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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Reflections on The Lambeth Conference '98

Wallace P Benn

I am immensely grateful to God for Lambeth '98, as I believe that it pulled the whole Anglican Communion in a biblical and orthodox direction. Furthermore I believe that it needs to be 'talked up', particularly in the Anglican churches of the West, where some of the issues which it resolved refuse to go away. Lambeth only has a moral force in the Anglican Communion but it must be allowed to carry that force undiminished. But first let me share with you some initial impressions of the Conference.

My first impression was of the length of the Conference – three weeks is a long time – but when so many are travelling from all over the world, their journey needs to be worthwhile. The second was of the sprawling nature of the university campus where we met in Canterbury, which meant that we were somewhat fragmented and scattered around in Halls etc for our accommodation. These impressions did not last long! My wife and I found it such a privilege to be there and to meet bishops from other countries, many of whom come from churches which are growing rapidly. Take, for example, Nigeria, which in 1989 had some 11 dioceses and now has about 64! That amounts to around 17.5 million people in church every Sunday! This compares with the purely notional 26 million Anglicans in England (certainly not in church every Sunday!). Given these kinds of figures it is not surprising that the centre in the Anglican Communion has moved from the West to the two-thirds of the world where the church is really growing and is bearing fruit. We have much to learn in the West from our brothers and sisters as we struggle in our post-modern missionary situation. In Nigeria, where the church is weak, they send a bishop in to do church planting! Now there is a good idea for the West, I would love to be on the cutting-edge like that.

Many moving stories emerged in conversation. Many of the bishops struggle in difficult and dangerous situations. The Archbishop of Canterbury wrote afterwards: 'How could any of us forget the Bishop of Kitgum's simple but moving account of the death of his beloved wife Winifred, blown up by a landmine?' I remember talking with a wonderful bishop from Rwanda who told me that none of the parishes of his diocese can operate normally and that they all live in fear of their lives. A bishop from northern Nigeria said that in his area Christians have fewer rights

than black people in South Africa before apartheid was abolished! One only had to listen, for example, to stories of a suffering church in the Sudan, to be moved beyond words. Some years ago I remember asking a returned missionary who was serving as secretary to a bishop in Tanzania to describe in one sentence the difference between the church in England and the church in Africa. She replied: 'They have so little but are so full of joy, we have so much but are so inclined to complain.' I found myself thinking of that comment often during the Conference as I talked particularly with African bishops.

My wife too, in the spouses' programme, would repeat the same observation as she listened to the humble and moving experiences of bishops' wives from overseas. It was challenging and encouraging to meet with such people from other parts of the world church, and especially for us Westerners!

The Conference was divided into four sections. The one I chose was 'Called to a Full Humanity' and one of the subsections of this stream dealt with the issue of Sexuality. There were daily Bible studies in small groups, with people from one's own stream (often subsection) which were valuable, and plenary worship every day (it was good to experience different flavours of worship from different parts of the world) but most of the rest of the time was spent in one's stream and in particular one's subsection. I chose the subsection that I did, not because it is my primary interest (I would rather have been in the group dealing with evangelism amongst young people/young couples) but because I felt that if I came away from Lambeth depressed and discouraged it would probably be because of what might happen in the Sexuality subsection, so that it was there that I ought to get stuck in and contribute my half-penny's worth! It was inevitably that stream which hit the headlines but there were many other things addressed at Lambeth and many other good resolutions passed, so let us take a look at those first.

