

Mission and Disintegration in Global Anglicanism from the 1960s through 2022: An Update to Stephen Neill's *Anglicanism*

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Abstract

Stephen Neill's masterpiece *Anglicanism*, published in 1965, still has fans and sponsors. This is especially true in the hispanophone world where well-researched resources on Anglicanism are hard to find.

The purpose of this article is to provide a summary of some important events that have deeply formed and influenced what is today global Anglicanism. Anglicanism is less centralized—not that it has ever been very centralized—than in 1960, and it is also much more heterogeneous and varied than it was then. This article briefly recounts developments in four key areas: theology, jurisdictions, Lambeth Conferences, and demography.

Key Words: Anglican, Canterbury, GAFCON, ordination

Theology

Perhaps the main theological—and ecclesiological and liturgical and thus missiological—development in the Anglican Communion was the introduction of women's ordination. The first woman ordained to the priesthood in the Communion was Florence Li Tim-Oi. She was ordained on 25 January 1944 by Ronald Hall, Bishop of Victoria, Hong Kong, in response to the crisis among Anglican Christians in China caused by the Japanese invasion. To avoid controversy, she resigned her licence (though not her priestly orders) after the end of the war.

The first woman ordained to the episcopate in the Anglican Communion was Barbara Harris, an African-American woman of the diocese of Massachusetts. She was ordained as a bishop suffragan in 1989. Since then a number of provinces, predominantly white and anglophone, have ordained other women as bishops. A number of provinces appear to allow for the ordination of a woman as a bishop, but none have yet to appoint or elect a woman for that position.

The introduction of women's ordination was unacceptable to some Anglo-Catholics. Some of them tried to continue within their jurisdictions requesting oversight from bishops who had not and would not ordain women, seeing it as an action that could call into question or even nullify apostolic succession.

In England a compromise was reached whereby congregations and their priests could request a provincial episcopal visitor (PEV), who were popularly known as "flying bishops." This concept of episcopacy by affinity (rather than territorial location) would grow and become a key factor in global Anglicanism.

Groups of Anglo-Catholics seeking reunion with the See of Peter had approached bishops of Rome requesting guidance. Some were from within the Communion, while others came from separated churches known popularly as the Anglican Continuum or Continuing Anglicans.

John Paul II had, in 1980, promulgated the Pastoral Provision, whereby an Anglican (or other Protestant) priest could be received into the Roman Catholic Church and then be ordained again. Rome had long ago decided that Anglican orders were null and void, but in this curious move the pontiff also decided that the vocation to the priesthood may well have been authentic.

As a result, the novelty of Roman Catholic priests with wives and children surfaced in places where the local bishops would allow for it. In 2009 Pope Benedict XVI promulgated the document *Anglicanorum Coetibus*. This allowed for the erection of personal ordinariates whereby groups of Anglicans would be received into full communion with Rome while also retaining what was, in effect, their own diocese. (A personal ordinariate is a structure akin to a diocese, though membership is not based on geographical location, but connection to the person of the ordinary, that is, the head priest/bishop of the ordinariate.) Again, territory was moved to the side and affinity—here, Anglican hymnody and a modified prayer book—was moved to the center. There are presently three such ordinariates: The Chair of Saint Peter (the USA and Canada, 2012), Our Lady of Walsingham (Great Britain, 2011), and Our Lady of the Southern Cross (Australia and Japan, 2012). In this way elements of Anglican liturgy, hymnody, homiletics, spirituality, piety, and polity have been reinserted into the Church of Rome. The year 2021 saw the famous scholar, human rights activist, and former bishop of Rochester, Dr. Michael Nazir Ali, enter the Ordinariate in England and receive Roman Catholic ordination to the priesthood. (Nazir Ali was instrumental in the founding of GAFCON, which will be discussed below.)

If women's ordination was the occasion for some Anglicans to find other pastures, a greater debacle was related to the question of human sexuality: Could holy matrimony be celebrated by two persons of the same sex? Of the same gender? Were there ethical grounds anymore for barring non-celibate gay people from holy orders? Others answered that Scripture was very clear on that matter: that sexual relations between two people of the same sex were clearly prohibited and decreed as sinful. But revisionist scholars answered with novel reinterpretations of passages from Genesis to Revelation. The issue reached a boiling point in 2003 when the Rev. Vicky Gene Robinson—a divorced man who was gay and living in a same-sex relationship—was elected bishop coadjutor of the small diocese of New Hampshire (USA). The House of Bishops of the USA, against the advice of the Archbishop of Canterbury, approved his election.

