

Lambeth Conference 2008

Mark Rudall talks to

Bishop Christopher Hill, Bishop of Guildford

Q: Bishop Christopher, now you're back from Lambeth, how do you feel about it all?

Bishop Christopher: Exhausted! I'm going on holiday very soon. But ... in a way exhilarated, and I really wasn't expecting to be. I remember the end of the last Lambeth, which was very fraught indeed – some people angry, some people crying - therefore I wasn't hugely ... if you'd asked me six weeks ago ... I'd have said I wasn't looking forward to it. But ... the atmosphere was extraordinarily different. Exactly why, I don't know.

And it wasn't just because there were certain people not there – we had plenty of bishops, some of whom had been to Gafcon, some of whom hadn't, but who take a clear traditional line, almost – almost - all the African bishops would be in that position and many from Asia and the developing world in the south. So it wasn't that. But people were listening to each other. The North American bishops came, feeling a bit defensive I think, to be honest, and they said that; looking a bit nervous and keeping rather quiet until we actually asked them to talk a bit – how did they feel?

So there was listening, and I believe there was also some hearing. There's a difference between listening and hearing. And what the ultimate fruits of that will be we do not yet know, because as you know the issue itself was not resolved in terms of a complete consensus. The position remains as we were at the last Lambeth Conference, that resolution from 10 years ago stands, as the position of the Anglican Communion and the Archbishop of Canterbury made that very clear in his closing presidential address, summing up the work of all the Indaba groups – those discussion groups where people didn't vote or pass resolutions, but tried to listen to each other and come to, as far as possible, a common mind. So I was exhilarated and moved.

The last service was back off the university campus down in the Cathedral Sunday night. Now again last time, ten years ago, the final service was quiet, a bit of an anti-climax, the Cathedral had pulled out all the stops – I have to say a huge admiration for Canterbury Cathedral; we had as great a liturgy as the one at the beginning. But the high point this time, was after Communion – the Archbishop had preached and the Archbishop Pogo – The Archbishop of Melanesia – was the President – presided at the Eucharist – for very good reason; because, after receiving Holy Communion, the Melanesian Brothers and Sisters who'd been leading of the prayer worship, and singing and praying all the time for us, brought to the Archbishop of Canterbury the names of seven martyrs, died in a peacekeeping exercise – blessed are the peacemakers was the text we used – between two lines, Government and rebel, and trying to keep peace and preserve life and seven of them – one was taken hostage, six others went to try to negotiate release and all were killed, martyred, as Christians trying to keep peace.

Those names were given to the Archbishop of Canterbury and then the Melanesian Brotherhood and Sisterhood sang a litany of the saints, carrying the names – we were down in the nave of the Cathedral – up the steps through the great screen, through the choir, right up to the Corolla Chapel which is in the far east end of the Cathedral, which is the Chapel of the Modern Martyrs, where the Pope and an Archbishop of Canterbury some years ago prayed commemorating the martyrs of the different churches in the 20th century. Now some additional martyrs - Anglican martyrs - of the 21st century. And as they sang, in their very Polynesian, Melanesian way – Oceanic way – interesting rich free tones – so one heard the singing gradually diminish as they went further and further away. And the whole atmosphere was electric; several people were just in tears at that point. It was an extraordinary – as you know the word for 'a martyr' is the same word as 'a witness' in the New Testament, so the whole Lambeth conference was brought back to our Christian witness, our mission in the world, and that's exactly the right place to have ended, gone out from the Lambeth Conference on as we all, the next morning, we all flew all over the globe and I came back on the M25 to Guildford.

Q: That's hugely inspirational and very moving, but what's the hard edge of it all? Where has it got us? Some five million pounds has been spent on the Lambeth Conference – two and a half weeks of exhaustion for bishops and their spouses; what's it achieving?

Bishop Christopher: As I said earlier in this process, Mark, the process was different. This time we didn't have a kind of parliamentary procedure so we weren't quite clear where we were going to end up in terms of that hard question that you've just asked. A document called 'Reflections' which of course carries some balanced comments - some people in favour of some things, some against - all that kind of nuanced stuff is there and gives, I think, a good narrative – that's not an authoritative document, it's a narrative document – but at the final plenary session the Archbishop of Canterbury acted as the primate of the Anglican Communion and did what almost only he can do, and that is sum it up, and he got two standing ovations. There's no doubt that he spoke where the Lambeth Conference had got to. And in his final address which is available on the website and will be I think if we can attach it to ours as well.

But in the Archbishop's final presidential he was very clear that we are committed to – that we are committing ourselves to – a covenantal – a covenant – process. There's clearly a definite steer for that from the Lambeth Conference. Some bishops are critical of some parts of the earlier drafting of it. Not least there will be continuing discussion about what teeth it will have, but clearly a covenant does have to have some teeth, and that was recognised. So that's very important.

But just as important as that, is one aspect of this committing ourselves to each other and that is the moratoria. Moratoria is committing yourself not to take things further and that is the challenge, largely to the churches - the Episcopal Church in the USA and to the Church in Canada - on the inappropriateness of a bishop in a partnered relationship, in terms of the unity of the Anglican Communion on grounds of how the majority of the Communion still understand Scripture and tradition. So the US church is being solemnly requested, in the covenantal process, not to take further actions like that.

Then of course there's the issue of same-sex blessings and, again, those churches are being asked to put a moratorium on that.

Meanwhile structures of the Anglican Communion are being developed. Not over-heavy ones, but nevertheless the covenantal process continues. That is a huge achievement; for the first time the Anglican Communion – which has not had overarching structures capable of bearing this strain; that's why we have almost a split in the communion. The other challenge of course is over the incursions of other jurisdictions in the US and Canada and there's some material on that as well. And the other final challenge will be to take some of the good news of the Lambeth Conference to those churches whose bishops felt in conscience they couldn't come, so there's a whole process set in place.

So I came away much more hopeful about the unity of the Anglican Communion. I'm not saying there isn't going to be a lot of tough negotiation, discussion – listening continuing – but I think the Communion listened to each other for the first time and that we owe to the grace of the Holy Spirit, but also working very much through our Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan. ENDS *(Warm thanks to Gill Poole for transcribing this interview)*