



THAT WE MAY BE ONE

A Guide to Intercultural Conversations

by

The Consultation of Anglican Bishop in Dialogue

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INTRODUCTION

This Guide to Intercultural Conversations is a gift to the Anglican Communion from The Consultation of Anglican Bishops in Dialogue. The Consultation was a fluid group of bishops from several African Provinces, The Anglican Church of Canada, The Church of England, The Scottish Episcopal Church and The Episcopal Church. For over a decade they worked to mend relations and build understanding among parts of the Communion that have been in conflict. The first Consultation was held in London UK, in February 2010. Since then, the group has met every year in different parts of the Communion, until the final event in Zanzibar, in February 2020. This Resource is part of the Testimony the “Bishops in Dialogue” are offering to the Anglican Communion.

For more information, please visit www.anglican.ca/gr/bishopsconsultation

Find Introductory Videos on the Consultation of Anglican Bishops in Dialogue here:

www.anglican.ca/gr/bishopconsultation/videos

For those who may wish to replicate our consultation and dialogue process, here are some of our procedures, observations, learnings, and best practices.

1. Group Method

To seek and serve Christ is the purpose and goal of the exercise.

Meetings and discussions should be in the context of prayer and Eucharist. Daily worship among the participants, as well as with local Anglican churches where possible, grounds the work sacramentally, and is foundational to the gathering.

Care should be taken to allow all participants, especially those who may join later, to introduce themselves and to describe their ministry.

The African practice of “indaba” provides a rich model for honest conversations. This is a process of respectful listening in which all have the opportunity to speak and to be heard.

The object of these conversations is not to convert others, but to respect and celebrate the diversity of honestly-held views. The cultivation of mutual respect allows us to become more understanding of one another, and to take back learnings to our own context.

Start by letting go of pre-conceived and stereotypical assumptions. Build assurance that openness and vulnerability will not be manipulated or disrespected.

Take care to maintain confidentiality and privacy. Be aware that agreement to participate by some members may pose a risk to them.

Build agendas collaboratively. But do not be slaves to an agenda.

Build on previous gatherings. Be mindful of previous learnings and discoveries. Bring new participants up to date, so far as possible, while inviting them to add new perspectives to the work.

Build in time for theological reflection. It is especially helpful to bring local expertise (e.g. theologians with a sense of the local context) into the dialogue.

Learn about the local context. Do not fly in and out without encountering the people and culture where you meet. Deep, rather than superficial, encounter will enrich the work of the group.

The work is intense. The participants are busy. 2–3 days should be sufficient for each gathering.

A communiqué, public statement, or Testimony following each meeting may be useful in opening the dialogue to others in the wider Church. This fosters accountability and transparency. Critical feedback is to be welcomed and built into the process of continuing reflection.

Story-telling, rather than debate, enhances the ability of participants to listen.

Presentations

Decisions should be made by consensus. This is not the same as unanimity. Members are free to hold a different view from the majority. Some, for example, may not be able to sign a public statement.

2. Group Composition

Participants should be selected to reflect a range of cultural and theological diversity. Guests may be invited as presenters (not necessarily members) with particular gifts or expertise.

Membership may evolve and change as participants are added or leave, though it is helpful to keep a core of members for stability and memory.

Participants attend as individuals, not official representatives of their Province or Diocese. There is no hierarchy among participants.

Start from the premise that we are all children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ. Participants should be able to accept others without prejudice, able to see where God might be at work in the other's life and context. At the same time, they should be willing to engage others with differences.

Members will need the virtue of humility: that is, the assumption that they will learn more than they teach, and receive more than they give.

They will require a deep trust in God's guidance, including the expectation that outcomes may be surprising and not always painless.

Misunderstandings and misperception are a constant reality. Participants will require patience and fortitude, and the courage to be honest and transparent.

3. Logistics

It is desirable to meet in quite different cultures and locations.

Funding for travel, accommodation, and hospitality should be secured in advance.

Participants should be invited to contribute financially, either personally or from funds available to them. It is not to be expected that each participant will be able to pay an equal share.

