

Strains on Anglican 'self-understanding'

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It is next to impossible to define Anglicanism, and almost equally so to define the Anglican Communion. It has learnt to live without definition: it has, instead, a "self-understanding".

That self-understanding is under strain at the Lambeth Conference and will no doubt shift plastically into a new shape.

It is frustrating for other churches to find something so indefinite, but it also has its advantages.

Faced with the fact that some churches in the Anglican Communion do ordain women to the priestly ministry and some do not, the Anglican self-understanding has to adapt to that anomaly. Today the process of adaptation will be in evidence at Kent University, Canterbury, when the Lambeth fathers discuss women priests. Whatever the Anglican Communion was before the first woman was ordained with official sanction, it is that no longer.

Cardinal Hume, in an interview in the latest edition of the *Church Times*, expresses this sense of frustration. He says: "I am uneasy concerning the comprehensiveness of the Anglican Church. Comprehensiveness has been seen by the Anglican Church as a matter of pride. I wonder whether it is not its Achilles heel—leaving the rest of us asking: what does the Anglican Church, as a church, hold to be essential?"

He said he hoped the Lambeth Conference could move towards a greater sense of central authority, the collegiality of bishops as described by the Second Vatican Council. At the same time he acknowledged what appears to be a trend in the Anglican direction inside his own church towards greater regional and local freedom from Rome.

The need for a sense of identity, if not a definition, probably lies behind the desire of the Anglican bishops of the so-called third world to continue with the Lambeth Conference system. It is largely by membership of the Lambeth Conference that far-flung bishops in African or Asian settings keep alive the sense of belonging to something wider than their own geographical segment.

The Church of England has no such need, being secure in its historical self-understanding as the national church of the English. Without that, and without an international local point, Anglicanism would have little to stop it from gradually falling apart.

The ordination of women in some places actually shifts more weight on to Lambeth Conferences, for the Anglican Communion can no longer happily define itself in terms of the complete interchangeability of ministers. There is no longer, as there was, one universally recognized Anglican priesthood.

Faced with this new degree of diversity and comprehensive-in-action, the Lambeth Conference system needs strengthening rather than weakening, so that it can bear the load it will have to carry. The Anglican Consultative Council, an advisory world body, designed to take the necessary steps to coordinate world Anglicanism in the 10-yearly gaps between conferences, is similarly in need of reinforcement. At the moment, most of its theological work concerns relations with other churches: it could do more to act as a focus for Anglican theology for reasons of internal unity.

It needs the power to command attention, for example the power to put motions directly on to the agendas of the synods and governing bodies of local churches. It needs a larger central staff, and a larger budget. It could even be given the power to impose a year or two's delay on any local church initiative that it judges questionable.

Such measures would also meet qualms from the Orthodox churches, whose special relationship with Anglicanism is under considerable strain.

Behind the ordination of women issue, therefore, there are others that might broadly be called ecclesiological. The Archbishop of Canterbury, opening the conference with a call for renewed faith in the Spirit's guidance for the church, was touching on similar issues. If the Anglican Communion is open to such guidance as a body, then, as a body it must have a self-understanding that is theological as well as social and historical. It is the difference between the church as a club and the church as a sacrament.

The international theological consultation of Anglicans and Roman Catholics, whose report appeared last week, was surprisingly quiet on this topic. "Progressive" Roman Catholic theology a necessary manifestation of Roman Catholic comprehensiveness though it may be, is not necessarily Anglicanism's best medicine at the moment.