

## A Most Agonizing Journey towards Lambeth 2008 - Abp Peter Akinola

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*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph. 4:1,3)*

We have been on this journey for ten long years. It has been costly and debilitating for all concerned as most recently demonstrated by the tepid response to the invitations to the proposed Lambeth Conference 2008. At a time when we should be able to gather together and celebrate remarkable stories of growth and the many wonderful ways in which our God has been at work in our beloved Communion as lives are transformed new churches built and new dioceses established there is little enthusiasm to even meet.

There are continual cries for patience, listening and understanding. And yet the record shows that those who hold to the "faith once and for all delivered to the saints" have shown remarkable forbearance while their pleas have been ignored, their leaders have been demonized, and their advocates marginalized. We made a deliberate, prayerful decision in 1998 with regard to matters of Human Sexuality. It was supported by an overwhelming majority of the bishops of the Communion. It reflected traditional teaching interpreted with pastoral sensitivity. And yet it has been ignored and those who uphold it derided for their stubbornness. However, we have continued to meet and pray and struggle to find ways to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The journey started in February 1997 in Kuala Lumpur. It was here, during the 2nd Encounter of the Global South Anglican Communion that a [statement was issued](#) in which concern was expressed about the apparent setting aside of biblical teaching by some provinces and dioceses. The statement pleaded for dialogue in 'a spirit of true unity' before any part of the Communion embarks on radical changes to Church discipline and moral teaching.

Sadly, this plea, and several similar warnings, have been ignored and ten years later, in February 2007, the Primates of the Anglican Communion met in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and experienced an agonizing time trying to repair the Communion that has been so badly broken. Their earlier prediction at the Primates Meeting at Lambeth Palace in 2003, that rejection of the faith committed to us would tear "the fabric of our Communion at its deepest level," has proven to be accurate. In [Dar es Salaam the Primates proposed](#), as one last attempt to restore unity, a period of seven months for those who have brought our Communion to the brink of destruction to reconsider their actions and put a stop to the harmful actions that have so polarized our beloved church.

With about seven weeks to go, hope for a unified Communion is not any brighter than it was seven months or ten years ago. Rather, the intransigence of those who reject Biblical authority continues to obstruct our mission and it now seems that the Communion is being forced to choose between following their innovations or continuing on the path that the church has followed since the time of the Apostles.

We have made enormous efforts since 1997 in seeking to avoid this crisis, but without success. Now we confront a moment of decision. If we fail to act we risk leading millions of people away from the faith revealed in the Holy Scriptures and also, even more seriously, we face the real possibility of denying our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The leadership of The Episcopal Church USA (TECUSA) and the Anglican Church of Canada (ACoC) seem to have concluded that the Bible is no longer authoritative in many areas of human experience especially in salvation and sexuality. They claim to have 'progressed' beyond the clear teaching of the Scriptures and they have not hidden their intention to lead others to these same conclusions. They have even boasted that they are years ahead of others in fully understanding the truth of the Holy Scriptures and the nature of God's love. Both TECUSA and ACoC have been given several opportunities to consult, discuss and prayerfully respond through their recognized structures. While they produced carefully nuanced, deliberately ambiguous statements, their actions have betrayed them. Their intention is clear; they have chosen to walk away from the Biblically based path we once all walked together. The unrelenting persecution of the remaining faithful among them shows how they have used these past few years to isolate and destroy any and all opposition.

We now confront the seriousness of their actions as the year for the Lambeth Conference draws near. Sadly, this Conference is no longer designed as an opportunity for serious theological engagement and heartfelt reconciliation but we are told will be a time of prayer, fellowship and communion. These are commendable activities, but this very Communion, however, has been broken by the actions of the American and Canadian churches. The consequence is most serious because, even if only one province chooses not to attend, the Lambeth Conference effectively ceases to be an Instrument of Unity. The convener's status as an

instrument or focus of unity also becomes highly questionable. Repentance and reversal by these provinces may yet save our Communion. Failure to recognize the gravity of this moment will have a devastating impact.

### Scored Opportunities

Following the 1997 warning, the 1998 Lambeth Conference issued [Resolution 1.10](#) that affirmed the teaching of the Holy Scriptures with regard to faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union and declared that homosexual practice was incompatible with Biblical teaching. At their meeting in Porto, Portugal, in March 2000 the [Primates reaffirmed the supremacy of Scripture](#) as the “decisive authority in the life of our Communion.”

The General Convention of the Episcopal Church USA responded in July 2000 by approving [Resolution D039](#) acknowledging relationships other than marriage “in the Body of Christ and in this Church” and that those “who disagree with the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality, will act in contradiction to that position!”

The Convention only narrowly avoided directing the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to begin preparation of official rites for the blessing of “these relationships ... other than marriage.”

In 2001, the Primates’ meeting in Kanuga, North Carolina issued a [pastoral letter](#) acknowledging estrangement in the Church due to changes in theology and practice regarding human sexuality, and calling on all provinces of the Communion to avoid actions that might damage the “credibility of mission in the world.” In April, 2002 meeting at Canterbury the Primates further issued a pastoral letter recognizing responsibility of all bishops to articulate the fundamentals of faith and maintain the Church truth.