Staff support is vital, both for making local arrangements and in attending to communication between meetings.

The meetings should be residential, giving opportunities for relaxation and informal interaction among participants.

Participants should be able to make a commitment to several meetings. This is a process that grows through successive rounds of engagement. Meetings should be regularly scheduled rather than occasional and sporadic.

InterCultural Communication and the Anglican Communion

In recent years, intercultural communication has become a subject of professional study among scholars and leaders of multicultural institutions in universities, governments, inter-governmental organizations, industries, and within and between faith groups.

A growing body of published research is available. Some of this offers insight into the current context of the Anglican Communion, and supports several of our experiences in the International Dialogue of Bishops.

A. InterCultural Anglicanism

The nations of the world today number 193. The worldwide Anglican Communion is present in over 165 of them. And whilst it is possible to count the countries in which Anglicans live, work and worship, it is impossible to count the cultures to which we all belong, since no nation consists of a single culture. We are a multicultural Communion, and all of us are formed and nurtured (mostly unconsciously) by plural cultures.

“The person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool.”¹

And we speak multiple languages. Two nations alone – India and China – together contain over 800 language variants or dialects. There is no global *lingua franca*. Whilst large formal gatherings of our Communion now provide simultaneous translation in 5 tongues – Swahili, English, Spanish, French, and Japanese (others may be added for the 2020 Lambeth Conference) – many of the participants in these international events are conversant in 5 or more languages and dialects local to their own communities. We are a multilingual Communion.

Thus, every regional or international gathering of Anglicans is an exercise, among other things, of intercultural conversation. Whether in regional provincial Synods, or official meetings of the Instruments of Communion, or large scale mission conferences, or simply in smaller informal gatherings, whenever Anglicans meet we are engaged in communication across cultures as well as languages. This is no simple task. Its complexities become clearer with experience.

B. Dialogue is preferable to warfare.

In contentious times, successful dialogue cannot be an attempt to bring everyone in the room to the same position or conclusion. One of the important distinctions in current peace studies is between *conflict resolution* and *polarity management*.

“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.”²

Conflict resolution is an effort to reduce tensions and violence between opposing parties by the mutual discovery of common interests. It involves many stages of listening, hearing accurately, giving feedback, taking responsibility, and engaging in the mutual search for common ground where compromise or agreement is possible.

When, however, the cause of the conflict is rooted in values, principles, or deeply held beliefs it is usually not possible to find a mutually agreeable middle ground. Parties to a conflict cannot trade away their understanding of truth, for instance, for the sake of a lesser goal, such as institutional cohesion. At stake here is the question of identity. Who are we? Whose are we? What is foundational and fundamental to our understanding (e.g. of the Gospel) and the community we serve?

In these circumstances, dialogue and conversation are not so much about finding a compromise, but about the deeper search for an identity that allows the parties to belong together and to recognize the same core beliefs in each other. The goal of polarity management is to achieve respect for differences. That is, the recognition that we need to find a way to be different *together*.

C. Cultural Differences

We are mostly unaware of the plethora of cultures that shape us and our identity. One of the benefits – and challenges – of intercultural communication is the discovery not only of other ways of being and seeing, but also the discovery of the necessity to change ourselves.

The fish only knows it lives in the water after it is already on the river bank.”³

Especially in times of conflict or misunderstanding, we tend to act towards the other in accordance with our own deeply unconscious habits and impulses.

Scholars speak of “task-oriented” and “relationship-oriented” cultures. In task-oriented cultures, such as the Western world, people view conversations as a way to exchange information. It is a sign of respect to speak clearly and to the point, and to leave no room for misinterpretation. Westerners expect others to get down to business fairly quickly. A failure by the other to engage the topic expeditiously, or in a vague and indirect manner, is seen as lack of understanding at best, or as avoidance of responsibility at worst.

