

Case Study: The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia

Background: *The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia encompasses the area described by its title. This area is not only wide spread but is also culturally diverse. The 1992 Constitution of the Province provides for three partners to order their affairs within their own cultural context: Tikanga Maori; Tikanga Pakeha; Tikanga Pasefika. Tikanga is a Maori word describing the 'way of doing things' and embraces each of these very different cultures and contexts. The Province affirms the unity and diversity of the Anglican community in these islands.*

In 2007, in accordance with the call within the Windsor Report¹ the province set about an in-depth, long term, province-wide exploration of hermeneutics. They planned to hold three major gatherings or Hui (another Maori term) attended by representatives from the three Tikanga. The Hui have included laypersons and clergy, as far as possible representative of the gender, Diocesan and Tikanga balance. This has also given representation of the range of theological and biblical perspectives held within the province. Where possible the same representation has been maintained for each Hui.

The Windsor Report makes it clear that our current crisis constitutes a call to the Anglican Communion 'to re-evaluate the ways in which we have read, heard, studied and digested scripture'². The report goes on to suggest that 'our shared reading of scripture across boundaries of culture, region and tradition ought to be the central feature of our common life, guiding us together into an appropriately rich and diverse unity by leading us forward from entrenched positions into fresh appreciation of the riches of the Gospel as articulated in the scriptures'³.

The pattern that the Province adopted for these Hui was that rather than launch straight into an exploration of THE red button issue of human sexuality a three stage approach be adopted:

- **Hui I** - a prayerful and respectful discussion about the ways and methods we use to study the Bible i.e. our hermeneutics;
- **Hui II** - a prayerful and careful study of the texts in the Bible that refer to being the Body of Christ; the Church;
- **Hui III** - a prayerful and careful consideration of the texts in the Bible that speak of Christian sexuality.

The rationale of this approach is that we are first of all members of Christ's body and we are Christians because we belong to it. Our sexuality is one aspect of this belonging and being. The proposed sequence meant that a Christian understanding of sexuality is put in the context of belonging to the Body of Christ, the Church, and that the nature of the Church is explored before sexuality is approached. The Province realised that this process was going to take time, and it should set aside up to seven years to complete this process.

As this report on *The Bible in the Life of the Church* project is written (August 2012) the Province have completed most of this planned process by holding the Hui I in August 2007, Hui II in May 2009 and Hui III in June 2010. Following Hui III it is felt that the Province

¹ *The report of the Lambeth Commission on Communion published in October 2004.*

² *Windsor Report, Section 61*

³ *Windsor Report, Section 62*



needs to meet again in a similar way to further engage with the issue of human sexuality in order to more fully consider it.

Each Hui followed a similar pattern:

- It met over three days in community, giving time for worship, fellowship and relaxed social conversations as well as the engagement with the topic.
- There was a daily worship pattern of an all-inclusive Eucharist; morning, midday and evening prayer.
- Each had a rigorous exploration of the three themes from differing tikana and theological perspectives.
- Participants were asked to prepare for each Hui by undertaking background reading and exploring Biblical texts.
- The Hui itself had a varied process consisting of: presentations representing diverse positions; in-depth small group work facilitated by trained leaders; plenary panels of speakers in conversation with one another; and other approaches that sought to ensure respectful listening and positive outcomes.
- There were also 'active listeners' present who observed the process and reflected back to the whole gathering.

Outcomes from the process

The overall process achieved two important results that laid the foundation for the whole enterprise. First it built a trust and respect among the participants that enabled honest conversation to happen. Second it led to a deepening understanding and appreciation of the task of engaging with and interpreting Scripture.

While it led to participants leaving each of the Hui with fresh questions about the topic under discussion it changed perceptions about how the differences these questions identified might be handled within the Church at every level. In short the process:

- Brought about a recognition of the importance of Scripture for us all;
- Began to build relationships among participants that enabled them to listen to people with whom they might not otherwise engage and in so doing provided a model for parishes and dioceses.
- Confirmed many commonalities as well as identifying differences.
- While it did not bring about dramatic changes in people's perspective, especially on issues of human sexuality, did promote a better understanding of differing views and a respect for how they had been gained.
- Underlined the need to continue conversations like these at every level of Church life. "Our unity is only as good as our ability to engage with our differences".

