

The Centre Holds: Primates 2016 in Canterbury

Interweavings No. 5

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Introduction

W. B. Yeats' 1919 poem, '[The Second Coming](#)', has the memorable line:

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.

The media, and many people around the world, thought there would be a split in the Anglican Communion during '[Primates 2016](#)'. This was the meeting of the senior bishops of the 38 provinces, joined by the Archbishop of the [Anglican Church in North America](#), from 11th to 15th January at [Canterbury Cathedral](#).

Remarkably, through the grace of God, the humility of the Primates and prayers throughout the world across the traditions of God's Church, the centre held.

Here we consider seven interweaving themes of the week.

1. Walking Together

The Primates were approaching a fork in the road. People thought some would walk left and some walk right.

Astoundingly and amazingly a central path emerged during the week and the Primates' voted unanimously to 'walk together' along that path.

They are 'walking together' and some are 'at a distance' from each other, but they are walking together.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has [described](#) the key moment:

The meeting reached a point on Wednesday where we chose quite simply to decide on this point – do we walk together at a distance, or walk apart? And what happened next went beyond everyone's expectations. It was Spirit-led. It was a 'God moment'. As leaders of our Anglican Communion, and more importantly as Christians, we looked at each other across our deep and complex differences – and we recognised those we saw as those with whom we are called to journey in hope towards the truth and love of Jesus Christ. It was our unanimous decision to walk together and to take responsibility for making that work.

This means that [stories of energetic mission links](#) will continue to reverberate around the world.

2. Priority of Prayer

The week was bathed in [prayer](#). The Primates joined in with the regular services of the Cathedral, Morning Prayer, Holy Communion and Evening Prayer and fasted on the first morning.

Prayer and the Renewal of Religious Life is the first priority of the Archbishop of Canterbury. This was manifest in the [presence in Canterbury Cathedral](#), throughout the week, of 17 young people from around the world and from different denominations, in their 20s and early 30s, from the [Community of St Anselm](#) at Lambeth Palace.

The Community of St Anselm was founded by the Archbishop (as Abbot) in 2015 and is led by him and [Prior Anders Litzell](#). There are 36 members, of whom 16 reside at Lambeth Palace and 20 live around London and continue in their day jobs. They have all offered 'a year in God's time' for prayer, study and service in local parishes.

The [Chemin Neuf](#) community of six people at Lambeth Palace, part of the international Catholic charismatic community, form the permanent praying community and the Community of St Anselm will change each year as members enter new roles, or return to their previous work, after their year at Lambeth.

A [video](#) filmed in Canterbury Cathedral has profound interviews about their experience of praying for the Primates.

3. Links through Loans

There were two very moving loans for the week, showing links from the past for the present. The Roman Catholic Church [lent the head of the pastoral staff](#) (crosier) associated with [Pope Gregory the Great](#) to Canterbury Cathedral specifically for the Primates as a symbol of prayer and catholicity in time. Pope Gregory sent [Augustine](#) to (re)evangelise Britain and he arrived in Kent in 597 AD. The ivory head of the crosier was transported from Rome to Canterbury and set up in a special exhibition case in the crypt.

Pope Gregory gave Augustine the [Canterbury Gospels](#) for his mission to Britain. They are kept in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge and were brought to the crypt for the Primates. The last time they were in Canterbury was for the [inauguration](#) of ministry of the Archbishop in 2013, when the Primates were also present.

In 1982, the Canterbury Gospels were in the cathedral during the visit of Pope John Paul II to Canterbury with Archbishop Robert Runcie. In

planning the [momentous service](#), a key question was who would sit on St Augustine's chair – Pope John Paul II or the Archbishop of Canterbury? The Dean, Victor de Waal, solved the issue with great insight. The Canterbury Gospels, were placed on the chair. The Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury sat under God's Word.

4. Wisdom from Jean Vanier

On the Friday morning, during the final service of Holy Communion in the Crypt, [Jean Vanier](#), 86, [expounded](#) John Chapter 13 and led the Primates in washing each other's feet. A Roman Catholic theologian and social innovator, originally from Canada, he founded [L'Arche Community](#), at Trosly-Breuil, France, in 1964. It has grown into an international fellowship of communities in 35 countries for people with developmental disabilities and those who assist them.

Archbishop Fred Hiltz, the Primate of Canada, [relates](#) the impact of this:

Vanier has often said that there is a sacramental character to this humble act. He spoke of some of his experiences in L'Arche. Even when, sadly, we cannot break bread together, we can still wash one another's feet. And then he knelt down and washed Archbishop Justin's feet. Justin prayed for him and then knelt to wash the feet of the Primate sitting next to him. So around the circle this quiet act of humble service was replicated. All one could hear was the gentle splash of water being poured over feet and the voice of prayer.

Jean Vanier also [spoke](#) to the Community of St Anselm on Friday morning.

5. Previous Meetings and Canterbury 2016

Statements from the previous 18 Primates Meetings, 1979 (Ely) to 2011 (Dublin), were gathered on the [Fulcrum](#) website as part of its wide-ranging [resources](#) on the Meeting.

