

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Out of Egypt

On 30 January 2010 Bishop Mouneer Anis of Egypt announced that he was resigning from the standing committee of the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC). The ACC is a little-known body that seeks to co-ordinate the activities of the Anglican Communion, and it wields considerable influence behind the scenes, setting much of the stage (and in effect, the agenda) for the Primates' Meetings, the Lambeth Conference, and so on. Since the consecration of Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire in 2003, it is one of the bodies where the continuing presence of American representatives has been questioned, especially by churches from the developing world who see it as a means of disciplining member churches of the Communion that have stepped out of line. No church has gone farther in that direction than the American Episcopal one, and its continuing participation in the ACC, which includes having Ms Schori, their presiding bishop, on the standing committee, is widely regarded as anomalous (to put it mildly). Many churches have given up on the ACC already and formed their own network of communication, the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans (FCA). The FCA is not an exact parallel to the ACC, because anyone can join it and make a contribution to the ongoing development of orthodox Anglicanism. It may have its faults, but at least nobody can accuse it of being a closed body of church bureaucrats, which is what the ACC all too often appears to be.

When the Anglican Communion started to unravel in 2007, following the Archbishop of Canterbury's unexplained decision to invite the American bishops to Lambeth 2008, even before the deadline for their compliance with certain restraints imposed by the primates, and the subsequent attempt to pretend that the 'deadline' was nothing of the kind, Bishop Mouneer stood out as someone who was not prepared to break with the central organs of the Communion. Unlike many other primates from the developing world, he continued to believe that the processes envisaged by the Windsor Report (2004) and the proposed Anglican Covenant, sponsored by the Archbishop of Canterbury as the answer to the Communion's incoherence as an ecclesial

body, were good and necessary solutions to the church's problems. Accused of being naive by some of those who went on to form the FCA, Bishop Mouneer stuck by Rowan Williams and became one of his strongest backers. His public statements are full of praise for him and often quote him at some length, a degree of devotion which must make him virtually unique in the Anglican world.

Alas, Bishop Mouneer's reward for this extraordinary loyalty has been meagre. At one point he specifically asked the ACC to hold back on a statement it was going to issue because he was on a pastoral visit elsewhere in the Middle East and would not have time to consider it until his return to Cairo. He was ignored, and the ACC went ahead without him, making only the shortest of apologies when it realised that it had caused offence. Dr. Williams, who seems to have all the time in the world for Ms Schori, never rushed off to Cairo or showed any public concern for Bishop Mouneer's position. He could not ignore the bishop's resignation of course, but his official statement was perfunctory in the extreme and betrayed no sign of any sympathy for the reasons which compelled him to leave.

Bishop Mouneer could easily have camouflaged his resignation in the way that people often do. He could have pleaded the burdens of office or the dangers of stress and ill health. He might even have said that it was time for someone else to take his place, and pretended that he was stepping down in order to give others a chance. He did none of those things. Instead, he told the truth. He made it as clear as anyone could that he was leaving because he had been marginalised and because the ACC was drifting inexorably in a liberal direction. Its pleas for a period of 'listening' to other people's points of view were nothing more than a desire to give the Episcopal church enough breathing space within the Anglican Communion to commit further outrages against it. Of course it had always been suspected that the 'listening' was going to be in one direction only. The Americans made it clear from the start that they had nothing to listen to, and at their General Convention in July 2009 they opened the way to further consecrations of actively homosexual bishops. No sooner was permission for that given that a lesbian was elected as suffragan in Los Angeles with the expectation that the necessary confirmation from the other bishops would be forthcoming. No-one could argue that the Americans had not heard the opinions of the rest of the Anglican Communion—the

Archbishop of Canterbury was at the Convention in person to make sure that the message was communicated. The reaction? He was ignored and even accused by some of trying to intervene in the affairs of another church in neo-colonialist style!

Meanwhile the ACC carried on as if nothing had happened and continued to work for further delays in implementing either the Windsor Report or the proposed covenant. As usual, it bent over backwards to ensure that churches opposed to the latter were over-represented on the committee which had to deal with it, whereas only one church that might have signed it (Ghana) was so privileged. The process of watering down an already weak document went on apace, with little sign that alternative voices, including that of the Archbishop of Canterbury, were being heard. Naturally there was no sign that Ms Schori would absent herself or step down, and it is now clear that she will never do so. We now know that even if the American Episcopal Church is censured by every other member of the Anglican Communion, it will not go away and its presiding bishop will carry on regardless. That was too much for Bishop Mouneer, who finally tendered his resignation from a body that he could no longer conscientiously identify with.

In the wider world of Anglican politics, Bishop Mouneer's resignation may look like a minor incident that will not affect the overall direction of the Communion. Something like that approach seems to be the one already being taken, and given the relatively low public profile of the ACC, it may very well succeed. But the deeper implications of his act should not be overlooked or discounted. Bishop Mouneer was one of the very few voices from the non-Western world who was still supporting the Archbishop of Canterbury, and his disillusionment will be seen by many as evidence that such support is pointless. Whatever Dr. Williams thinks, says or does, it now seems obvious that the Anglican Communion will accept the American Episcopal Church (TEC) without serious reservation, making its activities legitimate within Anglicanism, if only by default. There is talk in some quarters of the emergence of a 'two-tier' Anglicanism, but what that means is not spelled out. On current form, it seems that the Americans and their supporters in the Western world will form the first tier and the FCA/GAFCON churches will be relegated to the second division. That is what has happened so far, as Lambeth 2008 made only too clear, and we can hardly expect that there will be any great reversal of that.

