

# An Innocent Abroad: A Personal View of the Anglican Consultative Council

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Saturday June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005, was a difficult day.

The evening before had been exciting. We were guests of a patient of mine, whom I had delivered twenty-nine years earlier, as he sang a major role in Puccini's *La Boheme* on the opening night of a new production at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

A phone call from our daughter in Dunedin at 1.00am, about the illness of our dog, brought us down to earth and two hours queuing, later that morning, to collect our rental car didn't help. A late lunch with friends at Wrestlingworth, *en route* to Nottingham, relaxed us but Nottingham brought more troubles.

"Newark Hall, Wollaton Road" sounds a reasonable address – but Nottingham has many different Wollaton Roads, not to mention Avenues, Streets, a Park, Hall and other facilities. We searched much of the university and its environs before we finally found our accommodation, a welcome from Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) Chair, John Paterson (whose bus had also got lost), new acquaintances, good food and comfortable (though separate) beds. That Friday and Saturday could symbolize ACC 13, which seemed to have two quite different modes of being.

Major disagreement in the Anglican Communion had preceded the meeting, focused on the ordination of Gene Robinson as a Bishop in The Episcopal Church of the USA (TEC) and the authorization of services of blessing for same-sex couples in the Diocese of New Westminster, Canada. ACC 13 was to have met in the USA but the venue had been changed to Nottingham at short notice. The stresses within the Communion, which had moved the Archbishop of Canterbury (ABC) to set up the Lambeth Commission and led to its Windsor Report, had already affected ACC 13's very composition. The Primates' Meeting in February had asked TEC and Canada to withdraw from the ACC until Lambeth 2008, and those Churches had graciously (but in my opinion unwisely) agreed. Those who would have represented those Churches attended as observers but ACC 13 was already a "rump" meeting and many of those attending arrived already upset, either by the actions of TEC and Canada, or by that of the Primates.

Sunday, on the surface, was straightforward. A preparatory session in the morning was followed by a procession through Nottingham to the opening Eucharist in St Peter's



Church, with traditional and Gospel music and a sermon from Joel Edwards, Executive Director of the Evangelical Alliance. But John told us that a motion had been received regarding TEC and Canada, and the intensely hot weather typified what was to come. The initial meeting of the Resolutions Committee that night took nearly three hours, the first of many such meetings.

Our work each day began with worship, followed by Bible study. The worship was, frankly, pathetic: a collection of inane (and at times heretical) "songs", sung more than once if short, interspersed with a hotchpotch of prayers drawn from various provincial prayer books. Only the occasional Eucharist had any recognizable structure or integrity.

By contrast, Rowan Williams' daily reflections on the readings were brilliant introductions to the small group Bible study which followed.<sup>1</sup> Many of the Bible readings and Rowan's reflections, could be seen to hold truths which illuminated the business before ACC. This was often picked up by the discussion groups, but all organized discussion of the ACC's agenda items took place in full session. These sittings of the ACC varied immensely in style.

Ecumenical greetings from a wide variety of individual Churches, ranging from The Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar, the Roman Catholic Church and the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarchate to the Baptist Churches, were peppered through the meeting and there were Addresses from the President (the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev and Rt Hon Rowan Williams), the Chair (the Rt Rev John Paterson, Bishop of Auckland) and the General Secretary (Canon Kenneth Kearon). The Archbishop's address was a theological reflection on our business, the relationships between the Churches of the Communion and the place and purpose of our work in connection to the world, while John Paterson, in reviewing the events of the Communion since ACC 12 and the relationships between the "Instruments of Communion," noted that the ACC was the only such Instrument established constitutionally and the only one involving clergy and laity as well as Bishops. He spoke plainly of the difficulty caused to the ACC by the "... at least slightly premature, if not coercive and somewhat punitive" action of the Primates' Meeting in asking ECUSA and Canada not to be part of ACC 14.

Presentations were made by Anglican Networks and other bodies, dealing with Peace and Justice, the Family, Youth, Women, Inter-Faith, the Environment, the UN Anglican Observer, Ecumenical Affairs, Mission and Evangelism, Theological Education, the Lambeth Conference and the Compass Rose Society. These showed the breadth of activity at Communion level and emphasized our common purpose. To the casual observer this might have seemed a "normal" Church meeting, with enthusiasm for particular issues and some matters such as the Middle East, or the ARCIC II reports on Authority and on Mary,<sup>2</sup> generating disagreement – sometimes vigorous, but almost always polite and acknowledging other views. But throughout the eleven day meeting there was a constant, divisive sub-text arising from the disagreements within the Communion over sexuality.