For many evangelicals this was a step too far. They had different opinions about women's ordination, but, for them, Robinson's election was a clear violation of Scripture, not to mention the position of Lambeth 1998 that clearly stated that all sex outside of the marriage of a man and a woman was sinful and immoral. The Americans, convinced of the justice of their cause, proceeded despite the warnings.

Without going into too many details, this matter would eventually lead (with many twists and turns, and much nuance and controversy) to the birth of the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON), which first met in Jerusalem in 2008. It also led to the secession of several dioceses from the Episcopal Church (USA) and the formation, along with other likeminded Anglicans, of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) in 2009.

It is difficult to know how to describe GAFCON. It is not a rival to the Anglican Communion, really, because a large majority of the Anglican Communion is in fact part of GAFCON. But GAFCON has launched ministry initiatives, including missionary dioceses and even new provinces, that overlap with jurisdictions of the Anglican Communion. Nor is it reasonable to ask—as some have—if GAFCON might leave the Communion: it is the large majority of the Communion. Who is GAFCON? This is their answer:

The Gafcon movement is a global family of authentic Anglicans standing together to retain and restore the Bible to the heart of the Anglican Communion. Our mission is to guard the unchanging, transforming Gospel of Jesus Christ and to proclaim Him to the world. We are founded on the Bible, bound together by the

Jerusalem Statement and Declaration of 2008, and led by a Primates Council, which represents the majority of the world's Anglicans ([“About GAFCON”](#)).

The unfolding of the events of 2003, wherein the American province ignored the clear position of the Communion, led to a further conclusion by other Anglicans: if they can do it, why can't we? Anglicans, like other catholic Christians, had an ancient tradition of territorial bishoprics. But if one province of the Communion could, without any real, observable punishment or discipline, ignore other ancient traditions (like not ordaining gay men in same-sex unions), then why could we not do the same? From their point of view, these other Anglicans were receiving pleas for help from parishes and even entire dioceses. Numerous meetings with the archbishops of Canterbury and Primates' Meetings resulted in no significant or real discipline. (A primate is a senior bishop or archbishop who has the role of representing the entire province before the Communion.) It was clear, then, that evangelical and Anglo-Catholic provinces could likewise ignore the ancient tradition of not crossing episcopal boundaries and there would be no negative consequences. The Americans (and later the Canadians) had discarded an ancient principle in the name of “justice”; these others could discard another one in the name of “mission” and pastoral exigency. And they did.

In sum, questions of gender and sex have been at the center of much of the theological development of the last decades. But these are theological issues, though both sides have failed to clearly enunciate this at times. One side is certain that they are on the side of justice, while the other is certain that they are the biblical Christians. Meanwhile, many Anglicans around the world have their own opinions on the matter but do not feel that the battle is important enough to definitively take sides. Still others do not feel they have the liberty to provoke wealthy friends in the West by emphasizing the issue, even when they disagree.

Jurisdictions

In 1979 the Church of Nigeria separated from the Province of West Africa to become its own province.

In 1980 the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church and the Lusitanian Catholic Apostolic Evangelical Church were accepted into the Communion, though both had been established many years before.

In 1981 the five dioceses of Argentina—previously extra-provincial to Canterbury—became the Province of the Southern Cone, later (2014) to be renamed the Anglican Church of South America. In 1995 five dioceses in Mexico were officially recognized as the Anglican Church of Mexico. In 1998 the Anglican Church in the Central Region of America likewise became an autonomous province of the Communion, with its five dioceses of Panama, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. At first, the idea had been floated that the other dioceses of Province IX (an administrative region of the Episcopal Church [USA], not a province of the Anglican Communion) would likewise become an autonomous province. To date, however, this has not happened, and Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Central Ecuador, Litoral Ecuador, Honduras, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela all remain dioceses of the Episcopal Church (USA). In 2018 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church (USA) voted to readmit the diocese of Cuba.

In 1992 the Episcopal Church of Rwanda separated from the Province of Rwanda, Burundi, and Boga Zaire. In 2007 the name of the province was changed, replacing the word Episcopal with Anglican.

The Anglican Ordinariates were mentioned above, reminding us that theological issues are always, and also, jurisdictional. GAFCON has branches or provinces in New Zealand (2019), Brazil (2018), Australia (2015), and North America (2009) that not only are not part of the Communion but also overlap with members of the Communion. The ACNA ordained a missionary bishop for the United Kingdom and Europe in 2017.

