



THE MIDDLE WAY: A CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE FOR DISCUSSING THE LAMBETH COMMISSION REPORT

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INTRODUCTION: FOUR POINTS TO REMEMBER

The Report of the Lambeth Commission on Communion (LCC) is a document that is designed for study, dialogue and interpretation. (For an in-depth background on the LCC see the article by Dr. Ian Douglas on the website of Episcopal Divinity School, www.eds.edu.)

The question is: *how* will it be studied, discussed and interpreted?

Given the supercharged atmosphere of the church around the issue of human sexuality, the answer is likely to be: it will be studied in a climate of partisan conflict, discussed in heated exchanges, and interpreted according to preconceived positions.

But does it have to be that way?

No. The Report of the LCC does not have to be an opportunity for “more of the same” in recrimination and division within the life of the church. There is a way for people to study, discuss, and interpret the Report that offers new ground for dialogue, and hopefully, for reconciliation.

The key is in how committed we are to the goal of reconciliation.
The test is in how willing we are to stop talking about sexuality.

Sexuality is not the context of the LCC Report.

Partisan advocates for division within the Anglican Communion try to keep the focus on issues of sexuality, especially homosexuality. They insist that this is the context for studying, discussing, and interpreting the details of the LCC Report.

“The Devil is in the details.” That old saying will be true for Anglicans if we allow the dialogue on the LCC Report to be contextualized by partisan attitudes about human

sexuality. Rather than seeing the report in a broader context which encompasses us all, whatever our location within the Anglican Communion, we will be drawn back into the game of “biblical chess.” Rather than moving toward mutual understanding and reconciliation, we will be mired in mutual recrimination and division.

As we enter into dialogue about the details of the LCC Report, there are four points we should remember:

1. The real debate is not sex, but context.
2. Who defines the context, defines the debate.
3. Who defines the debate, defines the interpretation.
4. Who defines the interpretation, defines the outcome.

Those of us committed to the goal of reconciliation within the Anglican Communion must take these four points very seriously. We must use them to insist that the context of the dialogue on the LCC Report be grounded in a much broader human experience than sexuality alone.

Thirty years of debate over human sexuality has shown us that this issue is not the ground of reconciliation for the church. If we place the LCC Report into this context, we will only be using the Report as a predetermined political tool to advance preconceived theological agendas. The result will be a pointless cycle of continuing conflict that will further weaken the Anglican Communion and diminish its global mission.

The question is: if sexuality is not the context for the LCC Report, what is the context?

The true context for the LCC Report is a deep challenge for any Anglican from any point on the compass, either geographic or theological. It is a ground of our shared experience as human beings that is far broader than our cultural attitudes about sexuality. It is a call to courageous self-reflection, careful historic analysis, and difficult cross-cultural dialogue. It is an opportunity for us to come in from the extreme edges of emotional conflict to find a common center. It is a personal risk that each of us will have to be willing to take. It is an appeal to our leadership to lower the levels of invective and rhetoric so that the people of our Communion may listen to what others are trying to say. In short, it is a workable, prayerful, demanding context for the LCC Report and for all the discussions that will follow.

THE CONTEXT OF THE LCC REPORT

“Seeing” the context of the LCC Report is a matter of focus. If that focus is very narrow, on a single issue such as sexuality, then the dialogue will be very narrow. However, if we broaden the focus, then we broaden the scope of the conversation.

Why is that important?

It is important because it gives us all a chance to “see” ourselves in the conversation, not as adversaries, but as mutual stakeholders in seeking understanding, respect, and reconciliation. *We begin by asking not what divides us, but what we share in common.* The context of our study and dialogue is not the narrow range of our attitudes about sex, but rather the broad spectrum of our shared human experience.

While this sounds positive, it is also very risky. Many people will not want to broaden the focus because to do so puts them in the picture in a new light. It makes them accountable. It is far safer to stand on the sidelines and shift the focus onto others through accusations. It is safer to claim infallibility than to stand in the context of shared accountability. Resistance to a broader context will be intense. But if we truly value the Church and seek to find reconciliation then we must take the risk together.

