



World Council of Churches 9th General Assembly
Porto Alegre, Brazil, 14 - 23 February 2006
'God, in your grace, transform the world'

Visit to WCC General Assembly by
Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury

(from brief notes taken at the meeting)

The Archbishop paid a 24 hour visit to the Assembly, so was very busy during the day. As it was the same day that President Lula of Brazil was visiting, he found himself in second place in the security/room allocation/popular support queue! I caught a fleeting glimpse of him surrounded by carers being escorted to a comfort stop through crowds of local people who probably didn't know who he was.

At 8:30 am, he spoke to a small lecture theatre full of members of the Anglican Communion from many parts of the world. He addressed the questions: **What is constructive in the Anglican Communion? Why bother with the Communion? Why is it difficult at the moment?**

What is constructive?

Archbishop Rowan spoke firstly of the paradox created by the fact that the public stories about the problems of the Anglican Communion seem very alarming, whereas the realities on the ground are very creative and encouraging. Those involved in theological education within the Communion are enthusiastic people. Christianity takes it for granted that everyone should grow in understanding as well as faith and this means a study of theology. There is future planning for more lay education, across several different levels of ministry, including bishops. What is the Anglican way? A learning church, with foundations laid for the long term.

The Anglican Communion is also sharing more deeply about how to respond internationally to crises and development delivery. It has a unique role where resources need mobilising quickly, especially in Africa.

Why bother?

The Anglican Communion is not a tidy and organised body as (we like to think) other churches are. It should not become a liberal western elite, simply a religious version of well-meaning western society, OR an anti-intellectual post-missionary society which cannot meet its members' deepest needs, because if this happens, the two 'sides' will never know each other. They need each other, not just for financial support, but also for spiritual maturity. The enemy of all this is 'we can do without you'.

Why difficult?

There are complicated relations of power involved. There is the perception that western elites rule and manipulate, which complicates matters. Westerners are perceived as white, if not always English. In a good church, members can recognise in each other the same sorts of discipline, can see in one another the same patterns of obedience. The way they act and decide should show this. The 'southern' churches in the Communion can't recognise at the moment the patterns of obedience in the north. On the other hands, the 'northern' churches can't recognise at the moment some extreme perceptions of scripture which seem sometimes to be exercised in an idolatrous way. All need to listen and look informally, in fellowship and through existing mutual projects. For example, the Mothers' Union is a very strong agency of unity of the Anglican Communion. It builds relationships which allow change.

The Communion needs to build a future which is not polarised, where its members can share patterns of obedience to Christ which may not be the same, but may be recognised.

Archbishop Rowan asked people to step back, to cooperate in prayer, because it is worth it, although we have no idea what God's purpose is. To stop being bitterly and desperately anxious, because it would not be right to share that with the world. God has a purpose for us all. He asked for people to pray for him too.

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Canon Kenneth Kearon, Secretary General to the Anglican Communion, spoke of how things were progressing institutionally at this time of tension, and the work of reconciliation. The major work of his office is theological education, ecumenism, mission and evangelism. The Windsor Report came out in October 2004 and went to the Primates in 2005. Responses were now awaited from US and Canadian members of the Anglican Advisory Council, and the global south.

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Questions were asked by:

A young American working in Honduras asked if the perception he had of greater curialisation in the Anglican Communion was accurate. The Archbishop did not accept this.

A speaker from El Salvador expressed in Portuguese his great disappointment that there had been no interpretation provided for this session with the Archbishop. He had not been able to understand much of what had been said. There was a chorus of assent from many of those present. Apologies were given by Rev Gregory Cameron from the Anglican Communion office, who explained that the visit by the Brazilian President that same day had meant that facilities and rooms had been very difficult to arrange. Others asked if there could be ad hoc interpretation offered now, and it was arranged on an informal basis, very quickly.

A Colombian speaker asked if the Archbishop was planning to visit Latin America again shortly.

Brenda Harrison from the UK asked if there were strategies to give effect to the listening process, to avoid persecution of those involved in the discussion.

A speaker from Aotearoa New Zealand asked how the Anglican Communion supported the ministry of indigenous peoples.

A Canadian speaker asked for clarification of the Church of England Synod's recent decision to disinvest from the Caterpillar project. The Archbishop explained that the decision was not to disinvest but to determine whether the Church of England should profit from projects with ambiguous morality.

A speaker from Sri Lanka made two suggestions of resources which could contribute to reconciling the two extremes in the current situation: to use the experience of conflict and its healing in many regions of the Communion; and to use the experience of pluralism in many regions going back centuries, which can lead to a sensitivity to the presence of the other.

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Time ran out with much left not discussed. The swiftly arranged interpretation had helped, but of course then things took longer. Fortunately the times when the Archbishop spoke later in the day were in rooms where formal interpretation facilities were available.

We felt that there was tension and expectation among those present, but perhaps a sense of a Communion hanging on rather than hanging together.