

# **THE VITALITY OF WORLD ANGLICANISM**

## **Mollegen Lecture by the Secretary General of the Anglican Communion, Dr Josiah Idowu-Fearon to Virginia Theological Seminary**

**November 15 2017**

Thank you, Dean Markham for inviting me to this year's 'Mollegen Lecture' with the title: "The Vitality Of World Anglicanism" to kick-off the 20th anniversary of the Centre for Anglican Communion Studies Celebration. I also seize this opportunity to thank the Director of the Centre, Rev. Robert Heaney, Ph.D, members of the board of trustees, faculty members and visiting Seminarians from some of the Seminaries and of course, VTS Seminarians! I bring you warm greetings from the Archbishop of Canterbury and colleagues from the Anglican Communion Office in London.

### **INTRODUCTION**

"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing." (Colossians 1: 3-6).

Dear seminarians. You will soon begin a great adventure that I myself began over 40 years ago. You are now training for ministry in the Church of Jesus Christ, and more specifically, in the Anglican expression of Christianity.

And on some days, you may have some doubts or fears about that your chosen vocation. If you spend a lot of time reading Anglican blogs, you might get the impression that all we ever do is argue about sex and demonize those who disagree with us. And, in the face of all the reports – real enough, as far as they go – regarding the rapid decline of Christian faith in the West among young people and adults both, you might well be tempted to despair over the integrity of our witness.

I am here today to tell you that the negative narrative of the bloggers is a distortion of the truth. I am here today to tell you that the Anglican Communion is alive and well. I am here today to tell you that, as St. Paul says: 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world'. And one major and vital instrument for the Gospel growing and bearing fruit is the Anglican family of churches. Like all families, we have our problems and disagreements. But like all families, we have a great strength working together. I am here to tell you about that vitality or strength today.

### **EVANGELISM AND CHURCH PLANTING**

Jesus commanded us to "make disciples of all nations" by baptizing and teaching. And He promised to be with us always to the end of time. The Great Commission is our primary and fundamental job as the Church of Jesus Christ. And the Anglican Churches are at the forefront of evangelism and church planting all over the world.

The Anglican Communion's membership has grown over 10% in the last decade, and this is not due only to the birth rate. Much of it, in the face of other pressures, is the result of simple, persistent, and faithful sharing of the Gospel.

Perhaps we know about this, in areas like Africa and Asia. But there is even some soaring testimony in places like England. Most of what you read about church attendance in the Church of England is not encouraging. But remember that English Anglicans were the pioneers in Protestant world mission in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the fruit of their sacrificial labours laid the foundations for our burgeoning Communion. And that spirit is still alive. There are many shining lights in the midst of a challenging religious landscape. The Diocese of London is one of those lights. Holy Trinity Brompton (most people call it HTB) has had a profound impact on church attendance and church planting in the diocese of London. HTB is the most highly attended parish in the Church of England with an average weekend attendance of over 6,000. Because of its great success in making disciples of Jesus and the limitations of its building size, it has planted many new congregations in the vacant church buildings in London. It has also helped many other parishes to grow.

The main instrument for HTB's growth is the ALPHA course, which is now being used by thousands of churches of many different denominations in 169 countries all over the world. More than 16 million people have attended an ALPHA course. Of those, many have dedicated their lives to Jesus Christ, including Justin Welby. ALPHA is also being widely used in the prisons and military bases in England.

HTB's example and influence have helped to change the culture of the Diocese of London over the past 25 years. With the leadership of Bishop Chartres, the diocese established in 2015 the Centre for Church Planting and Church Growth with the goal of planting 100 new congregations in the diocese. A new suffragan Bishop was consecrated with the sole responsibility of overseeing this effort. Since 2015, 27 new congregations have been started with an average weekly attendance of 1,240. Last year I attended an open air evangelistic rally in Central London, organized by HTB. It was attended by thousands of young adults. The Archbishop of Canterbury was the main speaker and gave the invitation to believe in, and follow, Jesus. Hundreds of young people accepted his invitation.

Evangelism and church planting are alive and well and growing in London. Other Western Anglican churches need to be encouraged and inspired by this, and learn from it.

As I said, though, there is amazing witness going on around the Anglican world more broadly.

Consider the Diocese of Singapore alone. This single diocese has six missionary deaneries: Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Nepal. In each of these deaneries, new people are becoming disciples of Jesus, churches are being formed and the groundwork is being laid to form new dioceses.

In 2016, Bishop Rennis Ponniah flew by helicopter into remote villages in the Himalayas to baptize and confirm over 500 new Christian disciples – all brought to Christ through

Anglican missionaries. Who supports this tremendous work? The people of the Anglican Church in Singapore, assisted by friends from elsewhere in the world. Now, Asian Anglicans are taking the lead in supporting the work of evangelization in the area of the greatest Christian growth in the world: China. We should be paying attention.