Anglicans, of course, are used to disagreement. We have disagreed over organisational, jurisdictional, liturgical and theological issues. At times we have burnt our opponents and more recently we have rioted in Church.<sup>3</sup> At least ACC 13 did not riot or burn members for heresy. But the language resonated with that terrible history. Disagreement over

1 The only formal small group structures involving all participants of ACC 13

2 *The Gift of Authority and Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*

3 St Paul's Cathedral, Dunedin, holds vestments used in St George's-in-the-East, London, the use of which triggered some of those 19th century riots.

homosexuality was shown to be intense and bitter, bringing refusal of communion and rejection of some Christians by others as being beyond the pale, offensive, untouchable even by association because of actions of their Churches.

In response to concerns raised by some members, the first substantive session included a closed sitting for discussion of any issues members wished to raise. The main issue was the presence of those who would have been representatives for TEC and Canada but who, as their Churches had agreed to the Primates' request that they withdraw from the ACC, were attending as observers at their own Churches' expense. Some ACC members wanted them excluded even from that; they were "offended" by their presence even in the public gallery as if they carried a contagion of evil. When it was suggested that this could only be done by closing the whole meeting to others, some were adamant. Others disagreed, but (as John Paterson had ruled at the start of the session) no vote was taken and most of the meeting remained open. It was clear, though, that Purity Theology had its supporters at ACC.

The next day deputations from TEC and Canada made presentations, as requested by the Primates, to explain their positions covering theology, parallels with other disputes,<sup>4</sup> and stories of actual circumstances. The deputations included "conservative" and "liberal" theologians, a diocesan Chancellor, ordained homosexuals, a mother of two sons, one homosexual, and Bishops who had voted for and against Gene Robinson's consecration but still worked together in TEC. ACC 13 listened intently as the presentations and questions continued well past the allocated time.

A day later, after a resolution about the listening process, ACC 13 in another closed sitting addressed a draft resolution endorsing the 1998 Lambeth Resolution 1.10, and the Primates' action in asking ECUSA and Canada to withdraw from the ACC until Lambeth 2008 and also asking them to withdraw from all other official entities of the Communion for the same period. The Resolutions Committee had tidied up the earlier parts of the draft, in the interests of factual accuracy, but felt unable to make any suggestions about the final clause. The motion was moved by the SE Asian representative, and the seconders, one from Pakistan, one from England and ten from Africa, typified the split between Global North and South shown in the debate.

Clarification was sought from the floor about the meaning of "all other entities"<sup>5</sup> and, surprisingly, most supporters of the motion agreed to a replacement clause defining the withdrawal as being from the ACC itself and its Finance and Standing Committees.

Debate on the rest of the motion was prolonged and vigorous. In general, argument for the motion was inflexible, based on biblical quotation with no acceptance that other views could be justified by a more hermeneutical approach to Scripture, or that Anglicans could live together while disagreeing on the subject.

Unpleasantly, when the Chair, having ruled that the vote would be taken in secret ballot, appointed the Nominations Committee as scrutineers, a promoter of the Motion objected because one of the Committee had moved, unsuccessfully, that the Motion not be put. This briefly stunned the meeting into silence, but Rowan Williams denounced the slur on the member's integrity and the objection went no further.

The Resolution passed 30-28 with four abstentions and not only the North Americans but also the representatives from South India absent. For me, the South India representatives

<sup>4</sup> E.g. The place of Gentiles, women, and blacks in the Church

<sup>5</sup> It would have included all the Networks and the Ecumenical Dialogues



summarized the real importance of this debate when they refused to take part in what they considered a trivial squabble. The real issues for them were poverty, starvation, violence and the oppression of women.

As already noted, there was a general but not complete North-South divide in the debate.<sup>6</sup> I was disappointed by the result, but sensed there had been a significant shift in opinion during the three days of discussion. The Archbishop of Canterbury's Bible study reflections, with questions about how we can show the face of Christ and about reconciliation taking hard work and practice, had helped and the presentations by the North Americans encouraged some to think deeply.

One might think that the ACC could now concentrate on other matters, and for much of the rest of the meeting it attempted to do so. But it still had to hear from the provinces their views on the dispute over TEC and Canada. A business session the next day and short sessions later allowed this, demonstrating a wide range of views. One provincial House of Bishops affirmed the centrality of Scripture, recognized that its study is an area of divergence and must engage with tradition and reason, suggested that since all are made in the image of God none should be understood primarily in terms of their sexuality and encouraged mutual respect. It listed four differing views held in that House, all consonant with Scripture, ranging from fully traditionalist to affirming same-sex unions. By contrast, the Primate of another province had sent a letter that could be described as a scream of hate against homosexuals.

