

Relationships Across Differences: The Current and Future Hope of the Anglican Communion

**The Belshaw Lecture
Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey
February 29, 2008**

The Rev. Ian T. Douglas, Ph.D.

A Communion in Transition

These are indeed difficult and stressful times in the Anglican Communion with threats of schism and accusations of the waywardness of one or another Anglican church being bandied about in both the Church and secular media around the world. Like it or not, Anglicanism is at a crossroads that could make or break the fragile family of churches that is the Anglican Communion.

On the surface it appears as if the current debates in Anglicanism are about conflicting positions on human sexuality, or different understandings of biblical authority, or contradictory interpretations of the doctrines of the Church. As important as these concerns are, what I believe is most upsetting Anglicanism today are struggles over identity and power in a radically changing world and Church.

The transitions afoot in the Anglican Communion over the last five decades have been so extreme, and so challenging to those who have historically been the most secure in a white, Western, Enlightenment Church, that it is no wonder we are left confused and anxious. The key question before the Anglican Communion today is thus: Can a historically Western, hegemonic, mono-cultural, Church of imperial aspirations embrace a New Pentecost as a multicultural family of churches embodying wide differences yet called in unity to incarnate and extend God's reconciling love in every corner of the world?

Please allow me to unpack this question just a bit. Within the lifetime of most of us gathered here this afternoon, especially if you are middle aged like I am, The Anglican Communion has been transformed from a white English-speaking church of the West to a radically plural and world-wide family of churches made up of 80 million Christians in over 160 countries. These demographic shifts in the Anglican Communion over the last century are consistent with the changes in other Christian communions globally. For example, in 1970 approximately 65% of the 1.1 billion Christians in the world lived in Europe or North America. Today almost 63% of the more than 2 billion Christians live in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania.¹ In other words, over the last forty years we have experienced an inversion in the world Christian population.

And along with this radical transformation, individuals and groups who historically have been silenced or hidden in the Church have begun to find their voices

and places at the table. Previously colonized people, people of color, people for whom English is not their first language, people around the world who live in dire economic, political, and social circumstances, are all standing up and saying they belong. And, in the same way, here in The Episcopal Church over the last four decades African-Americans, women, lay people, and most recently gay and lesbian people, have begun to own their places in the Body of Christ. The Anglican Communion is thus no longer a Church primarily for, or controlled exclusively by, the Ian Douglases of the world: heterosexual, white, male, economically secure, overly educated, Western-thinking, English-speaking, US passport-holding, middle-aged, clerics. Thanks be to God.

So the question really is: given the plurality of voices and peoples in this New Pentecost that is the world-wide Anglican Communion today, will we become alienated from each other in attempts to secure new privileges through the assertion of our own single identity politics, whatever they might be? Or will we see the fullness of what God is up to in Jesus manifested in those who are radically different than we are and thus live more fully into God's mission to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ?

The Power of Identity/Identities

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, has said most adroitly that while the 20th century was driven by conflicts over ideology, the 21st century will be characterized by conflicts over identity, or identities. Identity is the way by which a person or groups of people define themselves based upon some aspect of their personhood. Identity is a powerful force for both the individual as well as for the social group to which an individual belongs; and the varieties of personal and social identities that exist are as broad and rich as the fullness of God's good creation. Some of the more easily defined identities include: gender, ethnicity, national origin, age, geography, race, class, economic status, sexuality, religion, theological commitments, and particularly within the Anglican Communion, church membership and clerical status.

While identity can be a positive force of social cohesion, and relationship building it is equally true that identities can be divisive and serve to alienate individuals or groups of individuals from each other. When disproportionate power occurs between individuals and/or groups then the differences in identity that exist between them can result in violent attacks from one onto the other. Violence in such places as Afghanistan, Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Northern Ireland, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sudan, and the inner cities of the United States come to mind. And even in the Bible, identity differences resulted in oppressive and sometimes violent circumstances, whether it be the people of Israel enslaved in Egypt, or the followers of Jesus who claim to belong to Paul, or to Apollos, or to Cephas (1 Cor. 1:12.)

The power inherent in identities and the way it is exercised in various social circumstances is the realm of identity politics. Identity politics presupposes a social construction of reality where individuals and groups have power and authority to assert an identity, and/or are disenfranchised and oppressed because of the same. Generally

speaking, those who enjoy the most power, be that because of majority status, historical circumstance or some other social dynamic, are considered privileged in the power differential; while those who are disempowered are seen as being “targets” of oppressive actions and structures.

