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# The Lambeth Conference

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## *The Editor*

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From 18 July until 7 August 1988 some 525 bishops of the Anglican Communion, representing 70 million communicants worldwide, met for the Lambeth Conference on the University of Kent campus at Canterbury. Held every ten years, the Lambeth Conference provides Anglican leaders with the opportunity of discussing together their mutual problems and concerns. These conferences are, therefore, important milestones for Anglicanism and, more recently, for inter-church relationships. The 1988 conference was no exception and extensive publicity was given to it by the media.

There was, of course, one dominant issue, namely the **ordination of women** both to the priesthood and to the episcopate. Delegates were divided over the issue and the Conference appeared to be facing a major crisis which threatened the gradual fragmentation of Anglicanism. Prior to, and during the Conference, signals were being given from all directions. For example, the Orthodox archbishop, John Zizionlas, warned the bishops that a decision by Anglicans to ordain women might seriously impede the search for world church unity. He urged there should be an exhaustive theological debate before a final decision was taken. The Bishop of London, Dr Graham Leonard, spoke strongly against the ordination of women. 'We are trying to stick together', he said, 'but you don't preserve unity by agreeing with what you believe to be contrary to the Gospels'. Dr Leonard suggested that men training for the ministry would need to be sent to separate seminaries. On the other hand, the primates of New Zealand and Canada revealed that they were ready to move forward and ordain women bishops.

The crisis has been temporarily averted by allowing individual provinces to proceed in the matter as they think appropriate while 'maintaining the highest possible degree of communion with the provinces which differ'. The resolution called on Dr Runcie, in consultation with other primates, to appoint a commission to examine relationships between provinces and to consult with other churches. Reporting the decision of the Conference, THE TIMES correspondents were fair and accurate in introducing their articles with the headlines: 'Lambeth Conference votes for compromise as means of preserving Anglican Church unity' and 'Middle path is chosen on women bishops' (2 August 1988). Yes, it was a classical Anglican compromise designed to hold diverse, contradictory views and traditions within one church. Scriptures were used and misused in debating the issue. The Archbishop of Sydney, speaking on behalf of 40 other bishops, considered it wrong to depart from the Scriptures, which had been endorsed by the unvarying tradition of the church. Opponents of the ordination of women obtained some support from the more evangelical bishops of Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria.

In this and other debates, we learned that a new but key word is **reception**, which many bishops are using as a solution to the problem of the ordination of

women. Reception, in this context, means that the final proof of the truth of a new idea in the church is the general consent of all the faithful which is only obtained slowly and patiently. Clifford Longley understands it to be 'a way of explaining a patchy pattern of belief over something important. A church still in the process of receiving something need not think of itself as disunited and, therefore, need not split up into rival factions' (THE TIMES, 21 July 1988).

Other issues, of course, were considered and debated at the Lambeth Conference but there were two earlier addresses which were particularly significant. One was the address by Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian Roman Catholic professor of theology who is, in the words of Dr Runcie, 'one of the founding fathers of the theology of liberation'. His radical theology dominated by Marxist philosophy was warmly received by the bishops. A second address was by Dr Runcie early in the Conference and was entitled, 'The Nature of the Unity we Seek.'

Described as a 'keynote address', in it Dr Runcie was primarily concerned with the need for increasing unity within the Anglican communion, especially in view of controversial issues like the ordination of women. He claimed that unfettered provincial autonomy had led Anglicans into great difficulties. His answer was that there needed to be a strengthening of the central organs of the Anglican communion (including the status and authority of the Lambeth Conference). Runcie did not stop there. Clearly feeling the need for the primacy of one bishop above others, he urged Anglicans through ARCIC to consider positively 'the question of an **episcopal primacy** in the Universal Church...ARCIC...is not proposing restoration but a reform of primacy as a ministry of unity'. The Archbishop of Canterbury referred to a meeting he had with the Pope and other Christian leaders as well as representatives of all the major world religions at Assisi in October 1986: 'At Assisi I saw the vision of a new style of Petrine ministry — an ARCIC primacy rather than a papal monarchy. The Pope welcomed us but then he became in his own words "a brother among brothers"'. And at the end we all bundled into the same bus and the Pope had to look for a seat!

How tragic! How sad! Dr Runcie, with others, is pushing Anglicanism strongly in the direction of Rome but hardly anyone at Lambeth spoke out for the supremacy of Scripture and for those biblical doctrines which our Protestant forefathers prized and even died for. Now I can more readily appreciate the anguish and conflict which some evangelical Anglican ministers feel as they see the church they love move further and further from the Word of God. Our prayers should include such brethren in this difficult situation.

Hot from the press is a book generated by the 1988 Lambeth Conference, **The Study of Anglicanism**, edited by Stephen Sykes and John Booty (SPCK, £17.50). It is a unique work of scholarship and is going to be a standard reference work. Thirty-one contributors from an internationally renowned group of authors represent every strand of contemporary Anglicanism. For those eager to understand the history and theology of Anglicanism, it is compulsory reading.

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