to the publication of your Lambeth Commission report later this year,

and the eventual outcome will depend to no small extent on an adequate theological undergirding to the discussions which will take place after that.

If ecclesiology is neglected when the church faces times of controversy, then assumptions will be made about church and ministry which derive from the nearest secular model. I do not suggest that this is a seditious procedure. It is perfectly natural, just what you would expect. But it highlights the way in which ecclesiology matters. It focuses the life of the church on the Living God and on the Mission of God, and that is not something that can be accommodated to the nearest secular parallels.

Of course some secular models have much to offer. God has not abandoned the secular world to its own devices, and indeed within it we can find insights and responses which can be seen as a consequence of the work of the Holy Spirit. Learning from the secular world – about process and planning, leadership in times of change or crisis management is always an open possibility, but we must beware of slipping into easy assumptions. In a critical and open way, ecclesiology needs conversations with sociology, so that it can benefit from the best in organisational theory and practice.

The importance of trust is increasingly recognised in secular thought. The success of complex organisations, societies, even the future of capitalist economies is seen to depend on a restoration of trust among all participants. And if that is true, how much more it applies to the future of the Anglican Communion. What are we talking about? It seems to me that the problems we face in attitudes to homosexuality (and a number of other issues as well) is intensified by a break down of trust which has taken place over a number of years. And because we have not had an adequate ecclesiology, or worked out how the ‘instruments of unity’ can function in an atmosphere where authority structures are almost universally questioned, then easy access to secular models have accentuated rather than helped solve our problems. For example, recourse to the tactics of modern communication media by one or other side of a dispute increases the polarisation of opinion that is so apparent among Anglicans today. Camps of the like-minded have been built up, and conversation between them seems virtually impossible. Conversation, communication, is the God-given instrument of community (which is why the reluctance of so many bishops and leaders of the Communion to take part in conversation about the Key Questions and Six Propositions is a major cause – quite as significant as any much-heralded public dispute – of the difficulty of maintaining and nurturing communion between them). Even on a personal level we know how destructive a break-down of trust will be on human relationships, like marriage for instance: “He says X, but he really means Y”. Where can you go from there? We operate in a

society, and also in a church which is becoming paralysed by what we have learnt to call ‘the hermeneutic of suspicion’.

Yet within the Christian Church the problem is even more profound, because ‘the other’ whom we are so reluctant to trust must also be seen as bearing God’s image and likeness. The Benedictine rule demands that ‘guests are to be received as Christ’, and in communion we are all fellow guests of Christ. The way I regard the ‘other’ is a consequence of a shared being (again the root meaning of biblical *koinonia*) – a metaphysical, ontological likeness – a common ‘being in Christ’. To mistrust another as a matter of course is actually to deny the other’s being in Christ.

What if that person seems unworthy of trust, or appears to have betrayed that trust? This is part, a tragic part of the human condition. Yet as well as the isolation which seems a natural result of such a break-down in communication, there is also another theological response. Rather than abandonment, within a fellowship formed by the gospel it should be possible to acknowledge the presence of Christ in the other and to respond by way of representations on behalf of the community, admonitions and concern. This is not empty idealism, or a pretence at ignoring the offence of alienating those who have been made one in Christ. If reconciliation is not possible then the suspension of trust can be formalised – *pro tem*. Discipline is invoked in order to bring about restoration. It is administered under an eschatological sign – the hope of reunification in God’s future – at the very least, a recognition that this person may well turn up in the Kingdom of Heaven! A catholic definition of excommunication is not a grim threat of impending punishment, it recognises that a person’s place at the eucharistic table has been *temporarily* suspended.

