The Anglican Prospect

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the prospects for Anglicanism seem stark. Over the past generation lines of conflict have deepened. The issue of human sexuality has become emblematic of crisis. Sexuality has subsumed more than the recognition of gay persons. Questions of biblical interpretation, religious authority, faith formation, and mission have emerged. Historic tensions traceable to colonialism and resource disparity are apparent. Alternative church structures and gatherings have coalesced, notably GAFCON and Global South Anglicans.

The most apparent fault line is between Anglicans in the global South and North. Author Philip Jenkins, an Anglican, has described the sources and outcomes of Christianity’s growth in the post-colonial world. He reiterates an argument familiar to religious traditionalists: that faithfulness in a literalist fashion is conducive to growth in church membership and influence, variation from literalism to decline. Jenkins implies that the disparity between Anglican vitality in the global South and conflict among Anglicans in the North can be ascribed to this distinction.

It is difficult to credit Anglicanism in the global South with uniformity of belief and practice, much less pervasive growth. While the church in West and East Africa has grown remarkably, and growth is seen in portions of South Asia, the church faces a myriad of challenges in these contexts, including internal tensions over basic expressions of faith. External issues faced in various circumstances seem to bear vague relation to the tension over sexuality. These include persecution (such as in Pakistan), decline due to social and political pressure (the Middle East), and the amalgamation of Anglicans into forms of contextual Christianity (China).

At the same time Anglicanism has grown impressively in the quality and quantity of its life in places where theological stance seems unrelated. In portions of Latin America and East Asia, for example, the church seemingly transcends the issues that divide it elsewhere. Anglicans in Mexico and the Philippines, for example, have become independent of Episcopal Church oversight and are moving toward full self-reliance. In various settings the church has shown impressive initiative for social justice, for amelioration of acute health and social crises, and for mediation between persons of different faiths. Anglicans patterns of witness are impressive.

Enough examples of decline and conflict in the global North are sufficient to suggest Jenkins has made an apt generalization. The church’s prospects seem adequately defined by conflict over sexuality and its ramifications. For a generation membership in the Episcopal Church has slipped, and the cause seems to be the strident liberalism of its leadership. Efforts to restructure the church are inconclusive and protracted. Legal battles, parish and diocesan departures to alternative Anglican ties, and diocesan reorganization linger. Widespread local conflicts have drawn the attention of researchers (Duke University’s “Pulpit and Pew” study). At least two seminaries are locked into acrimonious conflict and may be on the verge of closure.

Beyond the Episcopal Church, decline seems to be the prevailing reality, accompanied by conflicts locally and nationally. Close attention to the Church of England reveals an uncertain future at best, and the prospects for the Scottish and Welsh churches seem dire. Elsewhere
sufficient uncertainty and conflict have appeared to justify the conclusion that decline is the widespread Anglican reality. Multiple examples could be cited.

The reality of conflict tied to a variety of issues, not only sexuality, is unavoidable. But crisis cannot be traced to one theological divide, however profound. Two aspects of the conflict over sexuality, and of wider instances of conflict, surface readily and these represent the most pressing issues Anglicans face. The prospect for Anglicanism is not tied to sexuality as such, nor even to the issues immediately linked to it. But two key aspects of the issue are focal.

1. The centrality of contextual life

While church structures at the provincial and international levels wrestle with seemingly intractable challenges, grassroots Anglicanism shows abundant examples of vitality. In the global North, as in the global South, fresh patterns of parish growth are clear. Sheer growth in numbers is apparent in numerous parishes, in some instances remarkable growth. Various American parishes now top two-thousand members, some far more. Christ Church, Charlotte, North Carolina, has doubled in membership in seven years, to more than six-thousand active members. Christ Church, Ponte Vedra, Florida and St. Philip’s Cathedral in Atlanta now top seven-thousand members, and they are not the largest American parishes. All of this growth has occurred in the past decade, when conflict and decline supposedly were definitive.

In far more settings, growth in vitality, if not in numbers, is apparent. Parish life and leadership show strengths that confound assumptions. At the grassroots of the church, life is not defined by allegiance to one or another theological camp. Parishes that thrive put their energies into worship and pastoral ministry, formation and mission. Interestingly, best-selling authors such as Diana Butler Bass, Brene Brown, Jon Meacham, Barbara Brown Taylor, Phyllis Tickle, Lauren Winner in the United States alone are Anglican. A variety of writers, intellectuals, and public figures in the global North remain active Anglicans. Indeed the church’s capacity to attract gifted, influential and dedicated persons seems to have surged.

Interest in spirituality and mission at local levels has proven a fecund mix. Instances of parish-based mission, touching both local and international circumstances, abound. Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, an Episcopalian, has shown the extent and benefit of this trend. If the Anglican prospect hinged solely on local life, there would be much to commend optimism.

At the same time, various provinces of the Anglican world have faced and moved successfully through such major changes as liturgical revision and the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate. Though some continue to find such changes problematic, across the Anglican world large majorities endorse these changes by their patterns of church life. The recent approval of the elevation of women to the episcopate by the Church of England attests to this achievement.

2. The ties that bind

Local examples of vitality, and even forms of conclusive adaptation, do not negate the reality of conflict. In a sense they are enmeshed in it. The paradoxical realities of structural tensions and grassroots vitality demarcate Anglicanism’s central issue today: what holds
Anglicans together? The church has become a myriad of situations, some incomprehensible in the face of others. Even comparisons between patterns of local vitality and conflict from one circumstance to another easily become strained. What prompts vitality, as well as conflict, in one context may have different bearing on vitality in another context.

Further, the historic pillars of the Anglican Communion’s identity -- the Lambeth Conference, primates’ meetings, and the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury, for example -- have faltered. They serve more as occasions to air tensions among Anglicans than to resolve them. In various provinces of the church, clergy and local leaders side-step wider conflicts, and structures, to focus on diocesan and parish life. But this tactical stance begs the over-arching question: what holds Anglicans together?

That is, what structures must be rearticulated and reframed, or created anew in response to Anglicanism’s changed character? What form(s) of authority are both faithful and suitable now? Indeed what measure of uniform faith and practice is necessary for the coherence of Anglicanism as a living faith tradition? How can coherence be achieved practically and not simply proposed theoretically?

The synodical basis of Anglican life is particularly in the vortex. It is the synodical basis that arose as the church became more than an extension of the English state. But in light of the shift to local life, and the extent of conflict, the synodical structures of Anglicanism have faltered. Efforts to advance a “covenant” among Anglicans have become framed by the lines of conflict and thus appear compromised.

To compound the paradox, Anglicans are in ready contact and cooperation with one another on the basis of local initiatives. At times diocesan structures facilitate such contacts. But Anglicans also have created unofficial agencies and linkages without recourse to church structure. Organizations such as the American Friends of the Diocese of Jerusalem, for instance, have won widespread support and perform effectively in conveying resources and building ties. There is important precedent for the rise of such organizations: the CMS and USPG of the Church of England arose in such fashion.

But such efforts link local contexts while largely by-passing institutional structures of mission. They build independent boards, often involving bishops and influential clergy, but pay little heed to synodical proceedings. They work hard to side-step lines of conflict. Anglicanism today shows remarkable vitality, but in defiance of its historic institutional channels and structures of Communion.

In what sense, then, is Anglicanism more than a confederation of church bodies citing the same history and using the same ecclesiastical reference points, but otherwise acting independently if not at odds with one another? The issue before Anglicans is one of coherence. Finding faithful and effective forms of coherence in mission and ministry, in confession and formation, is the issue that frames Anglicanism’s prospect.

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