

WHY I AM GOING TO GAFCON

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The world-wide Anglican Communion is in crisis. There are some in our denomination who have rejected the plain teaching of Scripture on matters of doctrine and morality, while others cling to what has been revealed about God and the world in the pages of the Bible. This crisis is coming to a head this year. Let me explain:

The global Anglican Church is an association of Provinces (a regional grouping of Dioceses, usually a national church [eg Australia is Province] each led by an Archbishop called a Primate). Anglicans worldwide adhere to a common faith (expressed in the Book of Common Prayer, The Ordinal and the 39 Articles of Religion) but in matters of structure and authority the Provinces are relatively independent of each other (ie., they are not hierarchically linked like the Roman Catholic church). Once every 10 years the Bishops from the global Anglican Communion meet for the Lambeth Conference in London. This is one of the so-called "Instruments of Communion", a way in which we try to express the unity of a diverse church.

At the last meeting of Lambeth 1998, a number of resolutions were passed by the assembled Bishops about a number of things including human sexuality. These resolutions upheld biblical views of sexual ethics: "faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and ... that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage". It also made clear statements about what was, and was not expected for Christian leaders with respect to these matters: It said that it "cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions".

The independence of the Provinces mean that technically they don't have to uphold the resolutions of Lambeth (they are not like Papal encyclicals) but to reject them, means rejecting the agreed position of the denominational leaders.

Some time after the 1998 meeting, two Provinces of the Anglican Communion, Canada and the USA, took actions which directly rejected the Lambeth Resolutions. Ordinations of openly practising homosexual priests and a bishop took place, as well as the blessing of same-sex unions, and in many places, the repudiation of historic creedal Christian faith, denying the uniqueness of Christ and the authority of the Scriptures.

These actions all of a sudden called into question the nature of Anglican unity and identity. If we reject the clear teaching of the Bible and the clear resolutions of our bishops in Lambeth, what then is the nature of Anglican unity, and what does it mean to call yourself Anglican? This became a particularly vexed questions for the bishops of the Global South (Africa and South America) for whom the actions of the North Americans severely undermined the witness of the Anglican Churches in these places where the prevailing culture is Muslim. (Incidentally, the Anglican Church in Nigeria is probably one of the fastest growing in all the world.) The Global South bishops have been forthright in their opposition to the actions of the USA and Canada, and

many including bishops in Australia have called for their repentance, as have *all four* Instruments of Communion (The Archbishop of Canterbury, Lambeth, The Anglican Consultative Council, and the Primates Meeting). There has been unanimous rejection of the novel and unilateral actions, but still no repentance.

There are still Anglicans in North America who hold to biblical faith, and they have begun to look elsewhere for oversight from orthodox bishops in the Communion. Some of the bishops of the Global South have been providing that care. But this has meant that some seeking this alternative oversight have been disciplined in their Dioceses in North America for breaking from the hierarchy.

The next Lambeth Conference is to be held later this year. The Archbishop of Canterbury, who convenes the conference, has invited all the bishops of the Communion, except the practising homosexual bishop from North America, and several of the bishops who support the orthodox “dissidents” who have been seeking alternative Episcopal oversight. This causes immense problems in the Communion because there will be bishops at Lambeth who support those who have left the biblical faith and teaching, standing alongside the ones who still adhere to orthodox Christianity. And so the question remains, what is the nature of Anglicanism? If it is not a Church united in the biblical faith that we have received, what is it? Because of the confusion that attending Lambeth would create, some bishops of the Communion – representing more than half of the world’s Anglicans – (including all the Bishops from the Diocese of Sydney here in Australia) have decided not to attend Lambeth at all.

Enter the Global Anglican Futures Conference – GAFCON. This conference is to be held in Jerusalem in June 2008. Some of the orthodox bishops, notably from the Global South, have called this conference to plan and chart a future for the mission of the Anglican Church for those who still adhere to the biblical faith of our Anglican heritage. The function of the Conference is to encourage Biblical Anglicanism, to support those whose life in the Anglican Church has been difficult in recent days, to be open to learning from each other about mission and to consider how to work back to a Communion that is unswervingly committed to the Scriptures and its other, orthodox foundational documents.

It is not an alternative to Lambeth in that many bishops will go to both conferences, and that clergy and lay people are also invited to GAFCON, but not to Lambeth. It also does not have the status of Lambeth in the communion or any power. But it does acknowledge that there is now a real wedge between those who are committed to historic Anglican faith, and those who have charted a new route into different territory.

I recently received an invitation to attend GAFCON, and have decided to do so for the following reasons:

1. The focus of the conference will be getting on with the mission of the Anglican church in the next decade or two. The GAFCON website says:

GAFCON is a call to vision and action for mission based firmly on the “faith once delivered to the saints” and revealed in Scripture, to reform the church

and transform persons, communities and societies through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*It is to **outline the mission imperatives** for the next 25 years and how to begin to respond to them.*

*It is a **pilgrimage to the places of the Biblical story** to renew our faith and commitment. It is to envision the Global Anglican Future.*

It will host some of the most impressive leaders of mission in the Anglican Communion. Churches in Africa and Asia are seeing unprecedented growth through conversion to Christ. Here is a great chance to meet with these leaders and hear of their strategies in mission. We have much to learn from our brothers and sisters from the 2/3rds world.

2. This is a major Anglican conference, that needs delegates from all parts of the Communion. There will be over 1000 delegates, clergy and lay, including 300 Bishops. Because it includes lay people and non-Bishops, it provides a different kind of opportunity to encourage grass roots mission, than simply a conference of bishops. In my view it would be a mistake for us to consider that this was some kind of insignificant sideshow. We ought to have Melbourne Diocese represented there, to take our part in a Global Anglican Mission conversation.
3. I want to attend to represent the Melbourne style of evangelicalism that seeks to be generous, open, inclusive and participatory. We represent a situation where evangelicals come from a mixed Diocese, which gives us a particular insight into the workings of the Communion. (I often think that Melbourne is like the Anglican Communion in microcosm). I think we have a particular contribution to make.
4. While I think boycotting Lambeth is not the right response to this fracture of the Communion, (because I think we need a strong orthodox voice in that forum) the issues outline above do raise the need for sober discussions about the nature of the Communion and our fellowship within it. I do hope these matters will be discussed at Lambeth. I guess I see that GAFCON is another opportunity, for a wider body to prayerfully consider these things. I think it is vital for Melbourne to take its place in these discussions.
5. It is always a good thing to meet with others to contend for the Biblical faith. What a great opportunity for Melbourne Diocese to be a part of such a movement!

There will be four other delegates from Melbourne attending with me, two lay people, and two clergy.

Please pray for the Anglican Communion, for both GAFCON in June and Lambeth in July/August. We need God to act in a mighty way, to bring those who have rejected his Word to repentance, and to revive our denomination to embrace its mission to our broken world. Please take a keen interest in what is unfolding in the Communion. If

you would like to know more about GAFCON or the issues explored above visit
www.gafcon.org, www.anglican-mainstream.net

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