
Ian T. Douglas

The decennial meeting of bishops of the worldwide Anglican Communion, known as the Lambeth Conference, has never been immune from controversy. Archbishop of Canterbury Charles Longley called for the first Lambeth Conference in 1867, in part to consider whether John Colenso, bishop of Natal in South Africa, had gone too far in accommodating Scripture and the teachings of the church to Zulu culture.1 While the “Colenso Affair” had significant missiological implications, the nature of the conference itself was also controversial. Not wanting to lend credibility to a centralization of episcopal power within Anglicanism, the then archbishop of York and the bishop of Durham, two of the most senior bishops in the Church of England, refused to attend.2 Thus, questions that swirled around the fourteenth Lambeth Conference (held last summer in Canterbury, England, July 16–August 3)—questions related to scriptural interpretation, the nature of the church, the authority of the Lambeth Conference itself, and the lack of participation by some key bishops—were not at all new to this global gathering of Anglican bishops.

What was new for the 2008 Lambeth Conference was how the conference chose to address these difficult issues. Eschewing established processes, the conference pursued a decidedly missiological vision in its design, processes, and content. The Design Group for the conference was motivated by a belief that the mission of God is to restore all people and all creation to a right relation with God and each other through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the church is called to participate in the restoration and reconciliation of all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. Thus the unity of the church in service to God’s promise of a restored and reconciled creation is fundamentally a missiological concern. Bishops participating in the 2008 Lambeth Conference would be invited to discover anew their unity with God and each other in Christ. Thus the unity of the church in service to God’s promise of a restored and reconciled creation is fundamentally a missiological concern. Bishops participating in the 2008 Lambeth Conference would be invited to discover anew their unity with God and each other in Christ. Thus the unity of the church in service to God’s promise of a restored and reconciled creation is fundamentally a missiological concern.

The initial missiological imperative for the 2008 Lambeth Conference lay in another historical expression of the gathered Anglican Communion, namely, Anglican Congresses. In the last century there were three significant worldwide gatherings of Anglican laypeople, deacons, priests, and bishops focusing on mission, known variously as Pan-Anglican or Anglican Congresses, held in London in 1908, Minneapolis in 1954, and Toronto in 1963. These congresses brought together thousands of Anglicans from every corner of the world to consider the missiological challenges and opportunities before Anglicans as a global family of churches. The Anglican Congress of 1963, in particular through its forward-looking vision of Anglican responsiveness to mission known as “Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in Christ,” helped to set the ecclesiological and missiological agenda for the contemporary Anglican Communion.

There have been a variety of efforts across Anglicanism in the last decade or so to hold another mission-focused Anglican Congress. In particular, the eleventh meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, held in Dundee, Scotland, in September 1999, called for an Anglican Congress to be held “in association with the next Lambeth Conference.”3 Because of changes in the office of the archbishop of Canterbury, with Rowan Williams succeeding George Carey in 2003, planning for the combined Anglican Congress and Lambeth Conference was delayed. Not until late 2003 was a Design Group for the combined Anglican Congress and Lambeth Conference named by Archbishop Williams, and the first meeting of the Design Group did not occur until early 2004. The group was specifically chosen to include Anglican leaders from a wide variety of contexts and backgrounds, all of whom had a primary commitment to mission. The original Design Group included two laywomen, from Hong Kong and South Africa; a priest from the United States; bishops from Cuba, Uruguay, Malawi, South Africa, and Mauritius; and an archbishop from Melanesia. The Design Group was ably assisted by staff from the Anglican Communion office and Lambeth Palace (the office and residence of the archbishop of Canterbury in London) and was later augmented by two additional bishops, from England and Polynesia. The worldwide representation of these individuals, combined with a primary commitment to Christian mission in the many contexts and cultures that they represented, was most significant to the planning process. By mid-2004, planning for the combined congress and conference was well underway. It was soon decided that the site for the 2008 Anglican Congress and Lambeth Conference would be Cape Town, South Africa, reflecting the shift in Anglicanism to the “global South.”

Because of both logistic and financial limitations, however, it became clear in late 2004 that the Communion could not support an Anglican Congress in South Africa in 2008. This was highly disappointing for the Design Group, as well as for local hosts in South Africa. Recognizing that the brief for the Design Group had significantly changed with the loss of the congress, the group offered to step down so that Archbishop Williams would have a free hand to put together a planning committee made up solely of bishops who would plan a bishops-only Lambeth Conference. Archbishop Williams would have none of it. Moved by the missiological focus of the combined congress and conference, and informed by his vocation as a theological educator, Archbishop Williams retained the original Design Group and charged them to do a new thing.