In relationship-oriented cultures, on the other hand, such as across Asia and Africa, people tend to treat sensitive topics less directly and in a more nuanced manner. Conversations are seen primarily as a way to develop a relationship. Ambiguity and deflection of disagreement are signs of respect. To address a problem head-on, especially on a difficult matter, can be considered ungracious and immature. “The danger here is that a person from a direct culture may come across as insensitive and ill-mannered, while the person from the indirect culture may appear scattered and shifty.”⁴

In all relationships – not least within the Anglican Communion – conflict can serve as an unpleasant but necessary occasion to examine our own predispositions and assumptions. Before we can understand the other, we need to understand ourselves and how we react to threat. If the relationship is worth preserving, the opportunity of conflict can lead us to the hard work of changing ourselves.

D. Many Voices

An obstacle to genuine communication is the problem of stereotypes. A stereotype is a construct projected by one person or group on to another that distorts or obscures their true reality. It may be positive or negative, a hagiography or a demonization (e.g., the crowds in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and later on Good Friday). These constructs are often based on ignorance or wishful thinking. Whatever their motive, it is important to recognize stereotypes and to disable their obstructive power.

We do not encounter cultures. We encounter people. It is essential to allow the uniqueness and individuality of participants in cross-cultural dialogue to flourish and be welcomed. Distinctions of gender, education, affluence or poverty, privilege or exclusion, are found among people living in the same place and time, all over the world. Presumptions and expectations based on someone's place of origin rarely lead to genuine understanding.

"We assume that people who are raised or live in a particular place probably speak the same language, hold many of the same values, and communicate in similar ways." ⁵

One of the many things that became clear in the International Dialogue of Bishops is that neither the continents of Africa or North America speak with one voice. Nor does Europe, South America, or the rest of the Anglican world. The Communion has suffered from the misperception that entire regions of the Church speak with one mind on matters under disagreement. This is often a consequence of written statements or manifestos being sent rapidly around the world by individuals or groups without the benefit of personal relationships with the people who receive them.

There is, therefore, great value in gatherings that bring us face to face together. Communication between people takes place at many levels, including non-verbal signs and mannerisms. "Gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, posture, touch, dress, silence, the use of space and time, objects and artifacts, and paralanguage . . . carry as much or more meaning than the actual spoken words." ⁶

There is also the essential component of humour. Hardly ever successfully conveyed on paper, humour and laughter can allow a gathering of strangers to open their hearts to one another. Playfulness may enable the development of trust. "Joy is deeply converting" (Rowan Williams). So too with music and dance. Those with the gift of music in their bodies frequently have a greater power to transform relationships than intellectuals with the mightiest of arguments. While the growth in internet conferencing, such as Skype, has enabled a tremendous expansion of verbal and written communication around the globe, people can only dance and sing together when they meet in person.

E. Problems and Limits

Dialogue has many critics. Some suspect it is a technique for manipulation, based on the false assumption that all opinions are right, that no moral values transcend all cultures, and presumes the absence of an objective truth to which all participants are accountable.

“The celebration of cultural diversity, without falling into the trap of pernicious relativism, is profoundly important for global stewardship” ⁷

They see a great danger in a “pernicious relativism” that reduces ethics to local custom, allowing people to say “this is how it is where I come from. Do whatever you want where you come from” - thereby removing the ground for cross-cultural challenge and the search for a binding, universal code of behaviour.

Archbishop Welby acknowledged these concerns in a recent interview:

“So no, we can’t just say, well, you know, in England you can believe this and in Kenya you can believe that. That’s not how Christian faith works. At the heart of it we believe that in Christ we’re all one. National barriers and racial barriers and stereotypes are broken down or extinguished, dissolved. That is crucial, and that’s my hope and vision for the Communion. My prayer for the Communion is that it will be a body that says, in a world of immense diversity coming at you, in your face, there is hope to live together, to be a people who collaborate for the common good, serving Christ” ⁸

Intercultural dialogue often starts with the search for common ground between the participants. Contentious issues are initially avoided in the task of building safety and trust. Frequently, this involves the sharing of stories, the telling of histories, and the explaining of dilemmas in a value-neutral setting that discourages judgment among those in the conversation. Yet, if the exercise remains at this level, it may never evolve beyond mere cultural voyeurism, like watching dancers perform in tourist hotels. By staying at the level of anecdote, dialogue never matures, and the “hope to live together” is frustrated.

