Sexuality and Global Faith Networks

A Research Project on the Debates over Homosexuality in the Anglican Communion

Findings from Parish Case Studies in Three National Contexts

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Overview: Sexuality and Global Faith Networks

This report summarizes key findings of a research project entitled ‘Sexuality and Global Faith Networks: A Social Topography’, funded by the Religion and Society Programme of the AHRC/ESRC. The project was a 28 month study of current debates over issues of homosexuality within the international Anglican Communion. Specific issues covered by the research include how local parishioners think and feel about the ongoing debates about homosexuality in the Anglican Communion; how these debates have influenced parishioners’ perceptions of their relationships with other churches in the Anglican Communion; how different Anglican churches are adapting to changing public attitudes about homosexuality; and how new transnational networks and alliances are forming as a result of divisions within the Anglican Communion.

Fieldwork for the project was conducted in the UK, US, South Africa, Lesotho, and Uganda. Methods of data collection included semi-structured interviews with both clergy and laity; observation at a number of key events for the Anglican Communion (including the 2008 Global Anglican Future Conference in Jerusalem, the 2008 Lambeth Conference in Canterbury, UK, and the 2009 General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Anaheim, California); and extensive document and media analysis. In total, more than 140 people participated in interviews, as well as many dozens more in less formal interviews and conversations.

This report focuses primarily on a major subset of this research — a series of case studies conducted in parishes in England, South Africa, and the United States. Although issues concerning the ‘sexuality debates’ in the Anglican Communion have received considerable attention in the media and elsewhere, the focus has often been on the voices of bishops, senior clergy, and pressure group activists. In this report, we give attention to the perspectives of respondents in local parishes — perspectives which are often hidden or absent from the dominant flow of debate about homosexuality and the Anglican Communion. The research demonstrates how the voices of local parishioners can be more nuanced and complicated than the impression often given in media reports and other sources, which tend to focus on polarisation within the Communion.

Background

The Anglican Communion claims about 80 million members worldwide. It is composed of 34 national or regional provinces, as well as a number of other member churches. The Church of England has the largest number of baptised members, although the Church of Nigeria now contains a much greater number of actively practising Anglicans. This demographic shift reflects both a decline in membership in the traditional Anglican core and the growth of a number of provinces in the global South, particularly on the African continent. The Archbishop of Canterbury officially acts as the Communion’s ‘focus of unity’, in the language of the Communion. However, neither he nor any of the ‘instruments of Communion’ (such as the Lambeth Conferences, where bishops gather every ten years to discuss issues) have binding authority over the provinces. Rather, each province has its own autonomous structure of governance, and the provinces are said to be
linked by ‘bonds of affection’. These bonds are rooted in aspects of belief, liturgy, and a shared history often tied to British colonialism and missionary activity. There is a great diversity of styles of worship both within individual provinces and between provinces, with high church, broad church, and low church approaches.

For several decades, the Anglican Communion has been engaged in a series of heated debates about homosexuality. These include debates over the morality of same-sex relationships, the blessing of same-sex unions, the ordination of gay clergy, and the consecration of gay bishops. Divisions within and between provinces resulting from the sexuality debates have contributed to fears of a permanent ‘schism’ within the Anglican Communion.

At the 1998 Lambeth Conference, bishops passed the divisive Resolution 1.10, which labelled homosexual practice as ‘incompatible with scripture’. The resolution was advanced by bishops hoping to stop pro-gay developments in some provinces, particularly the Episcopal Church in the United States (TEC). Given the autonomy of the provinces, however, Lambeth declarations are non-binding. In 2003, TEC consecrated an openly gay man, Gene Robinson, as Bishop of New Hampshire. This decision received a negative reaction from a vocal minority within TEC as well as from a number of the Communion’s provincial leaders. Within the Anglican Church of Canada, the diocese of New Westminster created a liturgy for blessing same-sex unions in 2002, and (although not officially sanctioned) it was also known that some clergy in the Church of England and TEC were offering blessings to same sex couples. In reaction to a sense that Resolution 1.10 was unsuccessful in halting pro-gay developments, groups who oppose the acceptance of homosexuality have become increasingly vocal and organized in their dissent since Lambeth 1998. New transnational alliances have been forged between self-described ‘orthodox’ Anglicans in the global North and some global South bishops, who together are seeking to enforce ostensibly ‘traditional’ church teachings on homosexuality.

