

A Baptist at the 2008 Lambeth Conference

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I have just returned from six exhausting days at the Lambeth Conference. Yes, it was 'full on' from morning to night. I confess that I never made Morning Prayer at 6.30 a.m., but along with most of the bishops I was present at the 7.15 a.m. Eucharist, and from then on there was no stopping. Breakfast was immediately followed by Bible study, which was then immediately followed by 'indaba' groups. Most afternoons and evening were packed with meetings, where attendance was not compulsory, but nonetheless desirable. Furthermore, the conference was tiring not just because of the number of hours one was working, but because of the intensity of many of the sessions. Unlike Spring Harvest or the Baptist Assembly, this was not a 'jolly' - this was hard work.

I went to the Lambeth Conference to represent the Baptist World Alliance for the second week of its proceedings (Geoff Colmer had been there for the first week). There were over twenty ecumenical guests: for instance, an Australian Seventh Day Adventist from the USA, an English Salvation Army officer from Denmark, a Scottish representative of the Reformed Churches from the USA, a member of the Uniting Church of Australia representing the Methodists, and also representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, and other churches too. We were a motley crew, who were made most welcome by our Anglican friends. Like all the bishops and their spouses we went around with purple bands round our necks - with the result that I was constantly addressed as 'bishop' by the stewards! Some bishops were surprised to discover that I was not in some form of trans-local ministry: however, I delighted to inform them that in Baptist ecclesiology there is no higher office for a minister to attain than to be a pastor of a local church!

I am very conscious that I was only present for six days, and in particular that I was not able to be present for the final two days of the conference. My impressions therefore are inevitably limited in their significance. In writing this article I feel like a tourist visiting a foreign country for the first time - it is relatively easy to make all kinds of judgments after the first week, but the longer one remains in the country the more tentative those judgments become. Nonetheless, acknowledging my limitations, let me jot down some reflections:

1. The Lambeth Conference was a wonderful sign of the transforming power of Jesus Christ in bringing together men and women of vastly differing cultures and making them one. Would that the media could get that message! Yes, of course there were differences - major differences, not least relating to attitudes to human sexuality. But these differences paled into insignificance in comparison with our unity in Jesus. I confess that I was very sad that some 200 evangelical Anglican

bishops (including three from England) failed to attend the Lambeth Conference. Although as a fellow evangelical I share many of their concerns, I believe that they were wrong not to attend, for our oneness in Christ surely transcends our differences. Furthermore, in our conversations (which were not at all limited to human sexuality and ranged over every possible Christian issue) we needed to hear their voices - and they needed to hear the voices of others too.

2. The Lambeth Conference was a wonderful sign of cultural diversity in Christ. I found it significant that there were eight official conference languages - and a host of others which were used too. Unlike Baptist World Alliance meetings, people were not expected to use English, but rather they were encouraged to use their mother tongue. So, for instance, parts of the Eucharist were conducted in Chinese, French, Spanish, Urdu, as also in the languages of Burundi and of the indigenous people of North America. All of us had head-sets, or had access to printed English versions of the liturgy, so all of us could follow. I appreciated the effort which the Anglican Church made to take seriously other cultures.
3. The Lambeth Conference highlighted the importance of rooting our lives in bread and wine. The 7.15am celebration of the Lord's Supper was the main service of the day. Yes, there was Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, but first and foremost there was the Eucharist. I found this both an inspiration and a challenge. The morning communion services were inspirational in that the worship was rich in content, the music was superb, the brief sermons were thought-provoking. The style was not at all 'charismatic' (although on one occasion I did spot two people raising an arm!), yet God was undoubtedly present with us through his Spirit. The communion services were also challenging in that they revealed the poverty of the way in which many Baptist churches celebrate the Lord's Supper. We Baptists may pride ourselves on the way we baptise, but increasingly when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we 'dumb it down': in some of our churches even the words of institution and the prayer of thanksgiving are disappearing, and it becomes an occasion for 'fellowship' rather than for true 'celebration'.
4. The Lambeth Conference highlighted the importance of studying the Scriptures. Every morning we engaged in hour and a quarter of Bible study. All of us (including the Archbishop of Canterbury) were in small groups of six or seven bishops, studying the 'I am' sayings found in John's Gospel. Interestingly, the Scripture passages for discussion were first of all read in the morning communion service - and were then read again in the small group. The diversity of cultures represented in the Bible study groups gave an added depth to the study.
5. The Lambeth Conference highlighted the importance of listening to one another. In many Christian conferences the emphasis is on the 'set pieces' when we come to listen to a famous Christian 'personality'. But at Lambeth the cult of personality was not at all present. True, there were three plenary 'presidential' addresses by the Archbishop of Canterbury, but otherwise he, along with other archbishops, acted just like one of the conference participants. To my amazement, this was a conference of 'equals'. So in our discussion groups ('indaba' groups as they were

