

GAFCON, the Jerusalem Declaration & the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans

What's it all about?

“**GAFCON**” stands for the Global Anglican Future Conference held in Jerusalem from 22nd-29th June, which Richard Perkins and I attended (representing Co-Mission) along with almost 100 other UK leaders.

It was “**Global**” – almost 1200 delegates, including nearly 300 bishops (mainly from Africa), representing around 35 million of 55 million church-going Anglicans world-wide were there. The sessions were full of life and colour – spontaneous singing, marvellously colourful dress (not just the women) and a rich sense of multi-cultural joy in our common faith. It was very moving to hear Archbishops from South America, Asia, Africa and Australia teaching the same faith of the Bible that we teach every week. We are not weird or the “fundamentalist militant tendency” we are sometimes said to be. We are ordinary, faithful Anglican Christians, welcome among believers from around the world. It is the liberal western provinces of North America, Canada and the UK that are departing from the Biblical faith of Anglicans and bringing “schism” into the Anglican church.

It was “**Anglican**” – there was a repeated commitment to remain in the Anglican “Communion” (world-wide union of Anglican regions or “provinces”), to the ancient doctrinal basis of the Anglican church (the Bible as interpreted by the ancient creeds and the 39 Articles etc.) and to plenty of traditional Anglican liturgy and hymns (there were a number of Anglo-Catholics and Charismatics there) on the basis that we are the real Anglican Church and not those who have departed from the faith of the Scriptures. This was of vital importance to those in Canada and the US (perhaps also here soon) being pursued in the courts by liberal bishops claiming that their Biblical churches are no longer Anglican. The leadership of so many “primates” (the senior Archbishop of each Province) leading the majority of the Anglican Communion made this gathering much more representative than the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Lambeth conference in a few weeks. One could sense the legitimate frustration in the Africans that the Archbishop of Canterbury, who oversees perhaps 500,000 church-going believers in his Province, seemingly ignores the views of African Archbishops overseeing 30 million with an outdated “colonial” attitude.

It was about the “**Future**” – the reason for the conference was to address the crisis concerning the authority of the Bible that has paralysed the Anglican Communion over the last ten years. The presenting issues have been practising homosexual clergy and women bishops, but the real issue has been the authority of the Bible. The conference was focussed on the need for order and clarity for the future mission of Anglican churches world-wide. So there were brilliant Bible expositions each morning, tracing the gospel message through the Bible, keynote addresses in the afternoons looking to the future and seminar tracks focussed, not on presenting issues but the future: “Gospel and Culture”, “Gospel and Leadership”, “Biblical Authority and Interpretation”, “Family and Marriage”, Anglican Identity in the 21st Century”, “Evangelism and Church-planting”, “Theological Education” and “Bishops wives”. I was asked to contribute to the church-planting track (which was rather daunting for an audience that included about 30 bishops many of whom had been involved in planting hundreds of churches in Africa). This was not a conference dominated by protest but by exciting unity in the great Commission to make disciples for Christ from all nations.

“**The Jerusalem Declaration**” – is part of an extraordinary Conference statement which far surpassed anything I had hoped for. It is not a new creed or covenant but a solemn commitment from the delegates. The most emotional moments of the conference were when, after lots of submissions and consultations with delegates, the draft statement was read to the delegates for the first time on the Friday morning. As it was read, there was a growing and overwhelming sense of solemn history and a seismic shift in Anglican structures. At first there were isolated murmurs of approval, soon cheers and applause and as the magnitude of the proposals emerged many were weeping and at the end, the entire gathering leapt to their feet with rapturous approval. The Anglican church will never be the same again.