One reaction has been the growing process of ‘border crossing’ affecting TEC. This phenomenon involves the crossing of provincial boundaries by parishes disaffiliating from TEC and placing themselves under the oversight of bishops in foreign provinces. A small but growing number of US parishes and dioceses have declared their break with TEC and affiliated themselves with churches in the global South, including Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Southeast Asia, and the Southern Cone. Condemned by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the practice has led to bitter battles between leavers and stayers over property and finance.

The provinces of Nigeria, Uganda, Rwanda, Southeast Asia, and several others have declared themselves to be in states of ‘impaired communion’ with TEC because of its positions on homosexuality. They have called for the US province to repent or be expelled from the Anglican Communion. Relationships between provinces have become sufficiently strained that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has called for a new structure for the Anglican Communion involving an inner circle of provinces who agree to a binding Anglican covenant and a loosely attached outer circle who do not. In calling for an Anglican covenant, Williams argued that “we really need to build relationships, and we need to have a sense that we are responsible to one another and responsible for each other” (17 December 2009). The longer term
impact of such an ‘Anglican covenant’ is still unknown, and the future shape of the Anglican Communion remains highly uncertain.

Contexts and Case Studies

The research project ‘Sexuality and Global Faith Networks’ was designed to explore the nature of the sexuality debates in the Anglican Communion. One major goal of the project was to give voice to perspectives which are often under-represented in press coverage and other accounts of the ‘crisis’ in the Anglican Communion — those of ordinary Anglicans at the parish level. We chose case study parishes in each of three different national contexts: England, South Africa, and the United States. These three contexts differ from each other in a number of respects (as outlined below). These three countries are of course only a subset of the wider membership of the Anglican Communion. We do not claim that the case studies are ‘representative’ of either the wider Communion or of their national contexts, given the great diversity of Anglicanism. The case studies allow us to explore complexities, uncertainties, emotions, and reactions that are often absent from accounts that focus on the voices of the most vocal or powerful commentators. The case study data also reveal a great deal about the complex relationships between people’s commitments and identities at the level of the parish, province, and the wider Communion.

In each national context, we chose two different parishes within the same general location to explore issues related to the sexuality debates and the Communion. Choosing parishes in the same general area allowed us to examine not only the international dimensions of communion but also more local aspects of denominational connection. We briefly outline the three national contexts and the case study parishes within them below.

England: The Church of England is the officially established church in England. Although there are sometimes sharp divisions within the Church of England over homosexuality, the church has not yet been splintered to the same extent as the US church over this issue (although the potential for substantial divisions continues to loom over the issue of the consecration of women as bishops). Pressure groups have formed both advocating for and against a more inclusive approach by the church in relation to issues of homosexuality. There are also differences of opinion about the role that the church should play in British politics, including how it should respond to legal developments in relation to civil partnerships, anti-discrimination legislation, and other issues.

The two case study parishes in England were both located in an urban area in the north of England. The first English case study parish, COE-1, was a primarily white parish with a mixed working-class and middle-class congregation. The parish had a relatively high proportion of lesbian, gay, and bisexual members. It also had a reputation in the local community and diocese for engaging with social justice issues, including opposition to foreign wars by the UK government. The second English parish, COE-2, was ethnically mixed, primarily Afro-Caribbean and white, with a number of African refugees and asylum seekers. Its style of worship was relatively high church. In this parish, although members claimed that there was no ‘discrimination’ based on sexual
orientation, there were a range of views about the morality of homosexuality and how the church should respond. Issues related to homosexuality were not often discussed at length in sermons or at other church events, given the discomfort of some parishioners with the issue. The vicar in fact feared that discussing the issue too openly would potentially divide the congregation.

South Africa: South Africa is by far the largest member of the province called the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA). South Africa was the first country in the world to offer constitutional protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Yet despite progressive legislation, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) members of society have been subject to high levels of violent harassment. Although legislation has contributed to an emerging sense of gay identity and LGBT rights, reactions towards LGBT members of society can still often be deeply hostile and exclusive. Anglicans accounts for roughly about 4% of South Africans. South African Anglicanism has a history of schism and fragmentation, a factor which has led to a certain reluctance amongst current bishops to make strong public comments on matters of sexuality under discussion in the wider Communion, for fear of creating further internal divisions (although the inclusive position of retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu are well known). The official position of the Synod of bishops regarding sexual orientation is that it should not be a barrier to leadership in the church, but given that marriage is held as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman, clergy who are unable to commit to a partner of the opposite sex are called to a life of celibacy.