We were able to talk to each other, at least superficially, for the rest of ACC 13, to join in an inspiring service, which began with a spine-tingling arrangement of "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" for saxophones, organ, soprano, choir and congregation, in the Church of St Mary in the Lacemarket, the next Sunday and to visit local parishes and mission initiatives.

But on the final day prejudice showed again. The long motion of thanks included thanks to TEC and Canada for their "helpful responses" to the Primates' requests. Someone objected, moving that "helpful" be deleted and "expresses gratitude" be changed to "notes". Such petty nastiness, suggested, I understand, by some of the dark-suited, hard-line lobbyists observing the meeting and coaching some participants, met with disapproval even from conservatives. My objection that a "thank-you" motion which didn't say thanks was a nonsense was supported by a priest from a "conservative" province, who commented that he had certainly found the presentations helpful and that we should at least try to meet secular standards of courtesy. In the end Rowan Williams rescued the motion with a new form of words.

My feelings as the meeting finished were mixed. Appreciation of the huge amount and variety of mission work occurring in the Communion, the energy promoting the Kingdom of God, contrasted with the vicious language and divisive, exclusivist approach of some in relation to homosexuality, TEC and Canada. Even more disturbing was, not the presence, but the neo-colonialist activity of some conservative lobbyists from the USA and England, who sat in the gallery with their laptops, met with, coached and even texted instructions during debates to some members and were evil geniuses of the arguments over ECUSA and Canada. Conversation with them during tea breaks made it plain that they were there with a clear agenda and closed minds, aiming not for mutual understanding but for semi-

<sup>6</sup> South Africa opposed the motion, as did a West Indian Bishop, and some African women felt able to vote against it because the vote was secret.

fundamentalist domination of the Communion. It became clear that the real issue was not homosexuality itself, but power: a drive towards a "confessional" Church, leveraging on the push towards centralization of power within the Communion which has reared its head from time to time since at least the 1878 Lambeth Conference.<sup>7</sup> If the ordination of women had been delayed for a generation it might well have been the issue on which that drive hinged.

But it was also clear that many individual members of ACC 13 did not accept the rigid, exclusivist approach adopted by a few. Many representatives, from "conservative" and "liberal" provinces alike, were prepared to listen to each others' views, and the aggressive rejection described above emanated from only a few members. It was a joy to meet so many impressive Christians and, even though our meetings only started when other members could relax at the end of the day, to work with the brilliant other members of the Resolutions Committee.<sup>8</sup> We literally sweated, in temperatures not usually associated with England, over the long list of draft resolutions. Real friendships were made, and fascinating insights gained into the work of the Anglican Communion.

Four years later we expected the Jamaican heat of ACC 14 but were pleasantly surprised by the change in tone from ACC 13. By the time ACC 14 met, cross-border interventions by Bishops from Africa and the Southern Cone to provide episcopal oversight for conservative elements breaking away from the Episcopal Church of the USA and Canada had multiplied and had triggered litigation over property. The drive by those elements to be seen as still part of the Anglican Communion was personalised for ACC 14 by the attempt of Uganda to replace one of its representatives with a priest from one of those breakaway Churches.<sup>9</sup>

This time no province had been asked to stay away, and visa difficulty was the only cause of provinces not being represented.

Members arrived at Kingston knowing that the Report of the Windsor Continuation Group (WCG), with a number of recommendations, and the Ridley Cambridge Draft (RCD) of a proposed Anglican Covenant (which had been distributed in its final form less than a month before the meeting) would be debated and that decisions regarding them would be required. Since receiving the RCD I had drafted, in email consultation with our Primacy, a possible amendment which would have removed the penal clause from Section 4 of the RCD, changing the document to a purely aspirational one without provisions for exclusion of provinces from the Communion.

We began with a Quiet Morning, led by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who then described how the meeting would function. This involved a process for decision-making on critical issues expanded beyond the formal debates of ACC 13. Drawing on the "indaba" system used at Lambeth 2008, information plenaries were to be followed by discussion in four discernment groups (DGs); to enable each member to speak in a non-threatening, supportive environment and to allow feedback before a final draft resolution, as inclusive as possible of the feedback, was formulated by the Resolutions Committee, for presentation to a decision-making plenary.