You are, however, probably more familiar with the tremendous growth of the Anglican churches in Africa. Well you should be! It is one of the great stories of the Gospel in all of Church history. In my own home country of Nigeria, there are now about 18 million Anglicans. We have been the fastest-growing and now the largest province of the Anglican world. That didn't happen by accident. There is a concerted effort in a good number of dioceses to proactively make new disciples and plant new churches in the unreached rural areas where Christian faith is not yet known. These church planting missions are a priority. In a particular diocese I know about, every priest, from the dean of the cathedral to the most newly-ordained deacon, is expected to participate in a two-week long missions which involve basic evangelism. These missions are costly, in terms of the limited amounts of money and energy we have. There is no economic benefit to planting churches in these remote rural areas. The new converts are poor and have no money to give to the diocese. What's our motivation? We want everybody to know and experience the joy and freedom and hope of knowing Jesus. In the West, we hear many sincere and worthy pleas that the church be more inclusive. In Nigeria, we try to demonstrate that inclusive impulse by reaching out to the rural poor. And it has produced great spiritual benefits. And some of our most able church leaders have come from these rural evangelism efforts, including some bishops.

There is much to say about the evangelistic work of the Anglican Church throughout Africa – in East Africa, but also in places to the south, and centre of the continent, formerly ravaged by civil strife and sorrow – DR Congo, Angola, and Mozambique – but now bursting with new hopes carried at great cost by bearers of the Christian Gospel.

#### INTERFACE WITH EXTREMIST ISLAM

Evangelism is at the centre of Christian witness. But part of its character, and much of its fruit, lies in the way that the Gospel engages and finally transforms cultures in the midst of social challenge. Anglican evangelism has always witnessed to this transforming power that comes in the life of Christ and His Spirit.

Take the reality of militant Islam. On September 11, 2001, most people in the Western world, for the first time, became aware of what Anglicans in the developing world have lived with for our entire life. And with each passing year since then, it has become more clear that we Christians need to find creative ways to live with our Muslim neighbours. Neither faith is going away and we need to learn to live together with respect and mutual forbearance.

This relationship has been particularly difficult in the areas where Christians are a minority and Muslims an overwhelming majority. In many such communities, Anglicans and other Christians have had their churches and schools destroyed by mobs with the tacit blessing of the local governments.

Many Anglican bishops in these situations have begun building bridges of mutual respect and mutual cooperation. For example, by building schools that encourage integrated student bodies of both Muslim and Christian students and by providing equal opportunities for leading school prayers and other leadership roles. Other attempts for finding middle ground with Muslims is in the area of health care. In areas where health care facilities are very rare, Anglican dioceses are establishing health centres with the express purpose of offering medical care and equal respect to both Muslim and Christian patients.

The Diocese of Jerusalem is a shining light in this department. With a declining Christian population due to emigration, the Diocese provides high-quality education and medical care through well-funded network of schools and health facilities. Much of this work is possible by generous funding from members of the Episcopal Church through the American Friends of Jerusalem Diocese and the Compass Rose Society.

And despite the flood of Christians away from many war-torn areas of the Middle and Near East, Anglican Christians in these places continue to stay, to engage, to witness, to build. In Egypt, for instance, Anglicans are at the forefront, not only in ecumenical solidarity – with Copts and Orthodox and Catholics – but they have taken the lead in dialogue and constructive work with Muslim religious leaders and scholars, building bridges and trust in the process.

At the same time, and on a more sensitive subject, Anglicans are also at the forefront of sharing the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ with Muslims. Although exact figures are impossible to verify due to social pressures and death threats, many thousands of Muslims turn to Christ every year, in places as far apart as Indonesia and Algeria. And many of these become Anglicans. In my own former diocese of Kaduna three of my best priests , and some Anglican Bishops in nearby diocese, are former Muslims.

## EMPOWERING WOMEN

The transforming power of the Gospel is at work in the empowerment of women, and this is true among Anglicans especially. Women in the developing world have very difficult lives. Poverty, diseases, famine, childhood illnesses, domestic violence, a life of carrying water, caring for too many children and working the fields. There are many challenges, many inequities and many injustices. Much has been written about these issues and appropriately so. The world should know and the world should care about our sisters.

What is not written about or widely known is the role of Anglican Mother's Union in all of Africa and parts of the Caribbean. The Mother's Union is a powerful movement in almost every diocese in Africa. Begun in 1886 in England, and carried elsewhere by valiant Anglican women missionaries, the Mothers' Union soon became a steady framework for church life around the world, especially in Africa. In almost every diocese today, the Bishop's wife is the President of the Mother's Union and she has clout and she gets things done.

