

## Welby's way: How to avoid an Anglican schism

Welby's way: How to avoid an Anglican schism that many believe has already occurred



The Archbishop of Canterbury has called together the 37 most senior figures in the worldwide Anglican Communion to try to head off a potential schism. But serious doubts remain about his chances of persuading them to adopt a new way of working together

Among the crowds of tourists filing into Cathedral Close in Canterbury in 10 days' time, some may spot discreet notices politely declaring parts of the complex off-limits. The reason for the closures might best be classed as a health and safety precaution – at least from the visitors' point of view. Yet the risk is not, as one might imagine in a building as old as the medieval cathedral, from falling masonry but something more like flying crockery.

The Anglican Communion has been edging towards a bitter family feud for more than a decade. After years of relatives sniping at each other from a distance, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has finally ordered everyone home to have it out. Perhaps like many families scattered across countries and continents, the younger generation barely know each other. And what they do know, they don't much like. Some simply do not approve of their cousins' lifestyles. They, in turn, dismiss their moralising relatives as reactionaries.

Whether the archbishop's plan to clear the air will pay off remains to be seen. He has at least got over the first serious hurdle: everyone is planning to turn up. He spent much of his summer holiday in France ringing around primates, begging, charming or perhaps cajoling them into attending, privately admitting that the future of the Anglican Communion depends on it.

Anglicans like to see themselves as the third largest Christian denominational grouping in the world, even if the claim to 80 million adherents is questionable. Unlike the clear structure of the Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion is a tangle of around 3,000 separate relationships. Each of the 44 Churches is theoretically in communion with each other. But there is, as Archbishop Welby regularly remarks, no Anglican Pope. He – and in the future, possibly she – fills a symbolic role as spiritual leader, but has little, if any, real power to shape the Communion or, indeed, hold it together.

Such an arrangement might be unwieldy at the best of times. But since the almighty row which erupted 12 years ago, when the US branch of the family, the Episcopal Church (known as TEC), ordained its first openly gay bishop, Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, it has been unworkable. The individual ties between the North American provinces and most of those in the global south, where Anglicanism is still a major force, have already withered, in what all but the most optimistic admit amounts to a full schism.

Within the US the rift has become a battle not only for the soul of the Church but also for its temporal property, played out in court confrontations between Episcopal dioceses and a new conservative breakaway group, the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA). ACNA is not officially recognised as a member of the Anglican Communion, but is treated as such by most of the leaders in the global south and beyond – including many evangelicals within the Church of England – who openly shun the North American branches of Anglicanism as “apostates”.

Attempts to paper over the cracks have proved futile since 2008 when the Lambeth Conference, the once-in-a-decade global gathering of bishops, was boycotted by around a quarter of those invited. Instead, they travelled to Jerusalem to set up a new grouping, best known as GAFCON (the Global Anglican Future Conference) which has now become a rival centre of power within the fractured Anglican Communion.

Into this melee tiptoes the Church of England itself. It is riven with the same splits over homosexuality – an issue symbolic of a deeper liberal-conservative divide – as the wider Anglican family, but finds itself torn between loyalty to the global Church that its missionaries founded, and its immediate neighbours, British society in the twenty-first century.

Archbishop Welby's plan, to be put to primates behind closed doors in Canterbury, is elegantly simple but could prove too much for some to stomach. The Communion in its current form would effectively be dissolved and replaced with a structure loosely based on that of the Orthodox churches: with all provinces in relationship directly with the See of Canterbury – but not necessarily with each other.

The plan would mean Anglicanism could continue as the third largest bloc within Christianity, future Archbishops of Canterbury taking their place alongside popes and figures such as the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, ostensibly speaking for millions of believers. But whatever gloss is put on it, it would amount to a dramatic scaling back of relations. As one close aide to the archbishop put it recently: “It's not quite a legal separation; if one is going to pursue that metaphor, I think it's more moving into separate bedrooms.”

The plan could free different branches of Anglicanism to follow radically different courses. It would leave all but the archbishop without any levers of influence over each other.

Nothing will be decided in a single week. The hope is to draw up a declaration that all sides can sign up to, with a full Lambeth Conference around 2020 to sign off any new deal. But Lambeth Palace knows it could end in disaster, or at least it is managing expectations with that possibility firmly in view. It has been privately described as the “last throw of the dice to save the Communion”.

There is a possibility that some primates will refuse to speak face-to-face or to receive Communion together. ACNA has been invited to attend at least part of the meeting, a proposal understood to have received a decidedly frosty reaction from the US and Canadian churches. Rather than banging heads together, the strategy is to “over-accept” – giving each side time and space to disagree. To that end, there will even be two chapels set aside in case separate groupings wish to receive Communion apart. The archbishop's deepest fear must be that they decide that it tastes better that way.

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