

Editorial

It is the summer of 1998, and Lambeth Conference time has rolled round once more. These decennial gatherings of the Anglican episcopate have changed their character in recent times, to the point where serious questions are now being asked about their future viability. They have always been somewhat odd events, partly because they have no authority in the Anglican Communion, and partly because the weighting of bishops has not reflected the strength of the church on the ground. For a long time, the American Episcopal Church exerted an influence out of all proportion to its numerical strength, and this was not infrequently resented by others. Now, the balance has shifted in favour of the Third World, with very different results. There is a real possibility that the Americans will find themselves excommunicated if they pursue the radical policies for which their church has become famous, and if that happens, the Church of England will find itself in an unenviable position. Missionary ties bind us more closely to the Third World than to the USA, which has always been an anomaly in world-wide Anglicanism, but trends in General Synod have been going the American way in recent years. After all, one can hardly say that the pressure to ordain women or practising homosexuals has come from Uganda!

The future is impossible to predict, and who can say what the Lambeth Conference will look like in 2008, if indeed there is one by then. The Anglican Communion will probably expand even further in many parts of the world, making such a gathering even more difficult to hold, and it may well become more ragged at the edges, if North and South India schemes spread much further. Perhaps the real challenge for the next decade will be to decide who is really in the Anglican fold and who is not.

We have already seen that this is becoming an open question as far as the American Episcopal Church is concerned. The Church of England will never take the lead in expelling it from the ranks, but if others decide to do so, where will it stand? More importantly, what will it do with respect to the breakaway Anglican churches which are appearing in different parts of the world? This is not a new phenomenon, but it may have to be tackled in the next decade in a way which the Communion has managed to avoid up to now. One of the shibboleths of world-wide Anglicanism is that there should be only one church in a given geographical area. This is not a matter of faith, and the principle has in fact been breached in Europe, where there are overlapping (and occasionally competing) English and American jurisdictions. However, this pales beside the problem of the Church of England in South Africa, which has quite shamefully been excluded from the Anglican Communion on more or less purely territorial grounds. Nobody could question the doctrinal soundness of that church,

and its orders are valid in Anglican eyes. So what, precisely, keeps them from being accepted?

There is a similar problem in the United States, where the Reformed Episcopal Church, which goes back to the late-nineteenth century, has never made it into the charmed circle of Lambeth, even though its Anglicanism, not to say its basic Christianity, is a good deal more obvious than that of the officially recognized Episcopal Church. Again, territorialism is the only real reason why it has not been welcomed into fellowship. The more recent breakaway churches are a different issue, and here caution is certainly required. One of the more depressing things about them is their fissiparous tendency; there are so many splits that it is hard to know with whom one is dealing at any given time. To make matters even more complicated, there are groups like the Charismatic Episcopal Church which have no Anglican roots, but which have absorbed Episcopalianism along the way. What does one do with them?

To many people in England, all this must seem very far away, but the issue is coming home to roost here as well. We are unlikely to produce a charismatic episcopal church (at least not as a separate denomination), but there is every sign that the third province movement will gather strength in the years ahead and eventually provoke a crisis within the church. Those who want a third province are not radical rebels, but the exact opposite. They are people who for a variety of reasons, cannot accept the changes which have been voted through the General Synod in recent years. To be fair, some of this conservatism is bad and wrongly motivated, though its opponents are scarcely in a position to cast the first stone in this respect. That being said, however, there is much in the third province movement which is perfectly sound and quite understandable. It is now becoming increasingly clear that the decision to ordain women was far from being an isolated event. Rightly or wrongly, it is closely linked to the push for the ordination of practising homosexuals, and also to the desire for 'inclusive-language' liturgy. The number of men offering themselves for full-time stipendiary ministry has dropped dramatically, and it must be wondered whether loss of morale is not largely responsible for this. Who wants to join a church if it is obvious that one will be discriminated against for the rest of one's career?

Church leaders have made various promises to the effect that traditionalists will be protected, but nobody believes them, and rightly so. One has only to look at the protection given to the Prayer Book to realize just what such promises are worth. Other parts of the Anglican Communion have also made it obvious that dissent will not be tolerated, and if England is somewhat different, this is only because the complicated freehold system of benefices makes a certain degree of eccentricity possible. But we all know that pastoral reorganization schemes and the like

are afoot, which will make such resistance increasingly difficult in the future, and it seems likely that only a very few parishes will be able to stand out against the trend.

A third province, in which traditional faith and worship will be protected, is probably the only guarantee that such opinions have a future within the Church of England, but nobody has yet thought seriously about how such an organism would relate to the rest of the church. What would happen for example, if a whole diocese decided to join it? Would the option to belong to it (or to leave it) be open indefinitely, or would a decision have to be taken more or less immediately, say within the first five years? Would the bishops of the province be on a par with the others, or would they be suffragans only? Above all, what would happen to the quota system?

There can be no doubt that financial worries are the main reason why the third province idea is kept firmly on the back burner. The richest parishes are also those most likely to join it if the option were to become available, and there is a real risk that the existing provinces could be left with the blind, the weak and the lame. Liberals would not be welcome in the new province, though how one would keep them out is hard to imagine, particularly in the longer term. If a third province were ever to become viable, then one can be sure that liberal elements would flock to it, as parasites always seek the fattest body to suck blood from. We must have no illusions about this, but it may be difficult to avoid the problem further down the road.

Above all though, a third province in England would kill the territoriality principle which has shut out various breakaway Anglican churches around the world. What then? The Church of the Province in South Africa and the Episcopal Church in the USA are sure to oppose any move to recognize these groups, as they have always opposed them in the past, but third province people in England are likely to feel much greater sympathy with them. Is it possible that in future we shall see not merely two Anglican churches in some countries, but two Anglican Communion, one based at Lambeth and the other at Swanwick (for example)? The issue at stake is not merely jurisdictional – it is spiritual as well. This is hard to admit, but in the years ahead we shall be forced to decide what real communion means, and to draw the lines accordingly. Whether the Anglican Communion as it now is could survive such an operation is doubtful, but what would take its place remains hidden from our eyes. Nevertheless, as the bishops gather this summer, it is a question which it would be as well to bear in mind, before the excommunication of the First World churches is announced from somewhere like Kuala Lumpur.

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