The Changeless, The Changeable, and The Changing:
Thoughts on the Future of Anglicanism(s)
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It is a privilege to be asked to speak on this rather daunting topic of what is “changeless, changeable and changing” within Anglicanism. I believe that I have been asked to speak partly because I represent a segment of the Anglican community which describes itself as a “conservative evangelical.” I am happy with that label, although in this country I find that it is often misunderstood. “Evangelical” has to do with the gospel, and a “conservative” is committed to preserving certain things. I really would prefer to be known as a “conservative evangelical liberationist” since the terms “conservative” and “evangelical” do not seem to convey the necessity of a commitment to the transformation of the world in the name of Christ. Let me begin by attempting to outline a few Anglican kinds of “difference” which exist today.

Introduction: Kinds of Anglican “difference”

Diverse understandings of what it means to be an Anglican have long divided the Communion into “parties” (low, middle, high, catholic, evangelical, broad, charismatic) in both Britain and North America. In some parts of the world member churches of the Communion have been (to some extent) spared the trouble of party politics by having been evangelized by missionaries with a strong affiliation with one party. Hence Kenya and Uganda are evangelical because their missionaries were from the Church Missionary Society (CMS), and Ghana is catholic because their missionaries were from the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (USPG). Not every country in the world is so cleanly divided, of course, and with increased travel and ease of communication these neat boxes are breaking down.

But the formation of parties is not the only way that Anglicans have expressed their differences. Sometimes Anglicans have settled their disputes through some form of schism. We should never forget that although John and Charles Wesley remained Anglican, their movement, the Methodists, did not feel welcome to stay in the fold. The formation of the Anglican Mission in America (AMIa) as a union of some non-Western Anglican leaders with some American Anglicans with the explicit purpose of both preserving things which are in danger of being lost and also of spreading the gospel in an Anglican form within the United States – but unhindered by the perceived shackles of ECUSA – is only one example of how Anglicanism is fracturing. A search of the internet will reveal that there are today in North America at least thirty groups of Christians claiming to be “Anglican” which are not in communion with Canterbury. The oldest, of course, is the Reformed Episcopal Church, a group formed in 1874 when George Cummins, Assistant Bishop of Kentucky, led a self-consciously evangelical group out of PECUSA because of a perceived growing Catholicism within the Church. The REC has been a rather small group of parishes (many of them black churches, by the way) ever since, but it has seen a rapid increase in numbers in recent years. Most recent defections from ECUSA and the Anglican Church of Canada have been over the issues of the ordination of women (with mostly catholics leaving) and over homosexuality (with defections by some catholics, some evangelicals, and some charismatics). Some of those who leave ECUSA join one of these newer “Anglican” Bodies, although most lay and some clergy simply join another denomination – the Roman Catholic Church, an Orthodox body, or perhaps some self-consciously evangelical group. In postdenominational North America, most worshipers are less concerned about finding an Anglican church than they are about finding a place with good preaching, vital worship and a welcome for their children. Please note: it is probably true that some people who leave the Episcopal Church and join another denomination or a “continuing” Anglican body are grumpy; some might be characterized as “narrow” or “rigid” – but I would hasten to add that grumpiness, narrowness and rigidity are not something confined to the so-called “right wing.” Prior to Lambeth 1998 one notorious American Bishop suggested that Africans were too uneducated to participate in debate over the issue of homosexuality. Recently a “liberal” ECUSA bishop publicly compared African Anglicans to Nazis. These opinions can hardly be characterized as open-minded or helpful.

And of course separatist Anglican churches are known outside of Europe and North America. The Church of England in South Africa continues to exist alongside the Church of the Province of Southern Africa. Numerous “African instituted churches” have formed from Christians who have broken away from
mission-founded Anglican bodies. The Aladura Churches in Nigeria, for example, have Anglican roots. Most of these groups were formed not because of strictly “doctrinal” or “churchmanship” issues, but for cultural reasons. Often (sometimes for good reasons, sometimes not so good!) the mission-founded churches were unable to accommodate African traditions and many African Christians felt more at home worshipping Jesus in what they considered as a more “African” way. And before we judge those missionaries and their first converts too harshly some of those issues were (and still are!) very difficult – polygamy and female circumcision, for example, as well as issues like whether drums and dancing should be allowed in church, which appear in hindsight to be less controversial. So Anglicans sometimes divide internally (into “parties”) and sometimes divide by schism. It used to be joked that “Baptists will tolerate any amount of schism to avoid heresy and Anglicans will tolerate any amount of heresy to avoid schism!” This is no longer the case.

