

Gamaliel and Gafcon

An appeal to the Archbishops and Bishops of the Anglican Church of Australia

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Introduction

I did not attend Gafcon. I am in sympathy with some of its passions, less so with some of its politics.

This is an appeal addressed to those whose tendency is to reject or dismiss Gafcon and Anglican Mainstream, or who fail to see how God might use it.

Here are four reasons why I think we should take Gafcon seriously.

1. Do not Gafcon and Anglican Mainstream show the characteristics of reform movements in the past that have later been recognized as the work of God?

These reform movements usually include the following characteristics. They are grass-roots base ecclesial communities. They critique the status quo and work outside the existing Episcopal, diocesan, and parochial structures. They have clear intentions for reform, and they set up alternative complementary energy and power structures to the existing.

Notable examples of movements for reform include: The ‘desert fathers’ in the 2nd and 3rd Century, who protested against the worldliness of the church; the preaching and teaching Orders, such as the Franciscans and the Dominicans. They protested against the wealth and lack of effective mission of the organised church with its structures of dioceses and parishes that were no longer effective in achieving the mission of God; Wycliffe and Tyndale who translated the Bible into English, and were persecuted by the church; Many Anglican missionary movements began ‘from below’, when the church authorities were unwilling or unable to take the lead. These included SPCK, SPG, CMS, and UMCA; The Evangelical revival and Oxford Movement were led by clergy and lay people. Their members were at first persecuted and rejected; and the recovery of the Religious Orders in the Church of England in the 19th Century was also a reform movement.

Curiously enough, most movements of renewal and reform were first of all rejected by the establishment, and later on came to be an accepted part of the church. Jesus noted the same movement among the people of God in his day who built the tombs of prophets, and yet failed to accept him as the subversive messenger of God.¹

All such movements for reform and renewal have included the following features:

- a. They have begun ‘from below’ in order to correct lack of effective ministry or mission, to correct abuses, to supply what was lacking in the church, or to express new charisms.

¹ Matthew 23:29-32

- b. They were critical of the leaders of their day, the bishops and clergy who did not share the same needs or share the same passions for ministry or mission.
- c. They set up alternative structures of fellowship, support, authority and mission to continue and promote their particular passions or charisms.
- d. They were at first criticized, feared, rejected, marginalized, persecuted, or thrown out of the church by its leaders.
- e. They were later affirmed and accepted, and their passions and charisms absorbed into the life of the church.

I think of Gafcon as another movement of reform ‘from below’, which is naturally regarded with suspicion by those who are not part of it, but may yet be used by God to transform God’s people.²

When Bishop Stephen Sykes was in Melbourne in 2008 for the Frank Woods Centenary at Trinity College Melbourne he observed the variety ‘saints’ remembered in our Anglican Lectionaries. They include St Anthony, St Athanasius, the saints and martyrs of the Reformation Era, Nicholas Ferrar, Williams Law, John and Charles Wesley, John Henry Newman, Charles Simeon, William Wilberforce, Hannah Moore, Florence Nightingale, Elizabeth Fry, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Many of these were ‘non-conformists’ later embraced by the church. Our sympathies should be as wide as our prayers.

2. Should not the notion of ‘dispersed authority’ prompt us to take such movements seriously?

For the last 50 years Anglican Theology has proposed a model of Anglican self-understanding that includes the notion of ‘dispersed authority,’ articulated in the documents of the 1948 Lambeth Conference, and frequently rehearsed since then.³

One of the consequences of dispersed authority is our responsibility to pay attention to those who have a different view than our own, to listen to them, with the expectation that we might discern in their ideas and passions the will of God. If the authority of God is indeed dispersed, then we cannot assume that we have it under control or in our possession nor can we assume that it is only expressed in the existing authorities of the church. The notion of dispersed authority means that we have to allow for subversive truth to challenge and critique us.

A common response in every age to movements that critique the status quo has been, ‘How can they be so sure they are right?’ A fair response to that response is surely the question, ‘How can you be so sure they are wrong?’ For if the new movement sees things in terms of ‘black and white,’ then of course those who reject it do the same. If the new movement is ‘simplistic,’ then so too are those who reject it. In short, believing in the *consensus fidelium* requires constant patient listening, especially to those with whom we disagree.