Dr. Valerie Batts, an anti-racism and multiculturalism consultant and theorist speaking out of her context in the United States as an African-American woman, has charted some of the non-target and target groups that function in America. For example on the variable of race, the non-target (privileged) group would be those who are considered white and the target group would be people of color (African, Asian, Native, Latino/a Americans.) Similarly on the variable of socio-economic class, the non-target would be those of the middle and upper classes while the target groups are the poor and working classes. And the same would be true on the variable of gender with men being non-target and women being target.²

In these power dynamics of non-target and target groups it is very important to note that there are multiple identities at work for any one individual or group at any one time, be they along the variables of race, class and gender, or innumerable others such as education, religion, age, physical or mental ability, sexual orientation, language, etc. Every person thus “enjoys” both non-target and target status at the same time depending upon the identity under consideration.

For Christians the possibility of inhabiting non-target and target identities at the same time is manifest in Jesus the Christ. Jesus lived in the power and the possibility of being fully God while he also embodied the finiteness and limitations of being fully human. And on the cross, Jesus’ most powerful and freeing self-offering of God for the sake of the world occurred as he was the most oppressed, most debased, most persecuted. It is impossible for Christians, who believe that Jesus is fully divine and fully human, and for whom Jesus in his death of the on the cross provides new life, to deny that both non-target and target identities coexist.

And finally Batts emphasizes that, in addition to individuals and groups inhabiting multiple identities at any one time, the power dynamics of non-target and target status are also played out at multiple levels concurrently, namely: personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels.³

Perhaps a few hypothetical examples taken from current realities in the Anglican Communion might be helpful here to show how multiple identities function at the same time at various levels. Let us consider the somewhat pronounced example of a white, lesbian, lay-woman from the United States who is gainfully employed and speaks only English, and a heterosexual, married, bishop in an African Anglican church for whom English is not his first language. The woman from the United States enjoys the non-target, privileged status of being: white, a United States passport holder, economically secure, and educated in a Western English speaking context. Yet at the same time, she inhabits the target status of being a lesbian, a woman, and a lay-person (in Church circles.) Now for the African bishop: he enjoys the non-target, privileged status of being

a heterosexual, married, male, bishop in a growing Anglican church. At the same time he is a target because of his marginalization as black African whose people and country have been colonized by the West, who does not speak English as a first language and, and who struggles to live under dire economic realities.

When the woman from the United States and the African bishop meet in an inter-Anglican gathering, perhaps at a companion diocese consultation or at during a short term mission trip or preaching tour, all of their different identities at the four levels of the personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural affect their interactions. While the woman from the United States might feel secure and maybe even powerful in her status as an American, English speaking person who can easily negotiate her way through Western arranged meeting processes and agendas, she might feel insecure or marginalized as a woman, as a lay-person, or as a lesbian. In a similar vein, but with a different set of identities, the African bishop might feel secure in the interaction as a man and a bishop coming from a growing and vital Anglican Church. But he might also feel constrained or disempowered in a meeting that is conducted in English or that presupposes that he and his church cannot fully participate because of their financial limitations. The reality of the non-target and target status of these two faithful Anglican leaders is experienced in how they each see themselves in the international meeting (the personal level), as they come to share stories and know each other over tea (the interpersonal level), when they are speaking on behalf of their diocese or church in plenary sessions of the meeting (the institutional level), and when they are seen as representatives of the West or of the Global South (the cultural level.) These multiple realities lead us to ask: what is the possibility for genuine understanding and mutual responsibility and interdependence in Christ between the laywoman and the Bishop when all of these identity variables and levels are operative?

Overcoming Single Identity Politics: The Way Forward

Before considering the possibilities for understanding across the differences that exist between individuals and groups in the Anglican Communion, we might pause to look at what it is that most impedes such mutuality and interdependence. Given the multiple identities involved for any individual or group in the non-target/target power dynamic at the multiple levels in which power is exercised, it is difficult to see how a dualistic either/or presentation of identity politics can be sustained. And yet the Anglican Communion seems to be at a crisis point where the divisions over human sexuality are so pronounced that they threaten the very existence of the Communion as a family of churches. In order to perpetrate these battles over human sexuality, the many identities at the multiple levels that any individual or group inhabits must be diminished to a single identity politic.

