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The Church cannot heal this crisis of betrayal

Those who violate biblical teaching must show repentance and regret before we can share communion with them

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I love the Lord Jesus Christ, and I love the Anglican Communion. So, why did the bishops of the Church of Uganda and I decide not to attend the present Lambeth Conference? Because we love the Lord Jesus Christ and because we love the Anglican Communion.

St Francis of Assisi said: "Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary use words." We believe that our absence at this Lambeth Conference is the only way that our voice will be heard. For more than ten years we have been speaking and have not been heard. So maybe our absence will speak louder than our words.

The crisis in the Communion is serious; our commitment to biblical and historic faith and mission are serious; and we want to be taken seriously. In 2003 the Episcopal Church in America consecrated as bishop a man living in an active homosexual relationship. This unilateral and unbiblical action was directly contrary to a resolution of the 1998 Lambeth Conference. I participated in that conference and we overwhelmingly resolved that "homosexual practice is incompatible with Scripture" and the conference "cannot advise the legitimising of same-sex unions". As a result, the 2003 action of the American Church plunged the Anglican Communion into a crisis that, as the primates of the Anglican Communion said in 2003, "tore the very fabric of our communion at its deepest level". The crisis is about authority - biblical authority and ecclesiastical authority.

The American decision disregarded biblical authority by violating clear biblical teaching against homosexual behaviour. For this reason, the Church of Uganda and other Anglican provinces broke communion with the Episcopal Church in America in 2003, and we continue in that state of broken communion today.

Even though some scholars have tried to explain away specific biblical passages that refer to homosexual practice, the fact remains that nowhere in Scripture is homosexual practice affirmed or presented as a legitimate alternative to heterosexual relationships. In every case, homosexual practice is considered sinful - something that breaks our relationship with God and harms our wellbeing. It is something for which one should repent and seek forgiveness and healing, which God is ever ready to do. Not only is Scripture to be taken seriously, but it is to be obeyed, because God intends for us things far better than we could ask or imagine.

If a whole province, such as the Episcopal Church, acts contrary to God's word and the consensus of the communion, who in the Anglican Communion has the authority to discipline that erring province?

We in the Global South believed the Primates' Meeting had this authority - the 1988 Lambeth Conference urged the Primates' Meeting to "exercise an enhanced responsibility in offering guidance on doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters" and the 1998 Lambeth Conference reaffirmed this. So, it was appropriate, after the American decision in 2003, that the Archbishop of Canterbury convened an emergency meeting of the primates to address the biblical and ecclesiastical crisis into which the Americans had plunged the Anglican Communion. The primates, including the American primate, unanimously advised that the consecration should not proceed. Nonetheless, two weeks later, the primate in America presided at the consecration as bishop of a man living in a same-sex relationship. This was a deep betrayal.

Since that meeting there have been numerous other “betrayals” to the extent that it is now hard to believe that the leadership in the American Church means what it says. They say that they are not authorising blessings of same-sex unions, yet we read newspaper reports of them. Two American bishops have even presided at such services of blessings. Bishops have written diocesan policies on the blessings of same-sex unions. It is simply untrue to say they have not been authorised.

That such blessings continue and seem to be increasing hardly demonstrates “regret”, let alone repentance, on the part of the American Church. So, when the Archbishop of Canterbury invited these American bishops to participate in the Lambeth Conference, against the recommendations of the Windsor Report and the Primates’ Meeting, and in the face of the unrelenting commitment of the American Church to bless sinful behaviour, we were stunned. Further betrayal. It was clear to me and to our House of Bishops that the Instruments of Communion had utterly failed us.

Anglicans may say there are four “Instruments of Communion,” (the Archbishop of Canterbury; the Lambeth Conference; the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates’ Meeting). But de facto, there is only one - the Archbishop of Canterbury. The peculiar thing is that this one man, who is at the centre of the communion’s structures, is not even elected by his peers. Even the Pope is elected by his peers, but what Anglicans have is a man appointed by a secular government. Over the past five years, we have come to see this as a remnant of British colonialism, and it is not serving us well. The spiritual leadership of a global communion of independent and autonomous provinces should not be reduced to one man appointed by a secular government.

It is important that our decision not to attend this Lambeth Conference is not misunderstood as withdrawing from the Anglican Communion. On the contrary, our decision reflects the depth of our concern and the sober realisation that the present structures are not capable of addressing the crisis. How can we go to Holy Communion, sit in Bible study groups, and share meals together, pretending that everything is OK?, that we are still in fellowship with the persistent violators of biblical teaching and of Lambeth resolutions?

The Bible says: “Can two walk together unless they are agreed?” The Archbishop of Canterbury has asked us to “wait for each other”. But how is it possible when we are not travelling in the same direction?

The Church of Uganda takes its Anglican identity and the future hope of the global Anglican Communion very seriously. We love the Lord Jesus Christ, and we love the Anglican Communion. Lord, have mercy upon us.

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Guest Column

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