ACNA Archbishop recognised by seven Primates

The church leaders’ statement raises questions about Anglican identity, writes Gavin Drake

THE recognition last week of the new Primate of the Anglican Church of North America (ACNA), Dr Foley Beach, by seven Anglican Primates as “a fellow Primate of the Anglican Communion” has again raised the question what it means to be Anglican.

The statement was made by the Primates of Jerusalem and the Middle East (Dr Mouneer Anis), Kenya (Dr Eliud Wabukala), Nigeria (the Most Revd Nicholas Okoh), Uganda (the Most Revd Stanley Ntagali), Rwanda (Dr Oneshope Rwajjja), Myanmar (the Most Revd Stephen So), and the Southern Cone (the Most Rev Tito Zavala), who say that together they represent the majority of the world’s Anglicans.

ACNA is not officially part of the Anglican Communion. In 2010, the C of E General Synod said that it could “recognise and affirm the desire” of ACNA’s leaders “to remain in communion with us”. However, two years later, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, and the Archbishop of York, Dr Sentamu, said that the “wishes” of ACNA were “misread”, and that they had “a responsibility not to say or do anything which will inflame an already difficult situation” (News, 27 January 2012).

In January, responding to a question about the recognition of ACNA, Archbishop Welby told the General Synod that he could not “endorse reconciliation”, and that any attempt by him to do so “would be felt in many cases as gross interference”. But he emphasised: “We must be aware that it is mainly an agency to bring about renewed and reconciled relationships, and we are seeking to encourage that.”

The Episcopal Church is the province recognised by the Church of England in the United States. Its public-affairs officer, Neva Rae Fox, said this week: “There is no official relationship between ACNA and the Episcopal Church, nor, to my knowledge, between ACNA and the Anglican Church of Canada.

“May there, indeed, come a time when we can both be ‘in’ to have an ecumenical relationship; but such a thing takes time, and requires that a breakaway group develop an identity of its own that is more than simply being in opposition or rivalry to those Churches, such as the Episcopal Church, from which it broke away.”

The question whether ACNA should be recognised as an Anglican province is bound up with the question how this might be done. The Anglican Communion is not a corporate body, or a federation with a constitution, merely a number of bodies that relate to each other, corporately or otherwise, “in a constitution, merely a number of corporate bodies, or a federation with a constitution, merely a number of corporate bodies, and in an strongest possible terms, that communion with the See of Canterbury is the determining factor when it comes to Anglican identity. It is not, and never can be” (News, October 2010).

An ACNA spokesman, Canon Andrew Gross, said: “It is the Primate’s decision to recognise a new Anglican province, and the Primates of the majority of the world’s Anglicans have already formally recognised ACNA. We would welcome further recognition from other Primates, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, but the initial recognition has already happened.”

A more nuanced view was offered this week by Professor Norman Doe, a leading canon lawyer and barrister, who said that the constitution of the ACC, defined member Churches as “Churches in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury whose names are listed in the Schedule to these Articles”.

He said that the schedule can be amended with “the assent of two-thirds of the Primates of the Anglican Communion”. Professor Doe had reservations, however: “Strictly, for me, this merely confers membership of an institution, the ACC, not the Anglican Communion.”

The Anglican Communion has never been tidy — one of the causes of frustration in its dealings with the Roman Catholic Church. In a briefing paper in January 2010, the General Synod’s secretary-general, William Fittall, cited the Church of Norway and the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, as examples of two Churches in communion with the Church of England which were not in communion with each other.

Archbishop Welby is due to finish his series of meetings with Anglican Primates next month, after which, he told the General Synod, he will give the matter “further consideration”. In his Church of Ireland Gazette interview, he described ACNA as an “ecumenical partner”, and said that the reconciliation of the Churches was “a professional, emotional commitment to me, as well as a theological commitment”.

A Lambeth Palace spokesperson this week described ACNA as “a flourishing Church of Anglican tradition and spirit, with a sincere hope and prayer of many, including the current Archbishop, that there will be sufficient reconciliation across the Anglican Communion for ACNA. Not only to be of Anglican tradition, but also, in one way or another, to share the same contending faith within the Provinces of the Anglican Communion in a formal way”.

Until ACNA has some form of communion within the Anglican family is confusing, as recognised by full authority of the Episcopal Church, and as an ecumenical partner — that is, another Church, by others.

Sydney synod supports GAFCON

by Muriel Porter

SYDNEY diocesan synod has recognised GAFCON as an “emerging instrument of communion”, and has encouraged GAFCON and the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans (FCA) “to expand its membership, develop networks, and to authorize and affirm those who have been excluded by their dioceses or provinces”.

It has also congratulated the new Primate of the Anglican Church in North America, Dr Foley Beach.

An Australian branch of the FCA is to be launched in Melbourne next March by the Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Glenn Davies, during a conference sponsored in turn by Moore Theological College, Sydney. In his synod charge, Dr Davies highlighted a new diocesan mission, Mission, 2020, which is to target newcomers.

The goal was to raise the number of new people attending church from the current level of nine per cent to 12 per cent, he said. “Our vision for the next five years is to see Christ honoured as Lord in every community.”

He wanted to see “more and more from every part of our diocese come to put their trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. We have a mission, which is a matter of life and death.”

The synod also called for the release of the 699 children currently held in immigration detention on Christmas Island and Nauru; the synod noted concerns raised by the Australian Medical Association about the mental health of the detained children.

The Australian synod has deplored the treatment of asylum-seekers in Australia, especially children, as contrary to Christian teaching and morality. The 800 clergy and lay representatives emphasised the message by interrupting deliberations to gather in silence underneath the sign welcoming refugees which has hung outside St Paul’s Cathedral for more than a year.

The Melbourne regional bishop, the Rt Revd Philip Huggins, said that the synod’s gesture was a “strong and beautiful message of hope”. There are 3624 asylum-seekers currently in detention; some have been held for more than two years.