A single identity politic, by definition, elevates one identity to a place of predominance and exclusivity while significantly under-appreciating, or even denying, the other identities inhabited by a person or group. When one identity is focused on it is very easy to construct a dualistic either/or scenario that pits one side against another. As this happens it then becomes easy to demonize or vilify the other as different or less deserving of full respect or dignity. The Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen

sees single identity politics, or the “delusion of singularity” as he puts it, as the root cause of violence in the world. He says:

To see a person exclusively in terms of only one of his or her many identities is, of course, a deeply crude intellectual move . . . and yet, judging from its effectiveness, the cultivated delusion of singularity is evidently easy enough to champion and promote. The advocacy of a unique identity for a violent purpose takes the form of separating out one identity group – directly linked to the violent purpose at hand – for special focus, and it proceeds from there to eclipse the relevance of other associations and affiliations through selective emphasis and incitement.⁴

While Sen is writing out of the conflicted multi-religious context of South Asia, his analysis might well describe current tensions in the Anglican Communion over human sexuality. Those who reduce the complex and plural realities of the Anglican Communion today to the single identity politic of human sexuality want to be able to characterize the other as either “homophobic” or “less than human” depending on where one stands with respect to the place of gay and lesbian people in the church. Such hurtful and violent characterizations do not build up the Body of Christ.

So how do we get beyond the confines and specter of violence and alienation in single identity politics? Returning to the work of Valerie Batts and the multiple identity variables she emphasizes in her process of multicultural change, it is useful to reemphasize that every human and every social group embodies many different identities. The more that we can live in the multiple realities of both our non-target and target identities in our personal, inter-personal, institutional, and cultural transactions, the more free we will be from the trap of single identity politics. We can only do this if we live with an awareness of, an appreciation of, both our own non-target and target identities as well as the non-target and target identities of the other.⁵

While appreciating differences and multiple identities for myself and for the other can be a cognitive exercise that calls for mindfulness and awareness, a second and possibly more important step is necessary if we are to move to a place of genuine communion with, reconciliation with, those who are different. This step requires us to be in touch with how we feel about the many different identities we inhabit.⁶ What does it feel like to be a target of oppression? How do we process the pain and hurt that we experience when disempowered or abused? Conversely, (and this is sometimes more difficult), what does it feel like to have power and privilege? Can we identify the feelings associate with being non-target? Like Jesus who wept at Lazarus’s tomb and yet drew on his power to raise his friend, we Christians are called to be in touch with both our feelings of hurt and pain and our power and possibility if we are to serve the fullness of God’s mission in the world.

Once we are able to identify our feelings associated with our non-target and target identities, we are then able to connect affectively with those who inhabit different non-target and target identities us than we do. What I am arguing here is that the feelings

associated with being non-target will be strikingly similar even if there are different identities at play. And conversely the feelings associated with being target will likewise be comparable even if the identities are different. We are thus challenged to share what it feels like both to be privileged and oppressed, even if the identities are not comparable. For it is only in the sharing of these feelings associated with our different non-target and target identities that possibility solidarities across differences emerges.

Returning now to the example of the American lay-woman and the African bishop, how would the awareness and appreciation of multiple identities and the affective sharing of feelings related to these identities build understanding and solidarity across the differences between these two Christian leaders? Imagine if the American lay-woman could share with the African bishop what it feels like to have power as a Western English speaking person, or one who is economically secure, or who is white, or one who holds a United States passport. And imagine if the bishop could share what it feels like to have power as a man, or one who is married, or one who is a bishop in a growing and vital church. Similarly imagine if the American lay-woman could share what it feels like to be disempowered as a woman, or as a lesbian, or as lay-person; and if the African bishop could identify what it feels like to be targeted as an historically colonized African for whom English is not a first language in English dominant inter-Anglican meetings and who lives in economically dire conditions. While these two Christian leaders experience different sources of power and oppression based upon the different non-target and target identities they inhabit, the feelings associated with being privileged and disempowered are very similar. Sharing their feelings of power and privilege, or oppression and disempowerment allows for the finding of commonality and solidarity as a sister and brother in Christ across their profound differences.

The Missiological Significance of Relationships Across Differences: Lambeth 2008

Clearly if the American lay-woman and the African bishop are to discover their commonalities in their differences, especially around their shared feelings of power and oppression, then there needs to be a theological, or even a missiological rationale, for being vulnerable and open to one another. Key to this open and trusting exchange is the willingness to be in relationship with the other and the desire to see the face of Christ in the other. In meeting Christ anew in the other, through a process of relational engagement where individuals and groups can share the possibilities and pain of their non-target and target identities, is the promise of restoration and reconciliation.

