

To Make Room for the Spirit to Work: Reflections from Lambeth Conferences on Theological Education

C. K. ROBERTSON*

As the agenda was being formed for the Spring 2008 meeting of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, the planning team considered various potential topics. Certain areas of focus rose to the forefront, particularly in light of the 2008 Lambeth Conference. These included reconciliation training, communication and media interfacing, the history and context of Lambeth—and theological education. This last area was a follow-up to an earlier presentation to the House in 2007 by members of the council of Episcopal seminary deans, and there is further discussion between the bishops and deans planned for 2009.

Why focus on theological education when there is arguably a long list of things that can be examined (and debated) at this juncture in the life of the church?

The answer is that the long-term health and vitality of the Episcopal Church depend in large part on taking seriously the preparation and ongoing support of our clergy and lay leaders. Theological education is a significant part of that preparation and support. In acknowledging this fact through their agendas, both the seminary deans and the House of Bishops planning team are following in the footsteps of past leaders of our own church as well as the worldwide Anglican Communion. In this year of the decennial Lambeth Conference, when the Communion and our place in it are so much in the minds of many Episcopalians, it seems appropriate to examine anew the deliberations and resolutions of previous Lambeth Conferences concerning theological education, and perhaps gain a clearer understanding of the role and needs of such education in our own time and context.

* C. K. Robertson is Canon to the Presiding Bishop and a Fellow of the Episcopal Church Foundation.

Recurring Questions

It is an often repeated fact that Archbishop of Canterbury Charles Thomas Longley convened the first Lambeth Conference in 1867 in response to the express petition of Canadian bishops. From the start, the Archbishop made it clear that this was not to be a legislative synod or parliament, but instead a fellowship of bishops who would “consider together many practical questions” and “increase intercommunion among ourselves.”¹ Indeed, as reiterated at the opening of the conference, “it has never been contemplated that we should assume the functions of a general synod . . . and take upon ourselves to enact canons that should be binding upon those here represented.” Rather, any resolutions that might emerge from that and subsequent conferences would be “safe guides to future action.”² Longley’s successor, Archbishop Archibald Tait, further clarified this understanding of the purpose of the Lambeth Conference before convening the second gathering in 1878, reminding all invited bishops that “there is no intention whatever on the part of anybody to gather together the Bishops of the Anglican Church for the sake of defining any matter of doctrine.”³ Those earliest conferences focused largely on issues of increased unity between member churches, cooperation in missionary activity and chaplaincies, and possible intercommunion with various non-Anglican churches—all themes that have recurred in subsequent conferences. The first mention of theological education, however, did not occur until the fourth Lambeth Conference in 1897. This conference commemorated the thirteenth centenary of the coming of St. Augustine of Canterbury to England and outlined in clear terms the organization of the Anglican Communion. Within this dual context of celebration and systemization, a single resolution turned the spotlight on “degrees in divinity.” The specifics of that resolution reveal a dilemma existing in 1897 that remains with us to this day.

¹ From the letter of invitation to the first Lambeth Conference by Archbishop Longley, February 22, 1867. Quoted in Randall T. Davidson, ed., *The Lambeth Conferences of 1867, 1878, and 1888: With the Official Reports and Resolutions, together with the Sermons preached at the Conferences* (New York: E. & J. B. Young and Co., 1986), 12.

² From remarks made on September 24, 1867, quoted in Davidson, ed., *The Lambeth Conferences*, 77.

³ From an address by Archbishop Tait, April 16, 1875, quoted in Davidson, ed., *The Lambeth Conferences*, 22.

