

Tuesday 24 July 2008

## **GAFCON – was it worth coming?**

The Global Anglican Futures Conference (GAFCON) is being held in Jerusalem. It's certainly a conference, it is mostly Anglican, but it's not entirely global. Does it have a future?

Seven weeks ago I contacted LGCM asking if I could help at GAFCON or the Lambeth Conference. Things moved quickly. I am now their officially accredited "media participant" in Jerusalem.

So here I am, sitting on the terrace outside the Church of Scotland Guest House, overlooking the Jaffa Gate and the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. Was it worth coming? Already I can respond with a definite "yes" to that question.

I arrived on Sunday morning, after travelling overland from Egypt. I set off to the conference venue where security was tight but I met a few of the other journalists in the press room, and at 8:00 p.m. we moved into the Grand Ballroom of the Renaissance Hotel for Archbishop Peter Akinola's opening address.

After a rousing time of worship, the Nigerian Primate addressed the issues necessitating the calling of the GAFCON meeting: some parts of the Church, particularly the North American provinces, were in serious error, and some priests and bishops were clearly apostate. The Church had to return to its biblical roots of "Anglican Orthodoxy" and preach the "uncompromised gospel."

This meeting ended around 9:30 p.m. and was followed by a press conference at ten. Five Primates were on the platform including Archbishops Peter Akinola of Nigeria, Henry Orombi of Uganda, and Peter Jensen of Sydney. Questions were asked about the purpose of GAFCON, the expected outcome, the relationship and regard they had for Lambeth and Archbishop Rowan Williams, and the future of the Anglican Communion.

The conference organisers had produced a booklet entitled "The Way, the Truth and the Life" in which they outlined the need and theological justification for the gathering. They state a three-fold purpose:

- 1. To provide an opportunity for fellowship as well as to continue to experience and proclaim the transforming love of Jesus Christ*
- 2. To develop a renewed understanding of our identity as Anglican Christians.*
- 3. To prepare for an Anglican future in which the Gospel is uncompromised and Christ-centred mission is a top priority.*

I felt that the Gospel was already compromised by the failure of the African bishops to condemn the violence and intimidation that affects the daily lives of many LGBT people in their countries. I prayed, took a deep breath, and asked this question:

*"One of the things in "The Way, the Truth and the Life," one of the key points that you've written is to "prepare for an Anglican future in which the Gospel is uncompromised and Christ-centred" But the gospel is already compromised by bishops who support the jailing of lesbian and gay people throughout Africa, which then leads to rape, which leads to torture of people and yet they are not prepared to speak out against this and change the laws in their countries."*

Archbishop Akinola chose to respond, informing the world that he did not know of any such cases.

I asked again, was he really not aware of any who were in jail for being lesbian or gay?

He said he was not, and challenged me to give him an example.

This, I am sure, is where God intervened with one of his divine "coincidences". My church in Manchester, the Metropolitan Community Church, has begun a campaign on behalf of Prossy Kakooza, a 26-year-old woman seeking asylum in the UK. She fled Uganda after suffering vicious sexual, physical and verbal attacks due to her sexual orientation. I had brought copies of the information about the case, with the hope of being able to distribute them to members of the media covering the conference. While answering Peter Akinola's challenge to give him an example, I was able to reach down and pull the information out of the laptop bag at my feet and give the example requested.

The Archbishop then spoke at length about African culture and beliefs, and this was echoed by Archbishop Henry Orombi of Uganda. Neither of them chose to condemn the violence or comment on the particular case of Ms Kakooza.

Further questions followed but, just before the end, Riazat Butt of the Guardian asked a follow-up to my original question. Would the Archbishops condemn the torture and rape of Lesbian and Gay people? Again they would not.

Peter Jensen, Archbishop of Sydney, then took up the question and he was prepared to say:

*Can I add to that, because I think it needs to be said, on behalf of these brothers, if not by themselves, any violence against any person, is in Christian terms wrong .... I certainly have publicly condemned and will continue to publicly condemn any violence against any people and in particular gay and lesbian people .... I think I am right in speaking for all of us here and, indeed, if that were not the case I would certainly stand alone here and say it but I am sure I speak for all in saying that any such violence, any such behaviour within the prison system, for Christians of another variety, or whatever, is condemned by us.*

However, the African bishops remained silent and I did not even see them clearly nod their heads. Archbishop Jensen has since said that they were nodding but, as I pointed out, they have the video recording and so only they can show that. Neither I nor any of the other press representatives saw them.

After the press conference I returned to my guest house, arriving after midnight. I then sat up until 2:30 a.m. typing the transcript of the relevant parts of the press conference. I wasn't even sure that anyone would read it, but I did it anyway. I needn't have worried, the transcript has been posted on the Guardian website and is linked to by The Times Online website, the Church Times website, the Thinking Anglicans website, and many more, and the plight of Prossy Kakooza has been taken up on the Guardian blog site.

After finally getting to bed at 2:30 a.m., I was up at 6:30 a.m. for the GAFCON pilgrimage to the Mount of Olives. Being self-financing, I decided to walk, so at 7:30 a.m. I was walking around the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, passed the Western Wall, and down into the Kidron Valley where the Garden of Gethsemane is situated. Then I hiked up the hill to where the assembled conference participants gathered for worship and a photo-opportunity.

As the representatives processed back down the hill, I gave an interview to Ruth Gledhill of The Times of London. I walked with her back through the Old City where I purchased a cross and a purple stole which I plan to wear at the Jerusalem Gay Pride march on Thursday, where I have now been asked to speak.

I arrived back at my guest house with aching feet. I went up to my room to sleep but first I had to write a few emails. I still hadn't been in touch with the Jerusalem Open House gay and lesbian project and felt a bit guilty, I should have contacted them earlier! Wait a minute, I thought, I've only been in Jerusalem 24 hours and I've only slept for four!

Bishop Nazir-Ali is speaking today, Tuesday, so I'm waiting to see what happens next! There is a seminar this afternoon on HIV and AIDS and so that should provide more opportunities for questions at tonight's press conference. On Thursday I'll be marching and speaking in the Jerusalem Gay Pride March.

It was worth coming!

Iain Baxter for the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, Jerusalem, June 2008.