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Reconciliation not at cost of truth

WINDSOR REPORT'S assumptions questionable Windsor report's assumptions questionable

October 22, 2004

By Chris Chivers

The tone of the Windsor Report was undoubtedly encapsulated by the closing remarks which Archbishop Robert Eames, Anglican primate of Ireland and chairman of the Lambeth Commission, said were drawn from his experience of searching for reconciliation in Northern Ireland: "You can't make reconciliation happen. It only comes when people want it to be a reality."

Few who attended the press launch of the Windsor Report on sexuality in London this week would doubt the integrity and credentials of its chairman. If anyone knows the cost of reconciliation it is Robin Eames.

If anyone understands the complexity of the Anglican Communion, it is the man who chaired the earlier Commission on Women in the Anglican Episcopate and who has contributed so much to recent thinking about the structure of Anglicanism, not least to the under-read but hugely important Virginia Report.

But, despite all this, and the passion with which Eames advanced the careful work of those involved in the Windsor process, I found myself haunted by the Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria's recent claim that two people cannot walk together unless they are in agreement. It somehow resonated all too obviously with what Eames knows so well - reconciliation is indeed only possible if people want it.

So, do Anglicans worldwide want it? And are they prepared for the kind of reconciliation Eames advanced when he said "reconciliation must not be at the cost of truth"?

The Lambeth Commission clearly believes that this is the priority and its whole stall is set out in the light of that conviction. And who's to say that they don't have a point. The last thing the world needs right now is another faith community in freefall.

The difficulty, however, is that the Anglican beast - its communion - is like none other. And it can't be understood by recourse to everyday models. Throughout Eames's presentation he slipped into the rhetoric of family, the Anglican family, presided over by the gentle wisdom of the pater familias, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

But family really isn't the right model to use at all. And that's the trouble ultimately with the assumptions that lie behind the report and the issues that have occasioned it. The Communion is actually more like the Commonwealth, a federation, than a family. And to invite it to become more of a family by bolstering the role of the father figure, is actually to invite more teenage acting-out than has hitherto been the case.

For you bolster the father's authority - by giving him an advisory council so that he can bring the errant to heel - and what you actually invite is the errant, if so they be, to err a bit more, to test further the boundaries. This has never been the Anglican way.

Our loose communion has evolved away from colonial, paternalistic notions of family - we've been through the long process of granting autonomy and independence to the children, precisely because we knew that kind of family had had its day.

It didn't allow the grace of God to work through the children in their particular contexts for the good of the whole Church. To attempt now to reimpose the family model seems at best questionable, at worst to invite further and longer-lasting sibling rivalry.

Surely it's high time we thought of a different structure of presidency altogether, more on European Union lines, and revolving among the Primates?

And surely it's also time we got away from a Communion only one of whose instruments of unity (the Anglican Consultative Council) makes any provision for the laity?

Is a Communion so dominated by the collective authority of bishops really the kind of Communion we want in the 21st century? Since part of the Communion's problem is actually its creeping clericalism. But, if the bolstering of the Archbishop of Canterbury's role suggests the unhelpful prospect of the Communion president as fatherly referee, what of the accompanying recommendations?

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The proposed covenant - the suggested form is very much a draft in progress - is perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the report. Overly wordy (EM Forster's "poor little talkative Christianity" comes to mind) and, of necessity, woolly, one cannot imagine how this could ever be useable, given the autonomy of provinces which the commission is on the one hand keen to protect, though on the other obviously ever so gently keen to rein in. How long would it take for the covenant to be made legally binding, given the synodical complexity of each province? As food for prayer and reflection it is undoubtedly important, but in practical terms it must be a non-starter.



What then of the statement of regret which the Episcopal Church USA (ECUSA) - at least those of its bishops who were involved in the consecration of gay US bishop Gene Robinson - is now encouraged to make (the Commission hopes that similar statements will come from the Canadian Diocese of New Westminster in relation to same-sex union blessings)?

I once sat in a hall in Cape Town when FW de Klerk, testifying to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, offered an apology of sorts for the evil effects of apartheid, without actually apologising for apartheid itself. The negative impact of his statement of "regret" still reverberates through South African society.

What would it actually mean then for the presiding Bishop of ECUSA and others to say they regretted the pain that Robinson's consecration had caused, while, presumably, not regretting the consecration itself? Would such an expression really foster reconciliation?

Would it be perceived, as the Commission's members hope, as extending a hand of friendship, as a commitment to live in communion? Would this promote the maturity of Christian relationality the Commission rightly suggests should be our common goal?

My hunch is that it wouldn't. Since, despite all the careful theological thinking of the opening chapter of the report, what is required is a different underlying model. Since the undersong, as WB Yeats would put it of the communion, is avowedly not the family - to use that model, especially when you're claiming to listen to a diversity of experience of human relationships and expression of human sexuality is completely the wrong place to start.

No, the undersong of the communion is not family but friendship. And friendships flourish and mature precisely as those travelling disagree with one another.

For the person who accompanies them, reveals the scriptures, and interprets their disagreements for them, helping them to achieve a sense of context and balance, is of course Christ, the ultimate guarantor of friendship and reconciliation.

In this sense, it really won't do, as the report does, to raise the question of the authority of scripture - this is undoubtedly at the heart of the debate on issues of human sexuality - and move us in two sentences through four crucial centuries of Anglican thought, from the sixteenth to the twentieth!

No, we must have the debate about the place of scripture on the road. For underlying all the difficulties of the last 18 months or so, is this issue of the Bible and how we interpret it. If the report encourages us to have such a debate, then undoubtedly it will have done its job. If it results in an outburst of "elastoplast" theology, we may, sadly, look forward to a torrid time of it.

I, for one, left the press conference hoping that Eames was right, that the report would indeed stimulate others to reflect on their models for communion. And, if Akinola had been there, I should have grasped his hand, and invited him to walk with me into the brightness of an autumnal London day.

Given the right underlying model, the two of us may yet live together in the same Church, happily, if strenuously, ever after.

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