

# Churchman

EDITORIAL

## The empire strikes back

Readers of *Jane Eyre* will recall that the heroine was courted by two very different types of man. On the one side was the dark and dubious Mr Rochester, a man with a mysterious past and an uncertain future. On the other was the pious and pure St John Rivers, whose path to the overseas mission field was clearly predestined. As we know, Jane chose Mr Rochester, perhaps because she thought she could play a part in his redemption, but she remained in touch with St John and never lost her admiration for him, even if she could not see herself measuring up to his high standards. Nearly two centuries later, we can look back on that and ponder how the story unfolded after the novel ended. The descendants of the Rochesters have either been redeemed and reintegrated into normal middle-class society, or have continued to lead the sort of rakish lives that the tabloid press revels in. The St Johns have had a lower profile, but arguably their influence has been far greater. Unable or unwilling to conform to standard English domesticity, they have travelled to the far corners of the earth, preaching the Gospel and forming churches wherever they have gone. It would not be entirely true to say that they were the spiritual arm of the British Empire, but there is no doubt that they shared in the optimistic expansionism of the imperial era, nor that the modern Anglican Communion is strongest in the Commonwealth and in areas of British settlement outside it, like the United States and parts of South America.

Until a generation ago, this missionary expansion was accepted by the Church of England in much the same way that the Empire was. It was an extension of British Christian values, designed to benefit the people to whom it went, but its impact on the homeland was minimal. Lambeth Conferences that included overseas bishops convened every ten years or so, but most of them were little more than glorified garden parties with a little housekeeping attached. Old friends met up again, contacts were established or renewed, and everyone went home thinking that all was well in a church on which the sun never set.

This happy picture began to crack in the late twentieth century, for two diametrically opposed reasons. On the one hand, the slow but steady increase in Global South churches suddenly accelerated at an astonishing speed. Countries like Nigeria and Uganda have come to have far more Anglicans than the United Kingdom or the United States, and few of them are nominal or occasional churchgoers. For the most part, they are enthusiastic, highly motivated and deeply committed to their faith. Many are living in conditions of extreme poverty and not a few are in serious danger, either from civil wars in their homelands or from militant Islam—or both. At the other end of the scale have been the declining churches of the affluent West. Faced with falling numbers and growing indifference, church leaders in the lands of traditional Anglican Christendom have either buried their heads in the sand or sought to be “relevant” to their increasingly secular contexts. That has meant revising liturgies by introducing modern language and by diluting their theological content, opening holy orders to women and to non-university trained men (who were expected to compensate for their lack of formal training by “knowledge” gained from their social and employment backgrounds), and more recently by appealing to pressure groups, in particular to the homosexual community. Churches that a generation ago would never have allowed a divorced and remarried man to exercise a pastoral ministry have now found themselves accommodating openly lesbian bishops, with the very real possibility that a transgendered man/woman will soon be elevated to the episcopate.

Needless to say, these are two different worlds, and a clash between them was probably inevitable from the start. It came into the open at Lambeth 1998, when a resolution repudiating homosexual practice was passed by a large majority, only to be disregarded by those in the Western churches who opposed it. Before long, the American Episcopal Church (TEC) was in meltdown over the issue, and when the majority succumbed to the spirit of the age, calls to impose sanctions on TEC were heard across the world. As we now know, a form of discipline was invoked but it was ineffective, and when Lambeth 2008 came around, the erring Americans were invited to attend, in spite of assurances given to others that they would be excluded. The shock of this perceived betrayal was such that several churches banded together to create the Global Anglican Futures Conference (GAFCON), which has just held its third meeting in June 2018. What was originally intended as a pressure group to persuade the wider Anglican Communion to stick to its principles has now become a quasi-communion of its own. The election of the archbishop of the

Anglican Church of North America (ACNA), which is not recognised by Lambeth, as GAFCON's head and the challenge to the archbishop of Canterbury, not to invite heterodox prelates to the projected Lambeth 2020 has made it clear that any reconciliation is a long way off. We do not yet know what the archbishop of Canterbury will do, but it is extremely unlikely that he will succumb to this kind of pressure, which will be seen as a provocation, and the result will almost certainly be further, more deeply entrenched division.

