



GAFCON Nairobi 2013 Report

Rev. Michael Hewat

A report by Michael Hewat, the Executive Officer of Anglican Affirm and vicar of West Hamilton Anglican Church.

1358 delegates from 38 countries, drawn from 27 Provinces of the Anglican Communion and representing tens of millions of faithful Anglicans worldwide – that was the make-up of the second Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON II), held in Nairobi, Kenya, East Africa 21–26 October. There is no more representative or unifying body in the Anglican Communion today. Representative not only in terms of provinces, but also in terms of church orders (331 bishops, 482 clergy, 545 laity) and gender (at least 500 women).

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I attended the first GAFCON in Jerusalem in 2008, along with seven other Kiwis. It was slightly smaller, but impressive in size nevertheless. As we sat on the Ophel steps on the South side of the Temple Mount – the very same steps from which Peter almost certainly preached his Pentecost sermon – the Israeli Minister of Tourism thanked us for coming to Jerusalem: “This is the first time a major conference of Anglicans has ever been held in Israel” he said. It was an ambitious gathering, a huge logistical undertaking, completed very successfully in minimal time. But the challenges of staging such a conference in Israel were warranted by the call of God to begin this new missionary movement in Jerusalem, recalling that first missionary movement, launched on the Day of Pentecost nearly 2,000 years earlier.

If Jerusalem was a challenging venue, how much more so Nairobi. But again this was the leading of God’s Spirit and imbued with huge significance – greater in the end than anyone could have imagined.

There is no question that Africa is now the centre of global Anglicanism, not institutionally or

historically, but missionally. If GAFCON is to be a movement to revive Anglican mission, as it claims to be, then it needs to look to Africa for leadership and inspiration. Where better to hold GAFCON II then than one of the centres of the great East African revival of the 1930s–1970s, Nairobi?

Which is where the conference began, not just physically – in the magnificent All Saints’ Cathedral and modern Conference Centre (paid for by locals within six months and home to the 2,000+ strong cathedral youth group) – but also in terms of the programme.

Archbishop of Kenya, Dr. Eliud Wabukala, in his welcome noted that,

This (East African revival) history has something to teach us all. We are in a spiritual battle for the future of Anglicanism and some of you will no doubt be weary and discouraged. So it is my prayer that “with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” here in Nairobi (Isaiah 12.3).

The first afternoon was given over to accounts of the revival, led by Dr. John Senyonyi of Uganda Christian University. He identified four characteristics of the East African revival which he deemed essential to any revival movement:

- A Christ-centred proclamation of the biblical Gospel
- Personal repentance and submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ
- Loving Jesus and reading the Word
- The East African revival was lay-led

Addressing the western church, Dr. Senyonyi drew an analogy between the diminution of wildlife in Africa and the demise of the church in the West. Whereas early in the 20th century wildlife was prolific, the existence of many species is now largely restricted to a few protected reservations. He exhorted the western Church to return to “walking in the light” (1 John).

The re-evangelisation of the West was a major theme of the conference and the subject of one of the mini-conferences, led by Dr. Alfred Olwa, Dean of Divinity and Theology at Uganda Christian University. He too stressed the importance of personal repentance (“you must be born again”) and the proclamation of the true Gospel. “The Gospel is the Gospel – in the West or elsewhere. The Gospel needs nothing added to it – there are those who pervert the Gospel” he said. Pulling no punches, he noted that Paul declared that those who distort the Gospel “are accursed” (see Galatians ch.1). He also cautioned that conversion does not come simply from the proclamation of the Gospel: it requires the convicting work of the Holy Spirit too.

