

Iain Torrance: Comments, final plenary, Lambeth Conference, 3 August 2008

Thank you, Archbishop, and all your staff, for your invitation, hospitality and many kindnesses.

Thank you, to all of you, for your welcome and inclusion, especially to Bishop Brian Smith of Edinburgh, one of my oldest friends and my host bishop, and to my Bible Study group.

Though I am representing the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and am ordained in the Church of Scotland, I have an English mother and an Episcopalian wife. I was confirmed while at school in England and I care deeply about the Anglican Communion.

It is evident that the Communion is under stress. For these last two weeks, I have listened, taken notes, prayed and tried not to say too much. And I have come to believe that some form of Covenant has substance. Very briefly, as an external person, let me try to explain that.

The Communion is damaged. I believe that over the next few years you will benefit from finding images and appropriate language which will fire the imagination and rebuild confidence and trust.

For that to be effective, and for structures not to feel imposed, you need a point of entry into the maze and an architecture to hold it together. I think that Bishop Tom Wright's observation at a hearing a day or two ago that we are concerned with the triangulation of authority, subsidiarity and adiaphora puts this tidily and incisively.

In those three words I believe there is the governance challenge, not in human sexuality.

So: authority, subsidiarity and adiaphora, all under God.

Some discussion I have heard would suggest that these issues may be resolved out of the normal elasticity which resides in a healthy institution. In other words: Leave it alone and it will self-correct. I don't believe that will work any more, and I say that because over the last two weeks I could feel the anxiety. The Communion needs to experience transformed relationships.

So why a covenant? Does that not risk a non-Anglican precision and legalism?

Here is one kind of answer. We are familiar with contracts. In a contract, the conditions are spelled out first: If ... if ... then. A contract is designed to allow you to bail out.

A covenant is different. As all of you know, covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures begins with the unconditional promise of God's love. And who can come close to God and not

be changed? So, a covenant is an initiative undertaken by transformed persons in response to a gift of unmerited grace.

If this Communion can forge such a covenant over the next few years, it will truly be a light set upon a hill.

Finally, over the last two weeks my mind has constantly gone back to St Cyprian, the great African theologian who was martyred in the mid third century. Near the end of his life, Cyprian fought to keep the church from schism. In his foundational treatise *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, chapter 5, writing about the authority of the episcopate, he said: “The episcopate is one, each part of which is held by each bishop for the whole”. “For the whole”: the Latin is “in solidum”. Now, recovery of that African sense of authority held on behalf of the whole is at the heart of covenant and the well-being of the Communion.

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