GAFCON has its work cut out. It has to decide what kind of communion it wants to be and how to accommodate differences over things like charismatic influences and the ministry of women. It will also have to reach out to those Global South churches that have so far stood back from it, either out of loyalty to Canterbury, or because of differences, perhaps even rivalries, with the GAFCON leadership. There is a real danger that, just as the mainstream Anglican Communion has been hijacked by TEC, so GAFCON may come under the spell of ACNA, thereby internationalising an essentially American conflict. If that happens, non-Americans may be tempted to walk away from something that is alien to them, and if they do, any form of Anglican Communion will disintegrate. These are the challenges that GAFCON faces, and the next few years will determine what its future is likely to be.

Where the Church of England stands in all of this is hard to say. Observers at the June 2018 GAFCON meeting noticed that the English presence was decidedly weak. Only two suffragan bishops (Maidstone and Birkenhead) turned up, and the delegation was tiny compared to what some other countries produced. Some people put a brave face on this by pointing out that it proved that GAFCON is not an exercise in British neo-colonialism (American neo-colonialism being something quite different, apparently) and that Anglicans in the developing world have finally come of age. In some respects that is undoubtedly true, and we may be grateful for it. GAFCON is not an assembly of bishops in the way that Lambeth is, but represents the clergy and the laity as well. That makes it more authentically Anglican, but whether its formula can be extended to cover the entire Communion is doubtful, if only because the vastly inflated numbers will not allow it. The demand for cohesion is bound to place limits on expansion, but what should those limits be and how should they be enforced? Should the archbishop of Canterbury invite numerically restricted delegations from each ecclesiastical province or national church, and if he does, how should they be selected? Nobody

seems to know what the point of Lambeth 2008 was, so why should Lambeth 2020 be any better?

One of the difficulties that has to be faced is that the Church of England is an anomaly in the Anglican Communion, which makes any special role for the archbishop of Canterbury problematic. On the one hand, the Communion would not exist without the English Church, which remains its “mother,” but on the other hand, its structure and institutional mentality is quite different from what prevails elsewhere. In most Anglican churches, the basic unit is the diocese, which elects a bishop who both reflects its ethos and helps determine it. Even when a national church is mixed, as in Australia, dioceses tend to be more monochrome, so that it is possible to assume that the next archbishop of Sydney (for example) will be similar to his predecessor and that the diocese will retain its character for the foreseeable future. In many other places, what is true of Australian dioceses is true of the entire church, whose roots probably lie in the work of a particular brand of missionary society. Even in the British Isles, the Church of Ireland has a low-church bias, whereas the Church in Wales and the Episcopal Church of Scotland lean the other way. Thus it was that two diocesan bishops from Ireland (out of twelve) attended GAFCON, but there was virtually no representation from Wales or Scotland at all.

It is against this backdrop that the position of the Church of England has to be assessed. It is a national church to a degree that no other Anglican body is, but it is far from monochrome, and its structures are designed to prevent it from becoming so. Some dioceses tend to be more high or low church than others, but this is relatively unimportant in the wider scheme of things and in most places bishops of any stripe can be appointed. In recent years, dioceses have been more closely involved in choosing their bishops, but it would be stretching the truth to claim that there is any deep connection between the episcopate and people in the pews. As for the archbishop of Canterbury, nobody can say who the next one will be, or what line he (she?) will take about anything. Trusting the Communion’s future to such an unknown quantity is risky at best, and probably foolish as well. An international body like the Anglican Communion (or even GAFCON, for that matter) has to have some idea what its future leadership will look like, and can hardly allow itself to become dependent on the internal balancing act of one of its member churches, even if that is the Church of England.