The Anglican Church of Southern Africa has been very much shaped by the history of segregation under the apartheid system of government within South Africa. It is therefore a very diverse church, with different communities tending towards different liturgical styles and theological emphases. Although parishes and cathedrals within bigger urban centres often host mixed congregations, smaller townships and suburbs frequently continue to mirror the ethnic profile of the local community. Our two case study parishes reflected these dynamics. The first parish, ACSA-1, was based in a township, on the outskirts of a city in the Kwa-Zulu Natal region. The liturgical style was ‘high church’, reflecting the Anglo-Catholic missionary tradition, and all services and meetings were conducted in Zulu. Many respondents here (although not all) expressed largely conservative views on homosexuality, although the parish also had one ‘out’ lesbian member who reported feeling relatively comfortable in the parish. The second parish, ACSA-2, was located in a suburb of the city. The congregation was predominantly white and middle class, and all services and meetings were conducted in English. The liturgical and theological styles of the church differed between services which catered for different groups of parishioners — the early morning service for the more ‘traditional’ (and conservative perspectives), and later services catering for a more liberal audience. The overall range of positions between parishioners, including on matters of sexuality, was very wide.

United States: The Episcopal Church (TEC) accounts for a relatively small proportion of Americans overall (less than 2%), although its influence has been far greater than this figure would suggest. The sexuality debates have been very internally divisive within TEC. Although a majority of parishes have moved towards much greater acceptance of homosexual practice,
a minority have actively opposed this widened acceptance (including the practice of consecrating bishops in same-sex relationships). Active pressure groups exist both opposing and supporting LGBT inclusion within TEC. A number of disaffected US parishes (along with several from Canada) have broken away to form a competing body — the Anglican Church in North America — and hope to eventually replace TEC as the recognised Anglican province in the US. A number of other ‘conservative’ parishes remain uncertain about their future within TEC.

Both American case study parishes were located in a major urban area in the northern US. The first US case study parish, TEC-1, had a congregation that was predominantly middle class and white (although there was also an African American presence). The parish was known as one that had adopted an explicitly inclusive approach on LGBT issues. There were a substantial number of gay, lesbian, and bisexual parishioners. The liturgical style had many high church elements, but also other influences. The second US parish, TEC-2, was a predominantly white but ethnically mixed congregation where virtually all of the parishioners identified as evangelical Christians. The parish had been in conflict with its diocese about the acceptance of homosexual practice in TEC, and there had been discussions about potentially leaving TEC (although many parishioners were hesitant about such a move). Although the popular image of US evangelicals is often tied to a conservative brand of politics (usually linked to the Republican Party), many parishioners were quick to emphasise that they differentiated between theological and political conservatism. Some parishioners in fact supported civil marriage for same sex couples. Opinions about homosexuality within this evangelical parish were diverse.

Parishioner Feelings About the Anglican Communion

One of the key issues the project sought to explore was if and how parishioners in differing parishes felt concerned about the direction of the ‘sexuality debates’ and their impact on the Anglican Communion. Did they feel the same sense of urgency as the most vocal commentators on these issues? Although almost all respondents indicated that they were familiar with certain aspects of the ‘sexuality debates’, many indicated that they were not knowledgeable about how the debates might affect the Anglican Communion overall. Respondents frequently cited the controversy over the consecration of Gene Robinson (sometimes referred to simply as ‘the gay bishop’ by non-US respondents) as an issue that was familiar to them. However, despite most respondents being aware that there were tensions over the issue of homosexuality within the Communion, many also made clear that they were confused or uncertain about how the outcomes of these debates would affect their parish or diocese. Many expressed uncertainty about how the Anglican Communion was organised and governed. As one respondent in the English parish COE-1 stated:

*I never quite know where the authority structure lies in the Anglican church.*

(female, middle aged, COE-1)

For many respondents, there was also uncertainty about which countries/provinces were even members of the Anglican Communion. While many discussed how ‘African’ bishops were championing a so-called ‘traditional’ position on homosexuality — with (now retired) Archbishop Peter...
Akinola of Nigeria being the figure most commonly mentioned, either by name or as the ‘bishop from Nigeria’ — relatively few respondents (including in the South African parishes) had detailed awareness of which specific African provinces were involved. Provinces in Asia, Latin America, Australia, and New Zealand were rarely mentioned by respondents and did not seem to be perceived as significant participants in the sexuality debates. This tendency largely seemed to reflect the way in which newspapers and other popular media often portray the conflict, focusing on TEC, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the African provinces.

