

A proposal to the ACC from the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order

At the outset of a recent annual meeting of the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order (IASCUFO), we recalled an encouragement from the former Secretary General, Archbishop Josiah Idowu-Fearon, who met with IASCUFO at the start of its present five-year term. He described the task of the Commission as providing a robust theological scrutiny to assist in *discerning the vocation of the Anglican Communion*. At our meeting this year, the new Secretary General, Bishop Anthony Poggo, urged the Commission to reflect theologically on the Calls that came out of the Lambeth Conference, and to connect them with unresolved questions concerning structures of decision-making in the Anglican Communion.

Back in 2006, Archbishop Rowan Williams helped to articulate the shape of Anglican ecclesiology. Anglicans have tried, he said, to find a way of being the Church that is ‘neither tightly centralised nor just a loose federation of essentially independent bodies: a Church that is seeking to be a coherent family of communities meeting to hear the Bible read,’ and, whenever and wherever possible, ‘to break bread and share wine as guests of Jesus Christ, and to celebrate a unity in worldwide mission and ministry. That is what the word “Communion” means for Anglicans, and it is a vision that has taken clearer shape in many of our ecumenical dialogues’ (‘Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today,’ 27 June 2006, available online).

Following this ecumenical line of thinking, we wish, in this short paper, to sketch a piece of work that we would propose to undertake to help clarify ways forward for the Anglican Communion. Steering between both undue centralisation and unfettered autonomy, can we find ways to encompass our current divisions within the communion of our common baptism? Can we, in this way, reframe our disputes, and the impairment of our common life, within a shared commitment to trying to walk together with our Lord on the way to full communion?

Addressing Disputes

The Anglican Communion has faced several structural challenges in the last few decades, which we have yet to address consistently and coherently. Inter-Anglican ‘impairment’ first appeared with respect to the ordination of women, which the Communion sought to address in an orderly and respectful way, both at the Lambeth Conference and in a subsequent commission that coined the phrase ‘highest degree of communion possible.’ In a few cases, provincial churches have sought to accommodate varying views by developing structures of differentiation, which have been understood as ecclesiological experiments.

Disagreements about same-sex relationships and their place in the Church have proven to be more protracted, and they remain unresolved. While the teaching of Lambeth Conference 1998 1.10 serves for most Anglicans as an important and even authoritative touchstone, many others would wish to see it updated or dropped altogether. Amid continuing doctrinal, theological, and exegetical disagreement, as well as widening division, several churches have declined to attend the meetings of the Lambeth Conference in both 2008 and 2022 and have absented themselves from the other Instruments of Communion. Meanwhile, other provinces have changed their teaching and practice to accommodate same-sex marriage.

The Anglican Communion finds itself today facing a range of improvisational differentiation, developed in a series of *ad hoc* decisions and strategies. For some, this may not be a problem, but it complicates answering the call of communion, which demands some degree of agreement and consensus. Can we, for instance, still speak of a single Faith and Order shared by Anglicans, as Resolution 49 of Lambeth Conference 1930 famously presumed? If not, to what extent are we still one communion of Christians?

As a group asked to wrestle with precisely these questions, IASCUFO believes that the Anglican Communion should try to say again what it believes and to seek a faithful, visible expression for life together in the Church. Because, moreover, Anglican Christians and provinces can only hope to agree with one another to the highest degree and extent possible, IASCUFO believes that the Anglican Communion needs to consider orderly means of structural differentiation, as an ecclesiological expression of disagreeing well. ‘Good differentiation’ could enable continuing, conscientious discernment on the way to the agreement we are called to but cannot achieve at present.

Good Differentiation?

This project would not seek to presume the inevitability of such differentiation, nor enshrine it for the long term, nor take sides in our painful divides. Rather, the task would be to recognise the reality and depth of our divisions and attempt to describe them in as theologically responsible a manner as possible. This will require a doctrine of the Church founded in the Christ-formed unity of ‘one body through the cross’ that may make sense of the hard work of reconciliation to which we are called, not only among Anglicans but with all Christians (Eph. 2). So far from seeking to complete or heal our Communion, our interest will be to view the Anglican vocation through a broadly ecumenical lens.

Divisions and disputes between churches are not new, but the Ecumenical Movement went a long way toward reframing our arguments with reference to the persistent unity of the one Body of Christ. Often enough, we have found common ground in the earliest agreements of the apostolic Church; or, again, with reference to distinct spiritual and theological traditions, as in the Catholic Church’s accommodation of varying Franciscan, Dominican, and Jesuit emphases. Viewed in this way, all our denominations and structures appear provisional. Our own Anglican Instruments of Communion are of recent origin and may need adapting for our current challenges.

Versions of this suggestion have appeared in recent years from various quarters, as persons of good will have striven to make space for one another across difference. The proposed covenantal structure of the Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches, for example, deserves careful consideration, as do our ecumenical conversations that have thought carefully about degrees of communion in the one Body of Christ.

We also find a precedent for our proposal in the Anglican tradition of ecclesial reticence. Archbishop Michael Ramsey invoked the ‘incompleteness’ of the Anglican Church, which points ‘through its own history to something of which it is a fragment.’ Anglicanism is ‘clumsy and untidy, it baffles neatness and logic,’ wrote Ramsey. ‘For it is sent not to commend itself as “the best type of Christianity,” but by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church wherein all

have died' (*Gospel and the Catholic Church*, cited by IASCUFO, *Towards a Symphony of Instruments* 5.5.4, available online). If the Canterbury-centered communion of Anglican churches is provisional, as we have always maintained, there is no reason not to consider new ways and means of 'good differentiation' that may accommodate our disagreements as generously as possible.

What is the ACC asked to do?

We ask the Anglican Consultative Council to consider and accept the following Resolution:

The Anglican Consultative Council

- Welcomes the 'Proposal' from IASCUFO to explore issues of structure and decision-making in the Anglican Communion, as central to our call to be one;
- Affirms the importance of seeking to walk together to the highest degree possible, and learning from our ecumenical conversations how to accommodate disagreement patiently and respectfully;
- Asks IASCUFO to proceed with this work and report its progress to the Instruments of Communion.