



The Archbishop this afternoon briefed members of the Anglican Consultative Council, meeting at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Lusaka, Zambia, on the outcome of the Primates' gathering and meeting that took place in Canterbury Cathedral in January.

Thank you to all of the delegates here for this opportunity to talk to you generally about the background and the context to the Primates' meeting

Thank you, as president of the ACC, for those of you who have made long and difficult journeys and given up so much time. It is an enormous sacrifice. And all of you here are profoundly welcome, without exception.

Let me take some words from Matthew Chapter 13 verses 45 to 46.

Jesus said: "Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

The Anglican Communion is a church of immense, global and beautiful diversity. It is God-given, human-developed, history-shaped.

As God-given we are subject to the great task of collaborating with the work of God.

As human-developed we are a church of saints and sinners, of arguments and complexities, some of which are necessary and some of which are unnecessary.

As history-shaped we carry the baggage of the past, some of it wonderful, much of it a cause for shame and repentance. History includes the scriptures, our final authority when properly interpreted, the Catholic creeds, the historic episcopacy, the Dominical sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, what is called the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral that sets the limits of our diversity. And at an ACC, whose theme is intentional discipleship in a world of difference, we came together in January and we come together now recognizing that our history builds complexity upon complexity, difference upon difference.

From history we inherit our saints and our villains, the shaping that comes to Anglicanism with its roots in the mission of St Augustine, the Celtic saints, the English Reformation, the missionary movements and much else besides.

From history we also inherit the curse of colonialism, which affects our Communion widely. The blindness of a view too centered on the Global North, the insensitivity to the power of dominant cultures, of wealth, the habits of imperial rule too seldom repented.

In all this complexity which affects almost the whole Communion we have to add the history recent, and distant, of each of the churches of the Communion. Each of our own histories overlays the history of the Communion and is in each Province or country more powerful than our joint history.

Whether it be the first Bishops in the United States being consecrated by the Scottish Episcopal Church because the Church of England refused to do it, or the story of the Ugandan Martyrs, or the history of slavery, or the interaction with Islam, or a million other events recent and distant, our diversity and complexity, our differences are increased by individual histories.

In the midst of such difference we face a choice, of being distracted by difference or being intentionally united in discipleship to Jesus Christ. To be united by Christ, as intentional disciples, is the only way we show to the world that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

We are living in a world where the capacity to deal with difference is more and more required, because difference is right in front of us, difference is on our iPads, in our laptops, in our phones. We hold a whole world of difference every time we open a phone. And the response to in the world around is at best insult, and so often violence, a reality which is the living experience of many you here.

And into all this difference walks a merchant of pearls. The parable of the precious pearl is in the midst of a group of parables in Matthew's gospel concerned with seeking the Kingdom of Heaven, and knowing what it is and how we react when we find it. The merchant is a trader in fine pearls. He knows how to make money, he has a number of pearls, and all is well until one day he finds a unique pearl. He recognises its value and importance and he recognises what he must do, which is to give up everything else to gain it. Intentional discipleship.

The call of Christ to intentional discipleship cuts through the immense complexity of our lives and the lives of our churches, and enables us to focus on the essentials. And the essentials, as we went through them in January at the Primates' meeting, really come down to two things: that we are to be a people of worship and a people of witness.

We are a people of worship because when we see even partially the nature of Christ we can do no other. Like the merchant recognising the pearl, we must respond with the total self-giving.

We are a people of witness, because the reaction to finding Jesus Christ, is to witness to him by what we do and how we speak of him, to celebrate the Pearl in witnessing to it.

So we live in two worlds at the same time. One is a world of layer upon layer of difference, with boundaries but still complicated. The other is the sharp focus of the pearl of great value, the call from the Kingdom of Heaven to be those who worship and bear witness.

If we are too much of the complex diversity and difference, we lose sight of the breath-taking and beautiful salvation that is ours, we become bogged down, like so many human institutions.

If we are too closely focussed on the simplicity and clarity of our call we become pietistic, unable to speak with authority and fellow feeling and suffering into a world of difference.

It is because of these tensions which come between us and the pearl of great price that in the Primates meeting we sought to balance three things, freedom, order and human flourishing. As a Communion and as churches where authority emerges primarily out of loving one another more than through rules and regulations, or hierarchies, this trio of freedom, order and human flourishing is of huge importance. It anchors us in the breaking down of barriers, in facing each other, in the beauty of human interaction in love.

Trouble has come whenever one element of those three has overcome the others. Order often masquerades as a hunger for power. It often overcomes freedom, and neglects human flourishing. Order is essential, but it exists to make sure we wash feet and that we love, not that we dominate. It was out of these tensions of holding together order, freedom and human flourishing that Anglicanism emerged and developed a relational model of authority.

