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Church in crisis

The Anglican Church has been split by divisions over ordaining gay ministers. The cracks are visible in Christchurch. PHILIP MATTHEWS reports.

At the end of June, more than 1100 Anglicans from around the world got together in a hotel on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Among them were nine New Zealanders _ seven from Christchurch.

You would have seen Wally Behan there, and Malcolm Falloon. Behan is the vicar at St John's on Latimer Square. Falloon is at St Aidan's in Bryndwr. Both are also leaders of the Latimer Fellowship, the evangelical wing of Christchurch Anglicanism.

They had big issues before them. The Jerusalem event was called nothing less than the Global Anglican Future Conference, or Gafcon. It was the latest and most profound expression of disapproval in a debate that has preoccupied the Anglican world since the 1990s at least. Should the church bless same-sex unions? Should the church ordain ministers who are in sexually active gay relationships?

Two of the world's 38 Anglican provinces Canada and the United States have gone ahead, infuriating the conservative bishops who represent Anglicans in Africa. There have been charges of First-World arrogance, neo-colonialism. Some conservative American parishes have defected, putting themselves under the authority of African bishops.

The delegates at Gafcon were a mix of clergy and laity, including nearly 300 bishops. After a week of meetings, they hammered out a defining statement _ the Jerusalem Declaration. It condemned the "false gospel" that has approved diverse sexual preferences and immoral behaviour in North American churches. It said that provinces in the "Global South" _the developing world _ are now out of communion with those who promote this false gospel. It spoke of the failure of the church's "instruments of unity" _ including the Archbishop of Canterbury himself, Rowan Williams _ to maintain discipline.

Most notoriously, it argued that Anglican identity is not necessarily determined through recognition by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Rowan Williams' response came quickly. He urged those at Gafcon to think carefully about their "problematic" position and the risks it entailed.

Few in liberal Anglican circles would be surprised that Christchurch was so well represented at Gafcon. Behan and Falloon's critics use words like "fundamentalists" and "homophobes". They whisper about connections between the Latimer Fellowship and the famously conservative Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, an organiser of Gafcon. They note that Behan's offsider, outspoken assistant minister Peter Collier, trained under Jensen at Moore Theological College.

They see links with the conservative Bishop of Nelson, Richard Ellena, and mutter about how Ellena has opened a new theological school to train evangelicals and bypass Auckland's too-liberal St John's Theological College.

They've seen Falloon lead protests against the ordination of a gay minister in Dunedin and against an appearance by American liberal John Spong in Christ Church Cathedral.

"They want us to go away," Falloon says. "Some of them even want us to leave the church."

The trouble is that they are a sizeable chunk. Of the 71 parishes in the Christchurch Diocese _ which spreads over Canterbury, the West Coast and the Chatham Islands _ a third could be called evangelical. But when you start counting heads at congregations, the number of evangelical believers gets closer to 50 per cent. Compare that with about 30% in Auckland.

Falloon points out that the evangelical churches also deliver more than their share of income. Their congregations tend to be younger, more committed, more ready to believe.

At St John's, on Latimer Square, Wally Behan has been credited with reviving the fortunes of his parish _ the congregation has grown from 50 to 500 under, in Collier's words, Behan's "passionate Biblical preaching".

The parish's health is such that, a few years ago, Christchurch Bishop David Coles sought Behan's assistance in turning around the declining St Saviour's church in Sydenham-Beckenham. Behan agreed to send

40 of his congregation south to Colombo Street and helped find a new minister James de Costabadie. Now that church is thriving, and de Costabadie has joined Christchurch's loose federation of evangelical ministers. Besides Behan and Malcolm Falloon, there's Mike Hawke in Avonhead, Ron Hay in Sumner-Redcliffs, Philip Lyes in Cashmere and Jay Behan in Shirley.

The latter is Wally Behan's son, who also trained under Jensen. "Some view us with suspicion," Jay Behan says. "We're accused of being dogmatic, uncaring and unfeeling. And evangelicals tend to go out of line with the culture more, so you're seen as strange and different in that way. Sometimes we fulfil those stereotypes sometimes we're not careful in the way that we speak. On an issue like homosexuality, it's easy to forget that you are speaking about people."

The stereotypes worry them, which is why Wally Behan, Malcolm Falloon and Peter Collier have got together in the St John's vicarage on a quiet Monday afternoon. Collier is well known for his campaign of writing letters to The Press, arguing scriptural points with anyone who will step into the ring. Falloon is chatty and amiable _ he could natter happily for hours. Behan is initially more wary _ he asks nearly as many questions as he answers.

