

## **ALISTAIR DINNIE REPORT TO GENERAL SYNOD ON ANGLICAN CONSULTATIVE COUNCIL, THURSDAY 8 JUNE 2023**

Chair, members of Synod.

The 18th Anglican Consultative Council opened in Accra on the afternoon of Sunday 12th February. Again, ACC was in Africa where God is good, all the time, surrounded by the sounds – choirs and drumming – and the warm, hospitable, entrepreneurial energy of Ghana. And again, ACC was meeting in the shadow of a controversial communion development relating to what else, but our differences on the issue of human sexuality.

My first meeting – ACC16 – took place following a Primates’ meeting decision to enact consequences on the US Episcopal Church following its decision to permit same-sex marriage in church. ACC18 followed the Church of England’s more modest response to the same issue. The picture behind me, taken just before the opening ceremony shows me and the Reverend Lee Johnstone (who sends his apologies for today – you can look forward to hearing from him on future occasions). We thought we should get a joint photo in our kilts because – well, obviously – when the Communion’s Secretary General – Anthony Poggo – appeared as if from nowhere and jumped into the photo. I’ve included it to stand as an example of the wonderfully collegiate and colourful atmosphere which characterised the week – whatever anyone might have said, before, during or since.

But first, a brief explanation or perhaps reminder of what the Anglican Consultative Council is. Established in 1968, it stands as one of the four instruments of the Anglican Communion along with the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury (596) the Lambeth Conference (1867) and the Primates’ Meeting (1978). And by instrument we

mean structural element - recognition of which or participation in which indicates membership of the worldwide Anglican Communion. The ACC is unique among the instruments in being the only one that includes lay people and ordained people who aren't Bishops. Each Province, depending on size, is invited to send two or three delegates. When sending two people, provinces are encouraged to send a lay person and an ordained person with Bishops encouraged only to join the three-person delegations from larger Provinces.

Since its previous meeting in Hong Kong, ACC also benefits from the participation of youth reps so this year the Scottish Episcopal Church had a further representative in Amie Byers who as well as being an attendee, pulled essentially a double shift by serving on this meeting's Resolutions Committee.

ACC generally meets every three years with delegates appointed for three meetings which means there's always a degree of turnover which the SEC's representation illustrated perfectly. This was Lee's first ACC, Amie's second and my third and last.

ACC's remit is to facilitate the co-operative work of the churches of the Anglican Communion, exchange information between the provinces and churches, and help to co-ordinate common action. It advises on the organisation and structures of the Communion, and seeks to develop common policies with respect to the world mission of the Church, including ecumenical matters. So, how did we seek to achieve that at ACC 18?

We met over the course of five business days working at tables – just as you are here. I shared my table with sisters and brothers from Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, Brazil, India, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea and the USA – Lee and Amie's tables were just as diverse.

Over the week this created space for deep and honest sharing where we compared differences - some of which we might have anticipated - but as often discovered unexpected commonalities . Our work was grounded in bible study from St Mark's Gospel and a daily worship rhythm of morning prayer, Eucharist, Evening Prayer and Compline and each day themed by one of the five Anglican marks of mission rendered in their short form: tell, teach, tend, transform, treasure.

Our first day 'Tell' set the scene with an opening address from the Archbishop of Canterbury who is ex officio President of the ACC, opening bible study and opening ceremony.

Our second 'Teach' grouped discussion of Intentional Discipleship, theological education in the Anglican Communion and Church planting, concluding with a fringe event on the outcome of the Church of England's Living in Love and Faith process.

Our third day, 'Tend' scheduled conversation around the Anglican Health and Family networks, Unity, Faith and Order, the Liturgical Commission and Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion with an evening fringe event hosted by the Church of England Commissioners where they detailed their recent research into the Church of England's links to the transatlantic slave trade and resulting proposal to set up a £100m impact fund to invest in a better and fairer future for all but particularly communities affected by historic slavery. This session was held the night before the Council's day visit to Cape Coast Castle where those links – not just to the Church of England but also the Communion more broadly - were laid horribly and viscerally bare.

