The Importance of Moral Authority: Reflections on Current Events in the Anglican Communion

ELLEN K. WON德拉*

On January 14, 2016, the Primates of the Anglican Communion announced that they had passed a resolution “requiring that for a period of three years The Episcopal Church no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee and that while participating in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, they will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity.”¹ This action was taken in response to the Episcopal Church’s 2015 decision that the sacrament of marriage is to be available to same-sex as well as opposite-sex couples.² Notably, the resolution makes no mention of this subject. Rather, it is about doctrine and discipline, and who has what kind of authority to make determinations about both.

A week after the meeting, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby said that the Primates had “asked” that the Episcopal Church not participate in the activities stipulated by the Primates,³ whose actions he clearly supports. In his address to the Church of England’s General Synod, the Archbishop used the term “consequences” to describe the Primates’ actions, a term used in the drafts of the still-unapproved

* Ellen K. Wondra recently retired as Research Professor of Theology and Ethics at the Bexley Seabury Seminary Federation. She represents the Episcopal Church on the World Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Order. She is writing a book for the Peter Lang series Studies in Episcopal and Anglican Theology, titled Clumsy and Untidy: The Theology and Practice of Authority in the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion.


Anglican Covenant. Further, Archbishop Welby has said, “This decision binds the Primates as a group, but not any Province or other Instrument of Communion. It is a powerful and morally forceful guideline.”

At the beginning of the April 2016 meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, Archbishop Welby gave a report on the Primates’ meeting, in which he said that the Primates’ gathering had “sought to balance three things, freedom, order and human flourishing.” He specifically rejected the idea that the Primates had imposed sanctions or suspension, while also indicating that “consequences” could be expected for any province that “promotes its own autonomy over that of the catholic interdependence and mutual accountability of others.” He noted that no “instrument of communion” can legally bind the actions of any other, while also noting that the 1988 Lambeth Conference had passed a resolution stating that the Primates have an “enhanced responsibility in offering guidance on doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters,” such that the Primates are “a key to growth of interdependence within the Communion.” The Archbishop reported that he had fulfilled his responsibility as an instrument of communion, which included asking Episcopal Church “members of interfaith or ecumenical bodies . . . whose appointment he controls, to stand down,

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4 See The Anglican Communion Covenant: The Third (Ridley Cambridge Draft, Section 4.2, www.anglicancommunion.org/media/100850/ridley_cambridge_covenant_english.pdf. As of January 23, 2016, it appears that eleven of the thirty-eight Provinces and six extra-provincial churches have approved, subscribed, or acceded to the Covenant; four have decided not to subscribe; five are at some stage of decision-making; and twenty-five have yet to take formal action. A list of results can be found at http://noanglicancovenant.org.

5 Justin Welby, “Archbishop Reflects on Primates’ Meeting in Synod Address—Video,” February 15, 2016, www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5669/archbishop-reflects-on-primates-meeting-in-synod-address-video. There remains the question as to whether such binding applies to all Primates or only to those who remained until the meeting adjourned. Further, what “binding” means will only become clear through future actions by individual Primates and by provincial synods and other structures as well as by the instruments of communion and the Anglican Communion Office.


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and they have done so.”8 The Archbishop has also appointed the Task Group for which the Primates called.

At the end of its meeting, the Anglican Consultative Council passed a resolution saying:

The Anglican Consultative Council
1. receives the formal report of the Archbishop of Canterbury to ACC16 on the Primates’ Gathering and Meeting of January 2016; and
2. affirms the commitment of the Primates of the Anglican Communion to walk together; and
3. commits to continue to seek appropriate ways for the provinces of the Anglican Communion to walk together with each other and with the Primates and other Instruments of Communion.9

When asked what this resolution meant for the “consequences” the Primates had called for, Archbishop Welby said, “The consequences stand.”10 Episcopal Church representatives to the ACC said that “beyond [the Archbishop’s] report, ACC members seemed to have little energy for answering the primates’ call for consequences, for discussing disagreements over human sexuality, or for taking up the call of Anglican Communion Secretary-General Josiah Idowu-Fearon to pursue the Anglican Covenant. Yesterday [April 18, 2016], in fact, a resolution that sought to pursue further consequences against The Episcopal Church was withdrawn just before it was scheduled for debate.”11

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9 Drake, “ACC Commits to ‘Walking Together’ with the Primates.”