In 2011 the Republic of South Sudan gained independence from Sudan. Sudan is largely Muslim and South Sudan largely Christian, with some communities practicing indigenous religions. South Sudan decided to use English as its main language, as opposed to the Arabic of Sudan. These and other factors led to local Anglicans requesting recognition as the autonomous Province of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan. This was granted by the Anglican Consultative Council and other authorities in 2017.

In 2018 the Anglican Church of Chile, originally the diocese of Chile of the Anglican Church of South America, was likewise recognized as a new province of the Anglican Communion—both are also members of GAFCON, incidentally.

In 2020 a substantial rearrangement of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East was concluded. That province had consisted of four rather disparate dioceses:

- Jerusalem (including Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, and Syria),
- Egypt (including the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia, and North Africa but not Morocco, which is under the Church of England’s Diocese of Gibraltar in Europe),
- Iran (barely functioning), and
- Cyprus and the Gulf States (whose membership is almost entirely expatriate).

Egypt withdrew from the province, split into four dioceses, and was recognized as the 41st province of the Communion under the name of the Episcopal/Anglican Province of Alexandria. This took place in 2020 with the four dioceses being Egypt, North Africa (again, minus Morocco), the Horn of Africa, and Gambella (a region in Ethiopia).

Finally, in February of 2021 a new Anglican jurisdiction (not in the Anglican Communion, but in GAFCON) came into being: the Anglican Network in Europe. It consists of the already-existing Anglican Mission in England (AMiE), which also cared for churches in Scotland that left after the Scottish Episcopal Church changed its canon on marriage to allow same sex unions, and the newly formed Anglican Convocation in Europe. Initial clergy are from England, Scotland, and Portugal.

Lambeth Conferences

Beginning in 1867 the Archbishop of Canterbury started to invite all Anglican bishops to his palace at Lambeth for consultation and adjudication. Lambeth Conferences were held in the following years of the twentieth century: 1908, 1920, 1930, 1948, 1958, 1968, 1978, 1988, 1998 and then a conference—or, more precisely, Indaba—in 2008. For the conferences in 2008 and 2022, primates from some of the most populous provinces have declined to attend.

Lambeth Conferences regularly issued statements that were, famously, non-binding on topics like ecumenical relations with the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, Lutherans, Reformed Churches, and other traditions. Statements were issued on social and political issues related to war and unrest in different parts of the world. Various statements regarding women’s ordination were issued, but—since they were non-binding—provinces and dioceses did as they pleased. The 1968 Conference passed Resolution 43 which suggested that assent to the 39 Articles of Religion no longer be required of ordinands (“Resolution 43”). Lambeth 1988 was presided over by Archbishop Robert Runcie and there were over 500 bishops present.

Lambeth 1998 was presided over by George Carey. There were over 740 bishops present, including, for the first time, some women bishops. The 1998 conference is, even outside the Anglican world, considered by many to be a landmark (or history marker) in that it represents the first time that a global body of Christian leaders voted against the explicit will of the majority of wealthy, white, Western bishops: “What emerged was a major divide between conservatives and liberals. The global shift in Anglicanism was asserting itself. The post-colonial fight-back, with support from Western conservatives, meant that the final Lambeth resolution was toughened with the insertion of a brief text declaring that ‘homosexual practice is incompatible with Scripture’” (Chapman 2006).

In so far as there is any official position of the Anglican Communion on the issue, this is it. But, as has been demonstrated above, the so-called instruments of unity were either unwilling or unable to apply any sort of discipline to provinces that disregarded the Communion’s position from 1998. Americans (and by extension anyone else) could completely disregard Lambeth, the Primates’ Meetings, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Anglican Consultative Council and still receive invitations to the Lambeth Conference.

(Since the Communion does not have a common canon law or court, the four Instruments of Unity, also called the Instruments of Communion, have been identified as things that unite the Communion in mission and fellowship, if not in jurisprudence. They are the person of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Primates’ Meetings, and the Anglican Consultative Council.)

By 2008, the Lambeth “Conference” was no longer a conference where juridical and canonical issues would be debated and adjudicated. Rowan Williams opted for practical training in “effective, truthful and prayerful mission,” and he ruled out revisiting 1998’s Resolution 1.10, cited above. He also emphasized listening to different voices. But by 2008 many conservatives had concluded that “listening” was a code word signifying lack of discipline for the heterodox and even the heretical. Many conservatives—evangelical and Anglo-Catholic—believed that what was needed was decisive, disciplinary action, which was precisely what Williams had ruled out.