Genuine dialogue requires honesty and willingness to confront hard questions. Careful planning and preparation are needed to bring about the “kairos moment” when this can occur. Trust and safety are the necessary conditions to prevent frank disagreement from becoming a continuation of conflict. The International Dialogue of Bishops did not reach the point when we could discuss human sexuality for several years (Toronto 2012). It was made possible when a sufficient degree of confidence had grown among us that we did not fear our differences might lead to a breakdown of relationship.

Difficult conversations are helped greatly by the presence of a shared narrative or belief system to which participants adhere. In our case, it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as received in the Anglican tradition. Gospel and tradition provide reference points to which we can look when struggling to find the proper way forward. Of course, there are wide differences of interpretation at play, but at least we have common ground, or a common truth, under which we all stand and to which each can appeal. Secular and political dialogues can be at a greater disadvantage in this regard.

F. A Sign

The world we live in is both shrinking and becoming deeply polarized. Television, computers, and smartphones are widely available on every continent, bringing foreign places and people into our homes and lives in ways never before

“For the twenty-first century, the cheerful acknowledgment of differences is the alternative to a global spread of ethnic cleansing and religious rivalry”⁹

experienced in human history. The migration of peoples, including but not limited to refugees, has created an intermingling of populations in numbers large enough to create new sub-cultures in once-dominant societies that elicit both admiration and widespread fear.

In many parts of the world, ‘national security’ has emerged as the pre-eminent political motivation behind policies and actions that target immigrants and seek to exclude them. Millions of people today clearly believe that their identity and safety requires the rejection of foreigners, multiculturalism, and pluralism. Generally speaking, the world’s major religions teach tolerance and compassion. However, religious faith is also being coopted by

forces of hatred and violence. These polarizing powers tear apart families and homelands, and frustrate the quest for harmony, unity, and peace.

Intercultural communication can be seen as a countervailing force that points to the possibility of better outcomes. In a small way, the International Bishops Dialogue has tried to contribute not only to the health of the Anglican Communion, but also to align with the emerging global future.

“Identity is a concept of our age that should be used very carefully. All types of identities, ethnic, national, religious, sexual, or whatever else, can become your prison after a while. The identity that you stand up for can enslave you and close you to the rest of the world.”¹⁰

End Notes

¹ Sarah Apedaile and Lenina Schill; in “An Interactive Tool for Developing Awareness, Knowledge and Skills”; NorQuest College Intercultural Education Programs, 2008.

² Audre Lorde, poet. Quoted in “Approaches to Intercultural Communication” in “Intercultural Communication: A Reader”, 40th Anniversary Edition, Larry Samovar ed.; Cengage Learning, Mason, Ohio, 2015, p.1 (Hereafter cited as ICC:AR)

³ Quoted in “Communicating Interculturally; Becoming Competent”; ICC:AR p. 340

⁴ M. Hahn & A. Molinsky; in “Having a Difficult Conversation with Someone from a Different Culture”; Harvard Business Review, 2016.

⁵ Mary Jane Collier; in “Understanding Cultural Identities in Intercultural Communication: A Ten Step Inventory”; ICC:AR p. 370

⁶ Edwin R. McDaniel & Larry A. Samovar; in “Understanding and Applying Intercultural Communication in the Global Community: The Fundamentals”; ICC:AR p. 13

⁷ Yoshitaka Mike; in “Harmony Without Uniformity: An Asiacentric Worldview and its Communicative Implications”; ICC:AR p. 32

⁸ Archbishop Justin Welby; Interview on National Public Radio, USA; October 2015

⁹ Harlan Cleveland; in “The Limits of Cultural Diversity”; ICC:AR p. 404

¹⁰ Murathan Mungan, Turkish poet; “Cultural Identity: Issues of Belonging”; in ICC:AR p. 47

APPENDIX I

Here is some additional information that may be of value to the user:

Each participant comes to the table with values and convictions that are not necessarily shared by everyone. They proceed into conversation with the awareness that others around the table have views that are not only different but also possibly contradictory to their own. A key commitment required of participants is the willingness to listen without prejudice and to understand others without having to agree with them.