10 Drake, “ACC Commits to ‘Walking Together’ with the Primates.”

In other words, three of the four “instruments of communion” of the Anglican Communion have now acted in response to the actions of the Episcopal Church, and indicated that similar “consequences” may follow from possible actions of the General Synods of the Anglican Church of Canada (to be held in July 2016), the Scottish Episcopal Church (to be held in 2017), and any others that may make decisions similar to those of the Episcopal Church. Whether the ACC upheld the requirements of the Primates or simply received them with no judgment is a matter of interpretation, and so of considerable debate.

Meanwhile, the Right Reverend Ian T. Douglas, Bishop of Connecticut and a representative of the Episcopal Church on the ACC, declined to stand for election as chair of that body, and was explicit that his decision grew out of his own deep commitment to unity, not as a response to the Primates’ gathering. The Archbishop of Canterbury asked Episcopal Church members on some interfaith and ecumenical bodies to “stand down,” and they did. Beyond that, each province selects its own representatives to the Anglican Consultative Council. Yet what the “consequences” are and will be in future will continue to unfold over at least three years, and probably longer.

This is but the latest stage in a decades-long global Anglican debate about human sexuality, and an even longer debate about the theology and practice of authority. While the immediate issue most recently has been Anglicans’ understanding of homosexuality, the debate is also fundamentally about authority in the Anglican Communion. Who has the authority to decide what, on what bases, and according to whom? This is not a problem that can be solved once and for all. It is a dilemma, a matter “where issues and values can only be balanced,” and only provisionally. And it is a dilemma that can be resolved only through actions that generate “waves of consequences.”

12 The four instruments of communion are the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Primates’ Meeting. The term “instruments of communion” rather than “instruments of unity” has become prominent since the 2004 Windsor Report.


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in the lives of real people over an unbounded period of time, no matter how temporary any resolution may turn out to be.\textsuperscript{15}

It is no accident that Anglicans face this authority dilemma at a global level, even though it may have been resolved satisfactorily in some of the provinces. Since well before the English Reformation, issues relating to authority have constantly arisen and been addressed in the church, generally by trying to establish a balance between local (provincial) autonomy and overarching interrelationship. The matter is not one of legislation or formal governance on the basis of official and thereby binding pronouncements. It is, rather, a process of negotiating among available possibilities, in and through an array of ventures in exercising authority and how those are interpreted. Through this process, a tentative and temporary consensus may emerge, until it too must be tested in light of changing circumstances and understandings of the role of the church in proclaiming and witnessing to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In this article, I reflect on the most recent attempts at clarifying the practice and by implication the theology of authority in the Anglican Communion, focusing on the most recent meetings of the Primates and of the Anglican Consultative Council. The actions of these bodies have deep and tangled roots in the theology and history of Anglicanism, and those must not be forgotten. Notably, each of these bodies came into being at points when questions about practices of authority were particularly acute. At such points, proposals have been considered for structures and procedures that would have the authority to make binding decisions and agreements. And at each point, the decision has been that the resultant bodies and structures are consultative only. In establishing each of these bodies as an “instrument of communion,” the instruments themselves and the various provinces have thus far consistently given them moral but not legal (constitutional or canonical) authority. That is to say, the instruments’ statements and actions are not binding on the provinces of the Communion. At the same time, they have considerable weight and influence in and among the provinces as they seek to “walk together” as a global communion.

“Moral authority” is a fluid and flexible term, referring to various forms of symbolic or extra-canonical capacities to influence and persuade. Moral authority is attributed to persons and groups when

their positions and roles, along with their personal characteristics and manner of life, give them symbolic power within the particular communities that comprise the contemporary Anglican Communion. The effectiveness of moral authority depends to a large extent on what kind of response its exercise generates from those toward whom it is directed.

Moral authority arises from the habitus or culture or ethos of a particular group (here, the church), and both expresses and inculcates the group’s values, purposes, and virtues through a variety of practices that emerge and change over time, but which are widely held by the group as “the way things are” or as “natural.” In the Anglican churches, such practices include celebrating the sacraments according to particular liturgical rites, preaching and teaching, engaging in congregational life and the life of both the local community and the larger church, and making decisions and policies that affect how these practices are carried out. These practices constitute and convey meaning and purpose. They generally maintain community cohesion and form new members for appropriate participation.