It was not uncommon for respondents to ask the interviewers (or, in the case of group interviews, other parishioners) questions about the details of the current divisions in the Communion and how their local parishes might be affected (‘What would a split entail? I mean what, how?’, as one respondent from the South African parish ACSA-2 asked). As one American respondent noted when discussing the reactions of other provinces to the gay-friendly position of the Episcopal Church, ‘I haven’t followed it deeply and I’m embarrassed that I haven’t deeply followed it’ (white female, 30s, TEC-1). Similarly, as one respondent at U.S. parish TEC-1 explained with some distress in relation to the anti-gay pronouncements emerging from the Church of Nigeria:

> I think it’s very difficult for me because I don’t know these people. All I know is what I read in the paper, and I know what I read in the paper is so horrible, but I don’t know these human beings. I just know that I don’t know what they’ve been through. (white female, middle aged, TEC-1)

**Commitment to the Idea of International Communion**

Although respondents had varying degrees of concern about the damaged relationships between provinces, it was primarily seen as a job for bishops to ‘sort out’ these relationships. Compared to some of the more vocal commentators in the sexuality debates, relatively few respondents expressed a deep commitment to either preserving or urgently re-organising the Communion. Rather, for most respondents, events at the local, diocesan, and national levels were considered far more important than events in the wider international
Communion. For example, parishioners at COE-2 indicated that they hoped that there would be no permanent split in the Communion, but they doubted that life in their parish would change much either way. One parishioner at COE-2 thought that a schism would matter to her because ‘united we stand, divided we fall’ (Afro-Caribbean female, retired), but she could identify few actual direct impacts that a division would have locally. Similarly, another respondent suggested that a schism would be a source of sadness for her parish even if it wouldn’t be very important locally:

I think it would be very sad if (schism) happens but...I think it’s almost inevitable because the bishops between them can’t sort this out, can they? [...] Were it to happen, I think we would go on very much as we are now, because, at the end of the day, what we’re most interested in is our own little patch and the way we live our own individual lives, and the broader picture doesn’t really affect us from day to day. But as a whole I think it would be very sad....We would lose this whole concept of unity and communion, wouldn’t we?

(white female, retired, COE-2)

For this respondent, what would be lost is a ‘concept of unity and communion’ rather than a set of relationships with ‘day to day’ importance to her.

Echoing this sentiment, one priest at ACSA-2 explained how the congregation seemed to feel a sense of disconnect from events in the wider Communion:

I will read statements that are put out by the Anglican Church news service...and by various other church bodies...but I don’t feel that they have a huge bearing on the work that I do day-by-day in my parish. And as far as my parishioners are concerned I think most would have only an awareness that we’re part of a wider whole but it doesn’t really feature in people’s lives...unless people have travelled...widely and gone specifically also to Anglican Churches in other countries, there’s minimal sense of connection with the Anglican Communion...There’s a sense of disconnect, not because people don’t identify but just because...it has no bearing on their day-to-day experience of their faith or their worship.

(Clergy member, ACSA-2)

Given the potentially divisive nature of the debates, this parish priest explained how he had been highly cautious about opening the issues for discussion in the parish:

I'm not sure how people in my current parish would really respond. I have avoided too many open discussions on the subject. I know they took place in the parish some years before I arrived although the international debate was at a very different place then. I know that those discussions were somewhat erm divisive at the time. And to be
honest I think I've been I've been scared. I've been chicken of setting up huge division within our parish. There are people who discuss the issue, but they're small in number, and I think most people real concern would be ‘Can I still, will I still be able to come to church on a regular basis, have my service, have my religious needs attended to?’

(Clergy member, ACSA-2)

Another respondent at ACSA-2 spoke about the sense of sadness he felt about the ‘tearing apart...of the body of Christ’ that he saw as taking place. This sadness, however, did not reflect any broader commitment to the Anglican Communion in its current form.

Any tearing apart of the church and of the body of Christ is, I think, a very sad thing....but it (the Anglican Communion) actually doesn't have a whole lot of significance for me....I mean, people here are interested in it, but it's not the be all and end all of their lives, you know... You know there are times that I think that the church was in a good place during apartheid because there was something to fight, there was a cause to rally around and, and that tends to motivate Christians...We've found another cause now, erm, homosexuality among others which is, I just don't think it's as important a cause to, to fight.