² Its significance is that it is the first reform movement ‘from below’ that has arisen from across the Anglican Communion. In the past movements for reform and renewal have begun in one national church, and later spread across the Communion.

³ *Lambeth Conference, 1948*, London, SPCK, 1948, p.84

3. Should we not recognize a greater diversity of ‘instruments of unity’?

Until recently discussions about the unity of the Anglican Communion have centred on the four ‘Instruments of Unity’ the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Primates’ Meeting, the Lambeth Conference, and the Anglican Consultative Council.

However we find a new theme in the recent Kuala Lumpur Report of the third Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, *Communion, Conflict and Hope*.⁴ The report states, rather cautiously, ‘On that basis it be might be argued that the Anglican experience of companionship links, partnerships in mission, inter-Anglican networks, mission societies, and religious orders...can all act as significant ‘instruments of communion’, almost irrespective of more formal ecclesial structures.’⁵

This is a welcome perspective, and begins to acknowledge the realities of Anglicanism. Anglican ecclesiology is more than the relationship between the local or national churches and the whole communion. There is another significant dynamic, that of the relationships between the ecclesiastical structures of bishops, dioceses, provinces on the one hand and these other ‘instruments of communion’ that have arisen from below, or independently of the formal structures of the church.⁶

Such varied but influential ‘instruments of communion’ include *The Church Times*, the great Anglican Missionary Societies, the Religious Orders, and networks such as Forward in Faith, and the Evangelical Fellowship of the Anglican Communion. These informal ‘instruments of communion’ have their own identity, authority structures, and mission, and serve the Anglican Communion and mission. Ignoring these gives us only a truncated view of Anglican identity, Anglican energy, and Anglican mission. How impoverished we would be without them.⁷

I see Gafcon and Anglican Mainstream as new examples of such ‘instruments of communion’, and I expect that they will make their own contribution to the growth and development of the mission of God within the Anglican Communion. Of course they will make mistakes; all such movements do, as do those who resist them.

4. Is it not possible that Gafcon and Anglican Mainstream represent a legitimate protest against an unhelpfully English response to our current problems?

I recently read again John Fowles’ book of the 1970’s, *Daniel Martin.*, and found some hauntingly painful words in it. Daniel is an Englishman who has lived in America, and returns to his native land. He comments:

‘Perhaps all this is getting near the heart of Englishness: being happier at being unhappy than doing something constructive about it. We boast of our genius for compromise, which is really a refusal to choose; and that in turn contains a large part of cowardice, apathy, selfish laziness...’

Is the Anglican Communion merely conforming to the worldliness of its cultural origins? Is Englishness a sufficient response for 21st Century global Anglicans? Are we being

⁴ Kuala Lumpur Report of the third Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, *Communion, Conflict and Hope*. London, Anglican Communion Office, 2008.

⁵ *Communion, Conflict and Hope*, p. 40.

⁶ See above.

⁷ Of course the Roman Catholic Church also has its own ‘instruments of communion’ that are independent of bishops and dioceses, such as the Jesuits, the Sisters of Mercy, and St Vincent de Paul. To ignore them is to miss crucial features of the mission and ministry of the Roman Catholic Church.

betrayed by our provenance? Does not Gafcon represent a legitimate frustration at a continued English cultural hegemony and control of the Anglican Communion?

It is a frustrating characteristic of all movements of renewal and reform that their members and supporters want everyone else to join them. This universal expectation may be unreasonable, though, as I have shown, such acceptance and support is often gained in subsequent generations.

However, even if we feel unable to offer such support or to identify with such movements, we should be cautious about rejecting them. For many messengers of God in the Bible were rejected by the people of God to their peril, from the Old Testament prophets to Jesus Christ and his apostles. As Gamaliel warned his contemporaries:

‘If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!’⁸

We ignore subversive dissidents at our peril.

May God continue to direct and guide us all in his mercy in Christ Jesus?

⁸ Acts 5:38, 39.