



A Brief History of the Lambeth Conference

Part I of IV

Second of a nine-part series on the Lambeth Conference and the Anglican Communion.

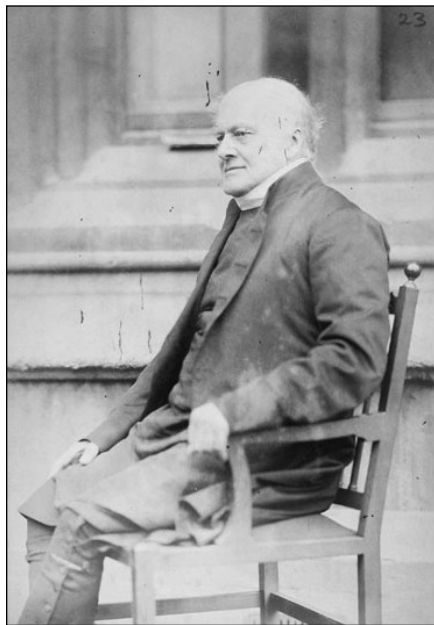
By Christopher L. Webber

John Henry Hopkins was Bishop of Vermont and Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church when he suggested in 1851 that a gathering of Anglican bishops would be useful, but nothing happened. Fifteen years later the Canadian Anglican Church suggested the same thing to the Archbishop of Canterbury and got his reluctant consent.

“It should be distinctly understood,” said Archbishop Charles Longley, “that at this meeting no declaration of faith shall be made, and no decision come to which shall affect generally the interests of the Church, but that we shall meet together for brotherly counsel and encouragement.” They would meet at the Archbishop’s town house in London, Lambeth Palace, and encourage each other, and go home again.

Even so, the Archbishop of York declined the invitation and only a bare majority (76 of 144) of the world’s Anglican bishops showed up. They met for four days and the major excitement came when the Archbishop of Capetown, Robert Gray, brought

up the matter of the Bishop of Natal, John William Colenso, who had done great work among the Zulus but upset the archbishop by his advanced views of Biblical scholarship. In an uncanny preview of current events, the archbishop declared Colenso to be heretical and sent a new bishop to serve the same area. Colenso stuck to his guns and his diocese and is now revered by the Church in South Africa.



Charles Longley, 92nd Archbishop of Canterbury

Photo: The Episcopal Church



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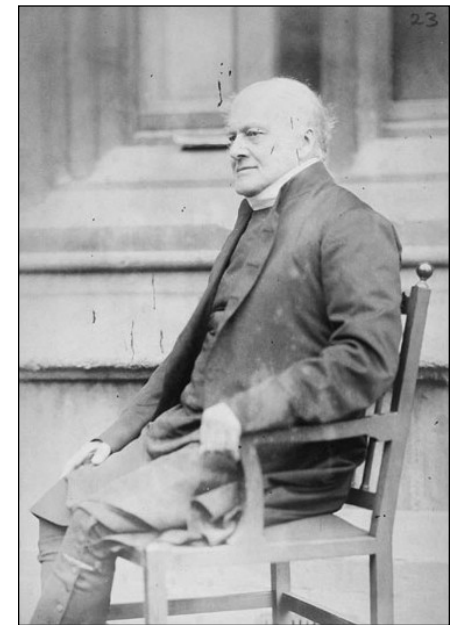


Photo: The Episcopal Church

Nonetheless, the idea of the conference seemed good and the bishops met again in 1878 to grapple with the nature of Anglican unity and pass some resolutions that are still relevant today. It is, they said, “of great importance for the maintenance of union among the Churches of our Communion” that “the duly certified action of every national or particular Church... should be respected by all the other Churches” and that “no bishop or other clergyman of any other Church should exercise his functions within (some other) diocese without the consent of the bishop thereof.”

By the third conference, 1888, the bishops had grown comfortable enough with their meetings to begin passing a wide variety of resolutions on subjects ranging from socialism to polygamy.

A central concern was the nature of Anglicanism. Two years earlier the Episcopal Church’s General Convention had adopted a statement offering to work toward Christianity unity on the basis of four essentials: the Bible, the Creeds, the two sacraments of Baptism and Communion, and the historic episcopate. Adopted by the 1888 conference, it is now known as “The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral” and has found a place in the Episcopal Church’s Book of Common Prayer (pp. 876-878).

Three conferences had created a tradition and led the bishops to imagine a wide variety of resolutions that might

be adopted. The 13 resolutions of the first conference and 12 of the second had increased to 20 at the third, but in 1897 the bishops adopted 69 resolutions on subjects as diverse as world peace, relations with the Eastern Orthodox, communion for the sick, and care for Church members emigrating to new countries. They were very clear that however diverse the members of the Church might be in language and ethnicity they were members of one Church. They stressed again that it would be very wrong for two bishops of the Church to attempt to carry on a ministry in the same area.

The issue of freedom and unity was addressed again in the statement that: “it is important that, so far as possible, the Church should be adapted to local circumstances...and nothing is required of them but what is of the essence of the faith, and belongs to the due order of the catholic Church.” The first of these statements of course, left undefined what was meant by being “in full communion with the Church of England” and the second left open “what is of the essence of the faith, and belongs to the due order of the catholic Church.” More than a century later, these questions remain unanswered.

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