Of particular significance were the resolutions from Section Three on the Bible and the authority of the Holy Scriptures which is the foundation of everything else. The resolution on the Bible was spoken to and introduced by Bishop John Ball (previously of *Crosslinks*) in plenary session and passed overwhelmingly. It was clear and helpful:

Resolution III.1 – The Bible

This Conference, recognising the need in our Communion for fuller agreement on how to interpret and apply the message of the Bible in a world of rapid change and widespread cultural interaction,

a. reaffirms the primary authority of the Scriptures, according to

their testimony and supported by our own historic formularies;

- b. urges that the Biblical text should be handled respectfully, coherently, and consistently, building upon our best traditions and scholarship believing that the Scriptural revelation must continue to illuminate, challenge and transform cultures, structures, and ways of thinking, especially those that predominate today;*
- c. invites our provinces, as we open ourselves afresh to a vision of a Church full of the Word and full of the Spirit, to promote at every level biblical study programmes which can inform and nourish the life of dioceses, congregations, seminaries, communities, and members of all ages,*

and again,

Resolution III.5 – The Authority of Holy Scriptures

This Conference

- a. affirms that our creator God, transcendent as well as immanent, communicates with us authoritatively through the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; and*
- b. in agreement with the Lambeth Quadrilateral, and in solidarity with the Lambeth Conference of 1888, affirms that these Holy Scriptures contain 'all things necessary to salvation' and are for us the 'rule and ultimate standard' of faith and practice.*

Furthermore it has been said, rightly I think, that there was more emphasis on mission and evangelism at this Lambeth than in the Conference ten years ago which produced the Decade of Evangelism! For example:

Resolution III.6b

asks that the Primates' Meeting, under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury, include among its responsibilities positive encouragement to mission, intervention in cases of exceptional emergency which are incapable of internal resolution within provinces, and giving of guidelines on the limits of Anglican diversity in submission to the sovereign authority of Holy Scripture and in loyalty to our Anglican tradition and formularies;

and

Resolution II.8.c.ii-v requires

- ii. that the bishops will give more attention to the furtherance of ministry to children as a recognition of their importance to God and as a foundation for all future ministry;*
- iii. that the bishops will commit themselves to give significant time over the next twelve months to meet with young people in their dioceses, listening to them, praying with them, searching the Scriptures and breaking bread together with them, and providing ways for them to be trained in leadership skills and to exercise that leadership in the life and mission of the church;*
- iv. that such meetings should open out into attempts to meet and hear young people who have not yet been touched by the Gospel;*
- v. that teams of adults and young people in as many congregations as possible be trained for holistic ministry to young people outside the church, so as to speak of God's love in Christ in ways that can be heard, and that Christian young people be equipped, in the power of the Holy Spirit, for service in Church and Community.*

This amounts to a continuing of the emphasis of the Decade of Evangelism with a particular emphasis on making younger people disciples of the Risen Lord. This is important not because young people are more important than others but because it is amongst younger people that the church is often doing less well, especially in the West.

Other important issues were looked at. The Eames Commission on the ordination of women as presbyters was 'accepted and endorsed' and in an important section on 'The unity of the Anglican Communion' upheld the idea that we are in a period of 'Open Reception' and defended the rights of bishops not to ordain against their conscience. This latter statement is especially important because in the Episcopal Church in America (ECUSA) you cannot hold office, on a PCC for example, if you have a conscientious objection to the ordination of women as presbyters. Lambeth defends the right of both 'integrities', especially in relation to bishops being pressured against their will:

Resolution III.2.b,c,d

- b. for the purpose of maintaining this unity, calls upon the provinces of the Communion to uphold the principle of 'Open Reception' as it relates to the ordination of women to the priesthood as indicated by the Eames Commission; noting that 'reception is a*

long and spiritual process'. (Grindrod Report)

- c. in particular calls upon the provinces of the Communion to affirm that those who dissent from, as well as those who assent to, **the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate are both loyal Anglicans;***
- d. therefore calls upon the Provinces of the Communion to make such provision, including appropriate episcopal ministry, as will enable them to live in the highest degree of Communion possible, **recognising that there is and should be no compulsion on any bishop in matters concerning ordination or licensing.***

Moves to give more authority to the Archbishop of Canterbury were strongly resisted, especially (and thankfully) by the Archbishop himself, but the Conference urged:

Resolution III.6.a,b

'that encouragement be given to a developing collegial role for the Primates' Meeting under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury' and that this group 'include among its responsibilities' ... 'intervention in cases of exceptional emergency which are incapable of internal resolution within provinces.'