This Conference is of the opinion that, failing any consent on the part of existing authorities to grant degrees or certificates in divinity without requiring residence, and under suitable conditions, to residents in the colonies and elsewhere, it is desirable that a board of examinations in divinity, under the archbishops and bishops of the Anglican Communion, should be established, with power to hold local examinations, and confer titles and grant certificates for proficiency in theological study.⁴

In 1897 there was a concern about the need for consistent standards for persons being ordained, as the diversity of practice at that time had resulted in varying degrees of quality in clergy preparation. It is interesting that what was a reality at the end of the nineteenth century is still a struggle now in the opening years of the twenty-first century. In the Episcopal Church, the traditional paradigm of full-time, seminary-trained, stipendiary priests has given way in some places to alternative models, particularly when there is a noticeable lack of financial resources. How, then, should a candidate for Holy Orders be trained, and how should that training be assessed, when she or he is being prepared for half-time work in a rural congregation that needs a vicar immediately but has little to offer in terms of remuneration? Or what kind of quality control, for lack of a better term, can the diocese or the larger church insist upon in regards to clergy raised up from within a local congregation or within a Total Ministry context? Clearly, these and similar queries both profound and pragmatic must be considered today by several interrelated parties, including diocesan commissions on ministry, Episcopal seminaries, the General Board of Examining Chaplains, and, of course, bishops and standing committees.

When the fifth Lambeth Conference gathered in 1908, the issue of priestly formation appeared as a much larger theme, with several resolutions focusing on different aspects of the “supply and training of clergy.” Besides the earlier focus on examinations, new questions were being raised regarding the recruitment and financial support of candidates for Holy Orders. Resolution 3 called the whole church to pray fervently for more laborers to be sent forth, while Resolution 4

⁴ The Lambeth Conference (1897), Resolution 62. All Lambeth Conference resolutions are available by date and number at <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/index.cfm>.

challenged parents, priests, and teachers to nurture a possible vocational call in young people whenever it was discerned. A genuine concern for the economic struggle that a priestly call can place on an individual is evident in the conference's acknowledgment that there were "many young men who appear to have a vocation for the ministry" only to be "hindered from realizing it by lack of means to provide their training" (Resolution 5). As in the previous two resolutions, there is a responsibility here for the larger community of faith to find ways to provide adequate funding for the candidate, and make such processes "part of the normal equipment of the Church."

Today, organizations are taking seriously the problems posed by seminarian indebtedness through student and personal loans. The Society for the Increase of Ministry, for example, a respected organization that recently celebrated its sesquicentennial, provides grants to various seminarians across the country, and has recently begun its most ambitious capital drive ever in order to combat this growing indebtedness. The Society recently computed the average indebtedness of students only halfway through their seminary years to be almost \$49,000.⁵ Many dioceses are also considering whether it is just and appropriate to send individuals off to seminary if the students do not have a reasonable chance of returning to some position in the diocese upon graduation. In recent years, many students have been released from their home dioceses just before graduation, only to have to scramble to find another diocese that can employ them. Thus, the issue of money presses not only on ordinands themselves, but on their ordaining dioceses as well.

The Lambeth Conference of 1920 was a landmark gathering that produced one of the great Anglican statements on ecumenical relations. Also at that conference, the contributions that could be made by women in ministry were first addressed in the context of seminary training, albeit tentatively. "Opportunity should be given to women as to men," Resolution 53 states, "to speak in consecrated or unconsecrated buildings, and to lead in prayer." The two provisos were that the women be "duly qualified and approved by the bishop," and—here is the frustrating part that would continue to prevent full inclusion for decades to come—that their speaking and praying should be done at times and in contexts "other than the regular and appointed services of the Church." Understanding in hindsight the many obstacles that have

⁵ *The Call*, Society for the Increase of Ministry (Fall 2007): 10.

been put in front of women to keep them from priestly and episcopal ordination in the decades since, it is somewhat amazing that this 1920 resolution even presented the possibilities it did.

Subsequent conferences built on this initiative. In 1930, Resolution 66 spoke of insisting on the “great importance” of offering women “of ability and education, who have received adequate special training” positions in the church that would allow them to exercise the “full scope for their powers and . . . real partnership with those who direct the work of the Church, and genuine responsibility for their share of it, whether in parish or diocese.” Again, in 1948, Resolution 38 spoke of the “importance of maintaining and indeed increasing the supply of men and women who are prepared to devote their whole time to some special form of ministry for Christ and his Church.” Although the wording was carefully crafted to omit the specifics of ordination, it is significant that decades before women finally received priestly ordination and the master of divinity education that precedes it, there were hints of possibility.