The Bishops who attended the first Consultation in 2010 knew little about one another. They were apprehensive about one another's motivations and the level of trust was relatively low. All this changed when they began to listen to one another's mission stories. As they shared the challenges of their different mission-fields and how those influenced their thinking, decision-making and actions, empathy and understanding emerged. They began to see one another as co-workers in God's vineyard, serving faithfully and doing the best they can in their particular contexts.

When you come together aim at the following

- Listening without prejudice
- Striving for understanding not necessarily agreement
- Sharing stories about your mission fields and the challenges thereof
- Recognizing one another's faithfulness in ministry

The Consultation of Anglican Bishops in Dialogue was born in a climate of hostility and strained relationships in the Anglican Communion. There was a lot of information on the internet that misrepresented the truth: bloggers with particular motives pushing incendiary narratives; reports from both secular and religious media designed to sensationalize the strained relationships in the Communion. Given those broken relationships the main source of information about the state of the Communion were these blogs and misleading reports. Most people's views of other parts of the Communion were therefore likewise skewed.

One of the gifts the Bishops in Dialogue conversations offered was that participants had the opportunity to hear stories about what is happening in other parts of the Communion directly from those who come from there.

- Build into the Agenda opportunities for participants to share accurate news about their parts of the Communion
- Allow time for informal networking and relationship building
- Create a safe space for open conversations to happen among participants

The hosting team will consider their context and decide which locations would be the most worthwhile for the guests to visit, when to visit and for how long. Consideration may be given to locations that:

- Occupy the local diocese or Province's attention in ministry
- Have historical significance the local church, wider church or the secular world
- Resonate with the Consultation theme or otherwise relevant to the group's work and reflection
- Of interest to the group for any reason

Incorporate what you learn from the community visits into the group's final Testimony to the wider church about their experience.

Always gather in the context of prayer, worship and theological reflection. This will have the effect of reinforcing the presence of the Holy Spirit, leading participants to engage one another through difficult conversations, but with love, recognition and understanding.

Every time the group gathers for Eucharist and as they read and reflect on the Scriptures together, they re-affirm the body of Christ and recognize Christ in one another, in spite of disagreement over a wide range of issues.

- The hosting team takes the responsibility to create space on the Agenda for prayers, worship, Bible study and theological reflection.
- While the hosts coordinate prayer and worship for the group throughout the meeting, all participants may share the leadership.

- Lift up any meaningful linkages between the Consultation theme and the devotional time. This will enhance the group's ability to hear the voice of God in one another and in the group as a whole.

Participants in the Anglican Bishops in Dialogue opted to call their final statements

'Testimonies'. They recognized that as an informal group they could speak only for themselves; bear witness only to what they have seen, heard and experienced. The word "Testimony" seemed to reflect their experience the most. At every meeting a team of three or four is appointed to observe and listen to the proceedings with a focus on enabling the group to draft their Testimony for the wider church. The call to witness comes out of a firmly held belief that whenever the group meets, God speaks.

Here are the Testimonies of the Consultation of Anglican Bishops in Dialogue:

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- Appoint a team of three or four people from among the participants
- The task of this team is to listen deeply and observe in order to facilitate the process of identifying the linkages and connections that inspire the group's Testimony.
- The team also normally writes up the final draft of the Testimony.

APPENDIX II Outline of a typical Session:

Session Objective:

To facilitate the forming of the group and the building of trust among the participants.

Session Goals:

- To pray and be in fellowship together
- To Introduce one another and share something about our personal lives, faith-journey, and ministry
- To share stories of mission in our different contexts
- To reflect on relevant biblical texts
- To bear testimony about our experience together

Process:

- Opening devotion
- Introductions and check in
- Theological reflection on select texts
- The challenges of mission in different contexts
- Break
- The challenges of mission in different contexts continue
- Lunch
- The Challenges of mission in different contexts continue
- Reflecting on the meaning of these shared stories
- Afternoon break
- Drafting a Testimony of our experience together
- Closing prayer