Rather than seeing the LCC Report through the microscope of sexuality, we must open the focus to see it in four contexts that describe our shared human experience as Anglicans:

The Historical Context
The Theological Context
The Political Context
The Cultural Context

As uncomfortable as it may be for any of us, we must stand together in the light of our own experience in each of these four realities. We must engage in a thoughtful study of how each of these contexts informs the LCC Report as a whole. We must be intentional about having open discussions on each of these *before* we get into the details of the Report; otherwise, the details will remain the unconnected weapons we use in an endless partisan debate.

One guiding principle should be kept in mind at all times: *how we process the Report will determine how we use the Report.*

If our goal is to fully understand the Report in the broad context of all of us who are receiving it, and, if we seek to implement it not as a means of punishment but of reconciliation: then we will take both the time and the risk to process it carefully. We will not rush to judgment. We will filter the Report through our own historical, theological, political, and cultural context as Anglicans living together in this century.

Carrying out that process is an act of stewardship for us all. It will require us to refuse to take the easy way out by simply using the LCC Report to justify our own partisan positions. It will insist that we be mutually accountable for the roles we have all played in shaping the history, theology, body politic, and culture of the Anglican Communion. None of us can define that broad context alone. We can only understand it as the church: the community that shares the experience of God.

STUDYING THE REPORT: FOLLOWING THE MIDDLE WAY

“How we process the report will determine how we use the Report”.

As your community seeks to understand the LCC Report, here is a simple method to help you process it. It is called **THE MIDDLE WAY**.

It is called that because it is based on our shared tradition as Anglicans. We have been known as the people of the “Middle Way,” the “Via Media”. In the 16th Century we sought a common ground between the poles of Protestantism and the Catholic Church. Consequently, we became the safe space for both. The strength of our heritage as Anglicans is that we can still find that space in our church: a safe place where men and women of good conscience can come together to seek God’s truth in their own lives.

The structure of **THE MIDDLE WAY** is very simple. It invites small groups to meet together for three hours. Two hours (roughly because you will need some break time) are spent on studying the *context* of the LCC Report. One hour, approximately, is spent on the Report itself.

The goal is to help people understand the LCC Report. The path to understanding is through the history, theology, politics, and culture that we all share as Anglicans. **THE MIDDLE WAY** also helps to promote a safe space where people of different opinions can find mutual support and reconciliation.

The LCC Report will create a wide range of feelings within any Anglican community. Therefore, we need a flexible, compassionate and reasonable process to help our community process it.

With that in mind, here is how to use **THE MIDDLE WAY** in your community:

1. First, you need to explain the purpose. Announce that your community is going to invite those who are interested to journey together on **THE MIDDLE WAY** as they study the LCC Report. Let them know that this is an open invitation and an open conversation. *It is not a debate*. Instead, it is an opportunity for people to put the LCC Report into some prayerful *context* before they form an opinion about it.
2. Next, organize a time and place for **THE MIDDLE WAY** conversation in your community. Set aside a morning, afternoon, or evening session. You will need three hours with enough space for small groups to meet (5 to 7 persons). If you have more than one small group meeting, begin with a time of welcome and orientation. Make sure everyone has read the LCC Report. When you finish you may want to conclude with the Eucharist or with a simple meal.
3. Each small group will divide their time in the following way: 30 minutes (approximately) for each of the Four Contexts. For example, spend about one hour on History and Theology. Take a break. Spend another hour on Politics and Culture. Take a break. Then conclude with about an hour discussing the LCC

report *within the framework of these four contexts which describe our shared human experience as Anglicans.*

4. When the small groups meet:

One person serves as the *Convener*. He or she opens with prayer and makes sure the conversation involves everyone equally. The Convener uses the questions provided at the end of each context statement to focus the dialogue. She or he keeps an eye on the time and allows for short breaks. **Note:** you may want to refer to the guidelines for small group conversation contained in “Good News: A Congregational Resource For Reconciliation”. You can find out how to obtain a copy of this resource from the Episcopal Divinity School Website (www.eds.edu).

