

THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION AND THE ACA

A Report of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission

(Report noted by the Standing Committee 22 July 2024)

Introduction

1. In February 2023 the following request was received from Standing Committee:

Standing Committee requests the Doctrine Commission to provide a paper on the doctrinal meaning of the term ‘communion’ in section 6 of the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia and how this understanding impacts ecclesial relationships in the Anglican context, both locally and internationally.

2. This brief report is prepared as a companion piece to the Synod Diocesan Doctrine Commission report produced in 2017 in response to following resolution of the Synod:

25/14: Theology of Communion and Catholicity

In the light of the Primate’s Address at the 16th General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia in Adelaide and recent comments by the Archbishop of Canterbury on what constitutes membership of the Anglican Communion (in an interview with the editor of the *Church of Ireland Gazette*), this Synod requests the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission to prepare a report on the theology of communion and catholicity with special reference to contemporary Anglicanism in Australia and to report back to the next session of this Synod.

The comments of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, referred to in the 2014 Synod request, were made in an interview with Canon Ian Ellis of the *Church of Ireland Gazette* on Friday 3 October 2014. The most noteworthy comment is this: ‘virtually everywhere I’ve gone the analysis is that the definition of being part of the Anglican Communion is being in communion with Canterbury.’

Key Elements of our 2017 Report¹

3. In the Bible, the word *communion* has two key senses; first, it refers to ‘the *fundamental truth* of our fellowship in the Spirit of Christ’; second, it is used to describe ‘the *practical expression* of that fellowship among a group or groups of believers in terms of a gospel-shaped common life’. A third extra-biblical use of the term refers to ‘structures for representing that fellowship between groups of believers’. This is a ‘derivative institutional application’ of the core biblical senses of communion and is of value only insofar as it reflects and supports that essential fellowship in Christ and his gospel.

¹ The 2017 Doctrine Commission report, ‘Catholicity and Communion’, is available in full here: <https://www.sds.asn.au/catholicity-and-communion-report-04-april-2017>.

4. The unity Christ forges in his Church goes beyond simply having a shared faith. We share in spiritual union with Christ, for the agent of our unity is the Spirit, who binds us together in Christ (John 14:23). Communion arises as a fruit of the gospel and ought to be highly valued. It is a God-given, Christ-created, Spirit-empowered reality with a missional dimension. 'Maintaining our unity' thus refers to acting in a way that faithfully expresses what we are in Christ through showing the fruit of the Spirit, expressing Christ-like love, and together learning to live out the truth of the gospel of Christ. However, although our unity, being grounded outside of us, cannot be broken by our failure to maintain it in love, or even by divisions of cultural or theological opinion, it is not inviolable. Communion is lost when the gospel is lost, when a person or a church 'deserts the one who called you by the grace of Christ' (Gal 1:6).
5. The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion did not envisage a global phenomenon of Anglicanism. However, as England's (and then Great Britain's) worldwide colonial empire grew, it took with it the shape and essential character of the English church. In this sense the idea of an Anglican communion arose *incidentally*. The churches which grew in these colonies were bound by historical association, a common creed and more or less common liturgical practices. In their formative years, leadership was provided by the English church.
6. In 1867, the Archbishop of Canterbury called together the bishops from around the world for the first Lambeth Conference. Although the motions put forward were not resolutions binding on all the member churches, a sense of fellowship and common mission, and, in particular, close ties with the Archbishop of Canterbury, were strengthened by the conference. The Lambeth Conference has continued as an *expression* of connection and a means of mutual encouragement and advice, and is now treated as an *instrument of unity*. However, in recent decades the conference has been overshadowed by considerable disagreement on ethical and theological issues. The idea of a common mission has been put under considerable strain as it has become clear that resolutions of the Lambeth Conference can and will be disregarded by those national churches who disagree with them.
7. The notion of an Anglican Communion has arisen as a product of historical development, not by divine mandate. As it is an historical and organisational structure, there is a danger of overreach in the claim to 'communion' in the use of the title 'the Anglican Communion'. Institutional approaches to communion may have their own legal validity in terms of 'the Anglican Communion', but they cannot determine the reality of either Anglican identity or Christian fellowship (gospel communion).
8. There will be times when, because of disagreements over issues of either life or doctrine, fellowship will be impaired or broken—particularly when it is recognized that essential elements grounding the communion are not held in common. Dissociation may be at the level of congregations, groups of congregations, or perhaps even entire denominations. Nevertheless, because unity is so highly valued, any process entertained in this respect will, of necessity, be careful, transparent, evidence-based, documented, and, to some eyes, protracted. And yet, it must always hold out the possibility of repentance, mutual agreement, and reconciliation.

9. Since our 2017 report, it has become increasingly evident that the so-called *instruments of communion* (the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth conferences, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Primates' meetings) have failed to function as *instruments of unity*. This was evident in 2023 when both the Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GSFA) and Gafcon issued statements withdrawing recognition of the Archbishop of Canterbury's leadership of the Anglican Communion and calling for a resetting of the communion.

Communion in the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia

10. Section 6 of the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia (ACA) states:

This Church will remain and be in communion with the Church of England in England and with churches in communion therewith so long as communion is consistent with the Fundamental Declarations contained in this Constitution.

Those Fundamental Declarations are as follows:

I. The Anglican Church of Australia, being a part of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ, holds the Christian Faith as professed by the Church of Christ from primitive times and in particular as set forth in the creeds known as the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed.

II. This Church receives all the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as being the ultimate rule and standard of faith given by inspiration of God and containing all things necessary for salvation.

III. This Church will ever obey the commands of Christ, teach His doctrine, administer His sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, follow and uphold His discipline and preserve the three orders of bishops, priests and deacons in the sacred ministry.

11. The Doctrine Commission has been asked to comment on the *doctrinal meaning* of the term *communion* in section 6 of the Constitution of the ACA. The Constitution, however, does not rely upon a *doctrinal definition* of the term but upon a *legal definition* (or, as described in our 2017 report, a 'derivative institutional application' of the term), by which the Church of England possesses the authority to determine those with whom our Church is in communion.
12. Nevertheless, the ACA Constitution does envisage the possibility that the Church of England in England could cease to remain faithful to our Fundamental Declarations. If, for example, the Church of England rejected the Scriptures as 'the ultimate rule and standard of faith' or if they ceased to 'obey the commands of Christ and teach His doctrine', then the ACA would automatically cease to be in communion with the Church of England or any other 'churches in communion therewith'. This, however, would require a determination by the Appellate Tribunal that communion with the Church of England had become inconsistent with our Fundamental Declarations. Until that occurs, the ACA remains in communion with the Church of England in the legal and constitutional sense of the word. In addition,

the ACA has no legal power to declare whether it is in or out of communion with any other church in the communion, other than the Church of England.

13. Nevertheless, serious breaches of gospel communion do exist within the Anglican Communion, and ‘impaired communion’ or ‘broken communion’ accurately describes this *doctrinal reality*. However, it may or may not be accurate to apply such language to the *legal relationships* between the ACA, the Church of England, and other parts of the Anglican Communion. When there is a risk of confusion, it would be more helpful to use the language of ‘impaired fellowship’ or ‘broken fellowship’.
14. Finally, it is important to note that breaches of gospel communion at a diocesan or provincial level do not prevent continuing communion between those Anglican parishes and networks throughout the world that continue to uphold the word of God and teach the doctrine of Christ. Such continuing communion ought, as far as is possible, to find new appropriate expressions.

Michael Stead (Acting Chair)

For and on behalf of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission

4 February, 2024