

May 7, 1981 Primates Explore Poverty, Authority, Disarmament

Episcopal News Service

Washington -- The primates of the Anglican Communion ended a week of new and renewed fellowship here determined to press for multilateral disarmament and with a heightened awareness of the need for inter-faith dialogue and a continuing struggle against all forms of poverty.

The 27 chief figures of worldwide Anglicanism kept to an intense working schedule that began April 26 with Evensong at the National Cathedral and ended with a similar service May 1. In the interval, they lived, worshipped, worked and ate in the College of Preachers on the Cathedral Close; leaving only briefly for a visit to the White House and tea with Vice President George Bush.

Their labors were focused in two related directions: authority within the Anglican Communion and the exercise of that authority in the world.

The issue of authority -- in a Church that is episcopally focused and synodically governed and in which members maintain autonomy while conceding a spiritual debt to the see of Canterbury -- is one that has been wrestled with for many years and in many forums. The 1978 Lambeth meeting of Anglican bishops had asked the primates committee to explore this matter. Five papers -- including two read at the conference -- guided their deliberations.

In their final report, the primates noted: "Clearly authority is not merely an ecclesial question. It is a social, political, national and international issue. Christians believe that authority flows from God. Authority has always been exercised in the universal Church in a wide variety of styles. The style characteristic of the Anglican Communion was described in the report of the 1948 Lambeth Conference as "dispersed Authority" i.e. Authority is not pyramidal, locussed in one particular office, but it is diffused and exercised in appropriate modes and through appropriate individuals or corporate bodies, e.g. Colleges of Bishops and Synods."

A seven-point appendix to that report adds: "In a divided universal Church, the Anglican episcopate shares its peculiar responsibility with those called and chosen to exercise episcopate in the totality of Christ's Church. The Anglican episcopate acknowledges that it has a special obligation to consult with leaders of other Churches and thereby to practise collegiality in a divided Church.

"Anglicans recognise that all exercise of episcopate entails personal loyalty to Christ, commitment to the poor and outcast, willingness to suffer for him, and an open appeal to the common conscience of fellow human beings. "

From that perspective, the primates went on to discuss the working of authority in the world through three working groups: in ecumenism and inter-faith conversation, Christian response to war in a nuclear age, and poverty.

The ecumenism/inter-faith group, working with Archbishop Edward W. Scott of Canada as moderator, agreed that as bishops "in the universal Church of God, exercising their ministry in the Anglican Communion, they were called, even in a divided universal Church, to be symbols of unity

and living links between the local and universal Church and that they had great responsibilities to provide leadership towards ecumenical goals. In this connection we acknowledged our need to have a clearer understanding of our own identity and tradition, especially in relation to our claim for 'comprehensiveness.' "

Specifically, they raised the need for increased inter-faith dialogue, "not simply in third world situations but universally" and commended the documents of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission to the Churches with the hope "that these documents will be widely discussed at all levels. . . in such ways as regional circumstances make desirable."

The discussion on poverty -- led by Archbishop Khotso Makhulu of Central Africa -- ranged over the complex systems and causes of poverty and, in remarks addressed largely to affluent nations pointed out ". . . it would be a serious delusion, especially in our more affluent societies, to imagine that poverty is confined to the lack of material resources, though primary poverty may indeed be located there. There is also intellectual, social and cultural poverty, and most of all, poverty of spirit, expressed, not in terms of humility, but in that spiritual malnutrition which is a consequence of our ignoring God. "

The most definitive statement came from the work of the group exploring Christian attitudes toward war in a nuclear age with Bishop Alastair Haggart, Primus of Scotland, as moderator.

In their paper, the primates pointed out that ancient "just war" theories may be inapplicable to nuclear war. They went on to praise the 1978 U.N. Special Assembly on Disarmament in its calls for comprehensive test bans, a halt to arms trade, and the development of alternative security systems. The statement "strongly commends" a proposal by U.N. secretary general Kurt Waldheim that each nation dedicate 0.1 percent of its defense budget to disarmament research and education.

The statement went on with a specific pledge ". . . to work for multilateral disarmament, and to support those who seek, by education and other appropriate means, to influence those people and agencies who shape nuclear policy. In particular we believe that the SALT talks must be resumed and pursued with determination."

The statement concluded by referring to the Archbishop of Canterbury's National Press Club speech in which the tone of the debate was set: "'We have made a great advance in technology without a corresponding advance in moral sense. We are capable of unbinding the forces which lie at the heart of creation and of destroying our civilization.... It is vital that we see modern weapons of war for what they are -- evidence of madness.' As Christians we recognise a demonic element in the complexity of our world, but we also affirm our belief in the good will and purpose and Providence of God for his whole creation. This requires us to work for a world characterised not by fear, but by mutual trust and justice," the primates said.

Veteran observers pointed out that the major significance of the meeting was not so much in the papers as in what it revealed of the Anglican Communion, which one characterized as "predominantly non-western, diverse in beliefs and increasingly engaged with the problems of the world."

In coming to grips with that, the primates agreed that three of their colleagues from Africa should share the planning and agenda for the next meeting of the group with the Archbishop of Canterbury. These last two meetings have been largely planned by the European and North American segments of the communion and it is expected that the forthcoming meeting -- set for 1984 -- will have a strong influence on the nature, and perhaps the site, of the planned 1988 gathering of the bishops of the communion.

Reflecting on this, the same commentator reported, "Under the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury, it is clear that the more than 50 million members of the Anglican Communion are learning to accept and live with their differences."

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