There is a third and more positive kind of Anglican diversity – cultural diversity within the Communion as Anglicanism has spread beyond the confines of the British Isles and has taken root in North America, Africa, Asia, Oceania, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The spread of the Anglican Communion both in places which were formerly parts of the British Empire, but also in places which the U.K. never had much of a foothold (Latin America, Congo and many other places) has led to various kinds of Anglican mutations. Maori Anglicans in New Zealand, African Anglicans in Nigeria, First Nations Anglicans in the Arctic of Canada, and Palestinian Anglicans in Israel are all struggling to root their churches in the soil of their own cultures, their own languages, their own peoples. It is no simple task and it is made more difficult when “Western” Anglicans visit and see what is going on and say: “that’s not ‘Anglican’ – that’s ‘catholic’ or that’s ‘Pentecostal’ or that’s ‘pagan’” – meaning, of course, “that’s not how we do things where I come from.” I am by no means suggesting that we should stop visiting our partner churches or that we should stop talking. I am suggesting that we should learn to listen and to ask questions and avoid the opinionated pontificating (!) which sometimes takes place when Anglicans from Great Britain or North America encounter non-Western Anglicanism for the first time. In the final section of this paper I will detail some of the cultural distinctiveness of the so-called “younger” members of the Anglican Communion, differences which I hope can be seen as gifts to the world church since they remind us of aspects of the gospel which we in the North Hemisphere sometimes neglect.

So we see that although Anglicans have long managed to accommodate theological differences within the Communion through the development of “parties” which were mutually recognized as “Anglican” but emphasized divergent theological understandings, the limits of this diversity have increasingly been strained to the breaking point. At present Anglicanism is not in danger of schism, it is in schism, with many groups claiming to be “Anglican” in some way or another. Anglican identity is further complicated by the fact that our common traditions are today being expressed in a wide variety of cultural contexts. This diversity always carries with it the possibility of misunderstanding as well as the possibility for growth and enrichment.

I. Changeless

We can agree, I think, that Anglicanism as it exists today is remarkably diverse. Is there anything about Anglicanism which is “changeless”? I suspect I was invited to speak to this gathering partly because of the hat I wear as a “Professor of Mission.” However, I am first of all a “Professor of Biblical Studies,” so please allow me to wear that hat for a moment.

Before we can even ask what, if anything, is “changeless” about Anglicanism we must first ask what is changeless about the Christian faith itself. This is no easy task. Every creed, or confession, or statement of faith is an attempt to express what is essential, what is central, to the faith. What is clear, I think, is that although creeds and confessions are often helpful, they are also limited. They are expressions of human understanding, in human words, which are always culturally specific and (often) polemically motivated. That is, people usually compose such documents when something they hold as precious is under attack.

So in full knowledge of my own fallible, limited, and sinful nature, please let me make a stab at a proposition which describes what is “changeless” about the Christian faith. In other words, let me attempt to preach the Gospel (you see it can be dangerous to ask an evangelical to come and speak!). Here is my
proposition: “The Christian faith is the embodiment of the announcement of the love of God in Jesus Christ found in the story of the Bible.” Now let me attempt to explain briefly what I believe this statement to mean.

The Embodiment

The Christian faith is not just a message but a message lived. It is first of all about a message delivered in the person of Jesus Christ (more about this in a moment). It is also a message lived in the context of the world by individuals drawn together in the community we call “church”.

Of the Announcement

The word “gospel,” of course, means “good news.” In the Graeco-Roman context in which the early church was born the word that we translate as “gospel” was sometimes used to speak of the announcement, the proclamation, of Caesar’s birthday. Christians seem to have co-opted this language to speak of Jesus.

Caesar is Lord? – NO, Jesus is Lord.
Caesar is saviour of the world? – NO, Jesus is the saviour of the world.

The Christian gospel is an announcement with universal implications. The entire world is to hear this Good News.²

Of the love of God

The Gospel says that God is not capricious, or distant, or aloof, but that God cares for the world (John 3.16 is not just for the football games). God’s love does not come to us because we are good or deserving of His love, but, Paul says, “While we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

In Jesus Christ

The Gospel of God’s love has come to us not simply as a written message or an oral announcement, but first of all as a person, a living word. It is about the incarnation (God entering the world in Jesus). And this is an incarnation for service, and service which leads to suffering. Therefore, the incarnation happens under the shadow of the cross and resurrection.

