

The Lambeth Commission on communion

A submission from the Executive Committee of Affirming Catholicism

The essence of communion

1. We begin by noting the prominence given to the language of ‘communion’ in ecclesiology in recent decades. Prompted in part by its deployment in the documents of Vatican II, and in part by other developments (see, for example, the now rather-neglected work of Lionel Thorntonⁱ), communion, or *koinonia*, has become almost a master concept in ecclesiology. Its significance in ecumenical dialogue was highlighted particularly in the Final Report of ARCIC I: “Fundamental to all our Statements is the concept of *koinonia* (communion)...Although ‘*koinonia*’ is never equated with ‘Church’ in the New Testament; it is the term that most aptly expresses the mystery underlying the various New Testament images of the Church.”ⁱⁱ ARCIC II developed this emphasis further, in its Agreed Statement, *Church as Communion*, the purpose of which was “to give substance to the affirmation that Anglicans and Roman Catholics are already in a real though as yet imperfect communion and to enable us to recognise the degree of communion that exists both within and between us”.ⁱⁱⁱ The World Council of Churches signalled the importance of this concept at its Seventh Assembly at Canberra in 1991, issuing in the Canberra statement, *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling*. If the Canberra statement appeared to amplify the scope of the term almost to indistinctness, nevertheless its attraction has been evident even in intra-Anglican discussion. Indeed, the Virginia report draws on this newly-established tradition of language in its second chapter, ‘Theology of God’s Gracious Gift: the Communion of the Trinity and the Church’: “Communion with God and one another is both gift and divine expectation for the Church”.^{iv} The report goes on to deploy, without explicit discussion of the link, the language of communion in a context primarily devoted to issues of organization and authority.^v Yet through the ecclesial use of the term ‘communion’ runs the more fundamental connotation of the shared life of believers in Christ, a life which draws us into a relationship (a participation, a communion) with the life of God as Trinity: “Union with God in Christ Jesus through the Spirit is the heart of Christian *koinonia*”, affirmed ARCIC I.^{vi} It is impossible to consider the present difficulties of the Anglican communion without taking cognizance of this substratum of meaning within the term ‘communion’.

2. Yet what is often not sufficiently apprehended is that, in its very wide and substantial use in contemporary ecclesiology (and especially ecumenical ecclesiology), ‘communion’ is not so much a foundational or definitional term, as a reflexive one. It is not one that seeks, in other words, to define comprehensively the basis on which descriptions of the extraordinarily complicated nature of intra- and inter-church relations can be erected. Rather, it tries to capture the spirit of an already-existing set of church relationships. This is usually in order, first, that something may be grasped of the nature of unity (however impaired) that already obtains in the situation under scrutiny, and, second, that ways of identifying and promoting a greater degree of unity than already exists may be adopted. ‘Communion’ is, then, a heuristic device, as much as anything else. It follows from the recognition that a person or group of people, as an ecclesial body, are indeed ‘Christian’, however much they may differ from us in specific matters of doctrine, worship and life. Hence the very plasticity of the term.

Communion and church division

3. Pressure to use the term ‘communion’ and its cognates occurs particularly in discussion about church unity and division, because it is here that the very question of the extent to which those who disagree nevertheless are in some sense ‘in Christ’ requires clarification and, possibly, consequent action. Anglicans may perceive significant bonds of unity across a dazzlingly broad and diverse range of Christian communities, all of which relations justify the perception of some degree of

‘communion’. Let us set aside, for our purposes here, the complicating question of whether or not traditional Trinitarian doctrine is a sufficient warrant for application of the description ‘Christian’. If we concentrate instead on relations with those ecclesial communities that do, explicitly or otherwise, accept Trinitarian doctrine, then the plasticity of the term ‘communion’ is evident at once. It does surely follow from the uncontroversial contention that Quakers are Christians, for example, that Anglicans, however much they may disagree with them on sacramental doctrine, authority, and ecclesiology, nevertheless do have communion at some level with their fellow Christians who happen to be Quakers. They would not normally say they are ‘in communion’ with Quakers, of course, but that is because the language of communion so easily slips from the broader, reflexive use, highlighted above, to a juridical or organizational one. Yet the two uses cannot be sundered absolutely.

