

Why it was the world wide web that finally did for the Anglican communion

Tim Berners-Lee's great invention allowed the world's Christian churches to see how disparate their theologies were. But the web's model of connectivity could also help heal the rifts

The archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, with archbishop Eliud Wabukala in Kenya in 2013



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In the end, it was probably Tim Berners-Lee that did for the Anglican communion. And yet he may also be exactly the right person to show the church how to put itself back together again. But more of that in a moment. The archbishop of Canterbury has just announced a final throw of the dice to keep the family together. He plans a looser structure – not quite a divorce, but “sleeping in separate bedrooms”. It's the right way forward. But it doesn't go far enough.

The Anglican communion began as the spiritual arm of British colonialism, with public-school soldiers exporting their style of prayer and hat-wearing, hymn-singing church throughout the empire. As the map turned red, so it also turned Christian, with the 20th century witnessing the most numerically successful period of evangelisation since Christianity first piggy-backed upon the Roman empire some 17 centuries before. Just as myopic western liberals began to celebrate that Christianity in particular (and religion in general) was in its dying days, so many forms of religion, including Anglicanism, were exploding in numbers, especially in Africa and the far east. Indeed, the Church of England has been one of this country's most successful exports – up there with football and the English language itself – creating the world's third-largest religious denomination with some 77 million members. The BBC's

World Service may have a greater reach, but in terms of soft power, it is hard to beat the presence of boots on the ground – or, rather, knees on the kneelers. Little wonder successive archbishops have loved the Anglican communion. Whereas, in Luton, a few hundred might turn out to greet them. In Lagos, it's likely to be tens of thousands.

But when the soldiers finally withdrew from the empire and the colonial civil service shrank back to Westminster, so local Anglican churches began to develop in their own independent ways, each adopting local custom and absorbing the values of the surrounding culture. Over the decades, as congregations swelled, few people noticed that the Anglican family was drifting further apart. Until, that is, the C of E nearly appointed a gay bishop in 2003. And then all hell broke loose – with English conservatives, fearing they were about to lose the gay argument back home, cleverly re-inventing the C of E as part of the worldwide communion in which they form a natural majority.

But it was the world wide web that finally did for global ecclesiastical solidarity. Through the web, different churches could finally experience each other's theology first hand. We could read their sermons and church pronouncements. And they could read ours. And we didn't like what we saw. Western liberals saw anti-gay bigotry. African conservatives saw an abandonment of the traditional gospel. We had become strangers to each other. No, worse than that: we realised we were fighting on very different sides. And, however hard they tried (and Rowan Williams really did) the men in mitres could not put Humpty together again.

But just as Berners-Lee's great invention opened the church up to its own divisions, so it can provide a model for a more robust ecclesiology. For the great breakthrough that Berners-Lee made at Cern in 1989 was the creation of hypertext, connections that share information horizontally, between users, without having to pass through some central command and control. It was the ultimate Reformation, not just (as it were) the abolition of the pope – but the abolition of the whole need for a hierarchical and centralised authority. This is how the church should develop – locally based, and with a crisscrossing network of national and international connections where solidarity is helpful and required. Yes, a bit like the letters of St Paul, but not so bossy.

I'm a bit of a Trotskyist when it comes to the Reformation: I believe in continual revolution. But the hypertext church – connected horizontally, not vertically – is not some future possibility. It is a present reality. Most of us in parishes just get on with our work, forming alliances, independent of the rows going on up in Lambeth Palace. In truth, they don't impinge on us all that much. The problem is not with the church on the ground. The problem is with the long, fictional notion of authority by which we are all supposed to be connected. And the archbishop himself knows it too: it's not our links to him that make us a family, it's our partnership in the gospel.

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