Being in relationship with one another and with God across our differences is thus fundamentally an exercise in faithfulness to the mission of God. If God's mission, in which the Church is blessed to participate, is "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ" (BCP p 855), then in our relationships across differences is the promise of restoring unity in a divided world. The missiological significance of being in relationship with those who are radically different than we are is that in such relationships we participate in the possibility of a restored and reconciled world intended by God.

Relationships across differences are incredibly difficult in a world torn apart by the forces of globalization and single identity politics. We Christians believe, however,

that in Christ God is reconciling the world to himself. In Christ the seemingly irreconcilable identities of one who is fully human and fully God have been brought together in a reconciled reality for the redemption of the world. The Body of Christ, the Church is thus called to live in the same fundamental reality that our profound differences are indeed already reconciled and that unity with God and each other in Christ is assured. Relationships across differences witness to the world the promise of unity in Christ and the truth that the Trinitarian God has effected restoration and reconciliation for all people and for all creation. In short, our salvation and the world's salvation are dependent on our being in relationship with those who are radically different than we are. We need the other if we are to come into the fullness of what God has done in creation, and in the new creation of Jesus Christ.

The fact that we need the other to come into the fullness of what God is up to in creation means that the incredible plurality and multicultural reality of the contemporary Anglican Communion gives us hope. For the more different we become in the New Pentecost then the greater the possibility of living into the fullness of God's reconciliation. Max Warren, the great General Secretary of the English Church Missionary Society is credited with saying: "It takes the whole world to know the whole Gospel." Paraphrasing Warren, we might say, "It takes the whole Anglican Communion, in all of our differences, to live into the fullness of God's reconciliation and restored unity." So, thanks be to God that the Anglican Communion no longer looks and sounds primarily like Ian Douglas. For in our differences, in the many new voices and faces at the table, is the hope of our salvation, is the hope of the world.

Here, then, is where the upcoming Lambeth Conference of worldwide Anglican bishops scheduled for this summer in Canterbury England offers hope for the current and future Anglican Communion. For the 2008 Lambeth Conference is predicated upon an understanding of the Anglican Communion as a radically multicultural and plural family of churches. In both design and process, (and here I speak as a member of the Design Group) the 2008 Lambeth Conference presupposes that differences in the Communion are positive and life giving and not something that need to be overcome and subdued. By engendering relationships across differences among the bishops, the Conference seeks to equip bishops to be more effective leaders in God's mission and in so doing, strengthen the Anglican Communion.

From the very early stages of our planning five years ago for the 2008 Lambeth Conference, the Design Group (made up of eight younger Anglican leaders from around the world, of whom initially I was the only person from the West) was encouraged by Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams to do a new thing. It was clear to the Archbishop and the Design Group that (in the words of one of us), the 2008 Lambeth Conference "should not be focused on reports that nobody read and resolutions that nobody paid attention to unless they were used to divide us one from another" And so the Design Group set about to do a new thing.

Basic to the design was the imperative to provide space where deep and meaningful conversations across differences could be engendered. And so at the very

outset we decided that small Bible study groups, base Christian communities (if you will), made up of eight bishops from radically different contexts would be the key community for Conference. We have called these groups *Indaba* Groups. *Indaba* is a Zulu word that means “gathering for the sake of conversation.” The *Indaba* Groups will meet every day of the Conference and in these small groups eight bishops will **encounter** God and each other in the sharing of God’s story by studying the Gospel of St. John, and in the sharing of their own life stories. The hope is to build a safe, face-to-face Christian community in the *Indaba* Group where honest and deep conversation can be had and relationships across differences can be engendered.

Now some have misrepresented the primacy given to the *Indaba* Groups as places of encounter and conversation as a way of dodging the hard issues before the Anglican Communion. I assure you that the difficult issues before us will indeed be considered at the Lambeth Conference but not in plenary gatherings where parliamentary procedures and politics based on win/lose resolutions prevail. Rather, each *Indaba* Group will meet with four other *Indaba* Groups in a regular and ongoing way as an expanded group of forty bishops. In these Expanded *Indaba* Groups of forty bishops, where face-to-face accountabilities have already been established through the smaller *Indabas*, the bishops will **engage** common issues before the Anglican Communion. The issues that all Expanded *Indaba* Groups will consider, in order of the days of the conference will be: 1) Anglican identity, 2) Evangelism, 3) Social justice, economics and the Millennium Development Goals, 4) Ecumenism, 5) Safeguarding the integrity of creation, 6) Multi-faith issues, 7) Gender inequalities and violence, 8) Biblical authority, 9) Human sexuality, and 10) The Anglican Covenant and “Windsor processes.” On occasion these issues will be introduced by major international speakers in evening presentations.

