

The Lambeth Conference 2008

Self Select Session on ‘Full Communion’ Agreements: Mutual Accountability and Difference’

This session looked at the implications of ‘full communion’ agreements, where Anglican churches and their partners may retain their autonomy and structures but undertake to adopt patterns of deeply mutual responsibility and accountability. Below is a contribution from the Revd Canon Alyson Barnett-Cowan, Director of Faith, Worship & Ministry, Anglican Church of Canada:

If the 20th century was the great century of ecumenism, the early 21st century provides an opportunity for churches to begin to live out the reality of their unity. After all the theological debate, the examinations of each other’s ecclesiologies, orders, and practices, there is now the possibility for real shared life and mission. In the whole oikumene, churches in communion provide the greatest lived experiment in mending – the body of Christ.

There has been a clear trajectory over the past 100 years for agreements variously termed ‘intercommunion’, ‘communion’, ‘full communion’ or simply ‘agreement’. Beginning with the invitation from the Archbishop of Uppsala to the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1908 for “the establishment of an alliance of some sort between the Swedish and Anglican Churches”, Anglicans have entered into relationships with various Lutheran, Mar Thoma, Philippine Independent and Old Catholic churches. Some of these are global, and some regional, yet they bear a clear family resemblance, not least because ecumenists read and travel a lot, overhear useful conversations, borrow and steal ideas, and help their churches build on the experiences of the past.

I detect three generations of communion agreements, and believe that we are watching the fourth generation being born.

The first is the recognition that there is sufficient similarity in faith and order that national churches can declare that people may receive communion in one another’s churches. For the early 20th century, this was an ecumenical breakthrough, though to us now it is largely the case that any baptized person can receive in another’s church, and many more churches than those with which we have formal agreements. But intercommunion was the first step, and it was taken with churches that occupied different territories, making provision, for the most part, for travellers and immigrants to find a pastoral home in another land.

The first formal, mutually signed ecumenical agreement to which Anglicans were a signatory was of course the Bonn Agreement 1931, which is a lucid and simple model of a covenant between churches:

1. Each Communion recognizes the catholicity and independence of the other and maintains its own.

2. Each Communion agrees to admit members of the other Communion to participate in the Sacraments.
3. Full Communion does not require from either Communion the acceptance of all doctrinal opinion, sacramental devotion or liturgical practice characteristic of the other, but implies that each believes the other to hold all the essentials of the Christian faith.

This marked the establishment of communion to communion relationships and is highly significant as we think about the ways in which the various Christian families can be brought into the one koinonia into which we are called. Yet the Bonn Agreement did not spell out what its implications are for common ministry and accountability.

The full communion – or full intercommunion, using the language of the time – agreements between Anglicans and the Philippine Independent Church and the Mar Thoma Church are similarly communion to communion agreements. Because each of these families has spread around the world, there are important ecclesiological and pastoral questions: what is the relationship between a Mar Thoma priest in Toronto with the Anglican bishop of Toronto? The first wave has opened up possibilities and challenges that have not really been fully explored.

The second generation of communion agreements was the wave of schemes of union which were devised in many regions of the world, some of which were actually entered into by Anglican churches. Because they made real institutional change, they are very detailed indeed, laying out the exact conditions for mutual recognition, providing for new constitutions, etc. They made one church in one place a true reality, though in the lived experience there have often been continuing churches in at least some of the traditions. There is one Church of Pakistan in Pakistan, for example, and these churches also represent an interesting theological challenge as we consider what it means that churches can be a full part of several different ecclesial families at the same time.

The third generation was in some ways a reaction to the second. The great difficulty of moving institutional mountains led to the development of proposals of communion, or, in North America, ‘full communion’ which built upon the foundational principles of the Bonn Agreement, leaving each church independent, but making commitments to work together and to live into a fuller reality of shared life. Porvoo, Called to Common Mission, and Waterloo all stress that the purpose of the agreement is not simply to enable the interchangeability of laity and clergy, but to incarnate the relationship in actual common projects, and to commit ourselves to some form of mutual accountability.

In this third wave, churches are living side by side – in some cases, in neighbouring nations, but in some cases, as in North American and India and the Philippines, in the same territory. There is not at this point an intention to do away with overlapping jurisdictions – in fact, one of the reasons that the relationships work is that they provide for differing, but not competing, expressions of the church. Communion agreements leave space for diversity of culture, theological emphasis, liturgy and governance, so that co-operation can be undertaken on areas of mission without the enormous burden of

changing internal family patterns. Yet there can be a good deal of messiness as well. There is the question of what happens when one church changes in ways that the other church finds problematic, the question of holding each other accountable to the agreements, and the question of implications for other ecumenical partners with whom each church also has relationships.

So it is to the birth of the new generation that we have now come: how will churches in fact discipline themselves, how will they shift their self-understanding, so that they will indeed consult with one another on matters of faith and order, life and witness? Consultation entails the establishment of some forum in which to meet, some structures to undergird the commitments. How can we do that without the enormous expense of infrastructures of committees – and masses of them, because some churches are entering into relationships of communion with several others?

There would seem to be many echoes in the conversations among churches in communion with the tortured process in which the Anglican Communion finds itself – dealing precisely with the implications of interdependence and mutual responsibility in the Body of Christ. Our experience of being churches in communion with churches from other Christian families must surely have something substantive to contribute to our internal deliberation, and our internal process must include ways of including those churches with which we have already made commitments of mutual accountability.

North Americans have been criticized for using the term ‘full communion’ to describe the Anglican-Lutheran agreements, although we based our usage on language of unity by stages developed in the 1960s and 70s – Canada’s definition is heavily based on the WCC New Delhi statement of 1961. But the ecumenical movement flows on, and now ‘full communion’ is generally used for the goal of the complete unity of the one Church of God. It’s worth recalling the Canberra statement as the goal to which we indeed are all called, and to whose realization, under God, we can contribute through our lived reality of communion at the local, regional and global level:

The unity of the church to which we are called is a *koinonia* given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one Eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God's grace to all people and serving the whole of creation. The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness. This full communion will be expressed on the local level and the universal levels through conciliar forms of life and action. In such communion churches are bound in all aspects of life together at all levels in confessing the one faith and engaging in worship and witness, deliberation and action. (*The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling, Canberra, World Council of Churches 2.1*)

I hope that this session will provide an opportunity for all of you who are living into relationships of communion to explore more deeply how koinonia can be received, embraced and embodied more deeply.