What do they get done? They build housing for widows who have no place to live. They build and run women's training centres to teach women marketable skills (like how to

operate a sewing machine). And they help women get set up in business by helping them to buy their first sewing machine. They set up purchasing networks to help women buy materials at the best price. They build community stores to help women sell their products at the best price.

They provide basic health training for new mothers and family planning education to help families limit their children to the number they can afford to raise. They run schools to provide quality education to children in rural areas and provide significant female role models for girls to encourage them to avoid early marriage and to get a good education.

And here is another story that is not well known. The United Thank Offering from the Episcopal Church Women in the United States has partnered with the Mothers Union in many dioceses throughout the world to accomplish these goals.

Most activities in the Anglican Communion to end and prevent gender-based violence and care for survivors, and to promote gender justice generally, continue to be birthed and given energy by women. There remains an urgent need for Anglican men and boys to understand their role. Gender injustices and inequality will only end when men fully engage with the issue, reconsider notions of masculinity and, informed by God's grace, see that no form of supremacy, discrimination or oppression among women and men is legitimate. Anglican church leaders have an enormous role to play here, and we have seen some excellent examples of Anglican archbishops and bishops stepping forward to bless and support initiatives for gender justice – efforts ranging from film showings, to marches, to seminars, and more. Among these many leaders, we can cite

The Archbishop of Polynesia, Winston Halapua

The Primate of Burundi, Martin Blaise Nyaboho, and the Bishop of Rumonge, Pedaçuli Birakengana,

Archbishop Ian Ernest in the Indian Ocean,

The Moderator Bishop of the Church of South India, Thomas Oommen,

Much more needs to be done to empower women and empower men to live in just and loving relationships, and Anglicans continue to move forward in this journey.

#### GROWING RESPECT FOR CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

As we think of how evangelism has grown in the Anglican Communion, we should note as well how this very process has brought diverse peoples together in unexpected ways, for which, frankly, we have not always been prepared. As we all know, there have been many tensions within the Anglican Communion in recent years about differences – some theological, some cultural, some theological-wrapped-in- cultural differences. We know that some of this has focused on differences over sexual morality. But, just to keep everything in perspective, remember this: the Lambeth Conference discussed the issue of polygamy for about 100 years before reaching a definitive pastoral solution. That pastoral solution depended on an agreed-upon theological framework regarding truth and purpose in human relationships. But the framework itself was left to be filled-in locally as local

churches and local bishops deal pastorally with the issue. That was a matter of tremendous work, and the building of tremendous trust. Perhaps it is also a signal for how we must move ahead in other areas as well.

In the current situation, we have some very serious difference of opinion about other issues. And the tensions are real. But we are still together. Working through it as a family works through problems. One of the great and positive outcomes of the past 20 years is that Western Anglicans and Global South Anglicans are getting to know each other a lot better than before. Part of this growing awareness is the direct result of the controversies about sexual morality. On both sides of the issue, Anglicans from different parts of the world have made common cause with those who agree with their own point of view.

But something else has happened. When Western Anglicans travel to the Global South and when Global South Anglicans travel to the West, they begin to see the different contexts for ministry and faith and moral discernment. It isn't always easy, nor does it often result in agreement. But it furthers the skills of listening and trust, from which many other benefits of common life derive.

International mission trips and mission partnerships create friendship and mutual respect and most importantly, LOVE. And when you come to love someone as your brother and sister in Christ, you begin to see the world differently. You carry your own opinions more lightly. You place a higher value on the gifts of fellow believers from a different culture.

I have a friend who is rector of a middle-sized parish here in the US. His parish has been in partnership with a Nigerian diocese for the past 30 years. He has been on yearly mission trips there for the past 15 years. He tells me that his faith and his dedication to evangelism has been strengthened and his zeal for the gospel deepened by his interaction with the Nigerian Anglicans. At the same time, the Nigerian Anglicans (Bishops, Priest and Laity) have come to appreciate the witness and generosity and dedication of the American Anglicans who give up their time and money and personal safety to engage in meaningful ministry partnership with their Nigerian brothers and sisters. Mutual respect and mutual appreciation for cultural differences go both directions.

I cannot stress this enough. This kind of witness, uniquely offered by Christians and especially deep because of the challenges it is engaging among Anglicans, provides our divided world a tremendously needed way forward. This is so not simply in sentimental terms, but in quite practical and political terms. In the late 20th century, for example, New Zealand adopted a daring synodical style made up of three "tikanga's", or three cultural voting groups, that both reflected and further challenged growing cooperation and mutual respect between Maori, Pacific, and European members of the church. Civil societies have much to learn from this experiment, as does the larger church. And, of course, the Anglican Communion itself has been on the road to working out fruitful polity arrangements that will be of help to church and state both.