The Doctrine Commission and the Lambeth Commission’s concerns

In its submission to the October 2003 Primates’ Meeting, the IATDC urged a course of mutual admonition. We did not at that point discuss the particular question of the Primates’ authority as such: it was sufficient to address them as fellow Christians who have, like all of us, responsibility to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace among those with whom they live, serve and worship. As such even in their representative positions, they have the same responsibility to address those who they are convinced have gone astray – and equally to pay attention to any word of exhortation or rebuke which is sincerely offered to their own responsibilities and discipleship. It is a ministry of admonition within a fellowship, a communion, of *mutual* responsibility. Attention must be given to the due process involved: it should be open; clear reasons for any admonition should be given and published; there should be a clear right of a reply; and there should be serious attentiveness to both the

obligations of Christian love and the prompting of the Spirit. It is not just modelled on a secular court of law.

The Virginia Report did say much of this. Part of the scandal of mutual *suspicion* in the Communion is that attention is not given to the advice passed between the instruments of unity, the commissions, networks and committees which they appoint to enable to community to work together as one body. That failing too is a denial of the way Christ is met in the life of others. Much more work needs to be done – on a more pastoral use of canonical and theological language for instance. And if suspension of communion for some groups or individuals is felt to be necessary, greater clarity must be achieved in explaining the consequences of such an action. How far does it extend for instance? To whole churches (provinces or dioceses?); to supporters of what are held to be divisive opinions? To those who fail to oppose them actively? To those who may not agree with them, but are persuaded that they ought to tolerate that degree of difference in their fellowship?

The discernment of what are crucial issues to the maintenance of communion is a decisive element in this whole process. More is involved than simply listing criteria or conditions for inclusion or exclusion from the Body of Christ. Although it will disappoint some of the correspondents who have written to the IATDC (and no doubt others besides) I do not believe it is possible to specify in advance what are ‘communion breaking’ issues in the church. That is why spiritual discernment must always accompany discussion of the church’s integrity and authenticity. A situation we have considered more than once is that of the normally uncontroversial matter of bringing flags into the chancel of a church – uncontroversial that is until that flag carries a swastika and the church is in Nazi Germany! You cannot legislate away the challenge of fidelity or the cost of bearing the cross. But that increases the need to be attentive when an unexpected situation occurs and a significant number of experienced Christians draw attention to it as seriously compromising the message of the gospel.

Two judgements may be made when a controversial issue is judged to be so crucial that it threatens the communion of the church. The first may decide that a particular idea, practice or life-style is disrespectful to the honour of Jesus Christ; the second, that the opinion or practice is such a departure from the truth of Christ that the church needs to ensure that it should not be identified with or promulgated in its life and fellowship. Hence in the matter of the ordination of women to the priesthood or episcopate, some judged that they should oppose its introduction – and they should be able to do that without prejudice – while they did not draw the second judgement, that it was such a substantial departure from the truth that it broke the

unity of the church and invalidated its ministry and witness. Many who adopt that position hold that for the meantime the theological evidence for the ordination of women is indecisive, and the 'rights and wrongs' of any church's decision on the matter will have to await the judgement of the whole Church.

It seems that in the present situation Anglicans have *discerned* that the question of homosexual behaviour and the ministry of the church is a serious issue touching on the integrity of the church and the maintenance of its community. What is needed now is a process and a mechanism for *judging* whether it is an issue over which Christians can disagree, or whether it is something which requires a suspension from fellowship of those who teach that homosexual practice (as distinct from orientation) is still consistent with the truth of the gospel.

These are serious questions, and my counsel is simply that as part of our recognition of Christ in each other, in communion, we should attend closely to each other and to the gospel of Christ.

The two commissions, the IATDC and the 'LC' need to stay in close touch with each other. The Anglican Communion needs to re-establish an environment in which the task of spiritual discernment and the conclusions which follow from it can occur in a manner which is natural, constant, and virtually instinctive. As I understand it, your brief is to find immediate canonical and structural ways in which Anglicans can keep talking to each other – to communicate communion. I believe that the IATDC is looking towards ways in which the theological environment, the tradition of doctrine and spirituality which has served Anglicans well during controversies in the past, might be renewed. I do not believe that either body will be satisfied with a solution (even if one were possible) which is merely political, managerial or superficial. There is no clear divide between the task of theology and canon law in sustaining and nurturing the communion of the church. Law and theology must follow the nature of the Church of Christ.