As if anticipating the dilemmas of more recent decades, the 1930 conference recommended that clergy should be better educated in moral theology in general and “study the problems of sex from the Christian standpoint” in particular (Resolution 12). This fit within a broader understanding of areas of study for which ordination candidates should display competency, including not only Scripture and church history but also a basic instruction in psychology and social economics (Resolution 64). The conference likewise called for retreats to support clergy and laity alike (Resolution 6). It is intriguing to see how much more holistic is the education envisioned by the Lambeth bishops than what has often been the case for many seminarians in the US and other countries in subsequent generations. Even more interesting, perhaps, is the fact that these recommendations of 1930 were made within the context of an ecclesial reflection that concluded that the Anglican Communion itself is a fellowship of churches “bound together not by a central legislative and executive authority, but by mutual loyalty” (Resolution 49c), and that provinces or national churches are the appropriate bodies in which dioceses should be organized and tribunals should be held.

Experiments and Reactions

The Great Depression and World War II postponed the next Lambeth Conference until 1948. At that conference, signs of strain

began to appear within the Communion as some began to call more vehemently for the ordination of women (Resolution 115). In the postwar culture at large, many women who had worked outside the home during the war suddenly found themselves taking a huge step backward with the return of the soldiers. Similarly, experimental plans for ordaining deaconesses to the priesthood for a period of twenty years were met with hesitancy on the part of the Lambeth bishops. Using language that sounds quite familiar in today's Communion, the bishops argued that such a move would go against "the tradition and order and would gravely affect the internal and external relations of the Anglican Communion" (Resolution 113). Other experiments, most notably the union of the Anglicans with other denominational groups to form the Church of South India, challenged traditional notions of Anglican identity and organization.

In response to these and other new challenges, as if reversing the earlier emphasis on provincial structures, the 1948 conference argued against any step taken by a part of the Communion that might eventually cause "withdrawal" (Resolution 56e). It also emphasized that priestly candidates are ordained "into the ministry of the Church of God and not into that of any one diocese of the Church" (Resolution 85). Even in terms of theological education, a desire for greater centralization, as it were, is evident in the call for the establishment of "a central college" in Canterbury (Resolution 86). Paradoxically, the most talked-about part of the 1948 conference was an official report to the conference that never actually became part of the resolutions. The report is notable for its focus on "dispersed authority" in the Anglican Communion, a claim that appears to be in contradistinction to several of the resolutions of that same conference.

The resolutions of Lambeth 1958 display recognition on the part of the bishops of the new world of scientific discoveries and "modern biblical criticism" (Resolution 4), and called Anglicans to "learn reverently from every new disclosure" while still "bearing witness to the biblical message" (Resolution 8). The importance of worldwide quality training for ordinands is evident in the call for "first-class theological teachers for colleges in the developing areas of the Church" (Resolution 83) and the provision of resources for the establishing of theological faculties and departments (Resolution 85). Indeed, concern was shown here for both a careful and continuous review of "standards for training for ordination" (Resolution 86) and "post-ordination training" (Resolution 87). The latter concern about continuing education

remains on the minds of many church leaders today. As the old joke says, all too often you can tell when a clergyperson graduated from seminary by the publication dates of her or his books; after graduating, the purchase (and, implicitly, the study) of theological materials ends. This remains a sad reality, but one that, thankfully, is being challenged in various parts of the Episcopal Church.

Arguably the most provocative resolution on theological education emerging from Lambeth 1958, Resolution 89, refers to the possibility of what we now call bi-vocational priests, those who retain their secular employment while also functioning in sacerdotal and pastoral capacities. Although the bishops were tentative in their recommendation, assuring readers that this alternative is “not to be regarded as a substitute for the full-time ministry of the Church” but rather as a supplement, the fact is that in various places this proposal has been echoed at times in the form of non-stipendiary, part-time, bi-vocational, or local priests.

