



Ecumenical guests at the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2016 / The Anglican Church of Canada

CHAPTER XIII

Difficult conversations: Ecumenical communication

In 2013, the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) proposed an amendment to its canon on marriage which would change the definition of marriage to include couples of the same sex. A process of broad consultation, including counsel from ecumenical partners, was mandated, and ARC Canada was specifically invited to provide input on this

matter. Two Roman Catholic members of the Dialogue, Fr. Raymond Lafontaine and Mr. Julien Hammond, share their reflections on being asked to play this role for the ACC.

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*It is still pretty unprecedented today for a church to invite an ecumenical partner to weigh in on an internal discernment/decision-making process; all the more when it concerns a matter as theologically contentious and pastorally sensitive as same-sex marriages. As two members of ARC Canada who participated in drafting a response, we recognized this, and were moved first by the invitation to offer a response, and second by the bonds of trust that had developed during the more than forty years that our two churches have been in formal dialogue with each other. We found that, even on a difficult theme such as this, it was possible to “speak the truth in love” to each other (cf. Eph. 4.15), and to engage in dialogue with one another with “the frankness that friendship allows” (Cardinal Walter Kasper’s address to the 2008 Lambeth Conference). We were all very careful to ensure that we represented our tradition’s perspective on these issues with sincerity and truth, even at times being called to express that perspective more clearly by a member of the other church. An equally sincere effort was made on the part of all to ensure that the final response was truly ‘owned’ by the whole group, and that it did not represent the perspective of only one community. This required enormous concentration of effort to listen to other’s words, feelings, assumptions, and experiences in the preparation of a common text.*

*In the end, we produced a nine-page report published in May 2015 and submitted to the ACC for review. We know this intervention was taken very seriously, and there are*

*a number of references to our text in the ACC report on this discernment process as a whole, This Holy Estate. In light of the common understanding of marriage affirmed in both international and national ARC dialogues over the past half century, the report identifies the proposed change to the marriage canon as an emerging difference which “would be felt deeply in our parishes and on all levels of our relationship.” While the statement acknowledges that the members of the dialogue would grieve the weakening of communion that this change would represent, nevertheless we were still able to affirm a desire to remain in dialogue and to continue the commitment to prayer for and the seeking of Christian unity as Christ wills.*



In *Life in Christ*, members of the ARCIC II dialogue note that “moral discernment is a demanding task” and that “the more complex the particular issue, the greater the room for disagreement” (LC, 34). The text goes on to affirm: “Christians of different Communion are more likely to agree on the character of the Christian life and the fundamental Christian virtues and values. They are more likely to disagree on the consequent rules of practice, particular moral judgements and pastoral counsel” (LC, 34) Yet, the impact of disagreement in practice on a dialogue’s claim of agreement in the character of Christian life and fundamental values continues to invite reflection. Formally established and sponsored by ecclesiastical authorities, ecumenical dialogue is therefore inherently ecclesial. Those who are appointed to take part in these dialogues come as representatives of their ecclesial tradition, all participants stand within the discipline of their tradition and are accountable to it. While committed to representing their own ecclesial

traditions, dialogue participants are also partnering in the search for Christian unity. As the Joint Working Group between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church has put it: “It is a spiritual experience in understanding the other, a listening and speaking to one another in love” (*The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue*, 19).

Christian communities, divided at the time of the Reformation, condemned one another because of their belief that the truth of the Gospel was at stake. With the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, however, Christians have come to see these divisions as impeding the proclamation of the Gospel. In brief, how can we, as Christians, bear true witness to a God who accepts us, unless we can accept one another? Many churches, including Anglican and Roman Catholic, have adopted bilateral dialogue as a way of moving beyond the divisive differences of the past to discover each other’s faith as it is lived today.

In May 2000, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the President of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, pairs of Anglican and Catholic bishops from 13 countries around the world met in Mississauga, ON, to review the state of relations between the two churches and to consult about how it might progress. At the end of the consultation, the bishops issued a statement and an action plan which includes a call for both churches to examine “ways of ensuring formal consultation prior to one Church making decisions on matters of faith and morals which would affect the other church, keeping in view the agreed statements of ARCIC.” These views echoed *The Gift of Authority*, which encourages Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops to “find ways of cooperating and developing relationships

of mutual accountability in their exercise of oversight” (GA, 58). The text states that the “mutual interdependence of all the churches is integral to the reality of the Church as God wills it to be. No local church that participates in the living Tradition can regard itself as self-sufficient” (GA, 37).

This commitment to consult an ecumenical partner prior to making a decision which could affect their shared relationship was put into practice by the Anglican Church of Canada in 2001 when the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishop’s Commission on Ecumenism was asked to respond to the proposed full communion agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC). Anglican/Roman Catholic dialogue in Canada, especially at the episcopal level, has frequently reflected on theological, canonical and pastoral aspects of marriage. In fact, for the first ten years of its existence, the ARC Bishops’ Dialogue included this topic in every one of its meetings, culminating in 1987 with the joint publication of *Pastoral Guidelines for Interchurch Marriages between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in Canada*.

Considering ARCIC II’s clear affirmation of common teaching on marriage and differing views on sexuality and sexual orientation (LC, 77, 87), the invitation from the ACC’s Commission on the Marriage Canon to ARC Canada represents a deepening of the ACC’s ongoing commitment to this process of consultation, even when those conversations are difficult.



*Meetings of ARC Canada, Toronto 2018 / Credit: Scott Sharman*

*What has been your experience with dialogue involving other churches?*

*What would you like to see as next steps in overcoming Anglican/Roman Catholic divisions?*