Found in the story of the Bible

Although Jesus is the word made flesh, we have access to his story primarily in words, the scriptures of the Old Testament and the New Testament. The story of God’s love for a sinful and broken world in Jesus Christ is found first of all in scripture. But it is encapsulated in Trinitarian, creedal orthodoxy. To put this another way, Trinitarian creedal orthodoxy is necessary and essential because it helps us to read the Bible. This is what is changeless about Christianity. In my opinion, the above proposition should also guide us in our thoughts about Anglicanism. Is anything changeless about the Anglican form of Christianity? At least four possibilities seem to have been suggested at various times.

1. A form of governance.

Some have suggested that what is distinctive about Anglicanism is its episcopal form of governance. But, of course other churches have bishops and not every Anglican Province has the same form of episcopacy (some make greater use of the synods, for example, in the governing process). And I must wonder whether episcopacy does not actually sometimes form a barrier to ecumenical union rather than a bridge. Is episcopacy necessary or even helpful²?
2. A form of worship.

Some have suggested that Anglicanism is distinctive because of its liturgy. Of course everyone is liturgical in some way: a Baptist friend of mine had a sign on his door that read “Baptists don’t have a liturgy; we just do the same thing over and over again.” And as Anglicanism becomes more culturally diverse, its liturgical practices are less and less unified. The Episcopal Church of Sudan has (at this point) a largely non-literate membership. What good are written liturgies in such a situation – even if the people could afford such expensive things? The liturgies of the Australian, New Zealand, Kenyan and Canadian churches have some things in common – but many things are no longer “Common Prayer.”

3. A way of doing theology.

Do Anglicans have a common way of doing theology? We sometimes talk about “via media” and “three-legged stools.” And it is certainly true that Anglicans have attempted to walk a balance between Rome and Geneva and have valued scripture, tradition and reason as important tools in the theological task. But when I was ordained the 39 Articles were still considered normative and they seem to have little in common with the theses proposed by Bishop Spong a few years back. How can the Articles and Spong’s theses both be considered authentically Anglican when they are in such blatant contradiction? There appear to be wildly divergent ways of doing theology within Anglicanism at present.

4. A sense of belonging to a family

Is Anglicanism unified by a sense of belonging to a worldwide, transcultural family? Well, yes, but Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Pentecostals (among others) also have global relations. And sadly Anglicanism is developing a tendency to exclude and alienate some of the more enthusiastic and committed members of that family. It has in recent years become more and more difficult to discover what it is that can be described as distinctively Anglican.

II. Changeable

If it is difficult to ascertain the “unchangeable” nature of Anglicanism, it is certain that some things are changeable and that some things must change. Anglicans (at least in official documents) have always affirmed that some things may be changed. The Preface to the American Book of Common Prayer states that,

It is a most invaluable part of that blessed “liberty wherewith Christ has set us free,” that in his worship different usages may without offence be allowed, provided the substance of the Faith be kept entire; and that, in every Church, what cannot be clearly determined to belong to Doctrine must be referred to Discipline; and therefore, by common consent and authority, may be altered, abridged, enlarged, amended, or otherwise disposed of, as may seem most convenient for the edification of the people, “according to the various exigency of times and occasions.”

There are, in other words, some things which are “adiaphora,” indifferent. Music, liturgical forms, ways of governance, modes of mission and evangelism and, no doubt, many more things which are not central may be changed according to the needs of the community.

Indeed some things must change. There are certain attitudes within Anglicanism, especially, perhaps, in its Western forms, which need to be done away with for the sake of the church and its witness to a broken world. Let me list three which seem to come too easily to mind.

The first is ecclesiastical arrogance. I remember as a theological student that the Principal of my college once mentioned to the students gathered together for a community lunch that he was hoping to bring some ecumenical visitors to meet with us that semester. His mention of a Roman Catholic and an Orthodox person didn’t phase us, but when he mentioned bringing in a Baptist to speak to us about evangelism the suggestion was met with derision. Unfortunately I have met with this type of attitude on
numerous occasions during my journey within Anglican circles. It takes a variety of forms, of course, but the rhetoric is remarkably consistent. Take the term “fundamentalist,” for example. This is a common term of scorn within “mainline churches” which seems to mean “anyone to the right of my opinion.” Very few who use the term have done any kind of research about the Fundamentalists actually were and what they thought (they were a group of scholars, by the way). The term in common parlance now simply means “biblical literalist” and “right wing” and, therefore, “narrowminded” and “mean spirited.” I was once teaching a class at the Toronto School of Theology when student used the term “fundamentalist” to describe a certain form of Pentecostal belief. She was surprised that I was somewhat offended by the term as a form of derision (I suppose because she had thought of me as an open-minded type of person) and she was also astounded to learn that the early Fundamentalists were actually anti-Pentecostal.