As in 2005, major, controversial matters (in particular the Report of the WCG and the RCD) were interspersed with other business, including the reports and draft resolutions

<sup>7</sup> S.T. Nevill: *A Bishop's Diary*, Dunedin 1922: pp. 79-81. For more recent examples, see *The Virginia Report*, and *The Gift of Authority*.

<sup>8</sup> The other members included lawyers (male and female) from the Seychelles, Ghana and Hong Kong, an Irish Dean, and a Melanesian Bishop.

<sup>9</sup> Ruled out of order prior to the meeting of ACC 14.



from the Networks and other pan-Anglican bodies and discussion of ecumenical issues, theological education, mission and evangelism, canon law, faith-based health initiatives and many other matters. A difference, though, was the clear, timetabled process which set out the information plenaries, discernment groups and decision-making plenaries for the WCG Report and the RCD.

By the end of the first day it seemed clear that, though “conservative” huddles were noticeable in the tea-rooms, the atmosphere of ACC 14 was quite different from the aggressive tone evident at Nottingham.<sup>10</sup>

Sunday morning took us to an indoor stadium where a congregation of about 8,000, drawn from all over Jamaica, joined in a Eucharist concelebrated by the Bishops of the Province of the West Indies. The “high Church” atmosphere of the service, with billowing incense, was coupled with superb organization – the distribution of the elements to that huge congregation took only slightly over half an hour. The three-hour service with Caribbean music never dragged and was an auspicious introduction to ACC 14 and the Diocese of Jamaica. It also set the tone for well organized, high quality worship organized by our host Diocese,<sup>11</sup> which began with pre-breakfast Morning Prayer and Eucharist and ended with Evening Prayer. After breakfast business began each morning with Bible study using Mark’s Gospel.

As in 2005, the work of the Resolutions Committee, which had a member from each of the DGs, began on the first evening.

The DGs, each consisting of several Bible Study Groups, began by getting to know the other members of the group, in smaller groups and as a whole group. This establishment of relationships built up by regular meetings as Bible Study Groups, Discernment Groups, Orders and Network and Ecumenical Interest Groups was, I believe, a major factor in developing the ability of ACC 14’s members to disagree strongly, even passionately at times, but still to be able to agree on many important things and to accept each other as real Christians, each keen to promote the mission of Anglican Churches.

Discussion of the WCG Report, and the RCD was spread through the first week. On Monday Archbishop Drexel Gomez,<sup>12</sup> Chair of the Covenant Design Group, presented the RCD, set out its history and urged its adoption to avoid splitting the Communion. The DGs then looked at the RCD and the accompanying motion from the Joint Standing Committee (JSC) which asked for the RCD to be sent to provinces for adoption and report by 2014. Each DG considered these texts in smaller groups and as a whole and it became clear that there was a variety of viewpoints. Some wanted more haste. Some wanted all or part of Section 4 removed before the RCD was sent to provinces.

The afternoon was devoted to meeting with particular Network representatives for discussion of their work,<sup>13</sup> a reminder of the real, mostly uncontroversial work going on in the Communion.

On Tuesday the ABC presented the WCG Report, set out its history, summarized its recommendations and presented a draft resolution from the JSC endorsing the recommendations, continuing the moratoria on consecration of Bishops in a same-sex relationship, authorization of blessings of same-sex unions and cross-border

<sup>10</sup> Though a (genuine) news service which photographed a “conservative” breakfast table was threatened with legal action if the pictures were published.

<sup>11</sup> The worship team decided that the ACC was not singing properly during the daily services, so organized singing practice for us.

<sup>12</sup> Recently retired as Primate of the Province of the West Indies.

<sup>13</sup> I attended the Anglican Colleges and Universities meetings, and that of the proposed Health Network.

intervention<sup>14</sup> and asking the new Unity, Faith and Order Commission to study the roles and responsibilities of the ABC, Lambeth Conference, Primates Meetings and ACC. He spoke of an "ecclesial deficit" – not knowing what sort of Church we are and what our fellowship means – in the Communion, of its future and of options involving more communion with more cohesive theology and structure, or less communion with either a federal structure or even complete rupture. The rest of the morning was spent in DGs to discuss the WCG Report, and the afternoon was spent on other matters.