(white male, 20s, ACSA-2)

Although some ACSA-2 parishioners did not 'look to Canterbury', others felt a particular sense of connection to the Church of England, with less concern about other provinces. For example, one retired female respondent (who held theologically conservative views on homosexuality, but who supported gay inclusion due to the experience of a family member 'coming out') felt meaningfully connected to the Church of England for reasons of migration history, but not to other places. Despite explicitly noting that she felt no connection with the U.S. or other African provinces, she nevertheless thought that a potential
split in the Communion represented a ‘distressing’ loss of something ‘very solid and secure’. The growing divides reminded her too much of previous internal divisions within South African Anglicanism. However, as expressed by both clergy and several lay people at ACSA-2, the parish had difficulty generating active interest in linkages with other parishes even within their own diocese, no less with other parts of the Communion (with a parish twinning project with a North American church having failed due to lack of parishioner involvement). As one respondent described it:

*I think most people don’t bother about going to anything but their local church anyway. Occasionally, when (there is) a function at the cathedral and they want us all to go, some of us will go, but not very many because we’d rather go to our parish church, we’re comfortable there […] and I think that’s probably the same in England or anywhere else in the world that you don’t think globally but you like to, you like to be global.*

* (white female, retired, ACSA-2)

**Anglican Identities and Denominational Loyalties**

Although many respondents reported liking that the Anglican church was a ‘global’ church, their feelings about the Anglican Communion were in part related to their feelings about the wider subject of Christian denominations. In all of the case studies, a proportion of parishioners were converts from other Christian or non-religious backgrounds. Even for those who were born into the Anglican church, there was a willingness to consider leaving the denomination if they developed too great a sense of discomfort with what was happening in their parishes or the wider Anglican church (whether related to homosexuality or otherwise).

In both US case studies, the term ‘church shopping’ was frequently used by the interviewees to indicate a relatively fluid approach to denominational affiliation. Respondents who had converted to TEC (a substantial proportion of the congregation in both US cases) often described having gone through a process of trying a range of alternatives before settling on their current parish. As one respondent at TEC-2 expressed, she cared about how issues impacted upon her own congregation, but she had little interest in the wider politics of the Anglican Communion:

*I’m not invested in it. In other words, I don’t care. I don’t care about this denomination stuff….I feel like I happened into the Episcopal Church and … this parish is actually the place to be because the people seem to really be thinking here in a way that sings for me.*

* (white female, 50s, TEC-2)

At TEC-2, which had an evangelical approach, parishioners often felt more attached to their broader identities as evangelical Christians than as Anglicans. Many liked their particular parish because it maintained a more liturgical approach than many non-denominational evangelical churches in the US, but they were willing to
consider disaffiliating from the wider Episcopal Church if necessary. This was reflected in ongoing discussions within the parish about whether to leave TEC over its positions on homosexuality (something which the parish has decided not to do, reflecting the diversity of views on homosexuality within the congregation and some desire to maintain connections to the national church and international Communion).

In contrast to TEC-2, the atmosphere of TEC-1 was explicitly welcoming of LGBT members. The parish had taken a relatively active interest in the affairs of the national church. In particular, at the time of the interviews, the parish was actively working to oppose what was known as B033 — a resolution that had been adopted at the 2006 General Convention of TEC. The resolution called upon “Standing Committees and bishops with jurisdiction to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion.” In short, the resolution was understood to be a ban on the consecration of any additional gay-identified bishops. The passage of this resolution was viewed as an attempt to appease opponents of full LGBT inclusion within the Anglican Communion. The congregation actively worked to build opposition to B033 (although some felt that this one issue had taken over the church), and LGBT members of the congregation talked about the hurt B033 had caused (B033 was effectively overturned in 2009, in part due to organising by parishes such as TEC-1 and pro-gay pressure groups). Prior to B033 being overturned, some gay and lesbian parishioners at TEC-1 compared the effect of the resolution to being excluded from a “table” or a “family gathering”.

It’s hurtful to those of us that are gay and lesbian and have had that happen repeatedly in our lives and have struggled with that in our families of origin and that’s why we’ve come to the church, a welcoming accepting church to say we are behind you, we care about you, we welcome you but then when push comes to shove and when there’s friction from another member of the family and one can equate this to a family function, a family gathering, to have the church say ‘well you know we won’t bring you along this time or we’ll hide you for this moment or we won’t let you be as part of the wedding party on the day.