Both moral and formal exercises of authority are explicitly legitimated in a variety of ways, such as ordination, election, and appointment. In addition, moral authority comes to be attributed through persons’ engaging in leadership practices, perhaps as members of committees, experts in particular areas, or informal consultants and conversation partners. Constitutions and canons set some expectations and limitations, but they can never cover all the ways in which authority is exercised, in no small part because authority is fundamentally practiced within a network of relations among persons. Those relations are mediated in many ways through structures, policies, media, and actions and responses, but these are mediators only, not the relations themselves.

Saying that authority is practiced relationally draws attention to the fact that a major characteristic of Anglican theology is its claim that the Good News must be proclaimed in terms and forms that are contextually apt, even as the Word became flesh in order to dwell among us in a very particular time and place. In other words, Anglican theology stresses the relational, the personal, and the concrete and contextual.16

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16 Percy, Anglicanism, 15.
From this basis, the church is understood as fundamentally ordered toward persons. Structures and even doctrines have to take into account and benefit the complex *gestalt* of thought, word, and deed; habits, dispositions, and orientations; history and context; and continuity and consistency without rigidity: these are fundamental characteristics of human persons, created in the image and likeness of a God who is a Who, not a What. Persons are more than the sum of their interdependent parts. And persons are irreducibly social: they come into being, survive, and thrive through relationships with others, with their context, and with themselves.

A correlate to this ordering toward persons is that authority is conferred in order that certain responsibilities may be fulfilled, for the benefit of the whole and the benefit of the persons who are brought together in and through it. (This is the purpose of constitutions and canons as well.) The exercise of moral authority aspires to enhance the thriving of persons within an organic system of relationships. This is part of what we mean when we say authority is about service rather than merit or power.

In this ecclesiology, organizations, structures, offices, policies, and the like are all ordered so that they enhance this personal, relational foundation. The missional correlate is that the church is called to serve and build up what God is doing in and through the messiness and particularities of the persons who make human history. By implication, difference must be seen as in some sense enriching even when it provokes disputes and even division. Communion, that is, entails disagreement.¹⁷

In all of this, moral authority is more important than formal authority precisely because it pertains to persons and groups rather than rules and structures. Moral authority effectively resides with persons (for example, bishops) or groups of persons (for example, consultative bodies) who are positioned to uphold and embody in relatively coherent and continuous ways the common values and beliefs that are essential to the church’s identity and its thriving. Moral authority relies on loyalty and commitment, and it reinforces allegiance and participation. Moral authority “works” insofar as it appeals to the desires and

willingness of individuals and sub-groups to participate in the larger
group because doing so is in some sense crucial to their well-being
and to their ability to be effective actors in the world, whether or not
they agree with a particular statement or action.

The action of the Primates in “requiring” “consequences” for the
2015 actions of the Episcopal Church is an exercise of moral author-
ity. It is thereby also a statement of expectation that such authority
should be made effective by those with responsibility to do so. In this
case, the language of requirement indicates the degree of seriousness
with which the Primates insist their statement be taken, rather than
any action they are officially authorized to take. The Primates have
no canonical or constitutional—that is, formal or juridical—authority
to carry out such a requirement; it is, at most, binding only among
themselves. But they do have the moral authority to evoke and ex-
pect a great deal of consideration of what their actions may mean,
and they have acted in a way that presses for precisely that effect.
The Archbishop of Canterbury has complied in areas where he has
responsibility. The fact that the Anglican Consultative Council did not
reiterate the Primates’ recommendations does not indicate that the
Council did not take them seriously. Rather, their “receiving” them is
an exercise of the Council’s own moral authority as another one of the
instruments of communion.

At the same time, what the Primates’ statements and actions turn
out to mean varies significantly from place to place, in no small degree
on the basis of what authority a Primate may and may not exercise in
his or her home province, relative to the life of the province, its dio-
ceses, its clergy, its worship, its programs, and other practices.18

So, in provinces where Primates and other bishops have a great
deal of formal as well as moral authority, the actions of any body of
Primates or bishops will be taken as having binding or nearly-binding
force. This is how it is credible for GAFCON (Global Anglican Future
Conference) and other bishops to claim that Resolution I.10 of the
1998 Lambeth Conference has binding authority.19

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18 See George Conger, “TEC Will Go to the ACC Meeting in Lusaka and They
Will Vote, ACC Chairman Says,” February 16, 2016, www.anglican.ink/article/
tec-will-go-acc-meeting-lusaka-and-they-will-vote-acc-chairman-says.