Wednesday morning was taken up with further consideration of the RCD and the WCG Report and their associated motions, first in Orders and then back in DGs, the last organized discussion of them before the decision-making plenary set down for Friday. Between these sessions we discussed many other matters, met in Interest Groups to look at ecumenical issues and divided into other self-selected groups for afternoon tours in or around Kingston.<sup>15</sup>

By Friday the Resolutions Committee, after meeting with the DG animateurs, had redrafted the motions regarding the WCG and the RCD and as its Chair I had to explain how the Committee had tried to accommodate as wide a range of views as possible and to make it clear where decisions had to be made. There was disagreement as to whether the ACC would "note" or "affirm" the WCG Report,<sup>16</sup> but the main dispute over this motion focused on an amendment, which eventually failed, to add a fourth moratorium (on litigation).

Consideration of the RCD was more complicated. The Committee proposed a Motion A, which would detach Section 4 from the RCD, to enable ACC to decide whether or not it should be part of the RCD, and a Motion B, sending either the whole RCD, or what was left if Section 4 was removed, to the provinces. In the course of good, strong debate it was suggested instead that Motion A be voted out and Motion B be amended to hold the whole RCD back for a short time to allow provincial feedback on the new Section 4. Some confusion was caused when the proposed new clauses were printed as part of the second motion and the whole, labeled Motion C, distributed, but eventually this change was voted through. After we had moved on to other matters a member queried whether the new clauses had been properly voted on, but the Chair and the Legal Advisor ruled that the final Resolution had been properly passed.

Throughout the debates on these matters, while members disagreed strongly at times, there was none of the vituperative language heard at ACC 13 and most participants at least appeared to be listening to their opponents.

During ACC 14 we twice went to evening social functions and on the second Sunday we visited Jamaican parishes where we discussed problems common to our provinces.

During its last few days ACC 14 elected a new Chair and Vice-Chair and four new Standing Committee members. Two of the new Standing Committee were described by a conservative blogger as "conservative" and two as "liberal" – a healthy outcome, I think.<sup>17</sup> I was heartened by a remark by a priest from one of the most conservative (with respect to sexuality issues) provinces on the last morning of the meeting, who said "We agree on the major things – we only disagree on minor things."

<sup>14</sup> The first has been observed, the second observed at provincial but not completely at local level, and the third blatantly disregarded by some Bishops.

<sup>15</sup> Our group visited Port Royal, once "the wickedest city in the world."

<sup>16</sup> Some disagreed with some of its recommendations, but in the end the Report was "affirmed."

<sup>17</sup> Whereas the blogger saw it as indicative of "deep division" in the Communion.



When, on the last day of the meeting, DGs discussed what members would take back to their provinces from ACC 14, there was a consensus from all the Groups that we *can* be a Communion, despite disagreements, that we agree that the mission of the Church is vital and that relationships are key. John Paterson, preaching at the lively concluding service that afternoon, summed up that feeling in the inspiring conclusion to his sermon.<sup>18</sup>

Why the difference from ACC 13? I believe several factors contributed:

- The interval since ACC 13 allowed some heat to dissipate, and members to reflect on the presentations by TEC and Canada.
- No province was excluded.
- Small changes in membership.<sup>19</sup>
- A deliberate and clear process for discussing controversial matters was set out.
- Spreading the sessions dealing with the WCG and RCD out through five days allowed time for consideration of the issues.
- The small group structure, with its development throughout the meeting of relationship within each group, encouraged every member to express their views in a secure and supportive environment, provided a non-threatening place to hear views different from one's own and allowed open discussion which probably would have occurred neither in open session nor in casual conversation.<sup>20</sup>
- The high quality worship which began and ended each day.

Of these I believe that the high quality worship and the building of personal relationships were the most important. These need to be priorities for those organizing ACC15 which will meet in New Zealand and which will have to address the responses of the provinces to the RCD Covenant.

### Postscript

Alongside the usual media observers at ACC 14 could be seen, wearing "media" hats, lobbyists from both sides of the sexuality dispute. Those reading some of the conservative online reports and blogs emanating from them, of which I had previously been naively unaware, but to which I was introduced during ACC 14, would get the mistaken impression that the Anglican Communion shattered into furious fragments during ACC 14. Some of what has been put online is confused, some is one-eyed and obviously biased and some is frankly mischievous, manipulative and seems to be deliberately misleading. More professional, balanced reporting came from the *Episcopal News Service* which interviewed many participants and published informative, accurate articles. ■

<sup>18</sup> See ACNS website: [www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2009/5/12ACNS4631](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2009/5/12ACNS4631).

<sup>19</sup> One of the particularly vehement anti-homosexual members of ACC 13 was not at ACC 14.

<sup>20</sup> During spare time in a small group of three, two of whom were from "conservative" provinces, I was asked about the views of our Church and state on homosexuality, and an open and respectful discussion followed.