For some time I had the privilege of attended a church in Montreal called St. Stephen’s. St. Stephen’s is a downtown church which at one point in its history was in danger of being closed because the congregation had dwindled down to about eight worshippers (including the four-person choir!). A new vicar was installed who immediately began to reach out to the student community in the area. He soon attracted a small group of concerned and active Christian students who, in turn, began to invite their friends. Since not all of the nave space was needed for worship, some of the pews were moved into storage or given away and lunch tables were brought in and a simple lunch served after the Sunday service. It was a brilliant move, since there are few things that students need more than a free meal and some space to meet people. Sadly, the clergy in the diocese met this innovation with scorn and labeled the church “Steve’s Diner.” And yet that parish has produced more ordinands than any other in the diocese over the last twenty years. It now has a regular attendance of more than two hundred – and this in a transient English student population in a French city. It seems that some clergy were more concerned to preserve a certain conception of what Anglicanism should be rather than reach out in creative ways to real people with real needs. Our arrogance rarely serves our vocation.

A second attitude which must change is a certain cultural imperialism. I was at a lovely dinner meeting of the Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars some years ago. One of the number at my table was a recent doctoral graduate. When dessert came he realized to his horror that he had eaten his entire main course with the dessert fork. Now I had heard the old joke about Anglicans going to hell for such an offence, but I had never actually met someone who believed that this was, in fact, the unforgivable sin. His embarrassment itself became rather embarrassing. He was convinced that he had just lost the only chance he would ever have of landing a decent teaching position in an Episcopal seminary or any other institution of higher learning for that matter.

Now this may be a (sadly) amusing tale, but it has a much more serious side: who do we exclude because they do not measure up to our social and cultural standards. When I was a teenager I had long hair and went to church in my bare feet. It is noteworthy, I think, that the church that welcomed me and more than a hundred other similar looking adolescents was a Pentecostal church. We were never castigated by our weird dress or our odd music, or even rebuked for the number of cigarette butts that we left on the front steps of the church. We were loved. How many Episcopal parishes could welcome and love such a motley crew? The sign may say “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You” but what are the limits of that welcome?

The third attitude in drastic need of change is our clericalism. Several years ago I attended an ordination. The preacher ascended the pulpit and (after praying) declared “Gentlemen,” (all the candidates were male) “start your engines.” The preacher then proceeded to talk as if these ordinands were about to begin “their ministry.” I was left wondering what in the world they had been doing their entire Christian lives if not ministry. Ephesians 4 makes it clear, I think, that the purpose of leaders within the Christian community is to “equip the saints for the work of ministry.” Ministry does not begin at ordination, but at baptism.

Anglicanism has a number of besetting sins: ecclesiastical arrogance, cultural imperialism and clericalism. Repentance is sorely needed.
III. Changing

I would like to suggest that a most important change has already happened and is still happening and that this change will have a multitude of implications for Anglicanism in the next centuries. Clearly there has been what Andrew Walls has called a “shift in the center of gravity” in the Christian world. That is, while it used to be true that most people in the world who called themselves “Christians” used to live in the white, Western, industrialized nations of Europe and North America, this is certainly no longer true. Already in the 1940s William Temple could speak of the “great new fact” that the Christian church could be found in every part of the globe. This sea-change has affected Anglicanism no less than Christians of other traditions. A quick look, for example, at the photographs taken at the last three or four Lambeth conferences should be evidence enough for most that the Anglican world is changing at least in its racial diversity. This “globalization” of the Communion is having and will have a profound impact on what “Anglicanism” means in the 21st century. The “typical” Anglican is no longer white and English-speaking, but is more likely to be a black woman who makes a living by subsistence farming and lives in Uganda or Nigeria. While Anglican churches in the Western world shrink, many Anglican provinces are facing the enormous problems which come with rapid growth: how do you establish diocesan structures, provide adequate pastoral oversight, or sufficient theological training when your church has grown from eight million members to somewhere between seventeen and nineteen million members, as in Nigeria? How do you confirm the tens of thousands of faithful who desire confirmation in the midst of civil war, jihad, famine and genocide in the Sudan?