Notice that the integrity of provinces in the Communion was upheld and that appeals for oversight from a church in one province to bishops in another was not upheld by Lambeth. It is doubtful that this can be sustained especially in America given the crusading liberalism there.

It needs to be said that the Lambeth Conference was something of a personal triumph for Archbishop George Carey and his wife Eileen. Their personal hospitality and relaxed style was hugely appreciated and contributed a great deal to the conference atmosphere. The Archbishop too was, as we shall see, clear and brave in the leadership that he gave.

The two major issues that hit the headlines at Lambeth were World Debt and Human Sexuality. It is not always understood that these are important missionary issues in two-thirds of the world. Many Christians are living and working in situations hugely handicapped by world debt. It is hard for us to realize the extent of the problem which is crippling many nations and hindering the church. Take an illustration that sticks in one's mind: proportionally, the relief given by governments and relief agencies in the West amounts to two dollars, while interest on debt amounts to some eleven dollars! All the bishops were united in believing that something

must be done and I know that the Archbishop of Canterbury with members of our Government is seeking to back the Jubilee 2000 campaign. This campaign seeks the writing-off of these huge debts by the Western banks, always recognizing that help needs to be given and safeguards constructed so that these problems will not simply reappear in ten years' time. We had a visit from the President of the IMF who addressed the Conference, and his presence (however fleeting) indicated the interest in this subject and what the bishops would say. We ought to do all we can to help our brothers and sisters world-wide who are labouring under such extreme conditions.

I want to give more consideration to the other issue which grabbed the headlines – human sexuality. This is because I was personally involved in the subsection which specifically dealt with the subject for the first two weeks of the Conference and therefore I know more about what went on in this section. The principal concern was the question of practising homosexuality and whether a 'stable homosexual relationship' was legitimate for Christians with a homosexual orientation. This is an important missionary problem as the more liberal voices from some in the West present untold problems to the church in Moslem countries for instance, who simply deride the lax morality of the church. It has become the current presenting problem between those who believe in a revealed Faith (and consequently in the doctrine and morality of the Apostolic church enshrined in the New Testament), and those who want to adjust such teaching to the pressure of our day and generation's 'politically correct' ideas. My worst quote of Lambeth was a bishop (from America) who said: 'The church wrote the Bible and it can rewrite it' and he subsequently said to me, 'We are on a roll, we do not want to refer back to the Bible all the time, we will improvise as we go along.' In the event, as you will know, after a tense and difficult two weeks in the aforementioned subsection the Conference passed a resolution (1.10) clearly affirming the teaching of the Bible with clarity and compassion, that heterosexual marriage is the only God-given place to express our sexuality and that homosexual practice is 'incompatible with Scripture'. It then goes on to condemn 'irrational fear of homosexuals' and calls us to listen to those who may disagree, but settles the debate clearly in an orthodox direction. The whole resolution deserves careful noting, and was passed by an overwhelming 526 to 70 in a plenary session on the final Wednesday of the Conference. This marked a decisive defeat of radical liberal bishops especially from America, and I am so thrilled and grateful to God for the clarity and grace of this resolution. Let me quote it in full:

Resolution 1.10 – Human Sexuality

This Conference:

a. commends to the Church the subsection report on human sexuality;

- b. in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage;*
- c. recognises that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ;*
- d. while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex;*
- e. cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions;*
- f. requests the Primates and the ACC to establish a means of monitoring the work done on the subject of human sexuality in the Communion and to share statements and resources among us;*
- g. notes the significance of the Kuala Lumpur Statement on Human Sexuality and the concerns expressed in resolutions IV.26, V.1, V.10, V.23 and V.35 on the authority of Scripture in matters of marriage and sexuality and asks the Primates and the ACC to include them in their monitoring process.*