Of course, other Anglican churches will not be forced to follow TEC's lead, but as they never have been, that is nothing new. What they will have to do though, is concede TEC's right to hold and implement policies which they regard as heretical and deeply un-Christian. TEC's behaviour will remain the elephant in the room that nobody wants to notice, and eventually the odour given off by that elephant will permeate the entire structure of the Communion.

The likelihood of this happening sooner rather than later has been brought home by the recent attempt by a lay member of the Church of England's General Synod to get that body to affirm its solidarity with the Anglican Church of North America (ACNA), a new organisation formed from a number of dissenting Episcopal churches in the USA. Unlike TEC, ACNA has professed a willingness to adhere to the Windsor Report and to sign the proposed covenant, but this display of co-operation with other Anglican bodies has not sufficed to win over the English establishment. To some extent that is understandable. ACNA is a new and untested body that may yet fracture under the weight of competing claims made by those within it. There is also the problem that there are still many faithful Christians in TEC who may one day recover the lead and succeed in wresting control of their church back from the renegades who now run it. Weakening them at this crucial juncture may not be the wisest move, and certainly nobody who advocates recognising ACNA wants to create further difficulties for them. It is also hard to say whether the General Synod has any right to express an opinion about who the Church of England is in communion with. The truth is that nobody seems to know to whom this right belongs, although traditionally the Archbishop of Canterbury has played the key role in deciding whom to accept and whom to reject. It is very possible, indeed almost certain, that TEC will object to any move the Church of England might make towards ACNA and that may well be the excuse needed for refusing to recognise it.

It is hard to escape the suspicion that behind the moves to dilute the resolution in favour of ACNA and to set up a committee to study the matter for the next year or so lies a profound unwillingness to disavow TEC. It is well known that there are many senior Anglican figures in England who would rather see the whole of Africa depart the Communion than lose the small but wealthy American church, and whose personal sympathies lie with the radical agenda now being canonised in the USA. The Archbishop of Canterbury is coming to

resemble no-one more than King Charles I, a man who tried to play one faction off against the other to his own advantage but who ended up losing the respect of them all, along with his throne and his head. Dr. Williams is unlikely to be executed (that would be against European Union law) but he has already reached the point where no-one of any integrity trusts him or believes a word he says, and how much longer can that go on? If nothing else, Bishop Mouneer's resignation has made it crystal clear that even Canterbury's most loyal supporters are losing patience with him. Dr. Williams evidently feels that such people are expendable—another characteristic of Charles I, who sacrificed both Archbishop Laud and the earl of Strafford in order to save his own skin. Seen in that light, Bishop Mouneer hardly stood a chance.

Will anyone stand up for him within the higher ranks of the Church of England? We can forget about most of the Evangelical bishops, who are no more likely to support him than they are to start preaching the Gospel. It was depressing, though not surprising, to see that the executioner chosen to torpedo the resolution in favour of ACNA was the bishop of Bristol (one of the few men on the bench with a serious claim to be an evangelist), who seems to have taken to his assignment with some relish. The brave bishops who objected to the appointment of Jeffrey John as bishop of Reading in 2003 are now mostly retired or reduced to silence, the most exquisite torture having been meted out to the bishop of Bedford, who has to work with Dr. John in the same diocese and so cannot say a word against him! The bishop of Liverpool has even gone so far as to recant and effectively withdraw his signature from the letter opposing the original appointment. It is true that there has been some fresh blood since then and perhaps we may hear from one or more of those bishops who were not in post in 2003. It is possible that the bishop of Durham will come out in support of Bishop Mouneer and urge the church to recognise ACNA, and we must hope and pray that he will do so. The new bishop of Peterborough is another possibility, though the omens there are not good. Few can have failed to notice that the congratulations on his appointment emphasised not his retention of the faith once delivered to the saints but his progressive abandonment of it, even before he had any inkling of eventual preferment. Now he has been reported as saying that he no longer holds to his earlier certainties and that he is on a 'faith journey', which for those who understand Orwellian Newspeak, means a journey away from faith, not towards it. The only question now is whether the next time the authorities need

a fall guy to do their dirty work for them, will it be to Peterborough or to Bristol that they will turn?

Egypt had a bad press in the Old Testament, having declined from being a land of refuge for the famished Israelites into a house of bondage from which they were forced to escape. Yet later on Alexandria became the main centre of Jewish culture and one of the most important bases of the early Christian church. Even today, after centuries of Muslim rule, Egypt still has a large and influential Christian minority, which is tolerated more than Christians usually are in the Middle East. Among them, Anglicans are few but influential. Many of the church's members are highly educated and cosmopolitan in outlook, with a sophisticated but determined faith—something they need in order to evangelise effectively in a fundamentally hostile environment. Bishop Mouneer is part of that culture and one of its most attractive representatives. In the face of constant provocation and attack, he has shown the Christian virtues of charity and humility to an unusual degree. Those with an eye for such things will not fail to notice these qualities and respect him for the spiritual leadership that he has shown in the most trying circumstances. What that example will mean for the Anglican Communion, only time will tell. Can it be that just as God raised up Moses to lead his people out of slavery, and centuries later allowed his Son to flee persecution by taking refuge on the banks of the Nile, that he is now calling his servant Mouneer Anis to point the way ahead for Anglicans everywhere who wish to remain faithful to the Gospel of Christ in spite of suffering and persecution? Perhaps it will even be that on the great and terrible day of judgment, when the hearts of all men are revealed and the compromising leaders of today's church are consigned to their everlasting fate, that the Lord of glory will turn to Bishop Mouneer and say to him: 'Out of Egypt have I called you, my son. Enter into the joy of your Lord.'

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