

# The Archbishop of Canterbury's Advent Letter of 2007: The Significance for Anglican Communion Life

Written by: The Anglican Communion Institute, Inc.  
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The long awaited Advent Letter promised by the Archbishop of Canterbury is now in the public arena. It is a remarkable piece of work—one that deserves careful reading and reflection on the part of all. Its rich theological content and wise procedural protocols will place it, along with the Windsor Report and the Communiqué from Dar es Salaam, in the center of all future discussions of the nature and calling of the Anglican Communion. It should be remembered that statements of this nature are not trial balloons or proxies for our voting, up or down, but rather have the character of Anglican instrumental discourse, to be ranged with other such documents as defining the nature of Anglicanism at a critical time. So they must be assessed with the same level of seriousness with which they are constructed and promulgated.

Among other things The Advent Pastoral seeks to define the Anglican Communion and the role both of the Lambeth Conference and the Archbishop of Canterbury within that Communion. We will say more about the understanding of the nature of communion to be found in the letter, but from the outset the reader should note **the role accorded to the Lambeth Conference and the Archbishop of Canterbury**. The Archbishop's understanding of these matters shapes his entire letter. As well, his views stand in marked contrast to the prevailing opinion of many within The Episcopal Church (TEC). The Lambeth Conference is neither "a canonical tribunal nor a general consultation." Rather, it is "*a meeting of the chief pastors and teachers of the communion seeking an authoritative common voice.*" As stated in the Windsor Report, it is, therefore, the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury "*to articulate the mind of the communion in moments of tension and controversy.*"

In obedience to the role assigned him, the Archbishop makes a trenchant diagnosis of the present crisis within the Communion, warns against unhelpful ways of addressing that crisis, and tracks a way forward that is faithful to the principles upon which life in communion is built. In keeping with the function of the Lambeth Conference the Archbishop urges its bishops to take a constructive part in the upcoming gathering at which it will be necessary to determine "what it means for the Anglican Communion to behave with a consistency that allows us to face...the deeply painful question of who we can and who cannot recognize as sharing the same calling and task."

It will prove tempting to rush to the end of the letter to see the concrete proposals made in respect both to the place of The Episcopal Church (TEC) in the Communion and the various responses of other Provinces to the crisis precipitated by ordination of Gene Robinson. However, to do so will result in hasty judgments, mis-readings of what the Archbishop is saying, and possibly unwise and precipitous forms of action.

The specific judgments contained in the letter, along with the course of future action the Archbishop proposes, follow in the first instance from his articulation of what it means for Anglicans to be in communion. The letter makes clear the long held conviction that the communion of Anglicans rests neither upon a centralized jurisdiction nor upon canon law. Rather it rests upon the ability of the family of churches that make up the communion to **recognize that its various provinces have received the same faith from the Apostles and hold faithfully to it.** Communion is defined by mutual recognition and is sustained by mutual subjection in the body of Christ.

Mutual recognition of this sort is expressed and maintained by common acknowledgment that **all stand under the authority of scripture.** Further, mutual recognition requires that the interpretation of scripture be undertaken as a common enterprise sustained, as the overall thrust of the letter suggests, by the practice of mutual subjection. No Province can interpret scripture on its own. A common reading of scripture is fundamental to communion because it allows each province to recognize that it belongs to a fellowship in which each both proclaims the same good news and shares a common ministry of word and sacrament.

The key to communion is mutual recognition on the part of those who enjoy fellowship in Christ, and it is just such recognition that has been called into question by the recent actions of TEC. In the light of these actions and the incomplete response to the Dar es Salaam Communiqué by TEC's House of Bishops many within the Communion **no longer recognize a church that stands under the authority of scripture, proclaims the same gospel, and shares a common ministry of word and sacrament.** This lack of recognition defines a problem that lies far deeper than the novelties introduced by the recent actions of TEC in the matter of sexual ethics.

With a diagnosis such as this the Archbishop puts on display a crisis of unprecedented proportions within the communion Anglican share. The question is how to respond in a way that coheres with the principles of communion one seeks to preserve. In seeking an answer, the Archbishop has pointed out what he believes are either inadequate or false steps.