On the day of the visit, I'm afraid I managed to leave my phone and therefore camera behind at the conference hotel so the image behind me isn't from Ghana but from outside the Mandela Room in Edinburgh City Chambers taken after I returned from Ghana. I've walked past it many times at work but after my return found it resonating as it never had before.

I know there will be some in the room who have themselves visited Cape Coast and will have their own memories and reflections. It is an immensely powerful and I found strangely dislocating experience. Its location, white-washed walls and almost Spanish architecture give it an attractive air particularly on the kind of blue-skyed, sunny day of our visit – the gracious proportions of the officers' quarters standing in utter contrast to the claustrophobic horror of the slave dungeons beneath where as many as many as 1,500 enslaved people could be held in the most appalling and degrading conditions for anything up to three months before being forced through the 'gate of no return' and shipped to the New World - up to 70,000 people a year at the trade's peak.

Some guides describe those slave dungeons as windowless which they mostly are but not quite. In a detail which stuck with all I spoke to, there is one window, into the largest of a series of inter-connected male dungeons from just outside the castle's chapel, apparently deliberately designed to allow those in the dungeon to hear church services when they were conducted. Astonishingly, allowing this brief glimpse of daylight and the ability to hear services in progress seemed to have been conceived as a compassionate gesture.

Fittingly, the theme for the day that followed our visit, was Transform - 'To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.' During that day we heard reports about the Communion's work on gender justice, from the Women's and Peace and Justice Networks, and from the work being undertaken to further our ecumenical relationships and dialogues.

Leaving us with our final main working day, Treasure, where we focused on the Communion's Environment, Indigenous, Youth and language specific networks.

In all, over the course of the 13 business sessions, ACC 18 considered 27 reports, elected a new Chair, Vice-Chair and Standing Committee and agreed 37 resolutions as well as developing valuable relationships and lasting friendships. Details of the meeting and its outputs are all available at [ACC18.org](http://ACC18.org) which remains live. Again, I came back from an ACC barely able to comprehend the range, depth and vitality of the work the Communion is engaged with – on some of the most difficult topics and in some of the most difficult places.

As I mentioned earlier, ACC 18 was my last and I want to offer the sincerest of thanks to Synod and the Province for the singular honour of being able to serve in this capacity as well as the opportunity of participating in the work of Synod during this time. And I ask for your prayers for all who will take forward the work of the ACC (indeed all the instruments of communion) in the future – its members, the Chair, Vice Chair and members of the Standing Committee, the Secretary General and the staff of the Anglican Communion office

who shoulder the work between meetings that ensures ACC isn't simply an occasional talking shop.

And I would like to offer this final reflection. Over the last seven years I have several times been in or witnessed conversations where someone has sought to identify why we are a communion and each time, I've observed a similar dynamic. Rather than leading to an identification of unifying features, the query tends to elicit analogies. I've heard the communion compared to a flotilla of ships – all moving in much the same direction but under their own steam or on another occasion, prized recipes for a traditional dish all with their slight regional variation as well as fierce argument over which version is the most authentic. When pushed, liturgy is often named. Whilst I've heard it often enough to agree it's a factor it has – and with all respect to the liturgists amongst us – felt like rather a safe choice and I've found myself wondering if there are issues of access to power, status and money that we are simply afraid to name.

Being part of that communion can be challenging in ways that are sometimes expected, sometimes not, sometimes constructive, sometimes not. For many – myself included – the most challenging point of the meeting in Ghana was the fringe event on Living in Love and Faith – where the tectonic plates of our communion differences on human sexuality crashed into each other with some heat but little light, something I shall not miss. But whatever the challenges, the Anglican Communion engages in vital work and encompasses a diversity which gives opportunity for conversation across nation, culture and language at a time when structures that enable that seem to be increasingly – even purposefully – under threat.

In that context, my personal reflection – which may in itself be something of a cop out – is that perhaps the reason we are a communion matters less than the fact we make the active choice to be one. With God's grace, may that be a choice we always make.

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