If the Anglican Communion has truly become a worldwide, a global church, what can we in the Northern Hemisphere learn from our sisters and brothers in Asia, Africa and Latin America? If the church is changing, what lessons can we learn from this change? In the following comments (which are in no particular order) I would like to outline some things that the churches of the “West” can learn from our fellow Anglican Christians in the global “south,”

1. Learning about sensitivity to the receiver.

Most Anglicans in the southern hemisphere are very aware that they are the recipients of mission. In one way or another, most Anglican churches in the non-Western world received the Christian message through the mediation of missionaries, in the Anglican case usually from Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia or New Zealand. This is not the place to rehearse missionary history, but we need to note that missionary endeavour is almost always a risky combination of love and courage, with arrogance and insensitivity. There are, of course, a multitude of stories about the cultural myopia, ignorance and just plain sinfulness of missionaries.

A rather blatant illustration from my own country concerns some of the first missionaries to the northern part of my own country, Canada. When Moravian missionaries arrived on the Labrador coast they correctly saw that an important part of their task was to translate the Bible into the language of the Inuit people. As most translators do, they ran into various problems. While attempting to translate the parable from Matthew 25:31-46 about the king separating the sheep from the goats, the translators noted that there were no words in Inuktitut for such animals. Sadly, rather than attempt to substitute known animals (perhaps they could have said that the king separated the walruses from the seals, or the foxes from the wolverines!) they chose to write that the king separated the men from the women. The Christians of the eastern Arctic lived with this translation for a century until a new translation was produced just a few years ago.

It seems that many who attempt to bring Christ to others believe (rightly) that the message of Jesus is for all times and all places and all people, but they sometimes fail to realize that our experience of the love of God in Christ is always cultural-specific and that our articulation of the gospel message will always be culture-bound. In many parts of the non-Western world missionaries vilified the receiving culture. And of course there are beliefs and practices in every culture which need to be rejected or corrected. In contrast, however, many third world Christians have had a more positive evaluation of their pre-Christian traditions. Most non-Western Christians agree that every culture needs transformation, but most have no wish to
throw out the baby with the bathwater. Many now speak of their cultural heritage as “a preparation for the gospel.”

The new eucharistic liturgy of the Anglican Church in Kenya, for instance, contains several examples of prayers which come out of traditional culture, but have been adapted for Christian usage. In her autobiography, Florence Li, the first woman to be ordained as a priest in the Anglican Communion, quotes Confucius several times, finding much in that tradition which coheres with the gospel.

And so the first thing we can learn from the relatively new reality of the global Anglican tradition is that those who cross cultures with the gospel must learn to be sensitive to the cultures and traditions to which we go.

2. Learning about a passion to share the gospel.

A second thing that we can learn from Christians in the non-Western world is about a desire to share the gospel. Knowing that the message may be presented badly or misinterpreted should not lead the church into a state of paralysis. One of the most obvious differences between the Western churches and the non-Western churches is that the latter are growing, sometimes at an amazing rate. A large part of the reason for this growth is that African, Asian and Latin American Christians have a passion to share the message of the good news of Jesus Christ. The church is growing because Christians are living the gospel and speaking the gospel. They are inviting their friends and neighbours to church. They are holding evangelistic events. They are recruiting new members. They are building new churches. They are reaching out to language groups in their countries (or beyond) who do not have churches. It is not just “evangelical” denominations or “Pentecostal” groups who have engaged in this evangelistic task – it is Anglicans. The Province of South East Asia, for example, has “planted” new Anglican work in the neighbouring countries of Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Nepal and Thailand. Those who have received the gospel are passing it on. One of the great surprises for many non-Western Anglicans when they first visit the West is the apparent lack of evangelistic zeal that they find in the churches in Europe and North America. That our churches are shrinking and closing is baffling to them. It was out of concern for our future that bishops from Asia and Africa proposed at Lambeth 1988 that the 1990s be “a decade of evangelism” for the whole Communion. Sadly, it seems that only the churches of Africa and Asia did much more than talk about evangelism during the decade.

3. Learning about “wholistic” mission.

It must immediately be added, however, that a third thing which can be learned from the non-Western church is that the gospel must not, indeed cannot, be divided spiritual from material, word from deed. In the West we have lived too long with a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, between the private and the public, between the mind and the body. So often this dualistic thinking (which owes more to Plato than to the Bible) has permeated the church leading us to think of mission in either/or terms: mission must be either evangelism or social justice; mission must be either about the spiritual or the physical; the Christian life must be about either prayer or action. These unbiblical and unhappy divisions have proved to be unwelcome and untenable outside of the West.

