

Diocesan Synod Presidential Address:

The Anglican Communion

November 8th 2025

Synod,

As I began to prepare my Presidential Address for this morning's meeting, I was reminded of the last such talk I heard, given by the Primate of the Church of Nigeria at their Standing Committee meeting in September. Archbishop Henry's was a wide-ranging address, including reflections on the Nigerian economy, on the creation of new dioceses, on persecution in the north of the country, on a zero-tolerance approach to domestic violence, and on relationships within the global church, including some typically strong remarks about the state of the Church of England.

I was glad to be able to give a rather more balanced speech about the state of the Church of England the following morning. But whatever its more challenging aspects, ++ Henry's speech was a tour de force, even though some of the delegates were disappointed that it only lasted for two-and-a-quarter hours, compared with the much longer addresses of the archbishop's predecessors!

You'll be glad to hear that I won't be emulating the Primate of the Church of Nigeria when it comes to either the scope or the length of my Presidential Address this morning: but I would like to give you some personal reflections on the state of the Anglican Communion. And that's particularly important right now, of course, given that a group called GAFCON, of which Nigeria is a leading member, has recently sent out a communique boldly entitled 'The Future Has Arrived'.

Up until the past few years I was quite naïve when it came to politics within the Anglican Communion. I'd visited Anglican churches in various parts of the world – in Hong Kong, Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, as well as the so-called 'united churches' of Pakistan and South India, which draws together Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists and Brethren. I'd taught on clergy conferences and preached at cathedral eucharists and was privileged to speak to very large crowds on occasions, including the Sialkot Convention in Pakistan where 8,000 people attended a 6am Communion Service, and the 70th anniversary of the Church of South India in Chennai Cathedral. But all the time I was blissfully unaware of some of the political complexities under the surface.

I was an associate vicar in Notting Hill, for example, when a group of provinces formed what they called the Global South Fellowship of Anglicans or GSFA in 1994, off the back of concerns they had about what they perceived as the growing liberalism within parts of the Anglican Communion. I was a vicar in Twickenham, when the consecration of Gene Robinson, the Communion's first openly gay and partnered bishop, led to the creation of another overlapping group called GAFCON, and to their first conference in Jerusalem

from which emerged the so-called Jerusalem Declaration. During my early years here in Guildford, another more moderate conservative grouping emerged called the 'Communion Partners' – a network of Catholics and evangelicals in the Episcopal Church in the USA, designed to hold people within the existing denomination rather than to wave them off into the arms of GAFCON. Some stayed and some went, and those who went formed a kind of quasi-GAFCON province of their own.

Of course, the Lambeth Conference in 2022 woke me up to some of what was going on. For a start, the Nigerians weren't there at all, nor the Ugandans, nor bishops from one or two of the smaller provinces: indeed, some of you with longer memories will remember that was equally true of the *previous* Lambeth Conference in 2008. That was the year of GAFCON's creation, when a considerable number of people from this diocese offered to host more than a hundred Nigerian bishops and their wives, only to discover at the very last minute that the Nigerians weren't coming!

Other provinces, like that of South Sudan, did attend the 2022 conference, but visibly opted out when it came to sharing in communion with the rest. Meanwhile I was privileged to meet the Communion Partners for the first time, and I've kept in touch ever since. In fact, I was privileged to speak in their conference last Thursday – though attending by Zoom rather than flying off to St. Louis, Missouri – the same day, incidentally, on which I hosted the Archbishop of Sudan in Willow Grange, who is part of GSFA but not of GAFCON.

So what's the difference between GSFA and GAFCON? Both bring together Anglican provinces from the Global South, mainly in Africa, but also Asia and South America. Both are evangelical and conservative in their outlook – though not universally so on issues of gender. Both have a troubled relationship with the Church of England and are wanting to redefine that relationship. And the membership of both organisations is largely overlapping – though it could be that that configuration will change in the next few months.

