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What is the Anglican Communion?

by David Phillips

The Anglican Communion is a loose affiliation of self-governing provinces. As such it much more closely follows the pattern of ancient Christian practice and the Orthodox churches than the later development (and then corruption) of centralism which is the hallmark of the Roman Catholics.

Any such affiliation needs some cement to hold it together. Today the Communion is often described in terms of four instruments of unity namely the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Primates Meeting, the Lambeth Conference and the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC).

The Archbishop of Canterbury remains a Diocesan Bishop who has special responsibilities within the Church of England and also has an historic place and responsibility within the wider Communion. As the organization has come under pressure there has been a desire to make the role of Canterbury more significant. This ranges from the inclusion of the Bishop of Dover in the House of Bishops to the proposals that within the Communion he have much more power. This tendency would alter significantly the ecclesiological basis of the Communion and would self consciously and disastrously mimic the papacy.

The Primates Meeting and the Lambeth Conference have both been seen by orthodox Anglicans as a source of encouragement though it is clear that there is an imbalance, particularly in the latter, caused by the relatively large numbers of Bishops in the North America and the UK.

These four instruments of unity have a purpose and a place but they all have to do with the organization and as such can never be the basis of true Christian unity.

What truly holds the communion together?

In the first instance it is a shared history. Most of the Communion has arisen from the colonial expansion of the British empire and from missionary zeal (largely evangelical). For this reason there is an emotional attachment to the Church of England as, in some sense the mother Church. However, this is not always healthy and it is reported that in the past there has been unnecessary deference to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Today the shared history manifests itself in a network of contacts between both organizations and individuals. This is not something that can be manufactured or controlled and it is a glorious reminder that the Christian church is not an hierarchical structure. Today mission is being shared and thankfully the needs to evangelise afresh the western world (including some of the churches) is beginning to impinge itself on the Communion.

Secondly we have, at least in theory, a shared faith. This is part of the historic reality. Most of the churches in the communion have in their background the 1662 Book of Common Prayer even though in some instances they have doctored it. All share, on paper, a commitment to the historic creeds and of course to the authority of scripture. The place where this is set out is the Lambeth Quadrilateral. This statement was set out first by the Protestant Episcopal Church at Chicago in 1886 and then was adopted by the Lambeth Conference in 1888. As has been stated in *Cross†Way* before the Quadrilateral is often simply quoted as being scripture, the creeds, the sacraments and the bishops. However, the statement is much more thorough. The quadrilateral quotes Article 6 in part and goes on to assert that scripture is the rule and ultimate standard of faith. This, as the 39 articles

makes clear, submits the Church to scripture and not the other way around. The endorsement of Bishops is also in terms of the historic episcopate but locally adapted, implying, as is blindingly obvious, that episcopacy is a development consistent with scripture which is therefore adaptable to local circumstance rather than being set down as an absolute pattern in scripture.

If this is the basis of our communion it is small wonder that it is now under threat. There is no reason to suppose that the bonds forged in history are any weaker today but the destructive influence of liberalism, which is, by definition, a movement away from apostolic Christianity, will always damage the concept of a shared faith. Even if the whole communion today were convinced of the claims of liberalism we would still not have communion with those of the past who upheld the apostolic teaching.