A few years ago I brought a group of Canadian Anglican theological students to Kenya for several weeks to experience the life of the church in that country. One of my goals was for those involved to look at ministry from a different perspective so that when the participants returned to Canada they might have some ability to look at ministry at home in new ways. One member of the group was quite young and had never lived away from home. In fact he had never been farther from Toronto than Niagara Falls. I put him in a parish in Kenya that I thought would be relatively safe and as familiar as one could possibly find on the other side of the world. Not long into his experience in that parish, the priest announced that he was taking my student to the market that day. Off they went, the student thinking that they were going to do a little shopping. When they arrived the priest pulled a box out from under one of the market stalls, stood on it and began to preach. A small crowd gathered to listen. The priest then said something to the effect of “but you don’t have to take my word for it...we have a visitor here from Canada and he is now going to tell you what God has done in his life.” So my student found himself doing evangelism in an African
marketplace standing on the top of a small orange crate. The next day, however, the priest had him helping at the diocesan office where a couple of times a week lunch was served for the homeless street children of the town. And on Sunday the priest was preaching a sermon in the Cathedral in which he was calling the government to account for its mistreatment of the poor in the country. The ministry of that priest included evangelism, practical caring for those in need and a prophetic ministry of calling for justice in the nation. In North America that priest would most likely be two different people – either someone passionate about saving the lost or a priest concerned about social action and social justice. In the West we have divided what God wants us to keep together. The non-Western church can help us to see concern for the body and concern for the soul as simply two sides of the one ministry of Christ which need always to be held together.

4. Learning about intimacy with God.

The first time I was in a Kenyan household I was greeted warmly, given a place to sit and made to feel at home. I did notice, however, that the woman of the house disappeared quickly after greeting me. I thought that perhaps women and men visit separately in that country and I filed that thought away for future examination. But after twenty minutes or so she returned, this time carrying a tray with a pot of tea and some mugs. She placed the tray on a central table and I instinctively reached over to pick up a mug. I sensed immediately that I was making a mistake (since no one else was reaching!) and I looked up to find her eyes fixed on me: I withdrew my hand from the cup! “Let us pray” she said. “Let us pray!” I thought, “but it’s only a cup of tea – that’s not enough to say grace over!” It was at that point that I realized that gratitude should not kick in only when there is some acceptable (by my standards) amount for which to be thankful. In fact, I soon learned that Kenyans punctuated all of life with prayer. We prayed when we had meetings. We prayed when we were going on a car trip – and especially we prayed when we arrived at our destination. These Africans Christians had an intimate relationship with God which was not compartmentalized to Sunday morning, or the daily office, or family devotions. God was a part of every dimension of life.

On another occasion a tutor at the college where I taught knocked on our door to let us know that a prayer vigil was going to take place that Friday evening from 7:00pm until 7:00am the next morning. I envisioned a staid, quiet event in which people would come and go in silence. I was used to the kind of vigil which I had experienced in Canada. Some worship aids would be made available, space and time set aside and those who could would give an hour or half an hour to prayer. Not so at this “kesha” (which means “all night” in Kiswahili). This kind of prayer vigil is a party. The whole community gathers to sing and pray and preach and give testimonies to what God has done in their lives, and then sing some more. This was not a spirituality for the weak – it was an endurance test! God was present and real and his followers were not necessarily expected to be quiet about it. We in the West have a great deal to learn from the relationship which our sisters and brothers in other parts of the Communion have with God.

5. Learning about sensitivity to the world of the Spirits.

In the Western world the influence of the Enlightenment has deeply affected the churches. Christians still believe in God (although we don’t want to show too much enthusiasm for such an antiquated system of thought) but we probably have serious doubts about “angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.” In practical terms we are extremely skeptical about the unseen spiritual world. The worldview of the society around us is deistic at best and we follow our culture in not giving too much credence to speculations about demons, or spirits.

