

**Communion Partner Christians**  
**Advent 2, Year A**  
**Romans 15: 4-9**  
**5 December 2010**

The Swiss City of Konstanz is these days a quiet lakeside university town of about 80,000 people. But between the years 1414 and 1418 it was the centre of the western church. The Council of Konstanz was called to deal with a situation as bad as anything the church has ever known. Three rival Popes, one at Pisa, one at Avignon, one in Rome were contending for the loyalty of a divided Christian world.

The Council delegates dealt with this situation of schism in a resolute manner. All three anti-Popes, as it called them, were deposed, and they then put their own legitimate candidate in place. And they didn't stop there. A series of reform measures were put in place to get the western church back on track. Throughout Europe Christians sat up and took notice. Many were enthusiastic about this new way of resolving the relationship issue of how the universal church could relate to the local churches – the Pope acting in concert with a Council of local church leaders across the Christian world.

However, a few years later a revived Papacy got ahead of the conciliar movement, and made very sure that nothing like the Council of Konstanz could happen again. From now on the Pope would be calling the shots in any significant gathering of bishops, monks and theologians. But the memory of what had happened at Konstanz didn't go away. In fact it exercised a powerful shaping influence on several of those who brought what we now call the Church of England into existence about a century later at the Reformation.

Sometimes Scripture and contemporary church situation come together in a remarkable way. Paul's appeal to the Roman Church to, "accept one another as Christ accepted you," speaks to a situation of considerable tension around a liberal attitude and a conservative attitude as to whether it is legitimate to eat food sacrificed to idols. The advice being offered is that liberals should restrict their liberty of choice and behaviour out of regard for their conservative brothers and sisters, and that conservatives should value the place of liberals in the church. Christians have access to a unique and remarkable dimension of community belonging, a rich texture of fellowship that you can almost run your fingers through. True liberality and true conservatism will ensure that this bond of life giving connection is nourished and maintained through thick and thin.

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, has called the Primates of the Anglican Communion to meet in Ireland at the end of January. Given the tensions within the Communion right now the meeting will be of considerable significance. But just in the last fortnight the

GAFCON Primates, the group that refused to turn up to the last Lambeth conference and then staged their own rival event in Jerusalem, have announced that they won't be coming to this meeting either. What is more they won't be supporting the Covenant, the proposed voluntary agreement between Anglican provinces, whereby they would promise to behave in a mutually accountable and interdependent manner towards one another, with no surprises and no unilateral action in future.

The GAFCON leaders want the Archbishop of Canterbury to disinvite the Presiding Bishop of the American Episcopal Church and the Archbishop of Canada to the Ireland meeting. In fact they would like to see the American and Canadian Anglican churches cast out of the Communion. Whereas influential liberal voices within the American and Canadian Anglican churches would like to export what they see as their enlightened approach to partnered gay relationships to every part of the Anglican world, and don't intend to let any outside agency restrict their freedom of action to order their church accordingly.

It is a situation in which extremists on both sides are dragging us towards a state of impaired communion. Instead of the divergent parts of the Anglican Communion calling down anathemas and excommunications on one another they just drift apart, not turning up to one another's important meetings anymore, and just making their own arrangements with the like minded to deal with problems and opportunities. In a situation like this you find out the status of inter Provincial relations through a variety of practical situations – could an American Anglican theologian be invited to teach at a Nigerian theological College – could a conservative Nigerian priest be allowed to become Vicar of an American parish?

Many focus on the gay issue as the determining factor in the contest. But is it? In my opinion Paul gets to the heart of the matter in what he had to say to us this morning. God, acting through Jesus Christ, has pulled off a sociological miracle in bringing Jew and Gentile together in this new creation the church. The way in which the Divine persons relate to one another within the Godhead sets the tone for the way relationships should flow within the church. Out of a mutual regard for one another, and out of the love for the church as the most rewarding community in their lives, Christians look for novel solutions to thorny issues in a God centred way. The issue becomes not what does my surrounding culture or society expect of us in this situation, but what does God want to happen here? Often the answers that emerge are a surprise to everyone, requiring mutual adjustments on all sides.

My prayer is that Anglican leaders who are in the thick of these difficult and decisive contestations will take these Pauline insights to heart. Let us hope that cool heads prevail in the days ahead.

But what about us, living at the bottom of the world, unable to influence the march of events, wondering what we might do if our Church fails to respond to the challenge of developing an effective sense of our Church operating at the world wide and universal level?

As the General Convention of the Episcopal Church came to an end at Anaheim, having passed a series of resolutions that were bound to enrage and alienate a substantial section of the world wide Anglican family, a small group of American bishops made a declaration. Their message was this. We don't agree with what has been done here, in fact we think that our Church is now off on a disastrous trajectory. But we are not leaving - schismatic behaviour is unproductive. We are staying on as a loyal opposition. Furthermore we consider that our primary allegiance is to the Anglican Communion as a whole, and to the Archbishop of Canterbury as its symbolic head. We will do what we can to fit in with the requirements of the Episcopal Church in those matters that do not affect our conscience. But we won't co-operate with those measures that we consider to be just wrong in every way. And we will work untiringly for the discovery and recovery of a worldwide sense of Anglican belonging, a valuing of the universal sense of the church. The world wide councils of the church should make the big decisions that really count in the lives of Anglican Christians.

This strand of Anglican life is called Communion Partner dioceses – and principally the dioceses of South Carolina and Central Florida represents it.

Their theological think tank is called the Anglican Communion institute. You can find their papers and opinion leaders by typing in Anglican Communion institute on google. Their approach to our current difficulties and challenges is close to mine.