In his [reflections](#) concerning the differences from previous meetings, Archbishop Mouneer Anis, Primate of Jerusalem and the Middle East and Bishop of Egypt with North Africa and the Horn of Africa makes three points:

1. The Archbishop of Canterbury consulted widely with the Primates in regard to the agenda. In the Meeting, the Primates voted for the most important agenda items. This gave the Primates a sense of ownership over the Meeting.
2. When the Primates chose the first item for discussion, "the response of the Primates' Meeting to the latest action of the Episcopal Church (TEC) General Convention", it became clear

that this time the burning issues were not going to be swept under the carpet.

3. The invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury to Archbishop Foley Beach of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) is another recognition of the facts on the ground. ACNA is an Anglican Church that holds the Anglican teachings which are recognised by a large number of Provinces from the Global South. On this basis, the Archbishop did not want to exclude anybody.

It was remarkable that all the Primates accepted the invitation to come to Canterbury. This owed much to the Archbishop's visits to all the other 37 Primates in their homes, during his first 18 months in post, to subsequent phone calls to them last summer, following General Convention of The Episcopal Church, to the wisdom of the new [Secretary-General of the Anglican Communion](#), Archbishop Josiah Idowu-Fearon, and to the invitation to Archbishop of ACNA.

The previous week *The Economist* elliptically had entitled the article in its print edition of 9 January, '[Rowing, not Rowing](#)'. This alluded to the Archbishop's student experience of steering as a cox in the Trinity College, Cambridge first boat. *The Economist* followed it up with further online comment, '[Why the Anglicans' Meeting Matters](#)' and, after the Press Conference, '[The Centre holds: Justin Welby just about manages to hold together the Anglican Communion](#)'.

6. Primates' Communiqué

The Communiqué was entitled, '[Walking Together in the Service of God in the World](#)' and was released at the [Press Conference](#) on Friday afternoon, 15 January.

Key points include:

- (a) They agreed unanimously to '**walk together**'.
- (b) This involved some walking together 'at a distance', in the light of the 'recent change to the **doctrine of marriage** by The Episcopal Church in the USA'
- (c) The **consequences for The Episcopal Church** were that 'for a period of three years TEC no longer represents us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee and that while participating in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, they will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity.' (Addendum A.7)
- (d) The Archbishop of Canterbury was asked to appoint a **Task Group** 'to maintain conversation among ourselves with the

intention of restoration of relationship, the rebuilding of mutual trust, healing the legacy of hurt etc. (Addendum A.8) The communiqué adds that points A.7 and A.8 were adopted by the majority of the Primates present.

- (e) They would 'develop this process so that it can also be applied when **any unilateral decisions** on matters of doctrine or polity are taken that threaten our unity.'
- (f) They 'condemned **homophobic prejudice and violence** and resolved to work together to offer pastoral care and loving service irrespective of sexual orientation. This conviction arises out of our discipleship of Jesus Christ.' They 'reaffirmed their rejection of criminal sanctions against same-sex attracted people.' They also 'recognised that the Christian Church, and within it the Anglican Communion, has often acted in a way towards people on the basis of their sexual orientation and that has caused deep hurt. Where this has happened, they express their profound sorrow and affirm again that God's love for every human being is the same, regardless of sexuality, and that the church should never by its actions give any other impression.'
- (g) They reported that they had discussed **many other issues**: evangelism, climate change, religiously motivated violence, child protection, tribalism, ethnicity, nationalism, patronage networks, and corruption.
- (h) They committed themselves 'through **evangelism** to proclaim the person and work of Jesus Christ, unceasingly and authentically, inviting all to embrace the beauty and joy of the Gospel.' (Addendum B)
- (i) They supported the Archbishop of Canterbury 'in his proposal to call a **Lambeth Conference in 2020**.'

As the Communion heads towards the [Anglican Consultative Council](#) in Lusaka, Zambia, in April 2016, and looks forward to the (newly announced) Lambeth Conference in 2020, the Primates drew on the language of [The Windsor Report](#) 2004, ('walking together' - adding a differentiation within that unity '...at a distance') and of the [Covenant](#) process ('consequences').

Reaction to the communiqué has been varied across the Communion. Most people are surprised, relieved and delighted that there was unanimous agreement to 'walk together'. It was received with pain by members of LGBTI communities and their supporters in various provinces. The Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, Bishop Michael Curry, was magnanimous and dignified in his [video statement](#), while remaining clear

in his support for LGBTI communities. A passionate evangelist at heart, he also is reported to have given a lead in the discussions about [evangelism](#).

Some commentators misinterpreted the communiqué, partly because the Addendum A had been leaked the day before the Press conference, without the context of the full document. The *Church Times* article, '[A Canterbury Tale](#)', by staff reporters, is accurate in its clearing up of misunderstandings and is worth reading in full. The *Church Times* [editorial](#) is nuanced and balanced and judged that 'the Canterbury meeting was characterised by a new honesty.'