At the heart of the process in and around the Primates' meeting was seeking to find this necessary balance of freedom, flourishing and order. It is only when the balance is held that we can see as a Communion the pearl that is before us, and as a Communion it is only then that we have the capacity to let go of everything in order to hold the pearl.

Like all the Instruments of Communion, whether the ACC, the Archbishop of Canterbury (for I am not a human being, I am an Instrument of Communion and for that matter a focus of unity) or the Lambeth Conference, the Primates' meeting has no legal authority over Provinces. Any kind of synodical control of that kind has been rejected since the first Lambeth Conference. Neither can any one instrument legally bind another Instrument. The Anglican Communion only works when the relationships within it are good enough to permit a common discernment of the way in which we are being led by the Spirit. And historically this has been seen in what is often called reception.

Both before, but especially since Lambeth 1920, one of the great Lambeth conferences, reception has meant the informal process of relationships, by which, over time, developments in the life of the Communion are accepted or rejected in a way that leads to consensus. Thus, issues in 1920 around contraception, in Lambeth 1930 and 1948 around divorce were at the time seen as threatening the unity of the Communion.

We have been here before. And they were seen as as much of a serious difficulty as issues of sexuality today. Reception goes both ways. There has been a consensus against lay presidency, despite significant pressure in favour of it in the past, but the reception process ended up informally, relationally, not accepting it. Reception is not a legal process. It is a discernment of the Spirit based in relationship: relationship between dioceses, between people, between parishes and deaneries, between provinces, between Primates and between the Instruments of Communion and many others. It is a whole network of relationships that makes the Communion possible and in which we find authority.

The importance of this is very great indeed. The Anglican Communion finds its decisions through spiritual discernment in relationship, not

through canons and procedures. Primates' Meetings, Lambeth Conferences and ACCs are not a question of winning and losing, but of discerning together in love.

It is for that reason that historically it has been expected that the Primates and the ACC, which are very different bodies, should work in the closest co-operation . That was the phrase used in Lambeth 1978 and in Resolution 52 of 1988. The ACC is one of the ways in which the Communion is held together. It is made effective by the involvement of lay people, our main bulwark and defence against an unthinking clericalism.

At the same time the long agreed understanding, since at least 1988 Lambeth , and re-emphasised in various reports, including the Eames report, is that the Primates, because of their positions as senior Bishops in their Provinces, have an enhanced responsibility. Let me quote Lambeth 1988, Resolution 18:2: The enhanced responsibility is for "Offering guidance on doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters". It went on "We see an enhanced role for the Primates as a key to growth of inter-dependence within the Communion." Not juridical, notice. A key to growth of interdependence. "We do not see any inter-Anglican jurisdiction as possible or desirable. . . A Collegial role for the Primates by contrast could easily be developed" – I have to say I like their optimism – "and their collective judgement and advice would carry considerable weight". That was Lambeth 1988.

In January the Primates explored and sought to establish what the consequences are for any province which promotes its own autonomy over that of the catholic interdependence and mutual accountability of others.

This task was undertaken recognising that any process which would be agreed in these specific circumstances of January, will be developed so that it can also be applied to any province when any unilateral decisions on matters of doctrine and polity is taken that threatens our unity.

There were critical points in the discussion when, if I am honest, it seemed that the decision would be made to walk apart. We were very close to that. However, after much discussion, if I quote the communiqué, we said:

"The unanimous (note that, unanimous) decision of the Primates (there was only one absent by choice, there were two others absent, one through family bereavement and one through illness) ... The unanimous decision of the Primates was to walk together, however painful this is, and despite our differences, as a deep expression of our unity in the body of Christ."

Given this commitment to their unity, it is inaccurate always to speak of suspension and expulsion, or sanction. Instead the Primates openly acknowledged the distance that exists between us on some issues and considered the consequences where decisions put strain on relationships. Let me quote the Communique again:

“Such actions impair our Communion and create a deeper mistrust between us. This results in significant distance between us and places huge strains on the functioning of the Instruments of Communion and the ways in which we express our historic and ongoing relationships. In keeping with the consistent position of previous Primates’ meetings such unilateral actions on a matter of doctrine without Catholic unity is considered by many of (not all but by many of us) as a departure from the mutual accountability and interdependence implied through being in relationship with each other in the Anglican Communion”.

And then we considered what would happen. And we saw that there should be significant consequences if we had recognized that we would walk together but necessarily at some time with a certain distance between us. But still walking together. And those consequences are set out in the communiqué. There is a time limited restriction in governance and representative roles; the Primates said that for a three-year period the Episcopal Church, TEC, should not take part in decisions on matters of doctrine or polity. They can speak but we suggested that they should not vote, nor should they represent the Communion on external bodies such as those dealing with interfaith or ecumenical matters.