Much could be said about the two weeks' discussion that led to the subsection bringing the resolution to the plenary. It was polite but tough and as the conservatives and liberals were pretty much even in numbers in the group, the outcome was in real doubt until the very last moment. It was amongst the hardest two weeks of my life, speaking personally, as I felt that we were in a real fight for the soul of the Anglican Communion. Conservatives knew all too well how critical it would have been if things had gone the other way, and so a number of us fought hard to see that any resolution remained biblical. There was joy in all this too! Friendships made there amongst those who stood shoulder to shoulder will last for ever. Personally I was delighted to get to know, amongst others, the

Churchman

Archbishop of Sydney, Harry Goodhew, Bishops Paul Burnett and Colin Bazley and I want to pay tribute to them for their grace and courage. A number of others, too, deserve mention, especially one of the unsung heroes of the Conference, Bishop James Stanton of Dallas, who with the help of some of his staff got all the conservatives together over lunch in the Franciscan study centre so that we knew one another's mind and could work effectively together. That, I think, more than anything else secured, by God's grace, the good outcome.

At the beginning we were given a theological paper for guidance by Professor Robin Gill which we politely binned! We resisted an early attempt by our chairman for us to be addressed by a pro-gay lobby group called 'Changing Attitudes' on the basis that we should also hear from gay folk who advocated celibacy. In the course of the Conference two fringe events were arranged to hear from these groups which were both packed out. It is simply not true to say that the gay voice was not heard at Lambeth, but it needs to be understood that the most unheard voice in the church is those gay people who are living a life of godly celibacy and who, according to the membership figures of organizations in England, number more than the more noisy gay activists!

We firstly, after a lot of debate and discussion, produced a report which it is important to read when it is published. It details our areas of agreement and continuing disagreement and is simply a factual and descriptive report. Then we came to the issue of a Resolution, and I pressed that any resolution should reflect the majority view of the Conference (which was likely to be orthodox). Bishop Paul Barnett said that unless this was done, there would have to be a minority report by conservatives and, after much further discussion, a resolution was agreed upon, which was just conservative enough to be acceptable. We were told that given the fact that it was difficult for our group, we would be allowed extra time to get our resolution in. We were then told, when we followed that schedule, that we had gone over time and that our resolution would need to be put by our chairman *de novo* at the plenary session. Along the way a resolution tabled in time was conveniently lost and transcribed from memory which left all the key ingredients out!

But, come the day, our resolution was slightly amended at the plenary, emphasizing compassion. A further key amendment proposed by the Archbishop of Tanzania, with the Archbishop of Canterbury's backing, allowed the inclusion of the key phrase in 1.10d '*while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture*'. The Archbishop of Canterbury spoke bravely and gave a clear lead before the vote which was then taken and was overwhelming (526 to 70).

It needs to be clearly understood that victory was not gained simply by African numbers, rather it was a coalition of largely Western evangelical and Anglo-catholic bishops who produced a conservative resolution which was slightly and helpfully further amended by others on the floor of the plenary and passed by the prevailing conservative convictions of most bishops. We were of course greatly helped by the numbers and new-found confidence of the two-thirds world bishops. In the early stages some work needed to be done to get the help and involvement of some of our brothers from Africa as they did not see why the subject needed to be discussed at all!

It also needs to be understood that Bishop Jack Spong, the leading liberal, did not really contribute all that much. He made a beeline for the media but was a somewhat lonely and marginalized figure during the Conference itself. Bishop Michael Nazir Ali debated with him very well on a TV programme at which Bishop Paul Barnett and I were able to contribute from the audience. His offensive statement before Lambeth that the African bishops were just one step up from superstition and witchcraft scandalized many, and happily did his cause no good at all. Neither did his outrageous 'Theses' in which he denied most of the fundamental truths of the Creed. These revisionist liberal bishops, who are often very pleasant people as people, have views which need disciplining and are absolutely scandalous for a bishop to hold. It is difficult to see how they can remain in the church with integrity and, indeed, this is a major challenge to the integrity of the Anglican Communion.

