



# FROM THE OFFICE OF THE ANGLICAN BISHOP DIOCESE OF JOHANNESBURG



Our Vision is: To Achieve the Practice of the Ministry of All Believers

## PASTORAL LETTER Vol 4 Lambeth Reflections 26 August 2022

Dear Diocesan family,

I have just returned from the Lambeth Conference convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Revd Justin Welby. Archbishop Justin is the ceremonial head of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Together with his team he provided an outstanding Christian experience for the several hundred bishops and their spouses, support staff and guests, who were privileged to attend what for many will have been a once-in-a lifetime experience. The planning that went into every aspect of the Conference was outstanding, from the magnificent worship services to the separate programmes for the spouses of bishops and times for relaxation. The worship services were most memorable, illustrating a united fellowship in a gathering of people who are very different in so many ways. The worship itself reflected the different cultures and Anglican traditions that were represented – in liturgy, the preaching of the Word, and in music and song. Indeed, the very final hymn we sang as we all prepared to go our separate ways was South African.

Sadly, this unity of purpose was not always present when it came to some of the discussions that took place during the Conference. At the outset let me say that the matter of human sexuality and in particular the recognition and sanctification of same-sex marriages was a hot issue. Many lively informal discussions took place before the plenary met to discuss the matter of Human Dignity. At one stage I wondered if we could remain together as the Lambeth Conference, but I proceeded with deep faith in my Lord, in Jesus Christ, and the movement of the Holy Spirit, and my commitment to the three pillars of Anglicanism: Scripture, Reason and Tradition.

I think many who do not understand what binds the Church of God together would have found the schisms in those first informal discussions bewildering, but understandable when one realises that the Conference is a gathering of representatives of various Anglican Provinces throughout the world.

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There were representatives from Asia and Africa, Europe and the Americas, and more. But there were not as many representatives as there could have been. Sadly there were many bishops absent. Their reason for not attending, put simply, is that they did not want to be in the same space as gay bishops. There are now gay bishops throughout the Anglican Communion, and they were welcomed at this Lambeth Conference even though there may have been other bishops present who had reservations regarding the sexual preferences of different people. The absence of the boycotting Bishops was despite the fact that the discussions that occur at Lambeth do not result in decisions that are binding on Provinces or Dioceses. In fact, this past Lambeth Conference moved away entirely from any suggestion that decisions taken had the strength of legislation. Matters which were agreed to were cast as "Calls". My own understanding of this is that a Province or a Diocese has been given the freedom to make its own choices, not least in the realm of Human Dignity.

The matter of human sexuality as represented in the Call on Human Dignity is exhaustively covered in the document at this link: ([https://www.lambethconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/LC\\_Human-Dignity\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.lambethconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/LC_Human-Dignity_ENG.pdf)). I urge you to read it as it is a wide-ranging document and the product of intense and sincere grappling with the challenges inherent in this matter. I wish, however, to quote the opening paragraph of the Call which speaks to God's reflection in each one of us, and the third paragraph which addresses the diversity of God's creation.

*Within God's good gift of creation (Gen. 1:31), humanity, male and female, is made in God's image and blessed by God's care and love (Gen. 1.26-28). This gives all human beings a dignity that cannot be taken away. "Whenever we face another, we see a reflection of God's infinite love and glory."*

*The wonderful diversity of God's creation is echoed in the diversity of human beings. Every human being is "a unique and deep mystery of inestimable value and dignity". This diversity among human beings and in all creation is good and beautiful. It can also be a source of tension and conflict, as shown in the story of the Tower of Babel. Pentecost - and the vision of Revelation 7:9 - show how diversity is a good gift from God when, in the unifying power of the Holy Spirit, it is used in God's service and for the good of one another.*

