

Bishops wrap Lambeth Conference with look ahead to unity, despite persistent divisions

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Anglican bishops from 165 countries attending the Lambeth Conference gathered for a group photograph on July 29 during the 15th Lambeth Conference held July 26- Aug. 8 at the University of Kent in Canterbury. Photo: Neil Turner/For the Lambeth Conference

[Episcopal News Service – Canterbury, England] Bishops from across the Anglican Communion, meeting Aug. 6 for their last business day at the Lambeth Conference, looked to the future as they emphasized the conference’s theme of Anglicans engaging with the wider world.

Many Episcopal bishops arrived at the July 26-Aug. 8 conference expressing trepidation over conservative attempts to reaffirm past Anglican statements against same-sex marriage. Though stark divisions remain over issues of human sexuality across the communion, which covers 165 countries, Episcopal bishops said they are concluding their time in Canterbury on a more hopeful note.

“It feels to me like this conference has been a new beginning for the Anglican Communion,” Minnesota Bishop Craig Loya told Episcopal News Service during a break between morning sessions at the University of Kent. Despite their differences, the more than 650 participating bishops have come together throughout the conference to examine some of the most pressing issues in the world today, Loya said, including climate change, interfaith relations, care for refugees and the threat of anti-democratic movements.

As part of the day’s business, the bishops adopted 14 statements of support, each proposed by a sponsoring bishop, highlighting a range of issues that included peace in the Middle East, the war in Ukraine and gun violence in the United States.

Newark Bishop Carlye Hughes described the conference’s full schedule over nearly two weeks as “a bit like drinking from a firehose.” Like Loya, she too was encouraged by her conversations with other bishops. “I leave with a real sense of knowing there’s extraordinary differences,” she said, especially over the level of LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church.

“But that is not what drives us together,” Hughes told ENS. “It really is this incredible love of Jesus, incredible love of all of God’s people and a desire to see all people live in some sense of safety and harmony.”

On Aug. 6, the final plenary session of the conference focused on “The Decade Ahead.” Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, who convened the typically once-a-decade Lambeth Conference, asked several conference participants to share their experiences and what they will bring back to their home provinces and dioceses.

“I have hope in the communion,” Western North Carolina Bishop José McLoughlin said from the main venue stage. “There’s a recognition that we are really here grounded in Jesus, that we really do have a desire to make Jesus’ love known to all people.”

An estimated 480 spouses also attended the conference, and some were invited during the plenary to share their thoughts as well. “What surprised me much in this conference is how much God can bring the whole wide world together, just to sit under his feet and learn from him and hear from him and listen to him,” said Phyllis Magina, whose husband is Bishop Robert Magina of Kenya’s Diocese of Nambale.

The theme of the conference has been “God’s Church for God’s World.” Welby will deliver his concluding keynote address on Aug. 7 in the morning, and the closing Eucharist will follow in the evening. Aug. 8 is marked as the bishops’ travel day.

[Find full ENS coverage of the Lambeth Coverage here.](#)



At the invitation of Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, Western North Carolina Bishop José McLoughlin offers his thoughts on the decade to come following the 15th Lambeth Conference in one of the last of the conference's sessions. Photo: The Lambeth Conference

Expressions of unity in these concluding days, however, cannot erase the divisions that remain across the Anglican Communion's 42 provinces over human sexuality. The conservative primates of three provinces, Nigeria, Uganda and Rwanda, refused to attend the conference, which welcomed married gay and lesbian bishops for the first time. Other conservative bishops from what is known as the Global South, where a majority of the world's 85 million Anglicans live, particularly in Africa and Asia, said that one of their top priorities in attending the conference was to demonstrate official majority support for anti-LGBTQ+ stances on marriage and sexuality.

Archbishop Josiah Idowu-Fearon, who is stepping down later this year as secretary general of the Anglican Communion, briefly addressed the bishops at the end of the day's decade-ahead plenary after receiving an honorary degree from Welby. The challenge Anglicans face, he said, is not to forget each others' differences but to understand them. "We are a family. We are very different," Idowu-Fearon said. "Let us learn to understand our differences, and when there is that understanding we can work together."

After Welby and conference planners blocked such a debate during the bishops' Aug. 2 discussion of the Lambeth Call on Human Dignity, leaders of the Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches resorted to lobbying on the sidelines for something similar to a petition

drive. Like-minded bishops were invited to sign on to a document reaffirming a 1998 Lambeth Conference resolution that had stated homosexuality is forbidden, marriage is only for heterosexual couples and unmarried people should practice abstinence. Results of the petition drive are expected after the conference.

Unlike in 2008, when then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams brought bishops together for “Indaba” discussions, at this Lambeth Conference, planners have issued drafts of what are known as Lambeth Calls focusing on 10 subject areas, to initiate discussion among the bishops and to offer action items for when they return to their provinces and dioceses after the conference. The Human Dignity Call references the need to address racism, exploitation, inequality, gender justice and climate change, but Welby, in remarks during the closed session on Aug. 2, acknowledged that human sexuality is part “of what we believe about human dignity.”