SHARING OF RESOURCES

Another benefit of the growing global awareness within the Anglican family is the growing and deepening level of partnership between the different provinces on a material and spiritual level.

You probably all know that Trinity Church, Wall Street, in New York is the richest parish church in the world, with more than \$2 billion in assets. Fortunately for the Anglican family, the parish uses its wealth to fund and facilitate mission partnerships with Anglican dioceses all over the world.

And while that is a very good thing, it is also a very good thing that many dioceses and parishes – even small parishes with limited resources – are entering into these kinds of partnerships. Churches and diocese and individuals from the wealthy parts of the world are sharing gifts they have. And in return, parishes and dioceses and individuals from the developing world are sharing their own gifts, chief of which is a radical dependence on the providence and mercy of God. Anglicans from the wealthy world always return home from such mission experiences with a deeper dependence on God and a deeper prayer life. Mutual gifts exchanged.

There are many gifts to share, furthermore. The Anglican Church of Australia has a great ministry of providing its tremendous educational resources to the rest of the Anglican world. Moore College in Sydney produces and makes available at a very reasonable price, basic theology courses for training clergy and lay leaders locally. This is a real life-saver for materially poor dioceses which cannot afford to send their leaders away to seminary. In addition to that they have provided many scholarships for promising students to come to Australia for more extensive education.

Singapore recently sent dozens of hospitality professionals over to Cairo to help the diocese there set up a functioning conference centre. While there, they learned something about Christian witness and peacemaking in a difficult context.

Another example, the Langham Partnership, based in London and founded by the late John Stott. This fund continues to provide scholarships to promising students from developing countries to get higher education for ordained ministry.

Nations, of course, share foreign aid. But this kind of personal and reciprocal exchange is something else: it embodies in real people a kind of sacrifice and mutual bearing of burdens that points to the very nature of God in Christ. That in itself is a transforming vision: not that we love, but that God loved first, before all things, sending his Son as a sacrifice for us (1 John 4:10), and so reorienting the dynamic undergirding the entire world. To repeat myself here: in a world of conflict and division, the mission of Anglican churches within our Communion, is necessary, powerful, and – for all its flaws – even divine in its purpose and power.

## MISSIONARY SOCIETIES

One could even say that the entire Anglican Communion is a missionary body, in the deepest sense. We are familiar with the great missionary societies of Anglicanism – The SPG (now USPG), the CMS, more recently, the South American Missionary Society (SAMS):

their work is both legendary in its extent and self-giving, but also still very much alive in various parts of the world. But taken as a whole, our Communion today, in all the ways I have just described and more, embodies the energies of the Holy Spirit bringing the saving love of God in Christ to the world, day in and day out, in the face of all kinds of obstacles, many lodged within the Church itself!

And, in light of this very real and vibrant mission, the understandable fears and worries about the Communion, even the deeper temptations to despair, must dissipate. Paul tells us that, in all our labours on the Church's behalf, it is God who "gives the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6-7). God, my friends, is giving tremendous growth to all the planters and waterers. We are asked now to discern it, to give thanks for it, and to our own selves over to its service.

Contrary to popular opinion, missionary societies are not a thing of the past but remain, as they have been for centuries, a vital force within the Anglican family of churches. CMS (Church Mission Society) sent missionaries to my own native Nigeria about 150 years ago and the fruit of their labour is richly on display to this very day.

Also, we continue to work in partnership with CMS Australia. For many years, the Principal of Kaduna Diocesan College (Nigeria) was a small but powerful woman from Australia who ran a tight ship and developed a fine reputation for running a quality school. Since leaving us, she ran a school in Kabul, Afghanistan and is now in Thailand. CMS continues to be a vital force in the Anglican world and makes us a stronger and more internationally engaged faith community.

SAMS (Society of Anglican Missionaries and Senders) based in Ambridge, PA. is a growing network of missionaries working in partnership with Anglican dioceses all over the world. It was originally named South American Missionary Society, but changed the name to reflect its growing scope of mission a few years ago

## CONCLUSION

In summary, World Anglicanism continues to be a vital force for the work of the kingdom of God throughout the world. St Paul's words are as relevant today as 2,000 years ago:

"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing." (Col. 1:3-6).

My dear brothers and sisters, as you prepare for a life of ministry, please know that it is a great adventure and high privilege to serve our Lord in His church. No chapter in the church's history has been without problems and challenges. And no chapter has been without blessings and joys and triumphs. You are part of the next generation whom God will use to bring the good news of Jesus love to a world that desperately needs to know it.