

Faith Seeking Understanding Conference
Huron University College
Jan 12-13, 2007

What started benignly enough as a suggestion by Revd Susan Baldwin in a staff meeting, that many clergy and laity were interested in learning as per the National Church and Archbishop Rowan Williams' charge something, *anything* about the present crisis and resulting *Windsor and St Michael's Reports*, became much larger than I expected. After some time, Dean John Chapman and I discussed a small workshop in response, then a conference; and, finally what eventually became our January event in which over 120 clergy, academics, laity and media (we simply couldn't hold more) attended and spent a weekend interacting with the documents and subsidiary themes therein. People came from all over Canada and the United States and the phone, as yet, still rings with interested media and persons on what transpired. So what exactly *did* transpire?

The theme of the conference, borrowed from St Anselm, was 'faith seeking *understanding*' and it was hoped that we could collectively move past the rhetoric of the extremes on the issues and events precipitating the two public reports in order to help Anglicans in Canada, and further abroad, understand each other, do theology and hopefully move to a position less entrenched and more open, on both sides, to God's unity which I, at least, hold as a necessary truth of Christian life together: as our Lord is One, so must we seek the peace.

The conference was designed with several keys in mind: physical space, intellectual integrity, and accessibility. In terms of physical space, we designed the conference with lots of interactive fellowship times, asked the 'usual suspects' not to set up information tables so as to avoid bunker mentalities and tried to take some of the heat out of the issues by moderating questions and answers in order to reduce pontification and increase hearing. To declare our invisible unity, the Eucharist close presided by our symbol of unity in Canada in Archbishop Hutchinson, underscored in common worship and therefore communion the hope all have in Christ and subsequently for a resolution that echoes the Gospel from both the Eurocentric West and Global South perspective. In terms of intellectual integrity, papers and keynote speakers were carefully selected to reflect a balance of ideas as well as excellence in content. Perhaps providentially, this editorial aspect was somewhat reduced as it seemed that in all streams we had a moderate, and two papers on more or less liberal and conservative sides of the questions. Finally, in terms of accessibility, we asked that the level be pitched at a level of a concerned Anglican parishioner who might need to struggle to keep up, but not be too lost in the conversation. This hope, I understand anecdotally, was largely met.

In terms of content, the plenary speakers dealt with the two main public documents of *Windsor and St Michael's* and we were pleased to have Chancellor Stevenson of General Synod walk us collectively through the process of reception and debate, clarifying the procedure and, in my mind, reducing some of the hysteria surrounding the mystical process of General Synod. Realizing that the issues raised in those two documents revealed a myriad of themes, we decided concurrent streams in the areas of Church,

Communion and Authority, Scripture and Interpretation, and theological account of Human Sexuality also needed to be explored and were offered. The results are for your perusal.

So what exactly happened?

I think there were several significant moments. First, I think it amply demonstrated that rather than fatigue there is a deep hunger and desire to understand among faithful people on both sides (and middle) in order to be responsible to the issues. Picking up from a theme of Dr Badcock's opening talk, Canadian Anglicans need to find a way to hear and speak in a manner that befits the cosmological agenda, whether in New Westminster or Nigeria, which the Gospel demands. It is both places that God needs to be sought, unity aspired towards and hope offered to each community and person beloved by God in Christ. Second, there was a fresh willingness to understand ourselves, our Eurocentric history and perhaps its effect in the postcolonial Global South, in a manner that asked whether the North Atlantic captivity of the Church is itself part of the problem. For example, in terms of theological anthropology we need to ask whether sexuality identity is really what we want to talk about when we come to discussing the human person in its broad range of incarnational love? The same question, in differing notes, can be asked about the bible and the historically raised nature of Anglican ecclesiological formation and responses. In cases, it can be asked how normative is our Western history, its interaction with postcolonial Anglicans and whether, in part, our conversations are stilted because each speaks past the other to a nebulous and dubious history instead. Lastly, I think there was a hopefulness on several levels. On the level of the laity, this hope is that someone was talking and not shouting and that they were invited to the proverbial table. On the level of the clergy and episcopate, the hope was that solutions would come from the centre of Anglicanism, not its extremes and that responsible talk was in fact talk. From the academic perspective, it was that the ivory towers and the church spires met and both came away in mutual respect as it was the questions asked that will continue to shape academic work on the issues for those who presented papers. You as a reader will need to judge this on your own.

On my part, it was a successful conference because all of the above seemed to be blessed. Perhaps it is a by-product of the fact that I am not a cradle Anglican, but instead I saw in action that which attracted me to the tradition. This was dialogue and hope well salted with a resignation that the way forward is not found in the extremes but somewhere in the middle. I do not think this is the 'via media' in its historical sense, but it does at least to me reflect a desire to be theological in answer to the questions of the day. This is hope, love and faith, but the greatest must be love. So I ask, who is furthest from us that we need, on both sides, to love?

Darren C Marks
Huron University College
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