

The Lambeth Conference: A Chaplain's View

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There appeared to be a degree of trepidation among the bishops and their spouses when they arrived at the University of Kent for the Lambeth Conference in July 2008. Was there a smell of schism lingering in the air? Could it be avoided?

The Archbishop of Canterbury made it clear in his welcome that the Conference would not solve the problems of the Anglican Communion. Nearly two hundred had declined his invitation to attend. Another conference, known as GAFCON, had been held in Jerusalem which was attended mainly by those who felt they could not in conscience be at Canterbury mingling with those with whom they had already disagreed over certain issues. A few managed to be at both conferences.

This Lambeth Conference was planned to be different from its predecessors. It would not be making resolutions and setting out policy which the various Provinces in the past tended either to accept, refuse or ignore. This conference was to be a time of pondering the Scriptures prayerfully, of corporate worship, of fellowship and learning from each other about each other in the very varied contexts in which they minister, and of intercession and encouragement for each other.

The tone of the conference was set at the very beginning by the retreat of three days in the Cathedral led by the Archbishop. He must have inspired all by his addresses. His prayerfulness and spirituality made a profound impression throughout the conference; an example to all of humble, godly leadership. On two occasions the whole conference gave him a long standing ovation.

It was into this setting that the chaplaincy team came, made up mainly of Religious under the leadership of the official chaplain, Winston Halapua, the Polynesian bishop in Auckland. The team contained eight Franciscan friars representing all the provinces of the Society of Saint Francis, six members of the Melanesian Brotherhood with their English former chaplain, a Cowley Father from America, and for some of the time a member of the Society of the Sacred Mission in Southern Africa. There were two sisters from Tanzania, three Sisters of the Church from Ham Common and the Solomon Islands, two members of the Melanesian Sisterhood, and a member of the Community of All Hallows, Ditchingham, who was the unfailing sacristan. With that lot no bishop or spouse could ignore the existence of Religious in the Anglican Communion.

Nearly all the team met for ten days at Hilfield Friary in Dorset to prepare for the conference before going to Canterbury. This enabled the team to become a close community and to continue as such throughout the three weeks of the conference. It enabled us not only to pray, talk, rehearse and plan but also to laugh together. The spirit of the team, caring for each other, became very strong.

For the Eucharist and Evening Prayer each day the team composed the intercessions which they led and also at the communion assisted the bishops with administering the Blessed Sacrament. During the retreat in the cathedral the team members were used for prayer, counselling and confession in one of the chapels and in the crypt.



Midday Prayer



Preparing for Opening Eucharist

In the university itself a large room was the prayer centre, suitably furnished for worship and devotion. Here each day there was Morning, Mid-day and Night Prayer. Over a hundred came to Morning and Night Prayer sung according to the harmonic custom of the Melanesian Brotherhood. And some people came to the centre for ministry or for meditation and personal prayer. The team itself met each morning for a Bible study on the same passages from St John's Gospel, which the bishops and the spouses were following in their groups, and to plan the day. Many bishops and spouses said how glad they were of our presence.

The conference opened with a sung Eucharist in the Cathedral at which the Archbishop presided and the Bishop of Colombo, Sri Lanka, preached a challenging sermon. Before the Gospel Melanesians danced up the nave and into the choir to the accompaniment of panpipes carrying a boat symbolising the spread of the gospel overseas. The conference closed with a sung Eucharist at which the Archbishop of Melanesia presided and the Archbishop of Canterbury preached. At the end of the service the President led the chaplaincy team to the chapel commemorating modern martyrs while the names of Melanesian Brothers who were martyred on Guadalcanal were read out by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the cathedral choir sang appropriately. It was a very moving moment.

If there had been a smell of schism when the bishops arrived it had definitely faded by the time they were to leave. Despite differences of opinion on certain matters there was no desire to separate. Much will depend now on the follow-up. If all are determined under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to seek the mind of Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life then breakages can be repaired and barriers broken down between those who were at Lambeth and those who did not come whether or not they were at GAFCON. Prayer for all must prevail. *f*