Moreover, because walking at a distance is not how it should be, a Task Group was appointed “to maintain conversation among ourselves with the intention of restoration of relationship, the rebuilding of mutual trust, healing the legacy of hurt, recognising the extent of our commonality and exploring our deep differences, ensuring they are held between us in the love and grace of Christ.” That Task Group has been set up. I was asked to create it. And it has been set up with a very wide representation on it of women and men, lay and ordained, from every part of the Communion.

On Human Sexuality the Primates issued an apology for the deep hurt caused to LGBTI people by those in the Church. You may remember that the Primates said they recognized “that the Christian church and within it the Anglican Communion have often acted in a way towards people on the basis of their sexual orientation that has caused deep hurt. Where this has happened they express their profound sorrow and affirm again that God's love for every human being is the same, regardless of their sexuality, and that the church should never by its actions give any other impression.”

The Primates specifically opposed criminal sanctions and any form of homophobic prejudice. In their communiqué they said: “The Primates condemned homophobic prejudice and violence and resolved to work together to offer pastoral care and loving service irrespective of sexual orientation. This conviction arises out of our discipleship of Jesus Christ. The Primates reaffirmed their rejection of criminal sanctions against same-sex attracted people.”

As Archbishop of Canterbury (a separate Instrument) I have acted on the Primates' decisions in those areas for which I have responsibility. It is both my and the Primates' desire, hope and prayer that the ACC should also share in working through the consequences of our impaired relationships.

And, of course, it is necessary to say, that the Primates' meeting covered many other subjects of huge importance. The second appendix to the meeting sets out a powerful and passionate call to the Communion to be a witnessing body of disciples, seeking to lead others to faith in Christ. Intentional Discipleship. We engaged knowledgeably and positively on issues around the environment, on the refugee crisis, on the issues of persecution and conflict. The energy in the room when we discussed those issues, was extraordinary. There was a real life. It spoke to me of the immeasurable possibilities for good of this, our Communion.

And finally, this may help to give you a sense of the final Eucharist in the Crypt of Canterbury Cathedral, the oldest part of the building. The Primates, those of them who were there, there were about four missing who had to go at various points, sat in a semi-circle around the altar, laid for the Eucharist. On one side of it, and a little in front, was the Crozier, the Bishop's staff, of St Gregory, Pope Gregory the Great, who had sent Augustine in 597 for the re-evangelisation of these Islands, at least according to the Roman tradition.

I should say that the Celts had been there for a couple of hundred years before that but Augustine didn't pay a lot of attention to that. There is nothing new under the sun. The Crozier is very beautiful, with inspiration which I suspect is drawn from the apocalypse, of a carved ivory lamb rising above an attack from a dragon.

On the other side of the altar, and just in front of it, were the Augustine Gospels. They come from the sixth century and are beautifully illuminated. They provided forceful symbolism of our call to continue in the tradition of the scriptures and of evangelism.

Before the altar, sat Jean Vanier, who founded the L'Arche Communities, who addressed us during the Eucharist, on John Chapter 13. He led us both in meditating on that passage and in washing each other's feet.

And, if you think about it, that last Eucharist, summed up the Chicago- Lambeth Quadrilateral.

- The Ministry of the Sacrament recalled to us that through the sacraments we reaffirm our catholicity, our essential unity with all Christians everywhere and in every time, our belonging to the church of the Creeds.
- The pastoral staff spoke to us of the call for unity and of the shepherding of the people of God through the episcopate.
- The Gospels, the Word of the Scriptures, unfold to us the life of Jesus our Saviour.

Jean Vanier himself, is a living symbol of what true simplicity and discipleship means.

I conclude there because it sets before us the reality of the Anglican Communion with all of its difficulties.

The Communion is the very work of God inspired by the Spirit, full of very fallible human beings who must confess their sins and who require the

comforts of the Word and the hope of the Sacraments and the example of the Saints, and the order of the creeds and the shepherding of those called by God into leadership, however weak they may be, if we are to be to the world the symbol of unity which will enable us to proclaim more confidently the call to intentional discipleship, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

RS Thomas, the Welsh priest-poet wrote this:

*I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you*

As Anglicans we are called to be something special, a people of reconciliation, finding authority through relationships, transcending complexity and difference, relishing diversity, loving each other. A monument, a beacon to the hope of Christ. In a world that burns with hellish darkness visible, may we above all see not just what we are, but what we can be when we turn aside to the Pearl of the Kingdom, a pearl only seen clearly when we love one another. When that happens, in this broken world, by the grace of God in the power of the Spirit, then we Anglicans can become a profound blessing of peace and hope.

This was first published on the Anglican Communion News Service

15 min read

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/acc-16-archbishop-briefs-members-primates-gathering-and-meeting>