(white male, 50s, TEC-2).

The pain of being a second-class citizen is so deep that any concession to bigotry is kind of like saying, ‘Oh, actually we are second-class citizens’. If there is still space, then you can get a place at the table but you’re not one of the first people to get seated at the table.

(white male, 40s, TEC-1).

Given the strength of the anti-gay sentiment emerging from some foreign churches (particularly the Church of Nigeria), a number of respondents at TEC-1 had conflicted feelings about their involvement in the international Anglican Communion. One man suggested that the US church should cut off mission funding to foreign churches with anti-gay vies, although others
challenged this view and hoped that their could be a way for the Communion to hold together. However, it was repeatedly emphasised by most TEC-1 parishioners that it would be wrong to compromise its gay-affirmative position for the sake of relationships with churches in other places. A similar stance was taken by many parishioners at the gay affirmative English parish COE-1, where some respondents worried that their relationships with churches in other parts of the world were damaging the faith of LGBT Christians in their own parishes:

_The thing I feel about the Anglican Communion is that... a diversity of views is good as long as those views don't actually become destructive, and I think we're at a stage now where... they're beginning to destroy, and not just destroy the church as a Communion but to destroy individuals... What these people are saying is actually damaging people here's relationship with God._

*(white male, 20s, COE-1)*

At the same time, many respondents expressed appreciation for the diversity of views in the Anglican Communion, and hoped to be able to maintain a situation where there was a ‘breadth of theology and experience and churchmanship.... Otherwise, you know, if we are content to let one wing go, it diminishes all of us and we are left with a narrower church’ (white male, middle aged, COE-1).

Within the township parish ACSA-1, denominational identity was a complex matter, involving struggles within the parish over what it meant to be Anglican. A major source of concern was how the parish should be positioned in relation to other churches in the township, particularly Methodist and Pentecostal churches. Some respondents expressed frustration over biblical interpretation, reflecting anxieties that Scripture was not taken seriously enough within the Anglican Church when compared with more charismatic ‘Bible believing’ churches in the neighbourhood:

_The Anglican Church seems to be allowing certain things to, we seem to be very accommodating and we don't want to hurt... by speaking the truth to say what the Bible says and now we begin to wonder, when do we decide the Bible is the word of God? And what makes us decide ‘no, not this; we can change this’?_

*(Zulu female, retired, ACSA-1)*

These anxieties over how scripture was used in the Anglican Church reflect wider anxieties over church membership. The Episcopal Church in America was deemed by some respondents to be too ‘accommodating’ to LGBT members, and the South African church’s unwillingness to take a strong stance against homosexuality threatened its position in relation to other denominations:

_I think America is too accommodating. The word of God is the word of God when it suits a certain trend of whatever. When it does not it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter...... [The Anglican church] says ‘everybody is the same’ but it’s not helping this_
You find that in those other churches the charismatic churches where they take Bible as the word of God as it is, many people are going there. They're joining the churches in droves.

(Zulu female, middle aged, ACSA-1)

Membership in the wider Anglican Communion meant for many ACSA-1 respondents that their church was associated with the consecration of Gene Robinson. Robinson’s consecration was something which respondents said was a source of ridicule by other ‘bible believing’ churches in the township.

Although there were anxieties about how the local Anglican Church was perceived by charismatic local churches who rejected homosexuality, the history of segregation, particularly along linguistic lines, had led to a sense of strong attachment between the township’s many Zulu speaking congregations under the umbrella of being ‘African communities’. This sense was conveyed, for example, by one respondent who discussed how Anglicans sang the same ‘African’ choruses as their Methodist and Pentecostal neighbours and friends when at funerals:

We are in an African Church. We are in African communities whereby you even sing hymns that when you go to the Methodist Church you know you’re related to them. You sing the same choruses and everything. That’s the culture of the black people in church, you know. Where you’re not very much different. (middle aged female, ACSA-1)

Relationships with other black Christians in the township were seemingly prioritised over those with predominantly white Anglican churches in their own diocese. Several suggested that they worshipped in an Anglican church because that had been the tradition in their families, but felt little commitment to a denomination. One respondent discussed how, for him, being Anglican was merely a ‘surname’; that is, it comes after the primary identity of ‘Christian’, which is of far greater significance (Zulu male, retired, ACSA-1). As another respondent emphasised:

Being an Anglican doesn’t mean anything to me….I’m no longer influenced by being an Anglican. I’m influenced by the word of God….If your spirituality has taken a step up, then you know that God is above Anglicanism. It depends on the level of [...] the relationship that you have with God. (Zulu female, retired, ACSA-1)

Overall, there was a strong sense that the role of the parish church within the township and its main priority was improving the life of the local community, particularly the lives of young people, by caring and looking out for each other and sharing available resources with the wider community. There was a feeling that a sense of individualism had undermined some of these community values, and that a sense of community must be worked towards. Alongside the daily
problems of poverty and health care, these concerns which affected the township were deemed more important as a focus of parish life than debates over homosexuality.

Staying Together or Breaking Apart?

Some respondents clearly were not optimistic about the prospects of the Anglican Communion remaining together in anything like its present form, given what they perceived as the polarisation between bishops. Our research, however, also found evidence that a number of parishioners did not see the different stances of the provinces on homosexuality as a sufficiently important difference to break up the Communion (this seemed especially true at ACSA-2 and COE-2, two parishes where homosexuality was not a major focus for parishioners, and where there were often conflicted views within the parish). Even in cases where people had relatively strong, well-defined views on homosexuality, there was sometimes a suggestion that the differences should not lead to schism. This was because these respondents thought that there would be no prospect for changing the opinions of those they disagreed with if there was no space for interchange or dialogue. Being in the Communion meant that the provinces had to be accountable to people in other places. As one respondent with strongly conservative theological views on homosexuality explained:

*I think that being in an Episcopal church, (the global Communion) has been very helpful for me [...] because in North America in the last 30 years, the Episcopal Church has been notoriously liberal and strayed from the historical Christian faith. And so in a sense it’s easy to write off those people and say they’ve started their own sect/cult that is not Christian, but being within it is a reminder that we’re part of a family .... and that we are responsible to one another and that we’re responsible for calling one another to account, which is what I think is happening in the Anglican community. That by virtue of being part of this Communion and part of this larger church body, we can’t just write off people with whom we disagree, but have to respectfully engage and call people back to the centre of the gospel.*

(white male, 30s, TEC-2)

For this respondent, being part of the Communion had been important to him because he could imagine himself as part of a wider international community where he believed most people shared his theological perspective (even if this was not true within the US province). However, he did not want to ‘write off’ theological liberals who, he said, might be viewed as creating a new ‘sect’ or ‘cult’. Instead, he saw the Communion as a means of returning people to the fold — a way to ‘call people back to the centre of the gospel’. The dialogue that results from being within the Communion was therefore not viewed by him as a way of creating new forms of understanding. Rather, it was a means to guide people back to the ‘historical’ faith.

However, although recognised as useful in this respect, the role of the
Communion as a mechanism for accountability did not necessarily make it actively valued by parishioners. One respondent, a white male who did not think that the church should affirm ‘homosexual expression’, appreciated the Communion as a means of preventing churches from being too easily ‘guided...by culture’, but nevertheless saw the value of the Communion in primarily ‘theoretical’ terms:

INTERVIEWER: So you don’t feel that connected to the international Communion in that sense?

RESPONDENT: I mean I certainly followed it and with some interest, but, yeah, no, I don’t feel hugely connected to it [...] (T)o the extent the Episcopal Church is held accountable by the wider communion, I also think that’s really valuable. That way it prevents any church from being purely kind of just guided by its culture and the cultural trends in that country [...] But that’s more just [pause] These are theoretical commitments, you know....I don’t feel deeply [committed] to the Episcopal Church.

This belief that the Communion could serve as a vehicle for influencing other parts of the Church was not restricted to theological conservatives. Several members of the two churches with clear pro-gay profiles, COE-1 and TEC-1, expressed largely similar views — that it was worth the Communion staying together so that there was the possibility of changing the view of the ‘other side’. For one respondent at COE-1 — despite his sense of anger at the statements of the leaders of the Nigerian church — being in communion required being ‘generous’: ‘I’ve actually got to take that risk of allowing bigots in, in the hope that we might be able to change them’ (white male, middle aged, COE-1). An ordained member of COE-1 discussed in even stronger terms how he hoped to stay in touch with ‘the evangelical wing’ of the Church for their sake as much as his.