4. There are similar ambiguities in the connotations of the term ‘communion’ in relation to Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs). Here, it is often the case that church communities from different denominations combine, or work together, in so many complementary ways that it is obviously possible to recognize some sense at least in which they are ‘in communion’ with each other. In some places, this goes very far indeed. Christ the Cornerstone, Milton Keynes is one such example – perhaps the best known. Here one church congregation, meeting in one building, sharing morning Eucharistic worship as well as other services, with a common baptismal policy, and shared elements of pastoral provision, comprises Anglicans, Baptists, United Reformed and Methodists.^{vii} Each denominational element remains in good standing with its own historic ecclesial community. Yet the Church of England is not formally, at a national level, in communion with the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the United Reformed Church, or the Methodist Church of Great Britain. The canon that governs the operation of LEPs, B44, does not of course use the language of ‘communion’ as such, but the range of shared services that may be approved by the relevant diocesan bishop goes a long way towards establishing a special relationship of communion between formerly separated churches at the local level. The disparity between what ‘in communion’ in an organizational or juridical sense connotes, and the reality it seeks to describe locally, could hardly be more evident.

5. The language of communion is thus a tensed language. On the one hand it captures significant relations between groups of Christians who nevertheless diverge to varying degrees on various subjects. But on the other hand it embodies an implicit assumption that this very identification of difference should subserve the greater purpose of realizing the true unity of the Church. How is it used most often in practice? It is both descriptive and normative, but rarely both in equal measure. As descriptive, it tends towards a sociology of church difference, marking the nature and extent of unity in the face of difference. As such, it need not imply or require particular organizational initiatives that seek to change the situation under review. As normative, however, it presumes that any categorization of difference must be evaluated according to the ultimate goal of church unity (however defined). Here, then, it is seemingly an implication of the language of communion that specific organizational form should be given to aspirations for closer relations or a more complete expression of church unity.

6. It is vital that Anglicans keep a weather-eye on the slipperiness of the language of communion, namely its susceptibility to use by different people for different purposes. This is precisely because of the risk that insufficient clarity of use will conceal what in fact are mutually incompatible ecclesial agendas. Anglicans, speaking of the Anglican ‘communion’, sometimes seem to presume that it is an adequate description of a federated system, with autonomous provinces bound together in a common recognition of basic doctrine and order. In this mode, the emphasis is often placed on diversity, and on the non-coercive nature of the exercise of authority within the communion. No particular proposal for closer bonds of unity need be implied. But Anglicans are also quite capable of speaking of the ‘Anglican Communion’ with an emphasis on common identity. In doing so, they imply that the Anglican churches constitute what is in effect one distinct denomination within the

range of denominations that make up world Christianity. In this mode of language, the further implication is also often present that the real unity and communion that Anglicans share ought to be served and promoted by formal instruments of authority, and perhaps even with a measure of coercive effect. It is arguable that the development of worldwide instruments in Anglicanism in the post-colonial era – the formation of the Anglican Consultative Council, for example, and the institution of regular Primates’ meetings – has thus signalled a shift from the former use to the latter. If this is so, it should at least be noted that it represents a substantial change in the nature of Anglican polity that has not been as widely acknowledged or discussed as it might have been. Before then, the Anglican churches worldwide were wary of taking steps that might suppress dissent at the cost of strengthening central instruments of authority. It could be argued that the Anglican Communion was in fact founded on conflict – the Colenso dispute is a case in point. At the same time, it should also be noted that the first view – the federal view – is itself a relatively modern development, albeit consonant with the description of Anglican authority proffered by the 1948 Lambeth Conference as ‘dispersed’.^{viii}

