

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Spring 2007 No. 104

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

THE PRIMATES – WHY CAN THEY NEVER DECIDE?

By David Phillips

When so much was expected it was almost inevitable that the meeting of Anglican Primates in Dar es Salaam would turn out to be a disappointment. Church Society had called for and looked for clear action to separate the US Episcopal Church from the Anglican Communion and to embrace in fellowship those Anglicans in the US who remain faithful to Biblical teaching. This did not happen, though it is still a possibility. The uncertainty is whether the Primates as a whole have the will to do what is needed.

It is possible to look at the recent Primates meeting and be bitterly disappointed. This is especially so for some of the beleaguered Anglicans in the US. However, we must also recognise what has been achieved despite strong opposition.

The hurdles

There are 38 primates able to attend such meetings and in Dar es Salaam thirteen of those present (just over a third) were at their very first primates meeting. It would be hard for anyone in such a setting to come to terms with decisive action.

There were threats in advance that a number of primates would not sit at table with the new primate of the US Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori. Whilst this was understandable given that she is a false teacher, the danger with such tactics is that it hands over committees to the heretics. Fortunately the Primates did not carry this threat through but rather did not sit at the Lord's Table. There were seven Primates who did not attend the services and a further two who apparently attended but did not take communion. It appears that there were also three primates missing altogether.

Notably there were also no group photographs. At all previous meetings there had been a big family photo with everyone smiling happily (the Anglican Communion website now shows the picture from a previous gathering), but a number apparently refused to co-operate and so no such picture was taken. I understood that there had been a picture of the 13 new primates, but there is some doubt even about that and the website now appears to show only a handful of pictures.

In a subsequent statement Rowan Williams told how he had written to the Primates after the US General Convention in 2006 to ask if they believed that the resolutions passed matched what the Windsor report required. Williams said:

About eleven provinces were fairly satisfied; about eleven were totally dissatisfied. The rest displayed varying levels of optimism or pessimism, but were not eager to see this as a life and death issue for the Communion.

Early on in the Primates meeting one event shocked people, when Schori was elected to the Joint Standing Committee. Given that there had been a request that she should not be there at all, this was an extraordinary move and seemed to suggest the whole meeting might turn out to be a disaster. However, she was not elected by the Primates as a whole. The Standing Committee is appointed on a regional basis and she was elected by the Americas. Whilst this region includes Greg Venables of the Southern Cone it also includes Brazil, Canada, Central America and Mexico all of which are revisionist and with the exception of Canada heavily dependent upon the US Episcopal Church.

All these things demonstrate that we should not expect too much from the Primates. At present only a third of them seem to be thinking biblically, recognising error and prepared to respond to it in a biblical way. A further third appear to be fully in favour with what the US Episcopal Church is doing (I suspect this includes Wales, Scotland and Ireland). The remaining third want to preserve unity.

Given all this the result of the meeting was quite extraordinary and is a testimony to the determination and faithfulness of some of the conservative primates such as John Chew, Bernard Malango and Peter Akinola. It should be remembered that they were not helped by the process. Papers were largely not sent in advance so there was little time to digest them before the meeting. They were not allowed to consult advisors for fears of leaks to the press. And the secretariat, the Anglican Communion Office, has long been dominated by, and dependent on the funding of the US Episcopal Church.

The proposed way forward is analysed in a following article but the fear is that though this has much to commend it the Primates as a whole will not have the will to carry it through. It is tempting to think that the revisionists saw it as the cost of the USEC staying in the communion. But the majority, whose overall concern is unity, seem to have seen it as the cost of keeping the conservatives in the communion. When it comes to the crunch their concern for unity is going to make it very difficult to exclude the US Episcopal Church.

Two footnotes:

The Archbishop of York attended the meeting despite the initial controversy over this. The responsibilities on the Archbishop of Canterbury are immense but we seem to be gradually drifting in a direction where he ceases to be *primus inter pares* (first among equals). In the Church of England we have already approved the Bishop of Dover becoming a full member of the House of Bishops for Canterbury Diocese so that the Archbishop can exercise a wider ministry. Likewise it appears that at the international level the pressure is for York to act as the Primate of England (which is one of his formal titles) whilst Canterbury exercises the wider role. All this moves us in a papal direction and needs to be seen in conjunction with the recently released Anglican Roman Catholic report (see separate article).

The primates who did not attend the communion were Peter Akinola (Nigeria), John Chew (South East Asia), Benjamin Nzimbi (Kenya), Justice Akrofi (West Africa), Greg Venables (Southern Cone), Emmanuel Kolini (Rwanda) and Henry Orombi (Uganda). Donald Mtetemela (Tanzania) and Bernard Malango (Central Africa) also did not take communion. These provinces account for around 2/3rds of the active membership of the Anglican Communion.

David Phillips is General Secretary of Church Society.