Four people serve as the *Readers*. They are given copies of one of the four essays provided below. The essays should be read in the following order: The Historical Context, The Theological Context, The Political Context, and The Cultural Context. At the beginning of the discussion, the Reader reads one of the essays out loud. The group is invited to listen in a prayerful way to hear what insights may come to mind. Following the reading, the Convener uses the two questions on *context* to carry out a 30 minute conversation. The third question under each essay forms the basis of the discussion on the LCC Report itself.

5. Conclude **THE MIDDLE WAY** experience by asking participants to share one thing they have learned from the discussion. These learnings may be written down on newsprint and posted for others to see if the small group is part of a larger community exercise. All small group conversations should conclude with prayer and with the passing of the peace.
6. Tell us how **THE MIDDLE WAY** worked for you. Feel free to contact us at ndavidge@eds.edu to share your experience and help us to serve you better in our ministry of reconciliation.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

What is the historical context of the LCC Report?

Some of us might say that it is something very new in the life of the Church.

Some of us might say that is not so new because we feel like the Church has been arguing about human sexuality forever!

But in reality, the historical context of this Report is much older than we might imagine. In fact, it goes back to the time of Jesus.

Consider this thought: the current struggles in the Anglican Communion are just one chapter in the ancient story of “Empire.”

Jesus of Nazareth was born into the Roman Empire. His parents went to be taxed by this Empire and he spent his life seeing how it oppressed the people of his time. Rome kept people in line through fear, intimidation, and the threat of violence. Jesus had the courage to stand up to that kind of oppression. He spoke openly about an end to fear. He told people that they had dignity and worth, even if others looked down on them. He invited the captives to be free and he taught all people to love one another in spite of their differences.

Rome killed Jesus because he was a threat to their Empire, not because he was trying to replace one kind of oppression with another. He said that his “kingdom was not of this world.” But because he offered people something more powerful than power itself, he offered them hope.

Today, Rome may be long gone, but the “Empire” is still very much a part of our lives. Anywhere there is oppression, there is “Empire”. Anywhere people live in fear and shame under the threat of violence, there is “Empire.”

We may all be very different people, living in very different parts of the world, but we have one thing in common: we all know what it feels like to live in an “Empire.” The poorest man in Nigeria knows. The most abused woman in Indonesia knows. The most closeted gay person in the United States knows.

The LCC Report is new to us because it represents a part of our recent history of conflict over human sexuality. We think that debate draws such sharp lines between us that we have nothing in common, but in fact, we have a great deal in common. Beneath our cultural attitudes about sex, there is a longer, deeper story: the story of innocent people all around the world who know what fear feels like, what hate feels like, and what danger feels like.

Jesus came so that all of these people might finally feel something else. He came so that we all might know what it is to be free, to be respected, and to be loved. He came to the poor, the abused, and the outcast. He came to you and me. We are part of that ancient story. Our context is “Empire” because people on both “sides” of the debate have known oppression. Our context is also the courageous stand against “Empire,” the message of mutual respect, compassion, and love in Christ Jesus. Now we have a chance to write a new chapter. As the Anglican Communion, what hope will we bring to a hurting world?

Questions

For the discussion on context:

1. Where do you see the modern face of “Empire” in the world around you?
2. What do oppressed people share in common? What does the Gospel offer them?

For the discussion on the Report:

3. How could the LCC Report help the oppressed to find hope within the Anglican Communion, or, how could it be used to further divide oppressed peoples?

THE THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

What is the theology of the LCC report?

One of the things that people find odd about Anglicans (and there are lots of odd things to find!) is that we never seem to agree with one another. Instead, we seem to be a community that values its freedom of thought over its conformity of theology.

Other traditions have long lists of things that people are supposed to believe, but we have very little of what might be called formal theology. Why?