Then too, there is the inescapable fact that although the Church of England has an episcopal structure, its members do not generally regard

their bishops as their spiritual leaders and the more committed ones tend to ignore them as much as possible. The principal reasons for this are that English dioceses are relatively large, requiring good administrators, and varied in their churchmanship, so that whoever is bishop has to get along with as many people as possible. Managerial efficiency combined with theological mediocrity is what is normally required—and what the Church of England usually gets. Continuity from one bishop to the next is impossible to guarantee and is frequently absent. For example, the last bishop of London did not ordain women, whereas his successor is female—the kind of sea change that is scarcely imaginable in other countries.

Evangelicals in England seldom pay much attention to bishops and can be quite cynical about them, not least because so many of their number who have received preferment have subsequently distanced themselves from their original constituency. But scepticism is present among high churchmen as well, who might be presumed to be more naturally “episcopalian” in sympathy. In his mini-classic *The Christian Mind*, the late Harry Blamires, a staunch Anglo-Catholic, had this to say (pp. 53-5):

It has been argued that our system [of appointing bishops] is good because it has worked well.... It has been argued that we have had the best men as bishops in the past. This seems to me a ghastly and almost blasphemous libel on the heroic and saintly parish priests who have served the Church so well in the past, often frustrated by timorous shepherds whose prophetic zeal has been tamed to the level of garden-party votes of thanks and radio uplift. The best men?...

To think Christianly is to know in our souls that our bishops have not been the best men available...The Church as an institution is entangled in the weaknesses and deficiencies of human nature. Its earthly set-up is necessarily corrupted by man’s sinfulness and distorted by man’s ignorance...If there are not enough good men to go round, it may well be a part of the divine economy to make sure that the weakest ones go where they can do least damage—the episcopal bench, where their personal influence over the souls of the laity is reduced to a minimum, where the qualities of individual personality are of least significance. It may be quite unpractical, in God’s eyes, to waste really good men in episcopal palaces. Surely, surely, to think Christianly is to recognise that God may have answered our prayers for the Church by putting the least promising human material into episcopal thrones, where the authority of the higher office will strengthen them and guide them in their ignorance,

and where the responsibilities of status will operate to restrain their natural foolishness.

Not everyone is as blunt as Mr Blamires, but his view of the episcopate is widely shared in the Church of England and is virtually universal among commentators in the British media. His words were written in 1963, but they could easily be recycled in 2018 simply by adopting gender-neutral language, and few people would sense any anachronism. Is this the sort of leadership that GAFCON wants to engage with? Or to put it another way, how many English bishops would feel comfortable sitting next to colleagues who actually believe what they are supposed to believe and worse still, are enthusiastic about proclaiming it?

It should be said at once that this situation is nothing new. The great revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sprang from the grassroots of the Church of England and it was only at a very late stage that bishops got involved. Initially at least, they were often some of the fiercest opponents of men like John Wesley and George Whitefield, whom they regarded as rabble-rousers and trouble-makers. The spiritual strength of the Church of England has always lain in its parishes and among its humbler clergy and laity. They are the ones most likely to be supportive of GAFCON, but how to engage them when the leadership in other provinces of the Communion is top heavy with bishops and even includes a primates council? That structure may be fine for them, but it is unsuited to the Church of England and it is hard to see how GAFCON will ever relate to it in a serious or productive way. Siphoning its supporters off into independent congregations with an “Anglican” ethos will only weaken the Evangelical witness inside the Church and cause confusion – “dissenting Anglicanism” is a contradiction in English terms and those who choose that route will almost certainly consign themselves to oblivion sooner or later.

In the final analysis, the English Church is like Jane Eyre, preferring to live with the Mr Rochesters of this world, despite their faults, than to venture abroad with the determination and dedication of a St John Rivers. It is what Sellar and Yeatman, the authors of *1066 and all that*, saw in the English civil war – the Roundheads (Puritans) were right but repulsive, whereas the Cavaliers were wrong but wromantic. The Roundheads were bold enough to execute both Archbishop Laud and the king, a move that solved nothing but made their victims martyrs in the eyes of many. The Church of England, like the bulk of the nation, eventually preferred the Cavaliers (“the Tory party at prayer”) while the missionary impulse of

the latter-day Roundheads drove them across the seas, where they were free to bring their light to the wider world. Now the Empire they created is striking back.

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