On that same day, while affirming that a majority of Anglican provinces and their bishops uphold conservative biblical interpretations on sexuality, Welby also made clear that he thinks inclusive provinces like The Episcopal Church are sincere in following their faith to the conclusion that traditional understanding of marriage needs to change.

“They are not careless about scripture,” Welby said, according to a transcript released by the Lambeth Conference. “They do not reject Christ. But they have come to a different view on sexuality after long prayer, deep study and reflection on understandings of human nature.”

Episcopal bishops were heartened by what they suggested is the first time the plurality of views on human sexuality has been recognized so prominently in the Anglican Communion. “This group of bishops today seem to be able to recognize and affirm our love and respect for each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, in the body of Jesus Christ, and that we could find a way to honor and respect our differences if we love each other and love our lord.” Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said in a video statement released Aug. 2 after the Human Dignity Call discussion.

But leaders of the Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches have interpreted Welby’s remarks differently. South Sudan Bishop Justin Badi, chairman of the Global South Fellowship, said during an Aug. 5 news conference that the Anglican provinces “cannot be a true communion if some provinces insist on their own autonomy and disregard the necessity of being an interdependent body.”

He also suggested the “degree of communion” between provinces may vary depending on how inclusive they are toward LGBTQ+ individuals. “We find that if there is no authentic repentance by the revisionist provinces, then we will sadly accept a state of ‘impaired community’ with them,” Badi said.

The Global South bishops' insistence on their conservative views of human sexuality belies the nuance and apparent contradiction in those views' real-world application and how individual bishops have addressed the issue here. Several Episcopal bishops said they were in Bible study and discussion groups with South Sudanese bishops whose top concerns in their home dioceses included from climate change to the threat of violence. Others had one-on-one discussions of a more personal nature.

After the opening Sunday Eucharist on July 31, Maryland Bishop Eugene Sutton related an earlier conversation he'd had regarding differing views over human identity and sexuality with a Kenyan bishop.

"I told him a story of a member of my extended family, who is gay ... and the struggle that he had all of his life, the struggle with his strong faith, and what some in the Christian community were saying about him, and the struggle against not wanting to be gay, but that he finally accepted who he was, and how that affected our family so much," Sutton said.

The Kenyan bishop "immediately stopped talking about it as an issue in the abstract," Sutton continued. "He asked about that young man, and he asked about our prayers for him, and he wanted the best for him. And he began to tell other stories in his own extended family, where some other person was gay and how they were shunned, and it brought some tears to his eyes."

Sutton said he found the most hope in such conversations centering on "real stories about real human beings."

That happened for the most part in the Lambeth Calls session, when bishops turned their attention to topics like "Safe Church" practices, discipleship, ecumenical and interfaith relations, the environment and sustainable development.

On Aug. 6, ENS spoke with Bishop Peter Yuol of the Diocese of Tonj, who said he was pleased this Lambeth Conference has addressed such a wide range of issues. His diocese struggles with poverty, illiteracy, violent crimes and government inaction, and the communities he serves also face devastating cycles of flooding and drought. "Last year it never rained, and now people are really suffering," he said.

He signed the Global South Fellowship's document reaffirming the 1998 resolution against same-sex marriage because he said it is an important issue for bishops attending the Lambeth Conference. But, he said, the topic is rarely raised by the people back in South Sudan, where same-sex sexual activity is prohibited by law.

[Read ENS coverage of the state of same-sex marriage and the legality of same-sex attraction across countries represented in the Anglican Communion.](#)

New Hampshire Bishop Rob Hirschfeld got to know another bishop from South Sudan through their discussion group. The South Sudan bishop's conservative view on human sexuality was not a pressing topic in their conversations, Hirschfeld told ENS.

"The world is on fire, and this issue just seems to be a nefarious distraction in the real work of Jesus, of bringing healing and reconciliation," Hirschfeld said. "And that's heartbreaking."

In South Sudan, the church is actively engaged with worldly issues, according to Yuol, the bishop who spoke to ENS. He and other Anglicans in the Diocese of Tonj have joined public campaigns to raise awareness locally on issues like climate change and public health precautions during the pandemic. He also mentioned that the South Sudan Council of Churches has tried to launch a peace and conflict resolution initiative to deal with the high number of murders in the country. He is grateful for the support of fellow Anglican bishops around the world.

"If Anglicans can do something, I would be very much happy," he said.

Loya, the Minnesota bishop, remained hopeful that divisions between provinces will not prevail.

"The Anglican Communion has always been somewhat messy and complicated, and my sense is that's not going to change anytime soon," he said. "But what we've also learned and talked about here over and over is ultimately this is God's church, and ultimately the mission of the church is driven by the power and love of God and does not depend on any of us getting it right together."

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