Only around 670 bishops were present, as numerous bishops from the non-Western world decided not to attend. Four Anglican primates announced they were boycotting the meeting—Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda. By that time the active membership of the first three of these four provinces was greater than that of the Church of England. A very large portion of active Anglicans in the world were not represented by their bishops at Lambeth 2008.

The first meeting of the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) took place in Jerusalem from 22-29 June 2008. GAFCON’s foundational statement, the Jerusalem Declaration, was issued. Later global meetings of GAFCON would take place in Nairobi (2013) and Jerusalem (2018). To reiterate, a large majority of the members of the Anglican Communion are also, simultaneously, a large majority of the members of GAFCON. Some provinces of GAFCON have announced impaired communion or broken communion with certain provinces of the Communion (i.e., the ones who have decided to ordain non-celibate gay people to the presbyterate and also, in some cases, to the episcopate, and then later transgender people as well).

Section K of the Indaba “reflections” was on the “Windsor Process,” which sought to salvage some semblance of unity and interdependence after the 2003 ordination of Robinson to the episcopate. The Windsor Process was by all accounts an utter and complete failure. This same section also mentions the so-called Instruments of Communion (§146), attempting to

bolster the Instruments' role in the governance and guidance of the Communion, but to no avail.

Section B on Mission and Evangelism commended the five marks of mission (§42) to the Communion. Those marks are to:

1. proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God;
2. teach, baptize and nurture new believers;
3. respond to human need by loving service;
4. seek to transform unjust structures of society; and
5. strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth.

These marks of mission have provided a locus for thought and action in mission in many parts of the Communion.

From 2000 on, the Primates of the Communion have also held regular meetings every year or two. According to the Anglican Communion website, “The Primates have no authority as a body and their own national churches determine how their ministry is carried out in their own context. The customs and responsibilities vary between provinces. The Primates' Meeting was established in 1978 by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan, as an opportunity for ‘leisurely thought, prayer and deep consultation’.”

In February 2005, the Primates met in Dromantine, Ireland. They received the Windsor Report, which as noted above came to nothing, said that many were “deeply alarmed” by the ordination of non-celibate, gay bishops in the USA and Canada, but acknowledged that those elections had taken place “in accordance with their constitutional processes and requirements.” They expressed a commitment to pastoral care for homosexual people. As with all the non-binding communiqués of this body which has “no authority as a body,” these words were, to quote Shakespeare, “sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

The 2020 meeting communiqué says not a word about homosexuality, LGBTQ, or same-sex attraction. However, various people who attended remarked that the meeting took seriously the divisions in the Communion (Davies 2020). It is now customary for some primates from GAFCON provinces not to attend these primates' meetings. For instance, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Uganda all declined the invitation to the 2020 meeting in the Kingdom of Jordan.

The most recent Lambeth Conference was in July 2022. Some 650 bishops attended, continuing the decline in numbers which started with Lambeth XIV in 2008. As with Lambeth XIV, many bishops from the most populous provinces decided not to attend because Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby had decided to invite bishops who were in same-sex unions.

At this 2022 Conference, a group called the Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GSFA) sought to reaffirm that Lambeth 1998 1.10 was still the official position of the Communion. (According to their website, the GSFA are, “...a worldwide fellowship (‘koinonia’) of orthodox Anglican Provinces and Dioceses within the Anglican Communion. Presently, approximately 25 Provinces belong to our fellowship. We have a history rooted in mission from as far back as 1994.”) Initially, a time had been allocated when this reaffirmation of 1.10 could be voted on, but vocal bishops from the USA and Canada—who represent a small portion of global Anglicans but of whom there are very many because their dioceses are often quite small—vociferously objected. Archbishop Welby surrendered to this small, wealthy, and white minority, and the opportunity for the bishops to even vote on the question was canceled.

Welby acknowledged that 1.10 had been validly passed in 1998, but he would not affirm that he actually agreed with it. He also clearly stated that he would not discipline any dissenting bishops. By the end of the conference Welby continued to opine the Communion could “walk together” in spite of these differences, while the GSFA Churches indicated that the Communion was in fact not walking together, and that questions of marriage were central to historical Anglican doctrine and were not adiaphora.