In what appeared to be deliberate defiance the Diocese of New Westminster in Canada voted in June 2002 to [approve the blessings of same-sex unions](#) with the enthusiastic support of their Bishop Michael Ingham. Later that year ACC-12 meeting in Hong Kong in October 2002 approved a [resolution \[34\]](#) urging dioceses and bishops to refrain from unilateral actions and policies that would strain communion.

The following year ECUSA met in General Convention in Minneapolis in July/August 2003. Among their many actions they chose to reject a [Resolution \[B001\]](#) affirming the authority of Scripture and other basic elements of Christian faith [ ] while [approving the election as bishop \[C045\]](#) someone living in an unashamedly sexual relationship outside marriage.

The Primates’ meeting specially convened at [Lambeth Palace in October 2003 issued a pastoral statement](#) condemning ECUSA’s decisions at General Convention describing them as actions that “threaten the unity of our own Communion as well as our relationships with other parts of Christ’s Church, our mission and witness, and our relations with other faiths, in a world already confused in areas of sexuality, morality and theology and polarized Christian opinion.” They also declared that if the consecration proceeds “the future of the Communion itself will be put in jeopardy” and that the action will “tear the fabric of our communion at its deepest level, and may lead to further division on this and further issues as provinces have to decide in consequence whether they can remain in communion with provinces that choose not to break communion with the Episcopal Church (USA).” They also called on “the provinces concerned to make adequate provision for Episcopal oversight of dissenting minorities within their own area of pastoral care in consultation with the Archbishop of Canterbury on behalf of the Primates.” ECUSA responded the following month by proceeding with the consecration of Gene Robinson thereby tearing the fabric of our Communion and forcing Nigeria along with many other provinces to sever communion with ECUSA.

Earlier, in June 2003, we in the [Church of Nigeria had cut our links with the diocese of New Westminster](#) and sent a clear warning of reconsidering our relationship with ECUSA should Gene Robinson be consecrated. As always, we were ignored.

During 2004 there was a growing number of so-called ‘blessings’ of same-sex unions by American and Canadian priests even though the Windsor Report released in September 2004 reaffirmed *Lambeth 1.10* and the authority of Scripture as central to Anglican Common Life. [The Windsor Report](#) also called for moratoria on public rites of same-sex blessings and on the election and consent of any candidate to the episcopate living in a same-sex union.

One consequence of this continuing intransigence by ECUSA was the alienation of thousands of faithful Anglicans who make their home in the USA. The attempts by the Primates to provide for their protection through the Panel of Reference proved fruitless. So the desire of these faithful Anglicans for alternatives for their spiritual home led to many impassioned requests to the Church of Nigeria and a number of other provinces within the Global South. The Standing Committee of the Church of Nigeria (CofN) recognizing this urgent need during their meeting in Ilesa in March 2004 and as a result initiated a process for the provision of pastoral care through the formation of a Convocation within the USA.

The Province of Nigeria made the conscious decision to initiate CANA in the light of the following: -

1. The undisputed alienation among Anglicans in North America created by the actions of TEC despite warnings from the Instruments of Communion.
2. The need for pastoral care and oversight for alienated Anglicans in North America in the light of the Primates Communiqué October 2003. “The provinces concerned to make adequate provision for Episcopal oversight of dissenting minorities within their own area of pastoral care in consultation with the Archbishop of Canterbury on behalf of the Primates.”
3. TEC’s establishment of churches in the diocese of Europe.

4. The consecration and appointment of Bishop Sandy Miller as a Bishop of the Province of Uganda called to serve in the United Kingdom.

As a matter of courtesy +Cantuar was duly informed of our intentions.

During the [African Anglican Bishops Conference \(AABC\) in October 2004 the Primates present released a statement](#) that among other things urged the Episcopal Church USA and the Anglican Church of Canada to take seriously the need for “repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation enjoined on all Christians by Christ.” It called on Episcopal Church USA and the Anglican Church of Canada to move beyond informal expressions of regret for the effect of their actions to a genuine change of heart and mind.

Although the [Primates in February 2005 at their meeting in Dromantine](#), Northern Ireland, advised the withdrawal of both ECUSA and the ACoC from the ACC the continued influence of these churches on the Communion and their renewed efforts to make others adopt their intransigent line frustrated any genuine reconciliation attempts. The agonizing journey towards unity and faith seemed unending.

The obvious reluctance of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the unwillingness of the other Instruments of Unity to effect discipline on those who had rejected the mind of the Communion prompted the Church of Nigeria to [effect a change in her constitution](#) during a General Synod held in Onitsha in September 2005. This constitutional change not only protects the Church of Nigeria from being led into error by any Church in the Communion but also makes full constitutional provision for the Convocation of Anglicans in North America (CANA).

The [Third Anglican South-to-South Encounter in Egypt October 2005](#) issued a very strong indictment of ECUSA and the ACoC and called for a common “Anglican Covenant” among churches remaining true to Biblical Christianity and historic Anglicanism.