I felt very sad for the....evangelical wing of the church here and overseas in that it’s a group of people who’ve lost sight of baptism and...who seem to be more concerned with a form of religious ethnic purity that I think is quite foreign to the Gospels... As I see it, the international kind of evangelical stuff and some of the Nigerian stuff in particular, phew, is, is caught up in what Jesus I think spent most of his time trying to coax people out of [Question: Are you in communion with Peter Akinola? Do you want to be in communion with him? Or would you prefer a kind of orderly split?] I would like to find a way of being in communion with him because I think he needs us. Because I think if that wing of the church is allowed to suggest gay promiscuity is in any way different from straight promiscuity, it’s in that sense hell bound....so if there was any glimmer of linkage and leaning and fellowship there I’d want to try and keep that alive....To have
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a blind spot that big is, is spiritually soul hurting, so I kind of want to stay in touch with them really, and maybe they've got bits that are important for us to pay attention to. (white male, middle aged, COE-1)

Describing evangelical Christian views as ‘unbiblical’ and ‘hell bound’ (a rare mention of ‘hell’ in our interviews), this respondent argued that conservatives ‘need us’. Although he expressed openness to a degree of interchange, staying in communion from this perspective had the goals of changing the views of those of the other ‘wing’ of the church.

Implications and Conclusions

This report has examined how a range of respondents in local Anglican parishes perceive the sexuality debates within the Anglican Communion. To summarize some of the key insights from this research:

• Although views on the Communion of course varied, few respondents attributed the Communion with the importance suggested by much recent media coverage and ‘elite’ discussions of the future of the Communion. While many respondents reported feeling ‘sad’ about widening divisions within the Communion, this sadness related more to the loss of abstract notions of ‘unity’, tradition, history, and memory. Few expressed feeling all that committed to the institutional arrangements of the international Communion.

• Respondents often expressed relatively complicated emotions about events at the Communion, with many hoping that divisions within and between provinces would not widen. Particularly in the parishes with strong pro-gay commitments (COE-1 and TEC-1), respondents often felt a sense of anger and outrage at the statements that they had heard from leaders of other provinces about issues of homosexuality, and this sometimes contributed to a feeling that their parishes would be better off not being in relationship with conservative provinces. Often, however, there was a hope that differences could be worked through so that a sense of Communion could be maintained (although this could not involve the compromise of the gay-affirmative stance of these respondents’ churches).

• For many theologically conservative respondents, there was a perception that the acceptance of homosexual relationships within TEC and elsewhere was damaging the reputation of their parishes locally (a view that was most notably expressed by a number of respondents in ACSA-1).

• For respondents with a range of different views about homosexuality (whether relatively liberal, conservative, or ambivalent), there was often a sense that the debates in the Communion were a form of ‘denominational politics’. For many of these respondents, denominational affiliation was a largely secondary matter to being Christian. A number of respondents in all six case study parishes spoke about their denominational affiliations in quite fluid ways, with a number reporting feeling only weakly attached to an ‘Anglican’ identity. These respondents prioritised
events in their own congregations and were most concerned about maintaining their parishes as spaces that they found comfortable and supportive for worship. Thus, although they had a sense of commitment to their local parishes, this did not necessarily translate into a commitment to remaining within an Anglican church if the sexuality debates continued to impinge on them in ways that they perceived as negative.

A bibliography of other publications stemming from this project will be made available from the project website: www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/research/groups/faithnetwork

More Information and Contacts

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About the Project

Individual and group interviews were conducted with congregation members in each of the six case study parishes in 2008 and 2009. All participants gave their informed consent to participate. We also interviewed the vicars/rectors of the parishes and, where possible, additional clergy members. An average of twelve respondents participated in interviews in each parish. One or more members of the team attended multiple Sunday services (a minimum of five services at each parish) and other activities at each of the parishes to meet members of the congregation and witness the style of worship. Minor edits have been made to some of the quotations to increase clarity or protect the identities of respondents.

Further details on the methodological approach and the case study data can be found in the following paper:

The AHRC funds postgraduate training and research in the arts and humanities, from archaeology and English literature to design and dance. AHRC Research Centres provide a focus for collaborative research in areas of strategic importance. Although the social and natural sciences have long had access to funding to establish centres of research expertise, it was not until the launch of the AHRC’s Research Centres Scheme that researchers in the arts and humanities have benefited from a similar opportunity. For further information please see www.ahrc.ac.uk