In 1968, the world was becoming something wholly unfamiliar to many. Within the context of unpopular wars and popular culture, Vatican II, and liturgical experimentation, theologians were “encouraged” by the Lambeth participants to “explore fresh ways of understanding God’s revelation of himself in Christ, expressed in language that makes sense in our time” (Resolution 3). These sentiments echo still in an address given by the Rev. Canon Martyn Percy, Principal of Ripon College Cuddesdon, at the installation of Dr. Ian Markham as Dean of Virginia Theological Seminary: “If we can become faithful, open, spiritual, . . . Struggling communities of interpretations . . . , the wider Communion has a chance.”⁶ Such an endeavor, the 1968 Lambeth bishops asserted, requires of the theologians “respect for tradition” while also demanding of the church at large “respect for freedom of inquiry.” Here we see the famed Anglican balance of tradition (and, implicitly, Scripture) and reason.

In the preparatory materials for the 1968 conference, bishops were reminded that it is by “appreciating our diversity, not emphasizing a kind of uniformity” that the church can truly reach the world.⁷ This spirit of appreciation was sorely needed, as different parts of the Communion continued to move in different directions on certain key

⁶ Virginia Theological Seminary, *News from the Hill* (November 2007): 1.

⁷ *Lambeth Conference 1968: Preparatory Materials* (London: SPCK, 1968), 124.

issues. With arguments both for and against the ordination of women being asserted from different quarters, Resolution 34 of the conference declared all the arguments to be “inconclusive” and, again in language familiar in today’s Communion, recommended that advice from the newly-formed Anglican Consultative Council “be sought and carefully considered” before any decisive action was taken (Resolution 37). Divergent theological views within the Communion were particularly evident in the vote on Resolution 43, which dealt with the Thirty-Nine Articles, the doctrinal exposition that had been part of both the Book of Common Prayer and to some extent Anglican belief since the days of the Reformation. Although several of the Articles focused on the core beliefs of the Christian faith, others appeared to be less timeless and more polemical. The 1968 resolution “suggested” that the Articles were now to be comprehended “in their historical context” and that assent to the Articles should “be no longer required of ordinands.” Presaging the divisions to come, the resolution was adopted—but with thirty-seven dissenting votes. As if to counter an underlying rift between member churches, the conference used strong language in stating that it “deplored” parallel Anglican jurisdictions (Resolution 63). In the midst of these cultural shifts and increasing tensions, the conference urged dioceses to provide “continuing training for the clergy after ordination” and, most interestingly, “to relate the programs of study to the new situations and developments presented by a rapidly changing world” (Resolution 42).

If the 1968 conference appeared to predict significant changes in the Communion, Lambeth 1978 took place in the eye of the storm, as participants witnessed in the American church both a massive revision of the Prayer Book and the ordination of women to the priesthood, the latter being done through “irregular” means in Philadelphia in 1974, and through canonical procedures beginning in 1977. It is probably little surprise, then, that Resolution 11 advised member churches “not to take action regarding issues which are of concern to the whole Anglican Communion without consultation with a Lambeth Conference or with the episcopate through the Primates Committee, and requests the Primates to initiate a study of the nature of authority within the Anglican Communion.” But “distress and pain” were felt on both sides, and the conference pleaded with member churches “to continue in communion with one another,” preserving the “unity within and between all member Churches of the Anglican Communion” (Resolution 21).

Human sexuality had long been part of the deliberations of Lambeth, and some of the other key resolutions of 1978 addressed

sexuality, at one and the same time “reaffirming heterosexuality as the scriptural norm” while also “recognizing the need for deep and dispassionate study of the question of homosexuality” (Resolution 10). In the United States, even as some more traditional Episcopalians departed from the church to establish “continuing churches” that would use the 1928 Prayer Book and disallow women’s ordination, ecumenical consortiums for theological education and training allowed Episcopal seminarians to study alongside students of other Christian denominations. Issues of intercommunion had been with Lambeth from the start, and now one significant way forward was being accomplished through theological education.

The move toward more “experiments in joint education with other Churches” was recognized in the 1988 conference where, paradoxically, within a now familiar context of internal debates and struggles within the Communion, the conference promoted ongoing developments “of ecumenical theology and catechetics” and “experiments in joint education with other Churches” (Resolution 16). This was the first Lambeth Conference in which the bishops from the Global South outnumbered those from England, the United States, and the other developed nations.