Ignoring all the calls for repentance, homosexual unions and nominations for episcopacy continued in the USA with the Archbishop of Canterbury expressing “deep unease” with such nominations in California in February 2006. (Article describing reaction by Archbishop Rowan to California election is found in Church of England Newspaper, February 24th, 2006.)

A much-awaited ECUSA General Convention in 2006 proved to be a disappointment as resolutions expressing regret for the harm done to the communion were rejected as well as one that tried to emphasize the necessity of Christ for salvation. Approved were resolutions promoting homosexual relationships as well one apologizing to homosexuals for the Anglican Communion following Biblical principles. A pledge to include openly homosexual persons was requested “of our sister churches in the Anglican Communion and Anglican Communion bodies as evidence of the apology”. Finally someone who does not regard homosexual behaviour a sin, and does not consider Jesus the One way to the Father, [was elected as Presiding Bishop](#). The agony of a frustrated communion was visible worldwide except among those already prepared to embrace this dangerous path departing from the faith.

Nigeria needed no further prodding to proceed with the election in June 2006 and the August 2006 consecration of the Rt. Rev. Martyn Minns to give Episcopal oversight to CANA. The Nigerian House of Bishops also declared a reluctance to participate in the 2008 Lambeth Conference with an unrepentant ECUSA and Canada. (see Minutes of the Church of Nigeria House of Bishops meeting June 2006.)

The Global South Anglican Primates meeting in Kigali, September 2006 recognizing that ECUSA appears to have no intention of changing direction and once again embracing the ‘faith once delivered’ said in their [communiqué](#): “We are convinced that the time has now come to take initial steps towards the formation of what will be recognized as a separate ecclesiastical structure of the Anglican Communion in the USA . . . . . We believe that we would be failing in our apostolic witness if we do not make this provision for those who hold firmly to a commitment to historic Anglican faith.”

The Anglican Communion Primates meeting in Dar es Salaam in February 2007 reaffirmed the 1998 Lambeth resolution and called on ECUSA (now TEC) to consider definite actions, which could heal the communion as well as reassure those who have been alienated of adequate pastoral care. By June 2007, both the ACoC and TEC indicated unwillingness to comply but a desire to remain part of the Communion they have hurt so much. As the deadline approaches, we fail to see how these positions can be reconciled. The situation has been made even more incoherent by the decision, made earlier this year, to extend an invitation to the Lambeth Conference of those responsible for this crisis with no call to repentance, whilst rejecting bishops who have stood firm for the Faith.

#### **All journeys must end someday**

*“We are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” (Hebrews 12:1)*

These past ten years of distraction have been agonizing and the cost has been enormous. The time and financial resources spent on endless meetings whose statements and warnings have been consistently ignored is a tragic loss of resources that should have been used otherwise. It now appears, however, that the journey is coming to an end and the moment of decision is almost upon us. But this is not a time to lose heart or fail to maintain vigilance. It would be an even greater tragedy if while trying to bring others back to the Godly path, we should miss the way or lose the race.

- We want unity but not at the cost of relegating Christ to the position of another ‘wise teacher’ who can be obeyed or disobeyed.

- We earnestly desire the healing of our beloved Communion but not at the cost of re-writing the Bible to accommodate the latest cultural trend.

As stated in "[The Road to Lambeth](#)": "We Anglicans stand at a crossroads. One road, the road of compromise of biblical truth, leads to destruction and disunity. The other road has its own obstacles [faithfulness is never an easy way] because it requires changes in the way the Communion has been governed and it challenges [all] our churches to live up to and into their full maturity in Christ."

The first road, the one that follows the current path of The Episcopal Church USA and the Anglican Church of Canada, is one that we simply cannot take because the cost is too high. We dare not sacrifice eternal truth for mere appeasement; we cannot turn away from the source of life and love for a temporary truce. The other road is the only one that we can embrace. It is not an easy road because it demands obedience and faithfulness from each one of us. It requires an unequivocal acceptance and commitment to:

- a. The Authority and Supremacy of Scripture.
- b. The Doctrine of the Trinity
- c. The person, work and resurrection of Jesus the Christ
- d. The acknowledgement of Jesus as Divine and the One and only means of salvation
- e. The Biblical teaching on sin, forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation by the Holy Spirit through Christ.
- f. The sanctity of marriage.
- g. Teaching about morality that is rooted and grounded in Biblical Revelation.
- h. Apostolic Ministry.

These are not onerous burdens or tiresome restrictions but rather they are God's gift, designed to set us free from the bondage of sin and give us the assurance of life eternal.

It is our hope and fervent prayer that in the coming months, all those in leadership will be directed towards the restoration of true unity in the Body of Christ by an unconditional embrace of the One who says to all who will listen, "If you love me, you will obey what I command."

John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, describes the Christian life as a journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. On his journey, numerous decisions and many crossroads confront Pilgrim. The easy road was never the right road. This is our moment of truth.

*This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. (Deuteronomy 30:19,20a)*

**+ Peter Abuja**