7. It is not the aim of this paper to explore thoroughly the ecclesiological implications of these contrasting applications of the language of communion. Noting the reflexive use of ‘communion’, however, it is at least possible to sketch a perspective on Anglican polity that could in theory accommodate significant differences between Anglican provinces. Rather than begin from an assumption of absolute unity in identity (whatever that might mean), it suggests that disagreements between Anglican provinces have to be set in the context of the wide range of ecumenical relationships that Anglicans currently sustain. Starting from the recognition that Anglicans share communion in some sense at least with all Trinitarian Christians, it is possible to discern an ascending scale of doctrinal agreement and ecclesial convergence. Of course, the image of a scale has to be used with caution, as it could be taken to imply a hierarchy of value, or a greater or more consistent unit of comparison than is realistic. But it does at least help to clarify the extent to which Anglicans can consider themselves ‘in communion’ with different bodies of Christians to significantly different degree, and it may also accommodate intra-Anglican diversity of opinion on this. At one end of the scale would be a relationship of communion based on certain common, basic beliefs, and this would seem to embrace all Trinitarian churches or communities of believers. Anglicans see themselves as part of the community of Christians worldwide. Yet they also share the conviction that the Church has embodied, institutional presence in history, and that that is marked above all by baptism. Anglicans are, then, in a more intensive relationship of communion with some communities of Christians (those in which Trinitarian baptism is practised) than with others. And so one could go on, enumerating the commonalities of doctrine, order, history and practice that Anglicans share with other churches, and with each other. At the summit of this scale would lie relations between the Anglican churches themselves, where patterns of order, liturgy and doctrine are in many cases almost identical. Yet scope for some difference remains. In this perspective, even sharp differences between Anglican provinces on particular issues that fall outside the constitutive structures of order need not obscure the basic observation that so much else is shared that the language of communion is applied justly in the Anglican context more intensely than would be true of other sets of inter-church relationships.

Communion and jurisdiction

8. We are well aware that the perspective outlined above will not necessarily be reassuring to those who see recent developments in some Anglican provinces over the question of homosexuality as a fundamental challenge to the apostolicity and catholicity of Anglicanism. For them, presumably, the apparent readiness of some provinces to breach what they take to be biblical norms constitutes so fundamental a violation of the bonds of communion that it would be inappropriate to apply the term ‘communion’ to relations with the churches at question – at least, in the sense currently appropriated to ‘Anglican communion’. The conflict is seemingly insoluble. One side claims that

the principle of provincial autonomy enables the retention of the current pattern of bonds of communion despite disagreement, embodied in differing ecclesial practice, over the acceptability of homosexuality. It does not deny the central authority of the Bible within Anglican polity, but its case does rest on the supposition of greater scope or latitude accorded to biblical interpretation than would be the case on the other side. It presumably assumes that the question of homosexuality itself falls into the category of *adiaphora*, and does not issue in a basic denial of scriptural warrant. The other side, on the contrary, appears to restrict the scope of acceptable interpretation, to the point at which no latitude can be left for embodying an acceptance of homosexual relations in a change of ecclesial practice. It is not easy to see how these conflicting claims can be reconciled, except by long consideration of basic issues of biblical hermeneutics and ecclesial authority. But we would like to point out that, even accepting for the moment the force of the position of those opposed to greater recognition of homosexual relations, it need not follow that the bonds of the Anglican Communion are irreversibly breached. Following on from the reflexive perspective indicated above, it should surely be possible to accommodate acknowledgement of a *de facto* loosening, or redefinition of the bonds of communion within the worldwide family of Anglicanism, without a corresponding attempt *de jure*, as it were, to excommunicate or expel particular provinces, or to assign them to a subordinate status.