7 Ecumenical Movement Proposing to Fix the Date of Easter

The Primates were discussing issues in the Anglican Communion, but not in a vacuum. The Communion is part of God's worldwide Church across many traditions and rooted in God's world.

The announcement by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the Press Conference that the Primates had also given backing to the ecumenical movement for fixing the date of Easter, [caught journalists by surprise](#).

This proposal came from the maelstrom of contemporary Egypt. The Coptic Pope, Tawadros II of Alexandria initiated the idea, for which he then received the backing of Pope Francis in Rome and of the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew, in Constantinople. When consulted, the Archbishop of Canterbury said he would raise it with the Primates at Canterbury. They agreed with this movement and the Archbishop [said](#) it would take "in between five and 10 years" to implement and that he "would love to see it before I retired". He added that Buckingham Palace and Number Ten Downing Street had been informed before the Meeting that this would be discussed.

In 325 AD, the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical Council of the Church, fixed the date of Easter: its 1700th anniversary will be in 2025. May that be a promising date for a profound ecumenical symbol?

In Britain, the Synod of Whitby fixed the date in 664 AD. Both St [Aldhelm](#), the first Bishop of Sherborne (who died in 709 AD), and the historian and biblical commentator, the [Venerable Bede](#) (who died in 735 AD) were fascinated by, and wrote about, the date of Easter concerning the Catholicity of the Church.

Madeleine Davis, in the *Church Times*, [describes](#) the calculation of the date:

Eastern and Western Churches use the same formula to calculate the date of Easter: the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox. They arrive at different dates because Eastern Churches use the Julian calendar and base calculations on the actual, astronomical full moon, and the actual equinox as observed along the meridian of Jerusalem, while the Western Church uses the Gregorian calendar and applies a fixed date of 21 March for the vernal equinox, and uses tables of new moons.

The former Dean of Durham, Michael Sadgrove, represents those who are more cautious, worried about losing the link with Judaism. He [concludes](#):

So, by all means, let an ecumenical conversation happen. But please don't let's give up on such a long and rich paschal tradition too quickly.

There will be many further discussions among churches and governments around the world: a fixed date has been on the British Statute book, but not enacted, since 1928. However, as a lead into the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, it was significant news. It linked what could be termed four 'Patriarchates': Alexandria, Rome, Constantinople and Canterbury. Wider discussions in other traditions will also be significant.

Reshaping the Communion is one thing: changing everyone's diaries is extraordinary.

Conclusion

So, rather than focussing on sexuality, ecclesiology was the key subject.

Rather than just being inward looking, the Primates considered holistic mission.

Rather than being only Anglican centred, they recognised the historic links of Catholicity, and contemporary fellowship, with Alexandria, Rome and Constantinople.

Rather than being completely 'Church' centred, they considered a proposal which, if followed through, will affect the whole world: the date of Easter.

We conclude by drawing on two 'doctors of the Church': one from Africa and one from the United States of America, who taught for decades in England.

Canon Professor Joseph Galgalo, Vice-Chancellor of St Paul's University, Limuru, Kenya, wrote an article for the official Primates 2016 site, ['What](#)

can we learn from Jesus' hospitality', based on an address he had given to the Community of St Anselm in November 2015:

Table fellowship defines Jesus' communality. 'Eating is patterned into the scheme of his work revealing a striking centrality of food to Jesus' ministry...The most undeserving of people are given a place at the table, to be heard, healed, forgiven, restored, taught and fed to become beneficiaries of divine hospitality.

The Primates lived and ate together at Canterbury and recognised themselves in those words.

The Revd Professor Daniel W. Hardy, during the last few months of his life, dictated the sum of his ponderings on ecclesiology to his son-in-law in Cambridge, Professor David Ford: they had both been theological advisers at Primates' Meetings and at the Lambeth Conference of 1998. His insights were published posthumously in a unique book, *Wording a Radiance: Parting Conversations on God and the Church* (2010). In it, he developed the theme of 'attraction towards God':

Creatures are created to move towards God. When creatures somehow lose that 'towardness' – becoming obsessive at some point, separating themselves from the whole of things, and serving only themselves – then the creation loses its order. (p. 47)

He then applied this to the Church:

If, for example, any denominations serve themselves rather than the whole Church, or if any interpreters claim, 'We have the whole meaning of the Bible, not just one perspective', then they move against God's attraction. (p. 47).

Later he applied to Scripture and the Church a word recently new to him, 'granulation':

I would say that Scripture enables the healing powers deep within a pilgrim (whether a community or a person) to 'granulate'. Recovering from a medical treatment recently, I learned that 'granulation' refers to the body's capacity to generate new connective tissue from deep within the flesh, just underneath the diseased tissue that lies above it. This is a hopeful sign, because it shows how the rebuilding of tissue is possible from within the deepest parts of the human body. I would extend the metaphor to the capacity of societies and persons to be regenerated from deep within themselves. (p. 64)

Following 'Primates 2016', may the Anglican Communion be regenerated from deep within, to the glory of God.