One reason is that, like Jesus, we see worship as our theology. When Jesus called people to follow him, he threw out a very wide invitation. He did not call just one kind of person. He did not discriminate and he did not judge. His community of disciples was made up of men and women who were extraordinarily different from one another. Some were conservative followers of a strict religious tradition. Some were social outcasts because of their sexual behavior.

Is it any surprise that they argued constantly? The Scriptures give us the portrait of Jesus' followers as a very contentious community. More than once he had to ask them "what were you arguing about this time?" Given how diverse the first Christians were, it is not surprising that they disagreed. What is surprising is how Jesus kept them together.

He could have done it by insisting they all conform to a single doctrine. He could have demanded that they all share the same theology. He could have required that they all read the sacred scriptures in exactly the same way. But he didn't. Jesus did not give his followers a list of rules about what to believe. He gave them a simple commandment about how to live.

The theologies of the Anglican Communion are centered around the table where Jesus still invites all of humanity to gather as one family. Like all families, it expects differences, even disagreements, but it focuses each person on the meaning of the fellowship: that together we love God with all of our heart and that we love one another as Jesus loves us.

Today, as disciples, we are still arguing about what to believe. The LCC Report is clear evidence of that. In our frustration, we may wish to have Jesus take our side in the argument and command the others to believe what we believe. In fact, we may start to become chaplains to the "Empire" by demanding conformity and assuming that we have a right to speak for God.

In this kind of situation, what will hold us together? What theology will be our common heritage and our common hope? Perhaps the words of Jesus at the Last Supper give us our final clue: “drink this, *all* of you.” Not some of you, not a few of you, but *all* of you. The sacrifice of Jesus was that we might all remain one family under God. The question is not about theology, but about whether we are willing to drink from that common cup.

Questions

For the discussion on context:

1. Why is the one commandment of Jesus simply built around love?
2. What is the theology of our shared worship as Anglicans and why has that always been so important to us?

For the discussion on the Report:

3. In what ways does the LCC Report reflect that our theology and in what ways does it seem to offer a different theology?

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

In the Church, we often like to pretend that we are above politics. But too many of us have spent time at church meetings to still believe that. We know better and have the scars to prove it!

The truth is, as much as we may dislike the reality of politics in the life of the church, it is a fact of life and has been from the very beginning. We should not be shocked to find different groups competing for our loyalty or different leaders making dramatic statements to capture our attention. When the stakes are high in the church, the level of politics heats up and many of us feel overwhelmed by the claims and counter claims. Smart politicians even know how to manipulate the media to help them sling a little mud at the opposition. None of this is new.

In fact, one of the first books ever written about what we call “church politics” was the Acts of the Apostles. It tells many stories about how the first Christians struggled with one another and with the world around them. Acts of the Apostles is an early use of media that talks about disputes, compromises, meetings and global diversity. It is an “insider’s” look at how very human leaders sought to gather a very human community around very sacred ideas.

One of those leaders was Saint Peter. Peter was at the center of early church politics. He represented a constituency that believed the message of Jesus was intended only for those who would conform to a particular religious view. His opponent in the political debate

was Paul. The issue between them involved the idea of a global church. At stake was the question about how diverse the church could be and still be called “Christian.” Peter and Paul argued it out in the forum of public opinion in a town called Antioch. Their debate was so heated that it is still remembered in the press report we call the Book of Acts.

But Acts is not just about politics. It is also about God. The saving grace for the church is that we are not just a body politic, but a Body of Christ. God came to Peter in a dream and helped Peter transcend his own political views. He showed Peter a vision that opened Peter’s mind to a new understanding of the church. Rather than a narrow definition of who could be acceptable as a Christian, God revealed a community whose boundaries were not defined by outward politics but by inward faith.

Peter’s ancient confession of faith, “truly I perceive that God shows no partiality,” is a political testament for our own time. Today we are like the people of ancient Antioch: we are witnesses to a great political debate in the church. Some of the key participants in this debate are leaders whom we respect. Consequently, we are confused when we hear them offer very different opinions about how broad our understanding of church should be.