Not so in most of the two-thirds world. In much of Asia perhaps the most pressing pastoral issue is the question of how Christians should practice or abstain from practicing filial piety. Are expressions of devotion to the ancestors a form of idolatry and therefore disobedience to the first and second commandment of the Decalogue or are these practices simply a way of “honouring my father and my mother” and therefore a mode of obedience to the fifth commandment of the Decalogue? Is the painting of biblical verses on the sides of buses in Nigeria for protection simply superstition or is it a form of intercessory prayer?
In the Sudan over the last fifteen years of civil war a massive change has happened among the Jieng (Dinka) people of the southern part of the country. Although they had previously venerated the spirits (the “jak”; singular “jok”), those ancestral beings charged with the responsibility of watching over and protecting the community, the decades of persecution and devastation of war have led the Jieng to believe that the jak were not living up to their promises. Almost en mass the Jieng have abandoned the spirits and in place of the household shrines they have raised crosses. They have exchanged their allegiance to the spirits for an allegiance to the crucified one who comes and suffers with them. Note: they have not abandoned belief in the existence of spirits. Rather they have come to believe in the superior power of Jesus.

The world of the spirits is alive and well in most of the non-Western world. And if we have eyes to see they appear to be making a come back in the West as well. Enlightenment skepticism has not provided answers to our questions or our spiritual longings and the Western world is now in the midst of a search for spiritual meaning. Can the evils of the world all be explained by the hubris of human sin, or is there some malevolent power who wishes us harm? Are the beings we can see and hear and measure with our scientific instruments really the only beings in the universe? Perhaps the non-Western church has something to teach us in this area as well.

6. Learning about perseverance under suffering.

The Christian church around the world is experiencing an almost unprecedented period of suffering and persecution. In the West we have become accustomed to freedom of worship, freedom to choose of our denomination or even our religion. We have tended to think of the persecution of Christians as something that went of style with the fall of the Roman Empire. Nothing could be further from the truth. In 2002 alone Christian schools and churches in Pakistan were fire-bombed, Christian missionaries in Indonesia were kidnapped and killed, Christian medical workers in Yemen were murdered by an assassin, Christian pastors in China were imprisoned, and (once again) churches (and hospitals and schools and refugee camps) in the Southern Sudan were bombed from the air by the government of the Sudan. Some of the churches in the two-thirds world were born in suffering: the Church of Uganda is just member of the Anglican Communion which considers “the blood of the martyrs” to be the “seed of the church” as Tertullian remarked long ago.

And, of course, “persecution” is only one form of suffering. Most Christians in the world now live in places where AIDS, the lack of clean water, the paucity of health care facilities, government ineptitude, and the inequities of globalization lead to thousands of preventable deaths, not every year, but every hour.

The church in the non-Western world is not just “patient” in the midst of suffering, but is learning to exercise patient resistance and opposition to evil.

7. Learning about the ability to repent and forgive.

I remember being stunned the first time I saw a copy of Ugandan Bishop Festo Kivengere’s book I Love Idi Amin. How could such an evil person be “loved”? But, of course, the Bishop was correct – cycles of violence can only be broken when human beings choose to love the undeserving, the unlovable. Festo learned to love because the East African Revival taught him that he was a sinner washed in the blood of Jesus, that he was deserving of judgement but loved by God and saved by grace. If Jesus could go to such lengths for him, it was his Christian responsibility to follow Jesus and love even his enemies.

Two recent examples of repentance and forgiveness deserve our attention here. For most of its existence the Nippon Sei Ko Kai (the Holy Catholic Church of Japan) supported its government and ignored Japanese aggression against other nations and even against segments of its own population. In 1995, however, the Anglican Church in Japan issued a “Declaration” at the conclusion of a Partners in Mission Consultation. This declaration was largely a statement of repentance in which the church accepted responsibility for its silence in the face of oppression. It outlined a process of change and led to a statement from the 49th General Synod the following year entitled “Statement on War Responsibility of Nippon Sei Ko Kai.”
And more well known, of course, is the involvement of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa in the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” through the Chairmanship of that body by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The Commission discerned that a Nuremberg style process would divide an already wounded country and that simply ignoring the abuses of the apartheid era past would ensure that South African history would repeat itself. The country chose a Christian option – forgiveness. The way of Jesus was put to the test and found to be not only helpful but genuinely healing.18

8. Learning about reading the Bible with new eyes.

I believe that we can all agree that scripture is in some way foundational for Christian thought and life. We can probably also agree that our culture, our gender, our language, our wealth (or lack of it), and many other factors are the lenses through which we view scripture. One implication of this is that Christians in one part of the world will see things in the Bible that others may not see.