The new thing was to plan a Lambeth Conference whose primary agenda was to equip bishops as leaders in God’s mission. The archbishop further believed that as bishops became more

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resourced as leaders in mission, the Anglican Communion itself would be drawn together in new ways of common service to the missio Dei. The missiological imperatives of the 2008 Lambeth Conference were clear: to equip bishops as leaders in God’s mission and thus strengthen the common life and identity of the Anglican Communion.

**Missiological Process**

With a free hand to design a new kind of Lambeth Conference oriented to equipping bishops as leaders in God’s mission, the Design Group, coming together in weeklong meetings in London three times a year, set about imagining what kind of conference would best serve the missiological imperative. Bishops on the Design Group who had participated in the 1998 Lambeth Conference remembered with pain and sadness the contentious parliamentary debates of the last conference, especially the debate over resolution 1:10 on human sexuality. With much prayerful discernment the Design Group concluded that following previous Lambeth Conference processes, which focused on drafting theological reports supported by resolutions debated in parliamentary procedure, would not best serve the Anglican Communion at this time. It was clear that a new, more relational and conversational process was needed if mutual understanding and common commitment to God’s mission across the Anglican Communion were to be engendered.

This proposed relational and conversational process for Lambeth 2008 was embraced by the archbishop of Canterbury. In October 2003 Williams had called an emergency meeting of the primates of the churches of the Anglican Communion. Speaking to the BBC at the conclusion of this meeting, which addressed the election of Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire, an openly gay man living in a long-term partnered relationship with another man, Archbishop Williams said of the perceived crisis in the Anglican Communion: “What complicates matters where the Anglican Church is concerned is that we’re not a single monolithic body with a single decision-making authority. Our Communion depends a great deal on relationships rather than rules and it’s those relationships that are strained at the moment.” The repair of such relationships and the desire to foster new relationships across differences in service to God’s mission thus became central to the design of Lambeth 2008.

Arriving at the University of Kent in Canterbury, the venue for the 2008 Lambeth Conference, close to seven hundred Anglican bishops and ecumenical participants encountered a rich opportunity to come to know and resource each other as leaders in God’s mission. To do this the conference utilized daily Bible study groups made up of eight bishops each, assigned to ensure representation from widely separated regions. While small-group Bible study had been a part of the last few Lambeth Conferences, prioritizing these studies as the key building block of the conference process was new. An international team of biblical scholars and theologians from Aotearoa/New Zealand, Democratic Republic of Congo, England, India, South Africa, Tanzania, and the United States put together sensitive and innovative contextual Bible studies focusing on the “I am” statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John. In over eighty groups of eight bishops each, those attending Lambeth 2008 encountered God and each other in a safe, face-to-face Christian community through the study of the Gospel of John and in the sharing of their own life stories and contexts.

The second significant design element for the 2008 Lambeth Conference was larger indaba groups comprising five Bible study groups each, for a total of approximately forty bishops in each. “Indaba” is a Zulu word from South Africa originally connoting a meeting of chiefs or village leaders that “gather for purposeful discussion” in community. In sixteen separate indaba groups, deepened by the face-to-face accountabilities being established through the smaller Bible study groups, the bishops engaged common issues now facing the Anglican Communion.

Indabas met daily in the last half of each morning, following both Eucharist and the Bible study. Although resourced with suggested small-group activities to discuss the assigned common daily topic or issue at hand, each indaba was free to design and follow its own life and group processes. The multivocal and multicentric way of engaging tough questions before the Anglican Communion in the indaba groups, as compared to previously utilized parliamentary procedure, was underscored by Archbishop Williams in his 2008 Pentecost letter to the bishops of the Anglican Communion in advance of the Lambeth Conference:

I indicated in earlier letters that the shape of the Conference will be different from what many have been used to. We have listened carefully to those who have expressed their difficulties with Western and parliamentary styles of meeting, and the Design Group has tried to find a new style—a style more reflective of that Pentecost moment when all received the gift of speaking freely about Christ.

At the heart of this will be the indaba groups. Indaba is a Zulu word describing a meeting for purposeful discussion among equals. Its aim is not to negotiate a formula that will keep everyone happy but to go to the heart of an issue and find what the true challenges are before seeking God’s way forward. It is a method with parallels in many cultures, and it is close to what Benedictine monks and Quaker Meetings seek to achieve as they listen quietly together to God, in a community where all are committed to a fellowship of love and attention to each other and to the word of God.