I was privileged to gain a deeper insight into the immense complexity of this matter as by default I became a facilitator of one of the bible study groups. Among its members were two bishops from South Sudan, one from Kenya and another from Louisiana in the USA, one from India and a Catholic Archbishop (UK) who was part of the ecumenical invitees. Our discussions in the bible studies regarding human sexuality were lively but enabled each one of us to gain an understanding of various positions throughout the world. Each

of us was challenged as we debated to improve our listening skills and to open our minds to the realities of the communities in which we minister. For example, the South Sudanese bishops were adamant that they had no gays or lesbians in their churches since “these people know what the bible says, and know it is wrong”. And therefore, there was no need to minister to such people. When it was put to them that if they were ignoring such people, they were inevitably also ignoring others – such as those who were committing adultery – and therefore not fulfilling their calling, they began to see that all are “made in God’s image and blessed by God’s care and love”. They realised that their insistence in applying only what “the bible says” in their interpretation of how to conduct their ministry fell short of our acceptance as Anglicans of “the diversity of God’s creation”. Yet we all had to be sensitive to the other, and for instance had to come to a new understanding of the deep challenges different communities face. The South Sudanese bishops reminded us of the cleavage between their country and the northern part of Sudan, a separate country called the Republic of Sudan. This state is Muslim, whereas South Sudan is predominantly Christian. This created its own issues for the church. And then there were those moments as Anglicans where we had to sit back and listen to our Roman Catholic Archbishop who was far more understanding and open in dealing with all the issues we were facing.

I was reminded of the rich heritage of our own Province here in Southern Africa as I reflected on where we stand on so many of these matters. I was also aware though of the deep differences in our own society which we face day by day: the gender-based violence that is prevalent, the high crime rate, the hatred meted out to our brothers and sisters from other African countries and overseas. Archbishop Justin summed it up well in saying “Today there is so much intolerance of views that are other than our own as we demonise those we do not agree with”. This is so true. In our rejection of others, are we in turn acting like demons? Are we sometimes guilty of protecting our own selfish interests so much that we cannot be together in Christ?

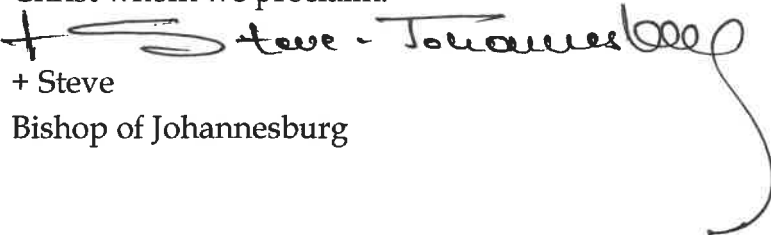
There is a saying in Setswana that sums up what we are called to do: “Ntwa ke madula Mmogo” – loosely translated as “If there is disagreement in a family it is a good reason to stay together and work things out.” The warm atmosphere of Lambeth, particularly during the worship, showed us this is possible. It is possible for us in every part of our lives, and as Anglicans we are called to practise this.

A final story from the bible study group. The bishop from Kenya told us of the wonderful work for ten years of a youth pastor. This pastor brought many young people to Christ, and into membership of the Anglican Church. Then the elders discovered she was a lesbian. They fired her. The youth she had ministered to were left leaderless, and

countless numbers of young people who would have been privileged to respond to her ministry are not in the church. How incredibly sad and what a waste of a God-given talent. Thus let me repeat part of that third paragraph from the Call I have mentioned above, for it speaks to us directly in this Diocese: "Pentecost - and the vision of Revelation 7:9 - show how diversity is a good gift from God when, in the unifying power of the Holy Spirit, it is used in God's service and for the good of one another."

These are my own views and reflections as Bishop of Johannesburg of the Lambeth Conference. I shall share more about Lambeth with you in the future. For now, let us embrace our diversity and with great energy work towards the realisation of human dignity. It is for this that our Saviour was prepared to die the most undignified of deaths so that we and all our fellow human beings, each one made in the image of God, may have such human dignity in its full abundance.

I return refreshed and happy to be home. Liziwe joins me in wishing you joy as you watch the new growth during this Springtime - a beautiful reminder of the Resurrected Christ whom we proclaim.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve-Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail that loops back down and to the left.

+ Steve

Bishop of Johannesburg