known) the emphasis was on listening to one another. Each of these groups was about 35 in number, but they then broke down into small groups of five or six. Notes were made on all the discussions that took place - the written record of these notes was then examined the following day, and where necessary corrected. The notes were then amalgamated with the notes of all the other 'indaba' groups. There were then 'hearings' at which the resulting amalgamated notes were critiqued and further amended. It was an incredibly complex process. However, the point of the process was to ensure that everybody had been truly listened to. I have never known a Baptist church meeting, let alone a Baptist conference, listen to one another so carefully! People truly 'conferred'.

6. Although there were many issues on the agenda, this Lambeth Conference will be judged by the way in which the bishops sought to deal with the issue of human sexuality. From the beginning the Archbishop of Canterbury made it clear that there would be no going back on Resolution 1.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference, which rejected homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, and which therefore could not "advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions". In 2004 the Windsor Report was produced requesting three 'moratoria' in relation to the public Rites of Blessing of same sex unions, the consecration to the episcopate of those living in partnered gay relationships, and the cessation of cross-border interventions (i.e. inter-provincial interventions, in which bishops from other Anglican provinces provide pastoral support for churches not in their 'jurisdiction'). The Windsor Continuation Group has made it clear that these moratoria not only refer to both future actions, but is also retrospective: that is that it requires the cessation of activity.

The difficulty the Anglican Communion have is that each Province is quite literally a law to itself - the Archbishop of Canterbury has no legal authority over other Provinces. As is well-known, the Episcopal Church of America flouted the moral authority of the Archbishop and consecrated Gene Robinson, a divorced priest living in a gay relationship, as Bishop of New Hampshire.

This is not the place to go into all the arguments 'pro' and 'con'. Suffice it to say that, theologically, the debate appears to be between those concerned for justice for the 'marginalised' (i.e. the gay, lesbian and bi-sexual community) and those concerned to uphold the demands of what they see as biblical holiness. However, I am increasingly of the view that theology is not the whole story, and that to a larger or greater degree the underlying issue is not theology, but rather a struggle for power by both liberals and conservatives alike. In this I am reminded of the Southern Baptist Convention's withdrawal from the Baptist World Alliance, where theology was all too often used as a smoke screen for power.

Whatever the rights and wrongs, the Anglican Communion is in turmoil. The issue which the Lambeth Conference faced - and which the Anglican Communion still faces - is how can these differences be resolved? Or in the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury to his bishops: "What personal sacrifices might it involve for each of us?" To my mind at this stage the only possible way forward is for both liberals (some of whom currently bless same sex unions) and

conservatives (some of whom 'interfere' in the jurisdictions of the more liberal bishops) to accept Resolution 1.10 from Lambeth 1998 and to implement all the moratoria as found in the 2004 Windsor Report. This would involve 'sacrifices' on the part of both the liberals and the conservatives, but sadly I question whether either side is actually willing to make such compromises. Were the moratoria to be accepted, then this would perhaps give more time for the Anglican Communion to find a way through their differences. As Baptists we need to pray for a resolution to this very painful situation, not least because our own witness is affected. The world does not distinguish between Anglicans and Baptists: it just sees a divided church, and such a perception is a great hindrance to mission.

Finally, the Lambeth Conference should not be judged by what is written in the media. Every day I bought a copy of *The Times*, and every day I marvelled at the misrepresentation of the previous day's events! But it is not just the secular press which misrepresents - there is also much misrepresentation in the church press. For instance, as I write I have before me an article from a denominational newspaper with the headline: "Evangelicals: get ready to be pilloried". The article then goes on to state: "Evangelical Anglicans are going to have to get used to two-and-a-half weeks of being accused, lied about and generally having their views abused during the Lambeth Conference". What utter nonsense! My experience of the Lambeth Conference was that everybody was treated with great courtesy.