If we were only a political party, we would have good reason to be anxious. But we are not just a political institution. The Anglican Communion is a part of the Body of Christ. Therefore, we are open to the same Spirit that brought a transforming dream to Saint Peter. The Holy Spirit can clear the air of our smoke filled rooms with the breath of a new vision. Like Peter, we can come to understand that God shows no partiality. Not between us, whatever our politics may be, and not between those who disagree with us, whatever their politics may be.

Questions

For the discussion on context:

1. What is the difference between a political body and the Body of Christ?
2. What is your dream of a church that “shows no partiality?”

For the discussion on the Report:

3. How does the LCC Report seem to be a part of church politics in the Anglican Communion and how does it transcend those politics?

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

How do we define the culture of the church? One way is to suggest doing something new in any parish. You will immediately discover where the boundaries of that culture are drawn, not to mention who gets to draw them!

Culture is agreement. We learn to live together by agreeing on *how* we will live together. We set boundaries for ourselves and establish common practices that we feel comfortable with as a community. In time, these agreements become so familiar to us that they seem permanent. We have difficulty imagining living without them. Instead of calling them our culture, we begin calling them our tradition.

One of the most dangerous things you can do is try to change tradition. Just ask Jesus. During his lifetime, Jesus was in constant trouble with the religious authorities of his culture because he wanted to change their tradition. He openly told people “you have always done it this way, but now I tell you we need to do it another way.” Because he was speaking of some of the most cherished traditions of his time, Jesus was called a radical, a blasphemer, and a threat to the community of faith. In the end, his willingness to challenge tradition cost him his life.

Why was change so important to the ministry of Jesus? He could have been a much more popular Messiah if he had simply championed the cultural tradition of his time. Why would he insist on challenging what his religious leaders declared was so sacred as to be permanent?

Perhaps the answer is in the images of the culture he sought to create. When Jesus called people to a new tradition, he did not describe that tradition as a museum but as a garden. He said that we would be like wheat growing in a field. He said that we would be like vines growing from a branch. In other words, he said that the boundaries of our culture would always be changing because they would always be growing.

The tradition of the Anglican Communion is the culture of Jesus. We are a community that has always been willing to change because we have always been willing to grow. We have always been described as “The Middle Way” because we are the flexible path between extremes. We welcome diversity. We welcome dissent. We welcome change. We are not fearful of this change because we are disciples of the Christ of change.

Today we confront a question about our identity as a community. We are asked how far we are willing to go in changing our tradition. Some insist that the answer to that question must be made on the assumption that our tradition is a fixed and permanent culture ordained by God. Quite understandably, they see change as a threat. Others insist that change is from God. Just as understandably, they see themselves standing within Anglican tradition, not outside of it.

Who is right?

Before you answer, consider this: if you are an Anglican, you live in a culture that has always said it is possible to remain in community with someone whose answer will be different from yours. Our long and sacred tradition has been an abiding wisdom: we grow healthier when we grow together. Perhaps the real issue is whether we believe that is a tradition worth keeping.

Questions

For the discussion on context:

1. Why was Jesus the “Christ of change?”
2. What does being “The Middle Way” mean for us as Anglicans?

For the discussion on the Report:

3. How does the LCC Report reflect the historic tradition of the Anglican Communion, or, how does it change that tradition?

Summary of Questions for the Discussion on the Report:

1. Historical Context: How could the LCC Report help the oppressed to find hope within the Anglican Communion, or, how could it be used to further divide oppressed peoples?
2. Theological Context: In what ways does the LCC Report reflect that our theology and in what ways does it seem to offer a different theology?
3. Political Context: How does the LCC Report seem to be a part of church politics in the Anglican Communion and how does it transcend those politics?
4. Cultural Context: How does the LCC Report reflect the historic tradition of the Anglican Communion, or, how does it change that tradition?

About the Author

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