

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Come over and help us?

The launch of the Anglican Mission in England (AMiE) is the latest development in what appears to be the ongoing split in the Anglican Communion between the liberals in the developed world and everyone else. Until about 2007, it seemed that the liberal wave was unstoppable. The American Episcopal Church (TEC) had nailed its 'progressive' colours to the mast long before, and Canada and New Zealand were not far behind. The Australian scene was more complicated, largely thanks to the unyielding opposition of Sydney, but there too, various loopholes in church law were being exploited to allow the church to head down the liberal road, leaving the few conservative dioceses more or less isolated.

In the Church of England the situation was less straightforward, but there was little doubt as to which way the wind was blowing. The willingness of the House of Bishops to tolerate civil partnerships among the clergy, without testing the opinion of General Synod, made it clear to all but those who refused to see whose side the establishment was on. Total victory for the liberals might still be some years away, but the trend was unmistakable.

Matters came to a head in July 2007 when the Archbishop of Canterbury invited the TEC episcopate to the Lambeth Conference in 2008, despite warnings from the Primates Meeting earlier in the year that its behaviour would not be tolerated. It became clear that there would be no attempt to discipline the Americans for having repeatedly ignored the wishes of the wider Anglican Communion on the homosexual question, and many churches felt they could no longer work in fellowship with it. That was the origin of GAFCON (the Global Anglican Futures Conference) which met in Jerusalem shortly before Lambeth and issued a resounding declaration of principles defining their opposition to the liberal drift and staking out benchmarks by which to combat it. An important plank in the GAFCON platform, and one that is easily missed (especially by people unsympathetic to it) is that its supporters have reaffirmed their loyalty to Anglicanism and their

determination to stay within the Anglican Communion even as they create parallel structures to cater for those left stranded by intolerant liberalism.

The prominence of many African primates in GAFCON, and the support of others like Sydney diocese, obscured the fact that it was just as much the product of dissension within TEC as the move to legitimate same-sex marriages was. American influence in GAFCON has been surprisingly strong behind the scenes. That encourages outsiders to hope that a viable alternative to TEC can be created to represent American Anglicanism, but it also makes it hard for them to assess the true nature and strength of domestic opposition to the TEC leadership. From a distance, it was relatively easy to see that TEC had veered off-course and reports of how dissidents were being treated were sufficiently disturbing to make many people, and not just conservatives, sympathise with its opponents. The deposition of Bishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh was particularly worrying, as was the renewed determination of TEC to go on ignoring the wider Anglican Communion whenever it chose to do so but still claim membership of it.

In those circumstances, it was perhaps inevitable that the fissiparous nature of the opposition would go unrecognised by many outside the USA. There is not one breakaway Anglican Church in the United States but several, and it is often unclear who belongs to which group. Some parishes migrate from one to another and flying bishops seem to be the order of the day in many places. Robert Duncan is now the archbishop of the Anglican Church of North America (ACNA), which is trying to gather all these different groups under its wing, but this is hard work and success is still a long way off.

The Anglican Mission in America (AMiA) stands out as one group that has remained within the Anglican Communion by joining the province of Rwanda. Officially, its clergy belong to that African church and are its missionaries in the USA and so they can claim to be bona fide Anglicans in a way that the clergy of ACNA cannot. On the other hand, relations with ACNA are good, at least on the surface, and they recognise one another as ‘mission partners’, whatever that means.

But the truth is that neither AMiA nor ACNA has so far established itself as a viable church, and their long-term future must remain in doubt. At the

moment, the leadership of both consists of disgruntled TEC (or ex-TEC) clergy who know what they dislike about TEC but are not as clear about what they want to put in its place.

The problem is that AMiA and ACNA are both coalitions of different types of churchmanship. In theory, Evangelicals, Anglo-Catholics and charismatics are all welcome to join them but Evangelicalism (at least as this is understood in England) is weak in TEC and so its influence in AMiA and ACNA is minimal. A charismatic, 'open Evangelical' ritualism seems to be the dominant force, but it is hard to be sure since both AMiA and ACNA are really congregationalist churches held together in a loose framework. They all do their own thing and where there are disagreements between them the unspoken rule is that they will be tolerated. Neither group has a seminary it can call its own, nor is it clear where the next generation of bishops will come from or what they will be like. The probability is that both groups will end up like the Reformed Episcopal Church (REC), the offshoot of a late nineteenth-century division that has become a separate denomination and remained marginal to the wider Anglican scene ever since. REC started off as an Evangelical protest against liberalism but in recent years has embraced a form of Anglo-Catholicism that has only been intensified by the disgruntled TEC members who have joined it.

