

Australian Anglican Church in danger

Australian Anglicans who value our relationship to the Church of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury will be dismayed by recent decisions taken by the conservative Global Anglican Futures Conference (Gafcon). These decisions could see moves to take the Anglican Church of Australia out of communion with the Church of England.

At a meeting in Kigali, Rwanda, Gafcon rejected the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Church of England because they have authorised the blessing of same-sex marriages. The Gafcon position is that this is a rejection of Scriptural teaching and therefore of Scriptural authority. It also led Gafcon to reject the key structures that hold the Anglican Communion together (Archbishop of Canterbury; Lambeth Conference; Anglican Consultative Council; the Primates meetings).

Sydney Diocesan leaders were prominent in the Gafcon move. The statement rejecting the Archbishop of Canterbury's authority was prepared by a committee chaired by a Sydney regional bishop, Dr Michael Stead, who is also Chair of the Australian Anglican Church's Doctrine Commission. The Archbishop of Sydney, Kanishka Raffel, is now vice-chair of Global Gafcon.

Given that Sydney Diocese now has majority control of the Australian General Synod, it is entirely conceivable that there might be an attempt to take the Australian Church out of communion with the Church of England, a status upheld in our church's constitution. This is something all faithful Anglicans must resist strongly.

First, is it true that the Church of England has rejected Scriptural authority? The interpretation of Scripture is rarely easy or straightforward. Down through the ages, Christians have disagreed quite markedly on how to interpret certain biblical texts. Indeed, there is a whole theological discipline around issues of biblical interpretation called 'hermeneutics'.

The Kigali Statement sweeps these complexities aside in favour of what it calls the 'plain meaning' of Scripture. But 'plain' according to whom? The claim is that Gafcon's interpretation of Scripture is the only way to interpret the text. They claim to have access to the real (and only) meaning of Scripture and to objective truth, while those who disagree have, to their mind, dismissed biblical authority altogether.

That view is not only untrue but deeply hurtful to faithful Christians who seek to follow biblical teaching and to interpret the text for today's world — people who take into account the diversity of Scripture and the different contexts out of which it arises.

In short, the Church of England has not rejected Scriptural authority, either explicitly or implicitly. It has interpreted the text in one way that may differ from ways in which some other Anglicans read the text. Instead of dismissing and rejecting one another, we need to recognise that we all love and take seriously the Bible as the source of the church's teaching and life. We need to come together in open dialogue in a spirit of respect to listen to one another as together we discern the Bible's meaning for us today.

Second, what can we do to protect the Anglican Church which is our spiritual home? We value a church where differences, and diversity of gifts, convictions and perspectives are welcomed as adding to the rich tapestry of God's wisdom in the Body of Christ. We seek a church where disagreements and conflicts, are borne with. We are committed to finding and living in the truth together and not apart. We believe that this is the tried and tested way in history by which our witness to the love of God in Christ is experienced as transformative and upbuilding. This is the way of a truly comprehensive Anglicanism; something we believe is critical in times of conflict, division and fragmentation.

A number of concerned Anglicans from around Australia have formed the National Comprehensive Anglicanism Network (NCAN), as a base from which a truly comprehensive

Anglicanism in this country can be protected and promoted. We will soon launch a website with resources and mailing list to connect all who desire to uphold the church's unity and witness to the gospel. In the meantime if you wish to register your interest for joining our mailing list, once it is established, please contact support@ncan.au with your details. If you wish to make a donation towards the work of Comprehensive Anglicanism, please contact donations@ncan.au to receive further information.

Grace and peace

Rt Rev'd Dr Stephen Pickard
Chair, National Committee
National Comprehensive Anglicanism Network