As one observer concluded:

It is no overstatement to say that the Lambeth Conference is in a moment of deep crisis. There are now emerging two Anglican Communion: one, in the western world of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, Wales, and increasingly England, which is accommodating a secular culture and giving up on Biblical authority; the other, chiefly in the Global South, together with those Christians in the western world who dissent from secular culture and hold to the authority of Scripture. Presumably, the next Archbishop of Canterbury will call for a Lambeth Conference in 2032 or thereabouts. By then, the emerging division will be even more stark, and he will be forced to pick between the two. Rowan and Justin have tried to have it both ways, to keep everyone “walking together,” papering over fundamental differences while avoiding the taking of resolutions. But this cannot work forever. The next Archbishop has the opportunity to take a clear Biblical stand, to discipline unscriptural innovation, and to allow the gathered Bishops of the global Communion to again issue Resolutions affirming and applying the Biblical witness. If not, more Biblical Bishops will boycott, and the Lambeth Conference will slide into irrelevance as a gathering of the revisionist Bishops of rapidly declining churches ([Johnston 2022](#)).

Up through 1998 the Lambeth Conferences issued resolutions. The 2008 Conference resulted in reflections and meditations. The 2022 Conference resulted in “Lambeth Calls” in English, or what in Spanish we might call “invitations” or “challenges.” The idea was that each bishop could return to his diocese and implement these different invitations according to the local context. According to [the website](#) formulated prior to the 2022 Conference:

The focus of the Lambeth Conference is exploring what it means to be ‘God’s Church for God’s World’ in the decade ahead. Bishops will discuss several themes through morning Bible Expositions on 1 Peter, and plenary sessions during the Lambeth Conference.

Lambeth Calls will be shared on these themes which will include:

- Mission and Evangelism
- Reconciliation
- Safe Church
- Environment and Sustainable Development
- Christian Unity
- Inter-faith Relations
- Anglican Identity
- Human Dignity
- Discipleship

All the calls, which had been prepared beforehand, were adopted by the bishops present.

Demography

The majority of active Anglicans in the world today are not in the West, they are not white, and they are not for the most part liberal or progressive. The Church of England alleges a large membership, but in terms of actual people involved in their churches the number is much lower. In terms of active membership, then, the four largest provinces of the Anglican Communion are, in descending order, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and then England.

While the Episcopal Church (USA) is widely known and has an exorbitant number of bishops given its small membership, its membership is, like that of England and Canada, in steady decline. Consider the following statistics for the U.S. Episcopal Church: In 2011 there were 6,736 domestic parishes and missions and about 1.92 million active baptized members. By 2018 there were 6,423 domestic parishes and missions and about 1.68 million active baptized members. The numbers for average Sunday worship were 640,142 in 2011 and 531,958 in 2018. In 1980 the reported membership was 2.78 million (“[Religious Groups](#)”). From 1980 through 2018, then, the Episcopal Church (USA) lost 40% of its membership, and this during decades when the overall US population grew substantially.

Similar figures could be provided for England, Australia, Canada, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and more. For instance, a [national poll in Britain](#) in 2017 revealed that only 15% of Britons identified themselves as being Anglicans. The demographic implications are quite clear: first, the future of global Anglicanism is in places where the church is growing or, at least, stable. The provinces of the anglophone West are wealthy and often have centuries of resources at their disposal. Second, many of the provinces of the non-Western world are conservative and judge that the approval of same-sex marriage (SSM) and the ordination of non-celibate LGBTQ people is a clear violation of Scripture and catholic tradition. It is these latter churches that are growing. Third, there are always exceptions. For instance, the Episcopal Church in Brazil (Anglican Communion) has in many cases embraced SSM and the ordination of non-celibate LGBTQ people; likewise, there are some dioceses in the West that are still conservative—though most have left or been forced out and have gone to new, non-Communion jurisdictions or Rome.

In the end, the future of Anglicanism is one of preference and individualism. Overlapping jurisdictions are now the norm in much of the West. Demographic trends point to the eventual extinction of the progressive Anglican wing, as they tend to plant very few new churches and have very few children—both in terms of procreation and attendance. The conservative Anglicans will continue to struggle with the issue of women’s ordination, which remains a bone of contention within GAFCON and the GSFA, and this is especially true in relation to women bishops. The authority of the instruments of unity is practically null and void at this point (2022). But those instruments never claimed to have any juridical or canonical authority, so perhaps this was to be expected.

In sum, after 60 years of wandering, Anglicans are less unified, more diverse, less white and less wealthy. In the West, Anglican cultural influence is much decreased but not so in certain countries in Africa. And finally, the fruit of Anglican mission in the Global South does not seem willing to succumb to the disintegration of a robust and real global Communion, while the tired provinces of the UK, Canada, and the USA are.

References

All references are cited in embedded links throughout the article.