### III

In the light of the principles of communion he sets out, the Archbishop presents the response of TEC House of Bishops to the Dar es Salaam Communiqué as at best incomplete and at worst subversive of the Communion's understanding of the gift of Episcopacy. It is not only the case that the House of Bishops has failed to give a pledge that no further blessings will take place. The more significant issue is that the bishops, in suggesting that they must defer in these matters to the actions of TEC's General Convention, **have failed to understand that their special ministry within the church requires them (rather than a convention or synod) to guard its faith and order.** So it is that by their action (or lack thereof) the TEC's bishops have placed in doubt the recognizability of the ministry they claim to share with the rest of the communion.

The Archbishop does note, however, that the TEC bishops have made it clear that they value their place within the Communion and that they wish to remain part of it. Nonetheless, the Advent Letter notes that nothing further can be expected by way of further elucidation on the part of TEC. **The clear implication is then that discussion of TEC's relation to the Communion has entered another stage**-one in which a determination must be made, on the basis of the Bishop's response and the principle of recognizability, concerning TEC's status within the Communion.

TEC's response to the charge of the Primates is inadequate. The reaction to this inadequacy by various provinces, dioceses, and parishes both within and without the U. S. is, however, further complicating and wrong. This is because their actions run in a direction quite contrary to the principles upon which communion rests. *Ad hoc* border crossings on the part of external Provinces and Dioceses and similarly *ad hoc* disaffiliations on the part of parishes and dioceses within the U.S. have been undertaken without reference to a principle on the basis of which one might judge an entire ministry defective. They are consequently contrary to a basic principle of communion that gives advanced credit to all to whom one is bound in Christ, namely, trust that the gospel is being faithfully communicated and faithfully lived out. One can say this without for a moment declaring any moral equivalence between those who seek some remedy in the light of TEC's actions, and those who have failed to respond adequately to what was asked of them. We see no evidence that the Archbishop has confused this issue, and indeed he notes the difficulty created by the decisions of a majority of TEC for a minority which remains keen to declare Windsor compliance, or which has decided under the circumstances to work for a 'solution' at odds with the spirit of conciliar decisions.

Actions of the sort in question should be undertaken, the Archbishop insists, only if it is **determined that the ministry of an entire Province is defective**. No such determination has been made or, at the moment, can be made. The ministry of the many within TEC who do not agree with the direction it has taken (Windsor Bishops and those who favor more radical solutions) simply cannot be judged defective. He leaves open, however, the question of status of the ministry of those who, after being admonished, continue in a direction opposed to the accepted teaching of the Communion.

Finally he notes very practical considerations that argue against these *ad hoc* responses. Among other things they have created confusion, rivalry, and forms of pastoral care from a distance that can hardly be effective. They have also, in contradistinction to the clear admonishment of the Primates, led to lawsuits. It is abundantly clear that recourse to law is now associated in the public eye with the affairs of TEC more than proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We judge the Archbishop's sober appraisal of TEC, at this critical juncture, to be a warrant for continued work for differentiation that does not entail legal entanglements but works **to forge communion alliances within the ample space available for that**.

#### IV

These things being said, the Archbishop recognizes that the Communion faces a genuine issue of the **logic and credibility of recognition**. His invitation to Lambeth is an invitation to make a determination about this issue. The present mind of the Communion is not to bless relations between persons of the same gender. TEC's House of Bishops has not given the requisite

assurances in this matter. Lambeth will not, therefore, be simply for consultation and mutual support. Its purpose will be to determine how to address this issue and then move forward as a communion.

How then does he propose that the Communion prepare for Lambeth? He sets out some very clear guidelines and announces certain very definite plans. His chief guideline is that attendance must imply a willingness to work with those aspects of the Lambeth Conference that relate to the implementing of the Windsor Report, including the proposed covenant. He insists as well that attendance must signal a willingness to ask how the Communion can avoid this sort of crisis in the future.

It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that these conditions place great limits upon the extensive autonomy the present leadership of TEC is claiming. The Archbishop insists that participation in the conference requires engagement with the issue of recognition. Since recognition requires standing together under a common reading of Holy Scripture, those who hold the polycentric, federalist conception of communion common among "progressives" are, at best, being asked if they must not in the name of their own integrity "walk apart" by choosing not to participate. In like manner, conservatives who use the term "biblically orthodox" to describe themselves have been told that invitation to the Lambeth Conference is not "a certificate of orthodoxy." Rather, it is an invitation to struggle together in the Lord **so as to reach a common mind about what constitutes recognizability within the Anglican Communion.** By implication, those who, because of prior judgments, are unwilling to undertake such a struggle must question the propriety of their own participation. We further understand that the Archbishop will be making direct contact with those Bishops in TEC who have made it clear that they are opposed to the direction a generous account of the New Orleans meeting was even prepared to give. That is because hard work lies ahead that would be frustrated by an inability to proceed with a minimal level of trust and mutual recognition.