Each day’s work in this context will go forward with careful facilitation and preparation, to ensure that all voices are heard (and many languages also!). The hope is that over the two weeks we spend together, these groups will build a level of trust that will help us break down the walls we have so often built against each other in the Communion. And in combination with the intensive prayer and fellowship of the smaller Bible study groups, all this will result, by God’s grace, in clearer vision and discernment of what needs to be done.
Missiological Content

The ten topics that the bishops considered sequentially in the indabas had a missiological trajectory initially focusing on the nature of God’s mission in the wider world and moving to matters more internal to the Anglican Communion. To discern initial common ground the bishops began with the topic of Anglican identity. This built upon a preceding three-day retreat in the Cathedral at Canterbury led by the archbishop of Canterbury on the theme “God’s Mission and a Bishop’s Discipleship.”

Days 2 and 3 of the indabas focused on the bishops’ participation in God’s mission through evangelism and social justice. These days gave a strong missiological grounding to the Walk for Witness in support of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in London, which followed on the first full Thursday of the conference. Starting at Whitehall and then proceeding alongside the Houses of Parliament and across the Lambeth Bridge and ending at Lambeth Palace, more than 1,300 bishops and their spouses dressed in purple cassocks and national dress provided an inspiring witness to achieve the MDGs.

Returning to Canterbury, the bishops in their indabas then looked at how service to God’s mission must be done cooperatively with sisters and brothers of other Christian traditions (ecumenism), as well as how the whole of creation needs to be safeguarded if the whole church is to serve God in the wider world. The bishops then engaged the question of Christian witness in the midst of other faiths, recognizing that Christians are not the only people on the face of the earth.

Having considered mission in relationship to evangelism, social justice, ecumenism, the environment, and other faiths, the bishops then spent a day in a common program with the parallel Spouses’ Conference to consider how the use and abuse of power in the church affects faithfulness to God’s mission. The day with the spouses provided a transition as the bishops moved from the wider global context of God’s mission into topics that are more specific to common life in the Anglican Communion. The bishops in indaba thus considered how the Bible forms and informs Anglican common service to God’s mission. The authority of the Bible and biblical interpretation led logically to an indaba on how Anglicans understand human sexuality and the place of gay and lesbian people in the church. The concluding few days of the indaba groups then focused on topics of Anglican common life with respect to the status of the Windsor Report and the proposed Anglican Covenant.

The third major programmatic aspect of the 2008 Lambeth Conference was afternoon Self-Select Sessions, where bishops were free to choose from over one hundred different workshops, panels, lectures, and other hands-on learning opportunities. These sessions were designed to equip bishops as leaders in God’s mission through education and information sharing and were loosely organized around the topics of the indaba groups.

As if worship, Bible study, indabas, and self-select groups were not enough, in the evening the bishops had the opportunity to attend plenary gatherings to hear from major mission thinkers including Ivan Dias, prefect for the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples at the Vatican; Brian McLaren, a leader in the “emerging church movement,” and Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth. On the evenings when there were not official plenary presentations, space and hospitality were provided for any and all groups from across the Anglican Communion to host “fringe events” as additional learning and social opportunities for the bishops.

Missiological Implications

The missiological implications of the 2008 Lambeth Conference are hard to determine immediately, and the full ramifications of the new direction of Lambeth might not be known for years to come. Still, one is able to offer a few tentative conclusions.

It could be argued that the aim of Lambeth 2008 to equip bishops as leaders in God’s mission and thus strengthen the Anglican Communion was pursued with diligence and faithfulness. At the conference there was a concerted attempt to gather up the various conversations on the different topics addressed by the indaba groups through appointed “listeners” in each of the sixteen groups. These listeners worked tirelessly every night to draft representative reflections on each day’s indaba conversations. The reflections were then brought together in a multivocal document that was offered back to the bishops and the whole Anglican Communion under the title “Lambeth Indaba: Capturing Conversations and Reflections from the Lambeth Conference 2008—Equipping Bishops for Mission and Strengthening Anglican Identity.” The reflections document prioritizes mission as “the total action of God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit—creating, redeeming, sanctifying—for the sake of the whole world.”