"We don't want to come across as fundamentalist, unthinking and narrow-minded," Behan says. "It would be wrong for us to be lumped into the Brian Tamaki camp. We're expressing the Anglican view, which is about study and thought and being scriptural."

"A fundamentalist just rejects the world," Collier says. "An evangelical engages with the world, listens to what the world is saying and critiques it. But we keep getting pigeonholed as bigoted and brainless."

Falloon talks animatedly about the history of evangelicalism, both in Christchurch and beyond. "It's always scandalised the institution," he says. "Wesley went outdoors to preach rather than stay in churches. Whitfield received communion from Presbyterians."

Lately, though, the institution has been more than scandalised _ it's been rocked. And Gafcon is both cause and effect.

But Gafcon also points to something deeper. Collier gets to the heart of it when he quotes an African church leader: "There's a small, white, rich minority from North America setting the agenda." Or as the Jerusalem Declaration says, "We are a global communion with a colonial structure."

It's often said that there are around 80 million Anglicans worldwide. But, Falloon says, take out the nearly 25 million in England who were baptised but don't go to church and you end up with 55 million believers. Of those, somewhere close to 45 million were represented at Gafcon. By contrast there are just 2.2 million Anglicans _ or Episcopalians, as they are known _ in the United States and two million in Canada.

So the First World perception of Gafcon as a splinter group, a minority movement, doesn't stack up. You could also say that to have this worldwide communion dominated by North American concerns is a classic case of the tail wagging the dog.

The general view is that religious attendance is declining in the West but rising in the developing world. And the version of Christianity that's rising tends to be more conservative, especially on sexual matters.

Catholicism is also affected, but its centralised structure _ all eyes look to Rome _ makes global consistency easier. The province-by-province diversity of Anglicanism was long regarded as its strength but it could now be its weakness. It means that Anglicans from one country to another, or even within the same city, no longer recognise each other.

Ask what an Anglican is in 2008 and you can get very different answers. The version at Latimer Square will revolve around scriptural belief and strict adherence to the 39 Articles of Anglican doctrine.

If you then head across town to St Michael's on Oxford Terrace and look for Ron Smith, a retired minister who is Collier's occasional sparring partner, you get a liberal version with more wriggle room: "An Anglican has a broad understanding of the will of God to enable the world to live at peace with one another." And the 39 Articles? They mattered in Victorian times, but not now. "I take my spirituality from Christ," Smith says, "not from a book."

The divisions are so deep that no-one can even agree on something as basic as who is _ or should be _leaving. The liberals call the Gafcon group the schismatics, while Behan argues that the Americans are the separatists through their defiance of the Anglican majority. Neither group wants to leave and neither group thinks that it's leaving.

And the gay issue just masks a bigger one about incompatible understandings of what it means to be a Christian.

For a liberal Anglican, the gospel is a story about justice and mercy, about caring for those who haven't been treated with dignity. A liberal might then agitate for the church to accept those who have been marginalised, as the gospel tells them to.

But the inclusiveness of this view, that God loves you and everything you do, sounds like indifference to Falloon _ that God doesn't really care.

"When I look at the ugliness of the world, the wars and famines that take place, to have a God who says, you're all included, it's all lovely _ to me, that can only be a rich-man's gospel. It doesn't sell in Africa. People who have opposed this as a Western gospel are poor, hungry and in war-torn places. It removes their hope of a transformed world. God does care _ that's the reason Jesus died and rose again."

So conservatives read the very same gospel and come up with a different story _ a tougher one about sin, repentance and forgiveness.

"Homosexuality is one of many things that are sinful," Jay Behan says. "It's no more or less sinful than anything else, but it is one of the sins that, according to 1 Corinthians 6, excludes us from the kingdom. Without repentance, there's no forgiveness. If that's true, the most unloving thing we can do is to say that something the scripture says is sinful is actually holy and righteous.

"It's thought that if you have a theological position on something it means you're uncaring and unloving. I'm a sinner and struggle with lots of different sins _not the homosexual sin, but other sins _ and I hope that people would still treat me with dignity and respect."

But those outside the religious world listen to these debates and hear nothing but homosexual this and homosexual that. Why is the church so obsessed?