The statement launches a new movement of “confessing Anglicans” (see below) run by a new “Primates Council” because of three facts:

- (a) many of the liberal western churches are preaching a different gospel of “inclusion” rather than “salvation”: that whatever religion is followed and whatever lifestyle is preferred, all are on their way to heaven. This denies the uniqueness of Christ and the authority of Scripture;
- (b) a realignment has already occurred in which many faithful churches (including some of our own Co-Mission congregations) have become separated from their bishops and have accepted, or are looking for, support (e.g. for ordination of staff) elsewhere. This realignment within the Anglican Communion needs to be recognised;

- (c) despite the clear resolution at Lambeth in 1998 that sexual activity outside of marriage (including homosexual practice) is contrary to God's word, the Archbishop of Canterbury and endless meetings and councils have promised to deal with heretical bishops and Dioceses but have done nothing. After a decade of broken promises and inaction, something must be done to restore biblical discipline and revitalise the mission of Anglican churches.

The "Jerusalem Declaration" is a wonderfully sound recommitment to orthodox, Evangelical Anglicanism. Anglican identity is defined, not by submitting to the Archbishop of Canterbury but by belief in the plain meaning of scripture which is well expressed in the creeds and 39 Articles of the Anglican church. We were all involved in modifying and improving the statement in what was an incredibly collaborative effort. Intemperate statements were removed, confusing clauses clarified and I am thrilled with the result. I would encourage all church members to read and discuss the statement, to ask questions about anything unclear or unwelcome and would expect all our church councils to subscribe to the petition affirming the statement on the Anglican Mainstream website.

A "Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans" – this sounds like a lot of guilty people admitting they were wrong! Though there was plenty of repentance for our many failures, to be a "confessing" church means that we are prepared to confess, or publicly articulate, what we believe rather than endlessly refuse to clarify the faith (which is what the Anglican church is famous for). Although there is now an international fellowship to which we plainly belong, it will be more important to be part of the UK fellowship that is now emerging. At a vital meeting at All Souls on 1st July, more than 750 leaders of a wide range of Evangelical churches (including Reform conservatives, New Wine charismatics and Anglican Mainstream moderates) heard Archbishops Orombi of Uganda, Venables of South America and Jensen of Australia and the elderly hero, Dr. Jim Packer (who was outrageously sacked in Canada) urging us not to hide from these issues, but to stand together for the faith. We need to pray that Evangelical churches and individuals will increasingly swell the ranks of this fellowship.

What will this mean in practice?

These developments are good news for Co-Mission churches for three reasons:

- a) our stand on these issues has been effectively endorsed by the majority of the worldwide communion;
- b) those being refused ordination of staff, processing of ordinands or the recognition of congregations could look to this confessing fellowship for alternative oversight;
- c) there is now a substantial fellowship that remains true to the Bible emerging in this country for the growing numbers of people disillusioned by the chaos, for the churches needing sound oversight (e.g. the 8 planted congregations across the country allied with the Crosslinks mission agency) and for the growing numbers of churches looking elsewhere if the blessing of homosexual partnerships or the consecration of women bishops proceeds;

What should we do?

- a) pray – for the Anglican communion;
- b) support - your church councils by subscribing to the Jerusalem declaration on-line (<http://www.gopetition.co.uk/online/20243.html>)
- c) speak up – for the freedom and joy of following Jesus as both Saviour and Lord;
- d) carry on – with holiness and evangelism – bishops and structures can support or damage our gospel work, but we must continue to prayerfully serve Christ at home, work and play.

Yours in Christ, Richard Coekin

For further information

If you wish to read the talks given at the recent All Souls Day these links will take you to the Anglican Mainstream website:

1. Talk by Peter Jensen: <http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/2008/07/01/post-gafcon-at-all-souls-abp-peter-jensen/>
2. Question time: <http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/2008/07/01/post-gafcon-at-all-souls-panel-discussion/>
3. Interview with Jim Packer: <http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/2008/07/01/post-gafcon-at-all-souls-4-interview-with-revd-dr-jim-packer/>
4. Talk by Henry Orombi: <http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/2008/07/01/post-gafcon-at-all-souls-abp-henry-orombi/>
5. Talk by Greg Venables: <http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/2008/07/01/post-gafcon-at-all-souls-abp-greg-venables/>