The precedents are not encouraging, but they are little known and generally ignored, especially outside the USA. In England there have been a number of supporters of both AMiA and ACNA, but few imitators. Now, however, their approach seems to be catching on and there have been English ordinands who have even gone to Global South countries like Kenya in search of a bishop who will lay hands on them.

There are clergy in England who have fallen out with the national Church in one way or another and who have appealed to the wider GAFCON community to come over and help them. With the support of retired and/or missionary bishops and the sympathy of many who are tired of the prevarications of the English establishment and fearful that the liberal agenda will be sneaked past them when nobody is looking, they have set up a 'society' that will cater to their needs. However, like GAFCON, they are determined to remain loyally Anglican, which seems to mean that they will subscribe to Canon A5 of the Church of England.

This sounds reassuring, but there are many questions that remain unanswered. Subscribing to the Church's Canons is all very well, but if the AMiE has no representation in General Synod or official recognition from it, what does that mean? It is a purely voluntary decision on their part, with no significance beyond that, and what will they do when the Canons change? Who will select AMiE ordinands, how will they be trained and who will ordain them? Will they be able to serve in non-AMiE congregations or parishes, or will their orders be regarded as 'valid but irregular'? What will the theological complexion of AMiE be?

At the moment it seems to be mainly Evangelical, but that umbrella covers a range of possibilities that will not be acceptable to everyone. At the moment it seems that AMiE will embrace the ordination of women, which for many will make it almost as undesirable as a church that ordains practising homosexuals. That, of course, raises the biggest question of all. What will happen to AMiE when the lie of the land changes and the presenting issues are different from the ones facing us now? Will such a coalition be able to hold together once the goal posts have moved?

That the supporters of AMiE are enthusiastic and well-meaning we have no doubt. That their fears about the general drift of the Church are real must also be recognised. Nobody should criticise this new initiative without taking these things into consideration and committing themselves to the same goals as AMiE – Gospel-based evangelism for the conversion of our nation. Those who cannot join with AMiE for other reasons must not lose sight of what ought to be the aims of every committed member of the Church of England. It is understandable that bishops do not want to be cornered by clergy demanding that they adhere to resolutions of past Lambeth Conferences as if they were the sole test of whether one should be in communion with them.

At the same time, the Church should not appoint men to senior positions if there is reason to doubt their loyalty to its official teaching and should not tolerate bishops who try to discipline their clergy for nothing more than their determination to defend orthodoxy. Church leaders who castigate the antics of conservative clergy but do nothing to remedy the defects that have caused their protests must realise that they are the ones who have done more than anyone else to bring AMiE into being. Just as the Archbishop of Canterbury is the true

founder of GAFCON by virtue of his own prevarications, so these leaders of the establishment have created a market for the likes of AMiE.

Having said that, England is not the USA and there are serious difficulties about adopting a tactic that has been developed and employed in a very different ecclesiastical context. For a start, it appears that AMiE has ignored the legal status of the Church of England, something that puts it in a very different position from that of TEC. There are legal constraints in England that make it much more difficult to operate the kind of parallel system that the supporters of AMiE seem to want. Those ordained outside the official framework of the Church cannot minister in it without a licence, which can be hard to obtain if the circumstances of the ordination are irregular. This may not matter to the enthusiasts, but it is bound to be a consideration for many who lack the support base that some of the larger churches can command. Could an AMiE church function outside the suburbs of our big cities? It is a safe bet that hardly any rural parishes or clergy will be attracted to it, nor will those engaged in non-parochial ministries find it attractive. The grassroots of the Church of England are averse to disrupting the system and those who try to do so are liable to be left high and dry.

Another factor we must consider is the growing weight of conservative voices inside the existing Church establishment. The recent General Synod elections have shown this, and there are signs that more orthodox men will be appointed to senior positions in the future. Perfection is unlikely to be achieved, but it may well be possible to vote down unwelcome liberal initiatives in Synod and make it clear where the limits of tolerance for episcopal eccentricities lie. The danger at the moment is that conservative people will lose patience and leave the establishment just as they stand a reasonable chance of being able to influence it for the first time in a generation. No doubt individual AMiE congregations will rejoice that they have preserved the 'pure Gospel', but they will have abandoned hundreds of parishes where faithful men and women are trying to preserve that same Gospel in an ecclesiastical environment made even more hostile by the actions of AMiE.

The most likely future for the AMiE is that it will become a small denomination like the Free Church of England, with which it might eventually link up. It is hard to see what else it could do, in spite of the claims and the

good intentions of those who have founded it. As long as the Church of England remains the established church of the country, its character will be fundamentally different from that of other Anglican churches, and solutions developed overseas will have only minor relevance in the struggle against institutional liberalism here. Those who are inclined to look abroad for our salvation should think again and remember that those whom we invite to come over to help us may turn out to be not quite as useful as either they or we might think.

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