"Why this issue?" Collier asks. "It's been forced upon us. If there was a bishop who said, 'I'm greedy, I was born greedy, I'm genetically greedy and I've been made to feel guilty all my life for my greed by the church, but now I'm going to celebrate it and I want everyone to accept it', you would have the same reaction. People have pushed this issue and said, 'we want this sin to be blessed'."

There's a familiar rhetorical response for those who oppose Collier. They look up the Old Testament rules about eating shellfish, or keeping slaves, and ask why we aren't expected to stick to those rules

as well. Why just the one about homosexuals? Australian comedy show *The Chaser's War on Everything* pulled that very stunt recently when it cornered Peter Jensen.

"It's ridiculous," Collier says. "We're New Testament Christians. Jesus, in the one conversation he had with the Pharisees, declared all foods clean and at the same time said sexual immorality is unclean."

Again, it's about different views of the same gospel. And it's remarkable how different. If you look up Corinthians, you get a line about adulterers and slanderers and drunkards and ... homosexuals. It's as plain as day to Collier. But at St Michaels, Ron Smith says homosexual doesn't really mean homosexual, or not as we now understand the term. It might have meant a heterosexual man indulging in same-sex acts _ going against nature in that sense, he suspects.

When I told Smith that I had been to see Behan, Falloon and Collier, he said, more than a little theatrically, "The names strike terror into my heart".

Cheerful, twinkly-eyed and English-accented, Smith is most people's traditional image of the Anglican vicar. He was dressed in black and wore a cross; he spoke forcefully about justice and love. He also upholds Western liberal values and sees the Africans as "antiquated", with a "Victorian mentality".

We perched on pews inside the freezing old church after Smith finished taking Mass on a Tuesday morning. Smith and three other retired priests keep the tradition of daily eucharist alive. Some mornings as few as six or seven come to worship you're reminded of the famous story about Sir Isaac Newton delivering a lecture to an empty room.

Sadly this image was fulfilling some stereotypes.

"The liberal elite in this diocese are finding that their congregations are ageing, their parishes closing," Falloon says. "The churches that are flourishing and growing are the ones that, in the 1960s, they thought were dead. They feel very threatened. They see it as a power grab by conservative churches who are part of the darkness we are trying to leave behind."

What darkness? Falloon is talking about a view of history. Again, the two sides are diametrically opposed.

Someone on Smith's side would hold to the view that, since the

Enlightenment, the world has been making steady progress, led by the West. We move from darkness to light. Science replaces myth. Religious devotion gives way to secular humanism. We put aside childish and primitive beliefs.

Falloon describes this as the modernist view that liberalism was based on _ everyone is ultimately the same and all faiths offer equal access to God, as long as the West sets the terms. He subscribes to a post-modernism _ our differences are deep and must be cherished. He remembers when he was involved in protesting against a new altar cloth commissioned for Christ Church Cathedral. The altar cloth included a Hindu prayer.

"It's not appropriate for Western culture to plunder other people's religious traditions and take this and that," he says. "That's not inter-faith dialogue."

It might seem odd to hear a conservative arguing for diversity and accusing liberals of being monocultural, but Falloon's point is this: the predictions of the modernists haven't really panned out. In the 1950s and '60s, the age that produced sceptics like John Spong and Lloyd Geering, no-one expected the new conservatism that has affected both Christianity and Islam in recent decades. And global Anglicanism has had to adjust.

All this is happening just ahead of the arrival of Christchurch's new bishop, the Canadian Victoria Matthews. She will be installed in the Cathedral in two weeks. Will she inherit a history of squabbles?

"There are parts of the diocese who want to set us up as troublemakers, but when she arrives and comes to talk to us, I don't envisage any major problems," Falloon says. "In the statements I've read, she's wanted to be open-minded, particularly on the issue of sexuality. It's still an open question to discuss. As a leader coming into Christchurch, that's a perfectly acceptable position to hold. And she's a trained theologian which is helpful because these are complex theological issues."

Behan offers his support, too, and Collier has a view that might surprise some. "I grew up in the Salvation Army so I'm used to having women in positions like that," he says. "One of my great heroes was Eva Burrows, the second woman general of the Salvation Army. Matthews reminds me of her."

She also has a global vision, which will be useful. Earlier this year, she

said that First World churches have been "dominant and bossy and arrogant for too long", that the time has come for the West to show humility and listen to the developing world. Behan, Falloon and Collier can surely get behind that.

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