Bishop Michael Marshall’s firsthand glimpse of the proceedings, *Church at the Crossroads: Lambeth 1988*,⁸ revealed the great difficulties that gave rise to doomsday reports of this being the last Lambeth, a prediction that has been made of Lambeth Conferences before and certainly since. Criticism of the conferences has been a given from the very beginning, when London’s *Daily Telegraph* spoke concerning the 1867 conference of “the utter absence of any positive significance, any practical guidance, any intelligible religious help for the age” (October 1, 1867). And the comments from the November 1867 issue of *The Christian Observer* (a leading Church of England journal founded in 1813) that all that the first conference did was “to issue a conciliatory address; which, so far as it has meaning, means that both parties are to sheath their swords and live in peace” could easily be repeated by critics of a number of Lambeth Conferences since.⁹

And yet, what is so boldly put forth as criticism might actually be lifted up as a word of praise, for Lambeth Conferences have always

⁸ Michael Marshall, *Church at the Crossroads: Lambeth 1988* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper & Row, 1988).

⁹ For more press and public reactions to that initial conference, see Alan M. G. Stephenson, *The First Lambeth Conference 1867* (London: SPCK, 1867).

been opportunities for strengthening fellowship and mutual understanding among the bishops of member churches. This is why, contrary to the unrealistic hopes of the media as well as Anglicans on the far ends of any theological or political spectrum, conference participants have often been quite aware that “we cannot suppose that we have found a way to solve all difficulties in a moment.”¹⁰ Despite its resolutions on issues ranging from interfaith communion or human sexuality to women’s ordination or theological education, at the heart is the fact that “the Lambeth Conference, after all, does not legislate.”¹¹ The Episcopal Church’s Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, speaks of the Anglican Communion as a “dream”; if so, it is one that needs to be realized and nurtured.

This is why the Lambeth resolutions on theological education are so important. It is on the formation of ordained and lay leaders in the member churches that the future health and vitality of the Communion depends. With this in mind, the Anglican Center based at Virginia Theological Seminary describes as part of its mission supporting the training of Anglican primates, encouraging the admission of international students at home, establishing Doctor of Ministry programs abroad, and promoting a library of resources and conferences on the rich heritage of Anglicanism. Through such a multifaceted strategy, the Center hopes to help shape an appreciation of Anglican identity and mission, and to provide practical means to reinforce the relational bonds among Anglicans throughout the world. Similarly, The General Theological Seminary in New York has sponsored a 2008 Conference on the Anglican Covenant, with the primary speakers both for and against the proposed Covenant all hailing from outside the Episcopal Church, providing a global perspective for the US church. Several other educational initiatives confirm the recommendations of past Lambeth Conferences. As fresh understandings of localized and bivocational priests are explored, seminaries such as Church Divinity School of the Pacific (CDSP) and Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest are instigating experimental programs of part-time residential, distance, and online education. Programs such as CDSP’s Business of God luncheons and Sewanee’s Education for Ministry

¹⁰ *Lambeth Conference 1968: Preparatory Materials*, 126.

¹¹ R. P. C. Hanson, “The Nature of the Anglican Episcopate,” in *Lambeth Essays on Ministry*, ed. the Archbishop of Canterbury (London: SPCK, 1969), 82.

(EFM) program continue to provide opportunities for lifetime learning for interested laity and clergy alike. Indeed, the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church has committed itself to a minimum of ten hours of continuing education at each of their semiannual gatherings, and the College for Bishops has received considerable positive response.

Now, at the time of the first Lambeth Conference of the twenty-first century, there is a substantial amount of tension and debate within the Anglican Communion, focusing on issues of authority, interpretation of Scripture, the role of tradition and reason, cultural differences, human sexuality, the nature of ordination, and intercommunion. But none of this is new. In every decade from 1867 onward, the Communion has endured challenges both internal and external. In the midst of the changes and chances of this life, a renewed commitment to enhancing quality theological education will help, in the words of Lambeth 1920, to “make room for the Spirit to work.”