This came home to me a few years ago with some force when I realized that the traditional date of the Feast of the Transfiguration and the date of the bombing of Hiroshima were the same—August 6. From then on I have not been able to separate the two in my mind. The contrast between the blinding death light of the atomic bomb and the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus is too strong a contrast for me to be able ever to dissociate the two.

Likewise I recall my first Christmas in Africa. It was 1987. My wife Wendy and our baby boy David had been in Kenya for about a year. Cara, our daughter, had been born in November. We were supposed to have gone to teach in a small theological College in Mundri, Sudan but the Anglican Church of Canada wisely discerned that the war in the Sudan was heating up and we were diverted to Kenya. A few months after we arrived in Kenya four of our would-be colleagues in Sudan were kidnapped by the Sudanese Peoples’ Liberation Army and disappeared for almost two months in the Sudanese bush. After his release, one of the hostages, the Rev. Marc Nikkel, a mission partner of the Episcopal Church serving in the Sudan, returned to Africa. Unable to return to Sudan for a time, he taught with us in Kenya for almost a year. We had maintained a strong interest in things Sudanese, so it was joy to have Marc living next door. A few days before Christmas he gave me a report prepared by some Mennonites who had surveyed the situation in a particular area of Sudan around the town of Rumbek, an area of the Southern Sudan which had recently been devastated. The authors of the report detailed atrocities beyond description. One of the most striking details, however, was the fact that in a vast area of hundreds of square miles they had found no living children: they had been killed, succumbed to starvation, fled as refugees, or carried off as slaves. A few days after reading this report I opened my Bible to read the lesson for the daily office: it was December 28 and this was the lesson:

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt have I called my son.” Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more” (Mt 2:13–18)

As with the Transfiguration and Hiroshima, the stories of Sudan and the massacre of the innocents under Herod are now somehow fused in my mind. Sometimes reading the Bible in a new situation, or with new eyes, reading the Bible in a “mission” context will confront the reader, perhaps even assault the reader, with its message. To speak of the Bible and mission may lead us to reflect on Scripture in ways that we had not previously dreamed. I went to Africa ostensibly to teach the Bible to theological college students – I ended up being taught the Bible in remarkable ways.19
9. Learning about holiness.

Much as it is uncomfortable, the church in the non-Western world is calling the church in the West to holiness. In the areas of sexual ethics and doctrine many in the churches in Latin America, Asia, and Africa believe that the West has lost its way. The involvement of Rwanda and South East Asia in the ordinations of AMiA bishops in the United States may be regrettable for a variety of reasons, but it is a genuine expression of dismay over our perceived lack of theological and pastoral discipline. There is no doubt, I think, that the church in the non-Western world will continue to prod us in this area.

Conclusion

The church is a messy business. We are a broken and fallen people in the midst of a broken and fallen world. Our witness is a fallible one. We need one another – people from every race, nation, tribe and language – if we are to fulfill our vocation as God’s people in this world. As Anglicans we have been given a great gift in one another and my prayer is that we learn more and more to be sensitive to God’s Spirit nudging us through our sisters and brothers in non-Western church. The gospel of the love of God in Jesus Christ does not change – but our response to the gospel does change, is changing, and should change. I pray that the church in the West will learn to change in appropriate ways, in ways that our consistent with God’s story in scripture, prompted by the Holy Spirit, and responsive to a suffering world.

Footnotes


4 BCP (1979), 9; Articles 23 and 34 of the 39 Articles also appear to be relevant to this issue.


7 This story was related to me by some of the translators who worked on the now complete and published version of the Bible in Inuktitut.


12 Although the term was not intended to be understood in this way, the phrase “third world” sometimes implies “third rate.” Some non-western theologians have preferred the term “two-thirds world” since Africa, Asia, and Latin America do compose at least that much of the globe.


17 English versions of the Declaration of the Partners in Mission Consultation and the Resolution of General Synod can both be found in Grant LeMarquand, ed. “Nippon Sei Ko Kai: Essays on the Church in Japan,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 75/4 (1996).


19 Compared with just a few years ago, there are now a remarkable number of resources available to those who wish to learn about the Bible from our sisters and brothers in the non-Western world. A good starting place is R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed. *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (new edition; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995 [1991]). On African interpretation, which is my special interest, see Gerald O. West & Musa Dube, eds. *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

20 For one example of a non-Western Anglican response to issues within the Episcopal Church see Drexel Gomez & Maurice Sinclair, eds. *To Mend the Net: Anglican Faith and Order for Renewed Mission* (Carrollton, TX: The Ekklesia Society, 2001).

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