Western culture came in for a good deal of stick, not just from African speakers. One of the highlights for many was an incisive analysis presented by Dr. Michael Ovey, Principal of Oak Hill College, London. After opening with an application of Jeremiah 2.11 to western nations (“Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit”), Dr. Ovey developed such themes as ‘cheap grace’ (“the grace we bestow on ourselves”), narcissism, a culture of entitlement, and inclusion without repentance. The full paper is available at www.gafcon.org

In a follow-up paper in the mini-conference on Gospel and Culture, Dr. Ovey majored on the growing hostility of western culture to Christianity, to the extent that Christians are now “the new atheists.”

Anyone who doubted the truth of Dr. Ovey’s claims would have been confounded by the report from Andrea Minichiello Williams, CEO of Christian Concern and the Christian Legal Centre in the UK. She reported that in the past three months authorities have detained three street-preachers in the UK. In each case they were released without charge, confirming their innocence, but Ms. Williams encouraged delegates to wake up to and resist such restrictions on freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

I noted earlier that there was an added significance to Nairobi as the venue for

GAFCON II, beyond its involvement in the Eastern African revival. I refer to the fact that the conference came within a month of the horrific terrorist attack on the Westgate Mall in which more than 100 died. While the attack was not primarily religiously motivated, the terrorists were Muslim and did make a point of singling out non-Muslims as their victims.

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The persecution of Christians, and the closely related Islamisation of most of the Middle East and Northern Africa, were other major foci. Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo painted a tragic, alarming and thoroughly pessimistic picture of the future of Christianity in these areas, from which the majority of Christians have already been driven or purged in the past four decades. A military adviser to the NATO and the Pentagon, as well as director of the Barnabas Fund, Dr. Sookhdeo predicted that Nigeria will eventually descend into civil war and Islamist militants will continue to press south, all the way to South Africa itself. In an additional session run by Dr. Sookhdeo, there were impassioned calls from delegates for GAFCON to do more to contend publicly for persecuted Christians, and to develop a clear strategy to do so. In my view, the final conference communique failed to address this subject adequately.

In a related mini-conference, former Bishop of Rochester Dr. Michael Nazir-Ali addressed “The Challenge of Islam: the Gospel, Islam and Freedom”, outlining core Islamic beliefs and how Christians might best witness to Christ to Muslims. One of the key distinctives between the two faiths, he observed, is that “Islam believes you change the world by gaining power, Christians believe you change the world by a willingness to give up power.”

These were the most disquieting of the mini-conferences, and have received most attention because of their urgency and the fact that they were the ones most of the Kiwi delegation attended. Other mini-conferences addressed the work of the Holy Spirit, marriage and family, episcopal ministry, being women of God, children and youth, aid and development, theological education. Conspicuous by its absence was a conference on care of creation, a point noted and included in the final conference communique.

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Of course there were other issues that caused differing levels of concern to delegates, but overall it was a tremendously encouraging and extraordinarily united gathering. The final communique, also accessible on the GAFCON website, was received in its final form (after considerable revision) with what appeared to be universal acclamation.

All credit to the Kenyans for a brilliantly organised gathering, excellent security, warm hospitality and vibrant worship – such as only Africans can produce. The conference began and ended with Communion in the Cathedral, and each day commenced with a Bible study in the Epistle to the Ephesians – providing an appropriate foundation for the conference’s theme “Making disciples of Jesus Christ in all nations.”

For those of us from New Zealand, fifteen in all from six dioceses, including Bishop Richard Ellena and Claude Fong Toy, Dean of Suva, it was a time of close fellowship and deepening collegiality. For Steve Maina, it was of course a case of returning home, and we all benefited from his local knowledge. We also learnt in what high regard he and Mary are held by the church in Kenya.

As it happened, we shared a hotel with 94 Australians (including 3 bishops and a number of other delegates not from Sydney), all of them ‘good sports’ with whom we likewise shared wonderful fellowship. It no doubt helped that the rugby season had just ended and cricket not yet begun!

Where to from here? Only God knows, but I think we would all say that as a result of GAFCON we are better equipped and positioned to face the missional challenges of the future – together, with millions of other faithful and confessing Anglicans around the globe.