The hope and prayer of the Archbishop is that those on both the left and the right will not decline the opportunity to engage in a conflict that is part of a process of maturation-part of a process in which the Anglican Communion will realize the gift to the Church Catholic the Archbishop believes it to be. He is, we believe, absolutely right in emphasizing the seriousness of our call in Christ to attend to the hard work he has given us to do as His Body, dying and rising in hope in Him.

## V

The guidelines all call the bishops of the Communion to engagement one with another on the basis of the views expressed in previous meetings of the Lambeth Conference and the suggestions of the Windsor Report that have been accepted by the Instruments of Communion. The same is true of the various courses of action he proposes. Thus, he makes it clear that neither Gene Robinson nor the bishops consecrated in foreign jurisdictions will be invited to Lambeth. To do so would be to affirm actions taken in direct contradiction of the specific requests of the Instruments of Unity. To do so would betray the principle of mutual subjection in the body of Christ.

The other courses of action he announces in like manner are to be guided by the same considerations.

1. The Archbishop will be in direct contact with those who have indicated they are unwilling to participate in the upcoming conference with a view of implementing the recommendations of the Windsor Report and taking those steps necessary to prevent crises similar to the one we now face in the future.
2. He will call a professionally facilitated meeting between the leaders of TEC and "those with whom they are most in dispute, both internally and externally."
3. He will convene a small group of primates and others to work in close cooperation with the Primates, the Joint Standing Committee, the Covenant Design Group, and the Lambeth Conference Design Group in order, among other things, to work on the unanswered questions surrounding TEC's bishops' response from New Orleans and "to consider whether or not it is possible for provinces or individual bishops at odds with the expressed mind of the communion to participate fully in representative communion agencies, including ecumenical bodies."

These courses of action are designed to facilitate a process of recognition. They are designed in a way that forces honest speaking in the Lord. They presuppose that the right way for the church to resolve conflict is through a process that stretches over time and demands both truthfulness and humility. The constraints that he places on this process do not allow for endless prolongation of the present discussion but drive toward its conclusion within a limited period of time.

## VI

It seems to us that the courses of action proposed and the guidelines provided all serve the principle of mutual subjection. The remaining question is what to do as the process plays itself out. In this respect, the Archbishop notes that the parties most affected by the current conflict rejected the proposal made by the Primates to find an interim solution. **We are firmly convinced that some interim solution must be found quickly if further fragmentation of the Communion is to be prevented during the process of finding answers to the difficult questions the Communion faces.**

The Archbishop himself acknowledges the need to find a way for those within TEC who support the direction marked out by the Windsor Report to differentiate themselves from the present leadership of their church. At present both they and the Communion are faced with a bad choice, namely, between the forces represented by the National Headquarters of TEC and those represented by Common Cause Partners. The clear implication of the Advent Letter and the Dar es Salaam Communiqué is that a solution to the **issue of differentiation internal to TEC** is the proper way forward. It is urgent that an American solution to an American problem be found. It is our hope that the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Presiding Bishops of TEC and the leaders of the Windsor Bishops will devote their energies to this issue and find a mutually acceptable solution with all deliberate speed. We fear that if no such action is taken both TEC and the Communion as a whole will be faced with a battle between opposing forces that may well simply tear fabric of our communion apart.

The Anglican Communion Institute is frequently criticized for providing no 'practical solution' for those struggling at this time. We take this opportunity-in the context of an Advent Pastoral that seriously confronts the problems with TEC as a recognizable family member in Communion-to underscore that work continues unabated on our part to see to the emergence of a meaningful, Communion aligned, Windsor alliance of Anglican Bishops in Communion. We believe the Advent Pastoral underscores the necessity of such work and the hopefulness that should attend it. We pledge our continued work to this end, in cooperation with others, and contend that a recognizable Communion presence is indeed available for encouragement in connection with the wider Anglican family, especially at this present moment when TEC as a whole is undergoing such a tremendous challenge of identity and Communion forbearance.

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