



A Brief History of the Lambeth Conference

Part IV of IV

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

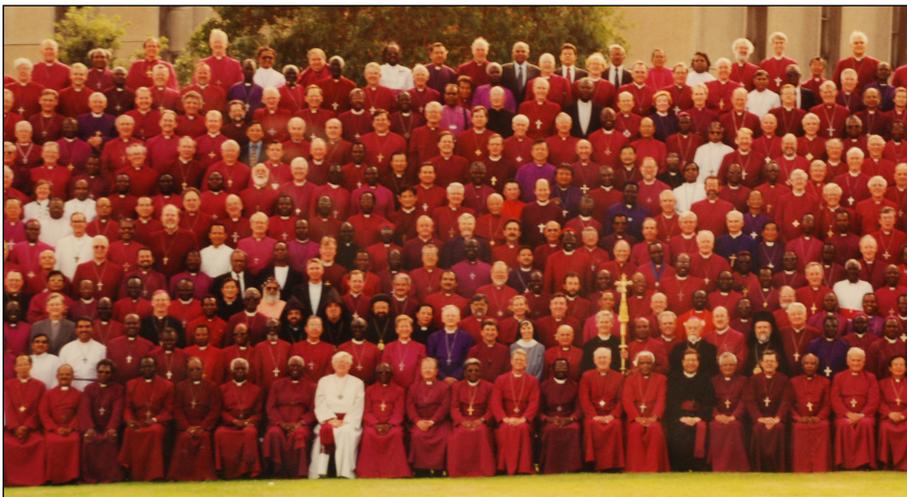
By Christopher L. Webber

The Lambeth Conference can recommend but not command. The bishops had said there was a need for careful study of sexual issues at their 1978 meeting, but when they came together again in 1988 the study had not been done and tensions were greater than ever. The bishops found themselves discussing “the present impaired nature of communion.” They said there was a great need for “sensitivity, patience and pastoral care towards all concerned.” But bishops facing intractable divisions were “encour-

aged to seek continuing dialogue with, and make pastoral provision for, those clergy and congregations whose opinions differ from those of the bishop, in order to maintain the unity of the diocese.” How separate pastoral provision would maintain unity was not explained.

If the bishops could not agree on homosexuality, they did find themselves able to agree to reverse themselves on a stand taken one hundred years earlier and allow the baptism of polygamists if they promise not to marry again and if the local community were agreeable.

Before the 1998 Lambeth Conference



Bishops of the Anglican Communion gather for the 1998 Lambeth Conference in Canterbury, England.



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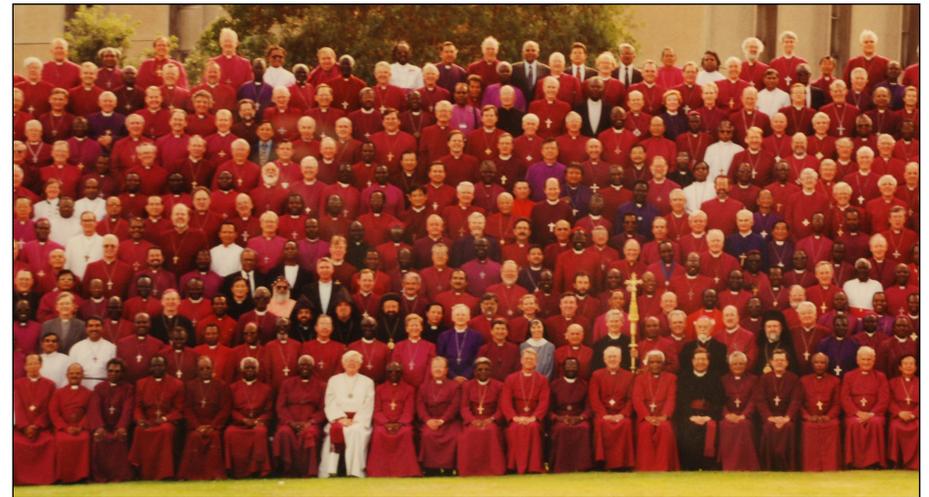
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convened, First World conservatives began building bridges with Third World bishops in preparation for the next gathering. Instead of trying to understand each other, factions were forming in preparation for battle. The result was prolonged and angry debate. As to homosexuals, the bishops committed themselves “to listen to the experience of homosexual persons” and “assure them that they are loved by God and...full members of the Body of Christ,” but homosexual practice was rejected “as incompatible with Scripture.” A resolution referring to homosexuality as a “kind of sexual brokenness” and calling on bishops who ordain homosexual persons to repent was defeated but the bishops found that they could not “advise the legitimising or blessing of same-sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same-gender unions.” They called for a Listening Process, but again many churches failed to take part and others were unwilling even to listen.

How, then, is unity to be preserved where such divisions exist—or how might it be regained? The resolutions concerning respect for diocesan boundaries first adopted more than a century earlier were reaffirmed. Bishops could not be a sign of unity while encouraging division. But these resolutions also have been often ignored.

A summary of such a tumultuous history is all too likely to reflect the concerns of the moment and the point of view of the individual historian. This review has focused on two central issues: changing understandings of gender and sexuality, and the balance between diversity and unity. In regard to the concerns of the moment, the initial hesitancy to pronounce on anything rapidly had shifted in the lat-

ter part of the 20th century when there were few things on which the conference did not have an opinion. The initial insistence on dispersed authority left a vacuum which the Primates Meetings now seem determined to fill. In regard to gender and sexuality, earlier positions taken on polygamy, birth control, and remarriage after divorce have been reversed.

All this seems to raise again the central question of Anglican life: can a Christian community exist without a central authority and narrow definitions of doctrine? One proposed answer is an Anglican covenant, which some see as a hopeful way forward, but others reject it as changing the focus of Anglican life from communion to laws.

A careful review of our history, even one narrowly focused on some aspects of the Lambeth Conference, might lead us to be less sure of ourselves, readier to listen, and more willing to leave a generous room for difference. If so many definitive statements of Lambeth have proved subject to change, how sure should we be of our own current pronouncements? Might it be better to recognize that we might be wrong again; that sexual attitudes may be culturally conditioned; that we do best when we do least to divide ourselves and do most to center our life on a pattern of worship that draws us closer to the redeeming love of God? This year’s conference will seek to provide guidance on these questions. It will need our prayers.

Christopher L. Webber is the author of Beyond Beowulf, the first ever sequel to the Old English epic. He serves the Diocese of Connecticut as an examining chaplain.

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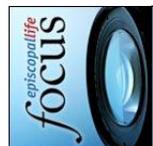
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