9. Such an outcome would presumably require concessions on both sides. One side would have to accept that redefining the bonds of communion would entail a renewed emphasis on provincial autonomy – an emphasis that would sit uneasily with the concluding sections of the Virginia report. We note that the report itself, however, contains some hints in this direction. On the Anglican Consultative Council [ACC], for example, it acknowledges that “to be effective and credible, the [Communion’s] Secretariat must be governed by a *reference* group [the ACC] which is informed, has continuity *and is also representative of the Communion’s diversity*”.^{ix} This proposal can only be made here in a general way. The precise implications it carries for the Lambeth Conference, the Primates’ meetings, and the Anglican Consultative Council would require more detailed substantiation, naturally. We make the proposal, however, firstly to reject the possibility that particular provinces might be placed in a different relationship from others *vis a vis* the Anglican communion as a whole. Secondly, we make it in order to reject the prospect of the creation of permanent, alternative episcopal (or archiepiscopal) jurisdictions within provinces. On the issue of the interchangeability of ministries, our proposal need not imply any departure from current practice, since it is currently the case that there cannot be absolute interchangeability across the Anglican communion, when particular provinces do not accept the practice of other provinces in respect to the ordination of women. Interchangeability, in other words, appears to be to some extent a matter of provincial determination. The other side would have to accept, as a *quid pro quo*, the continued participation of provinces that, in their view, had departed from Biblical warrant on the matter of homosexuality, at significant levels within the communion. It would also have to accept that – again in the context of worldwide Anglicanism’s ecumenical relationships – the bonds of communion, even between Anglican provinces apparently so divided on an important matter of principle, remain close and strong.

10. We have taken this view, in order to accent a possible way forward for the Anglican Communion as a whole. It does not represent, we are well aware, a resolution of the underlying conflict over the question of homosexuality. Nor does it presuppose indifference on our part, or lack of warmth, towards arguments in favour of according much greater public recognition of homosexual relations within the Anglican churches, amongst clergy as well as laity. Affirming Catholicism contains a range of views on that question, but overall it would probably be true to say that the sympathies of its members mostly lie with a willingness to see the traditional position modified. But we recognize the impasse the communion appears to have reached. We believe the unity of the communion is precious, and we are aggrieved to see it threatened. Our proposal is put forward in a spirit of hope, as well as realism. It need not imply a permanent alteration in the

character of the Anglican Communion. Indeed we hope very much that any such change would be temporary. That is because we remain convinced that the shaking of the bonds of communion between the Anglican churches is not by any means irrecoverable. If our unity is valued by all, despite difference, there will be a determination on the part of all to heal division, and to grow in mutual understanding and respect.

Executive Committee of Affirming Catholicism, United Kingdom – 05.05.04

Notes:

ⁱ See especially L.S. Thornton, *The Common Life in the Body of Christ* (London, 1942).

ⁱⁱ ARCIC I, *Final Report* (London, 1982), pp. 5-6.

ⁱⁱⁱ ARCIC II, *Church as Communion* (London, 1991), p. 8.

^{iv} Report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission (the ‘Virginia Report’), in J.M. Rosenthal & N. Currie (eds.), *Being Anglican in the Third Millennium* (London, 1997), p. 238.

^v The connection is evident in the simple affirmation made at the beginning of the third chapter: “Anglicans are held together in a life of visible communion”, the nature of which it proceeds to specify: *ibid.*, p. 243,

^{vi} ARCIC I, *Final Report*, p. 6.

^{vii} We have not included the Roman Catholic Church in this list, simply because, although it is represented in the congregation of Christ the Cornerstone and in its ministry, for reasons of Eucharistic discipline its relationship to the other covenanting churches is somewhat different in nature from that of their mutual relations. We do not mean thereby to diminish the intensity of the Catholic Church’s commitment in this particular LEP.

^{viii} “Authority, as inherited by the Anglican Communion...is thus a dispersed rather than a centralized authority having many elements which combine, interact with, and check each other”; *The Lambeth Conference 1948* (London, 1948), pp. 84-5.

^{ix} Virginia Report, p. 278. Italics inserted here for emphasis.