Traditionally GSFA has been ecclesial and institutional, with GAFCON more of a renewal and missionary movement. Traditionally GSFA has engaged constructively with the Anglican Consultative Council in discussions about reshaping the Communion, while GAFCON has rather stressed the independence of provinces and largely kept away. Traditionally GSFA has been more robust as an organisation, with proper governance arrangements in place, while GAFCON has been a more informal, and perhaps unstable structure. Meanwhile everyone agrees that the Anglican Communion needs to be moved away from its former constitution, given that it was birthed at a time when the British Empire was in full swing, and the whole balance of the Communion – indeed of world Christianity as a whole – has since tipped decisively from north to south. But the question remains whether that can happen consultatively, or whether the Communion will simply fragment in a much more chaotic kind of way.

Now for those of us who have visited other provinces in the Communion, we will know that they're often very Anglican. In my recent visit to Nigeria, for example, our morning worship consisted of Matins from the Book of Common Prayer, with clergy in choir dress, a selection of Anglican hymns, a robed choir, and a procession which had all the dignity of a Sunday Eucharist in Guildford Cathedral. That's not the whole picture: there was a wonderful worship band in the Church where I preached on the Sunday, with some great African songs and drumming. But in many respects the Church of Nigeria is more traditionally Anglican than most of us are. They honour the Church of England missionaries who founded their Church. They love the Book of Common Prayer, the Authorised Version (in an updated form) and the 39 Articles. The vibrancy of their Mothers' Unions is the envy of the West. Even their system of dioceses and parishes, of bishops, priests and deacons, of Synods and councils, vicarages and stipends – and yes, of parish share as well, I'm afraid – is entirely familiar. All of which raises another question: Is the Anglican Communion held together by its shared theology or by its shared history and culture? More conservative voices would say, 'By its Theology'; more progressive ones, 'By its history and culture'.

So 'The Future Has Arrived!', wrote the Archbishop of Ruanda and Chairman of GAFCON last month, before setting out the future he envisages. The previous so-called 'instruments of Communion' which have sought to hold things together – the Archbishop of Canterbury as the first among equals, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates' meeting – are to be rejected. Just one source of authority will remain – quote, the 'Holy Bible, translated, taught and obeyed in its plain and canonical sense'. 'Sola scriptura' to quote the great reformation phrase.

How much is all this to do with the appointment of Bishop Sarah as the new Archbishop of Canterbury? Not very much is GAFCON's response, though clearly both her gender and some of her more progressive views (duly exaggerated in the telling) have not gone unnoticed. But much of this is business as usual and has rumbled on since 2008 and before. What **is** new is the idea of GAFCON setting up an alternative Communion. Indeed, the Communique reads, 'GAFCON is leading the Anglican Communion', even 'We **are** the Global Anglican Communion'.

Now it's very difficult to know quite how things will play out from here. It's already clear that some of the GAFCON archbishops are unhappy about the statement and are disassociating from it, at least in private. I've also had no indication that the Primate of Nigeria is wanting our own warm, if sometimes complicated, relationship to end. All of which leads to a final question: What do I make of all this? And I want to stress that this is a personal take.

My first response is one of real disappointment. I shy away from the harder edges of the GAFCON movement, especially those elements within it – not all of it, I hasten to add – which are misogynistic and alarmingly homophobic; and whilst I still don't fully

understand the politics behind all this, I am suspicious of some who are driving those politics, especially given the levels of misinformation that I have encountered over the past few years. Reconciliation is a key gospel theme, and there is no attempt here to get round the table and talk. And name-calling and the demonisation of other parts of the Body of Christ is always distressing to watch.

At the same time, I recognise the dangers of name-calling and demonisation the other way round. Some of the bishops and others whom I've been privileged to meet in Nigeria are among the most courageous and impressive Christians I've ever encountered. Two in particular have become dear friends. And in the midst of all the safeguarding and LLF challenges within the Church of England, especially since the pandemic, I believe we have been careless about the Communion, regularly ignoring its perspectives in our debates and sending out the message, 'We have no need of you'.

So I believe that this crisis is a moment of opportunity too, and I'd like to encourage each one of us with any kind of connection with Anglican churches overseas to do two things this Autumn: first to freshen up those connections through personal communication, even when you get home today – emails, letters, zoom calls, the planning of visits – so as to enable our brothers and sisters to know they are listened to, honoured and loved. And secondly to pray for the peace of our Communion – that the reform of its structures which is so clearly needed, will be able to take place collaboratively and constructively, rather than leading to an angry and messy divorce.