19 Resolution I.10 on human sexuality says, among other things, that the Lambeth
Conference “cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordain-
ing those involved in same gender unions” (www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/
At the same time, in provinces where Primates and other bishops have authority primarily in and through synodical actions, the determinations of the Primates or the Lambeth Conference will be taken as advisory, as a way of proceeding to be considered seriously but as one way among many, the choice among which resides with the larger whole, the province. This is how it is credible for bishops and others in the Episcopal Church to claim that they have taken with the greatest seriousness the advice of the various instruments of communion and others, and so have maintained the “catholic interdependence and mutual accountability” upon which the Anglican Communion depends.

That these different understandings of authority contribute to a global dilemma is clear enough. That dilemma is, I think, most helpfully understood as an ongoing process of venturing and testing the conditions of the possibility of forming a consensus, of marking out a newly shaped common ground. This process takes place not only through particular actions, but also through a series of interpretations, including statements interpreting prior actions and those predicting future actions and outcomes. Thus, in the interim between the Primates’ gathering and the meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, there has been a clash of interpretations, including determinations that the actions of the Primates were not punitive, but did “recommend” “consequences”; public statements by several Primates that they would not participate in the April meeting of the ACC because no consequences had been enacted; and arguments about whether representatives of the Episcopal Church at that meeting ought to constrain themselves voluntarily in matters pertaining to doctrine and polity.

Each of these interpretations is an attempt to influence and persuade the ACC to take or refrain from taking certain actions. They are also attempts to influence how the ACC itself exercises authority. In turn the deliberations and actions of the ACC will influence how it is seen relative to the other instruments of communion as well as the Communion as a whole. In the immediate wake of the meeting of the ACC, the battle of interpretations took another turn, focusing
on whether or not the ACC had affirmed or simply received the Primates’ position. This constant positing and testing of interpretations will no doubt affect how the influence of all of the instruments will be seen in light of future actions by any of them, by the Anglican Communion Office, and perhaps most tellingly by the actions of the various provinces themselves.

In other words, the interactive process of action, interpretation, and further action has consequences beyond those that are named or even acknowledged. In a variety of ways this process will influence the upcoming General Synods in Canada and Scotland, for example, and there is already a range of interpretations of what kind of influence this may be, some of them springing from these provinces themselves in advance of their meetings.21

Further, there are likely to be consequences for the instruments of communion themselves. In its most recent working paper, the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order (IASCUFO) notes that “in times of crisis the Instruments become easily overburdened” with expectations and tasks that exceed their purpose and their mandate. This may lead to their being seen as “meaningless and inadequate for the purpose for which they were created,” that is, “to enable the people of the Church to follow Christ in the world.”22

However the process continues to unfold, and even once an uneasy acceptance of particular practices and structures emerges—if it does—questions about authority will not be settled once and for all, either for the Anglican Communion or for its member provinces.

What I point to here is not that the Anglican Communion has problems with authority, or at least questions about it. We all know that. Rather, I have argued that the frameworks in and through which we work out how authority is practiced and understood must recognize the primacy of moral or relational authority over canonical and


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constitutional structures and practices. This is certainly the case at the Communion-wide level, which has been the focus here. But moral authority is also primary at the provincial and local levels, no matter how formal authority is structured and legitimated.

This being the case, all Anglicans must give up the cherished dream of global harmony manifest in clear agreement, and recognize that disagreement is an inherent part of communion, at least until the Kingdom comes. Such recognition implies the need to develop wise practices of negotiation, persuasion, influence, and disagreement. Such practices likely entail an ongoing shift away from decision-making procedures that are adversarial (such as determining matters by vote) and toward consensus-based resolution. Such resolutions emerge not only from the difficult and artful process of dialogue (listening and speaking), but also from sustained actual practices of communion, such as common efforts in particular areas whether or not all are agreed on all issues, and the constant bearing of each other’s burdens through prayer and accompaniment. All this is often said. It is also effectively practiced, though this may be obscured by a preoccupation with formal authority. Yet it is through these practices that the church develops and sustains a *habitus* or ethos in which moral authority can be effective. And all of this must go on in recognition that living in communion always has been, always is, and always will be both a challenge to us and a gift from a gracious God.

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23 That this approach is effective is demonstrated through the consensus-based decision-making processes used by the World Council of Churches and local ecumenical bodies such as the Uniting Church of Australia.