

APPENDIX B

THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION

FOUR KEY QUESTIONS - RESPONSE FROM THE CHURCH OF IRELAND

PRELIMINARY

The Working Group was disappointed to discover that the response to the Virginia Report which it produced some time ago was one of only two such responses evident within the world-wide communion of churches. Considering this, the Group has provided only a provisional treatment of the questions submitted. One aspect of ‘communion’ is surely the cooperative and mutual nature of working, thinking and believing together – mutuality and co-operation not statistically demonstrable on the basis of the former procedure of ‘receiving’ the Virginia Report.

THE QUESTIONS

1. When we speak of an Anglican communion, what do we mean by the word ‘communion’?

The word ‘communion’ is often used cheaply and without proper attention to its meaning. Communion between the churches of the Anglican communion refers essentially to that dynamic and mutually enriching project wherein anglican communities of contextually diverse viewpoint struggle, with honesty, transparency and love, to sustain and enliven the links which exist between them.

These links are bonds of affection between living and growing spiritual organisms. Anglican communities are defined not only through self-description, but chiefly through the application of the criteria of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral (1888) - scripture, creeds, sacraments and historic episcopate. Communion is the process existing and forever developing between organisms so understood.

Communion is not, in this sense, simply a ‘given’ to be preserved strategically whatever the cost, it is the irresistible summons to a difficult, trans-community, trans-cultural, and perhaps unending endeavour, an imperative of our common belief which reflects the Gospel's praise for those who would forge peace in our midst (Matt 5.9).

In an Irish anglican aside, we think it worthy of note that, in 1870, the Church of Ireland produced the Preamble and Declaration which attempted to think the relationship between the Church of Ireland and the Church of England within the context of disestablishment. In that document the view develops of an autonomous church gladly and freely recognising the ecclesial significance of a historic relationship guaranteed and authorised in no other (certainly no juridical) way. The document also interestingly commits the Church of Ireland to act in such a way that communion will not be jeopardised, but rather maintained (Section 3).

2. What is it that makes some disputes so crucial that failure to resolve them threatens a break in communion?

‘Communion’ as a dynamic concept is periodically conflictual. This should give us pause for thought, not fear. The globalised nature of Anglicanism means that anglican communities witnessing in diverse contexts will witness in diverse ways. The presence of diversity is an inescapable corollary of the application of anglican theological method in significantly different situations and contexts. This diversity may become ‘communion threatening’ only where communion itself is understood to be only a method of definition. Where the notion of communion is held to be of value as a system for the theological coercion of the other and where the partiality and provisionality of all theological reflection has been forgotten, then the possibility of critical rupture within the communion arises. When bonds of affection become bonds of restriction, and the ‘struggle’ of communion is thereby no longer dynamic and creative, it may assume a demonic form.

Yet, at every point within the dynamic affection of communion, the issue of permissible diversity arises. Anglican “locational” theological method must be tested in broader contexts. The basic theological unit of anglicanism is the diocese, yet the diocese's local discernment of the faith must be tested against provincial, inter-provincial and perhaps other ‘catholic’ understandings. We consider that specific judgments of the limits of enriching diversity are themselves liable to situational influence. Therefore it is only in reflection across communities that an appropriate theological equilibrium (the Word of God to the Church) is likely to emerge. On simpler issues, we consider that the criteria of the Quadripartite may again provide functional guidance, but on a large number of issues the potentially painful activity of ‘speaking the truth in love’ will have to be (reciprocally) deployed. To be an anglican in the current global situation is to embrace the plural while resisting the relative. To be anglican in the current global situation is to grasp the distinction between Babel and Pentecost.

3. In what ways are Christian teachings about moral behaviour integral to the maintenance of communion?

We consider that the time has come for the churches to revisit the concept of “orthopraxy” - what is actually meant by right behaviour, right action. There can be no simplistic assertion of legitimate forms of Christian action - the orthopractic is liable to the same trans-community standards of reflection and argument, as the more predictable discussions of orthodoxy.

4. How far does the Virginia Report meet the relevant situations that have arisen in the Anglican Communion since its publication?

We in some sense decline to answer this question. We have commented already in an earlier submission and the basis of our thinking on the Virginia Report should be quite obvious. We feel that the Report has not really been received by the Communion as a whole (itself an index of failure). This, as we have suggested, is statistically defensible in

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light of the meagre provincial responses – two – received to date.

We do feel that the existing institutional element of the ACC is under-used as an agent for the promotion of “unity-in-diversity” within the communion. We therefore suggest a deficiency in using at least one of the mechanisms that already exist for sponsoring the kind of continual dialogue which we believe to be basic to the function of the communion. More importantly perhaps we consider that the crucial issues of orthodoxy and orthopraxy facing our family today ultimately centre on diverse understandings of the reading of scripture. Perhaps then our encounter with scripture within the communion is of more value and of more urgency than our agonizing over documents such as the Virginia Report.

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