The battle goes on to make Lambeth stick in England and the West generally. Lambeth does not have any legislative force but it does have moral force, and that needs to be talked up! Orthodox people are quite often marginalized in the church and Lambeth reminds us that we are mainstream! We can see that it is the revisionist liberals who have no respect for the clear voice of Scripture, or even for the voice of bishops from other parts of the world-wide church.

There has also been some spin doctoring since Lambeth in England. More than 40 UK bishops have signed a 'Pastoral Letter' presented at the end of the Conference by gay activists. Bishops signed this for different reasons, some simply wanting to underline the need for compassion in sexual matters. But the letter adds nothing to the compassion clearly and carefully expressed in Resolution 1.10, and has simply been used as a propaganda exercise to undermine the Resolution. In fact there is nothing objectionable in the letter other than one ambiguous sentence which pledges the support of the signatories to work for the 'full inclusion of gay people in the life of the church', but we all want to welcome gay people into our churches and to call them, with all of us as repentant people

Churchman

rejoicing in the grace of God, to live by the moral standards of the New Testament! I think that a number of bishops signed the document naively, and it must certainly not be allowed to undermine the clarity and compassion of Resolution 1.10. It is interesting to see that the Bishop of Wolverhampton has recently complained, as reported by the *Church of England Newspaper*, that the gay voice was never heard at Lambeth. This is simply not true! Others have said, perhaps rightly, that resolutions are no way for us to handle our business but one suspects that some of these complaints would not be heard if the resolutions passed had been different!

I have heard from a number of gay people who are living lives of honourable abstinence who are delighted with the outcome. They are, as I have said, so often the gay people who are not heard. All in all the Conference has been a significant victory for biblical orthodoxy, and though I have spent more time on the sexual issue, it ought to be clearly understood that biblical and orthodox truth was stated consistently across all the Resolutions and in all the Sections.

Lessons to be Learned

1. Do not give up on the Councils of the Church. In some quarters there is a feeling that it is wasted effort. Lambeth reminds us that this is not so! Those who love the Lord and his Word ought to be stuck in and speak graciously and clearly for the truth.
2. Do not get into a despairing frame of mind. We need the heart of Nehemiah, who said facing problems in the church of his day, 'I have sinned too' and 'How can the Lord use me to help in the situation?' We need to be more like him and less like Elijah after the battle of Carmel, 'I, only I, am left!'
3. Do recognize what faithful bishops under God have achieved (and do not let the spin doctors lessen it!).
4. Do recognize that Bishops Spong and Holloway were marginalized and somewhat sad figures at Lambeth.
5. Do see the importance of co-operating with credally orthodox catholics. Lambeth reminds us that if we fight together we can win. The principal enemy is revisionist liberalism that denies the fundamentals of the Faith. It is strident and far from 'liberal' in its attitude and mindset!
6. Do fight graciously but strongly to see that bishops stick by and with the Lambeth resolutions. We have a right to expect orthodox bishops. If we

are under outspoken and crusadingly liberal bishops (who deny some fundamentals of the Faith or key moral truth) we should try and help them see the folly of this, and failing that, seek extended episcopal oversight, within the system, hopefully from another member of the diocesan episcopal team, or from a PEV if we have passed (on its own terms and in good conscience) resolution A and/or B, and C. One way or another we desperately need the powers that be to understand that, for example, the homosexual issue is a first order issue (1 Cor 6:9-10) and is not an issue (like issues of ministry) on which we can afford 'two integrities' in the church. We have the support of the Lambeth Conference, as we listen and talk further with people with whom we disagree, to stand firm on issues of fundamental truth.

7. Finally, we should never lose heart but pray for our church knowing that there is an ever merciful as well as powerful Lord on the throne. Lambeth demonstrated that; to Him be the glory!

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