



Bishop Catherine M. Waynick of Indianapolis sings at the opening service of the 1998 Lambeth Conference in Canterbury Cathedral.

Photo: Johnny Eggitt/AFP/Getty Images



Women bishops will help shift focus to life-and-death issues

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

By Catherine S. Roskam

The 1998 Lambeth Conference was the first ever to include women bishops in its number. It was also the first Lambeth to include suffragan bishops and assistant bishops as well as diocesan bishops, thereby increasing the number

of bishops overall to around 850 and allowing all 11 of the women bishops in the Anglican Communion to attend, instead of just the six who were diocesans.

To people moving around the campus at the University of Kent, where the conference is held, the disparity in numbers was not so evident. Most



bishops were accompanied by their spouses and, since dress was casual, it was not always easy to determine who was a bishop and who was not, so the gender mix was about even.

It was rumored that some male bishops would cross the street if they saw a woman bishop coming toward them. If that ever happened, it would have been impossible to tell—with so many people going in different directions—who was crossing in protest and who, like the chicken in the ancient joke, simply wanted to get to the other side.

The gender disparity was very evident in the overwhelmingly male plenary sessions, a reminder that the councils of the church in many of the provinces, and indeed the so-called Instruments of Communion, are almost exclusively male. This stands in stark contrast to the fact that the overwhelming majority of Anglicans— estimates run in excess of 70 percent—are women.

The annual gathering of Anglican women in New York for the meeting of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women suggests that the concerns of Anglican women around the globe diverge greatly from the preoccupations of some of their male bishops. Major issues identified by the women's gathering were child mortality, maternal health, violence against women both in the home and as a weapon of war, women's education and women's ownership of property, which is against the law in some countries.

The "hot topic" of Lambeth 1998 and of subsequent House of Bishops meetings in the Episcopal Church and elsewhere in the communion is dubbed "human sexuality," but that is a euphemism for the discussion of homosexuality, principally in its male expression.

Human sexuality issues as discussed among the women include genital mutilation, sex trafficking in women and girls, the taking of "child brides" and the resultant physical and emotional damage it causes underage girl children when they give birth, and the prevalence of heterosexual male promiscuity that is the principal cause of the spread of AIDS, especially but not only in Sub-Saharan Africa.

While the councils of the Anglican churches worldwide and of the Anglican Communion itself remain overwhelmingly male, it will be difficult to shift the focus to the life-and-death issues that Anglican women are raising. It is incumbent on women bishops, and male bishops who are sensitive to these issues, to keep bringing them to the table until they receive the same heat and light that the current controversies enjoy.

What holds the Anglican Communion together is not so much its structures, but rather the relationships it fosters, the bonds of affection strengthened through working together in service of God's mission to a suffering and broken world, and of course, our common prayer:

Holy and gracious God, you cast your net of love so wide and gather us from the ends of the earth: So bless and guide our Anglican Communion that we may be held fast in the bonds of our affection for one another and in our love and service of you, through our Savior, Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns now and for ever. Amen.

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