The third major programmatic aspect of the 2008 Lambeth Conference will be afternoon Self Select Sessions where bishops will be free to choose among dozens of different workshops, panels, lectures, and other hands on learning opportunities. These Self Select Sessions are designed to **equip** the bishops as leaders in God’s mission and will be loosely organized around the ten topics/issues of the Expanded *Indaba* Groups. For example the Self Select Sessions might range from a lecture on the most recent epidemiological data on the HIV/AIDS pandemic to a practical workshop on how to set up a diocesan communications strategy.

These three daily programmatic aspects of the Conference, the *Indaba* Group where God’s story and the bishops stories are encountered, the Expanded *Indaba* Groups where common topics and issues will be engaged, and the Self Select Sessions where bishops will be equipped for leadership, all will be surrounded by regular daily worship and prayer beginning with morning Eucharist and continuing with midday and evening prayer. In addition, to set the whole conference in a context of deep prayer and presence before God, the first three days of the Conference will be a prayerful retreat in the cathedral at Canterbury where Archbishop Williams will accompany the bishops in a three day reflection on 1) what is the mission of God, 2) What is the place of the Body of Christ, the Church, in God’s mission, and 3) How do bishops as leaders and disciples best help the Body of Christ to serve and advance God mission in the world.

I want to underscore that the upcoming Lambeth Conference is designed to provide space for bishops from vastly different contexts who embody vastly different identities to discover and engender relationships in Christ across these differences. This might be a naïve and idealistic goal, but it is one that I believe is possible and is of God.

Why do I believe relationships across differences (engendered at the 2008 Lambeth Conference and myriad other contexts) are possible and offer hope for the current and future of the Anglican Communion? I believe such because I have seen it over and over as I have traveled around this world-wide family of churches. For example, I think of young women and men who, through The Episcopal Church's Young Adult Service Corps, work alongside sisters and brothers in Christ in almost every province of the Anglican Communion. I have seen how they and their co-workers outside the United States have discovered Jesus anew in each other through their relationships across different cultures, languages and races. In my own diocese of Massachusetts, we have joined with the Mother's Union in Kenya and Anglican church leaders in Uganda and Tanzania to feed and provide medical care to literally thousands of HIV/AIDS orphans. And in so doing we all have discovered God in the other, in both Eastern Massachusetts and in East Africa. And last July I witnessed forty African Anglican bishops and thirty American Episcopal bishops come together in a consultation in Spain to share stories of what God was doing in their lives and their dioceses, beyond divisive church politics. At this consultation I saw American and African bishops transformed as they came into relationship across their differences of theology, ecclesiology and biblical interpretation. And, last but not least, I have seen how the invitation to dioceses, parishes and individual Christians in the United States and around the Anglican Communion to contribute 0.7% of our incomes in support the Millennium Development Goals has turned the hearts and minds of millions of faithful Anglicans to the possibility of working together across our differences in order to make poverty history.

So yes, these are difficult and trying times in a radically changing the Anglican Communion. But the challenge before all of us Anglicans, whether we are in New Jersey or Nairobi, is to move from established, known, secure and well ordered places of privilege and the confines of single identity politics, to places of unknowingness, risk and vulnerability with Jesus and each other through relationships across our differences. In these relationships across differences we are invited to go more deeply into God's mission to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. In these relationships across differences is the current and future hope of the Anglican Communion. THANK YOU.

¹ David B. Barrett, Todd M Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, "Missiometrics 2007: Creating Your Own Analysis of Global Data." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 31(No.1, January 2007): 32.

² Valerie Batts, “Is Reconciliation Possible? Lessons from Combating ‘Modern Racism,’” In: Douglas, ed. *Waging Reconciliation*, 41. Much of the power analysis in this section has been developed through collegial work with Dr. Batts.

³ Ibid, p 51-52.

⁴ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2006), 175.

⁵ It is important at this juncture of articulating our multiple identity variables that we neither rank the variables nor compete with the other about who has more non-target or target variables. Such ranking or competition is simply another more subtle form of single identity politics that fundamentally denies the multiplicity of identities any person or group inhabits. The key point is that each person or group fundamentally inhabits both non-target and target identities, and that they are able identify and articulate what these identities are for themselves.

⁶ The power of feelings in building solidarities and understanding across differences is emphasized in the process of multicultural changes as developed by Dr. Valerie Batts.