Not everyone, however, including both bishops who were and were not at Lambeth 2008, were pleased with either the “reflections document” or the new direction of the Lambeth Conference. Those who were looking to Lambeth to be the arbiter of all things Anglican or a final decision point on such matters as the proposed Anglican Covenant were not pleased with the new design of the conference. Some even accused the archbishop of Canterbury of eschewing parliamentary process in order to avoid tough decisions, or of wanting to disempower bishops of the global South, who would have been a majority in a parliamentary plenary at Lambeth if they all had attended and if they had voted as a bloc. But Archbishop Williams defended the
misiological vision of the Lambeth Conference and its relational, conversational, and prayerful approach as follows:

Some reactions to my original invitation have implied that meeting for prayer, mutual spiritual enrichment and development of ministry is somehow a way of avoiding difficult issues. On the contrary: I would insist that only in such a context can we usefully address divisive issues. If our difficulties have their root in whether or not we can recognize the same gospel and ministry in diverse places and policies, we need to engage more not less directly with each other. This is why I have repeatedly said that an invitation to Lambeth does not constitute a certificate of orthodoxy but simply a challenge to pray seriously together and to seek a resolution that will be as widely owned as may be.

And this is also why I have said that the refusal to meet can be a refusal of the cross—and so of the resurrection. We are being asked to see our handling of conflict and potential division as part of our maturing both as pastors and as disciples. The transformative experience of Lambeth 2008 is summed up in a letter from a bishop in the Church of North India, to Phil Groves, facilitator of the “Listening Process” around issues of human sexuality in the Anglican Communion.

I came to attend the Lambeth Conference with a lot of questions in my mind about the issue of human sexuality, as I knew this issue has threatened the unity in the Anglican Communion. Coming from a conservative background, I was not even prepared to listen to any person who supported the gay and lesbian people. However, the Indaba experience has changed my opinion. After listening to the stories of bishops coming from different cultural contexts I have become aware of the pain and agony people bear because of our attitude towards each other. Further, I am convinced that despite their different and often opposite positions, all are committed to live and grow within the Anglican family. The binding force in a family is love. If we love one another we learn to transcend our differences and don’t hesitate to sacrifice our own interests for the sake of the family unity. This is possible only when we are willing to listen to each other. The amount of sacrifices I make is dependent on the depth of my love and the intimacy of my relationship.

As for me I have decided not to be hasty in judging the gay and the lesbians. I wish to learn more about their life and intimacy of my relationship. And this is also why I have said that the refusal to meet can be a refusal of the cross—and so of the resurrection. We are being asked to see our handling of conflict and potential division as part of our maturing both as pastors and as disciples. No one in the Anglican Communion believes that the difficulties and challenges before the Communion have suddenly disappeared because bishops from vastly different cultures can now better see and understand both the commonalities they share and their distinctives. But of the bishops who did attend the Lambeth Conference of 2008, most would agree that they are recommitted to God and each other in Christ and are better equipped to serve God’s mission in the world. And therein is hope for the Anglican Communion.

Notes

3. Discussion of the rationale for holding the Anglican Congress in association with the Lambeth Conference is beyond the scope of this article, although it is an important study of power struggles in emerging Anglican ecclesiology. See “Resolution 14: Anglican Congress,” in The Communion We Share: Anglican Consultative Council XI, Scotland, ed. James Rosenthal and Margaret Rodgers (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), pp. 349–50.
6. A primate is the head bishop, archbishop, metropolitan, or presiding bishop in each of the thirty-eight churches of the Anglican Communion.
8. The fact that ecumenical participants were considered “full participants” in the conference and not guests or observers was continually emphasized as a sign of a shared common calling in God’s mission.
11. The Windsor Report, drafted by the Lambeth Commission on Communion and released in late 2004, is a significant study of the current and emerging ecclesiology of the Anglican Communion. Its recommendations, including a proposed “Anglican Covenant,” are under consideration among the churches of the Anglican Communion in what is generally called the Windsor Process.
What practices is God blessing in raising up groups of Jesus followers among Muslims? And how shall we understand Muslim peoples and their access to biblical witness? In recent years, workers from a growing number of organizations have begun to discuss such questions. Their initial insights were refined by a broad group of workers in a consultation in the spring of 2007, further analyzed in subsequent months, and compiled in this volume. From Seed to Fruit presents the most recent worldwide research on witness to Christ among Muslim peoples, using biblical images from nature to show the interaction between God's activity and human responsibility in blessing these peoples.

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