

**Greetings from the Secretary General of the Anglican Communion
Dr Josiah Idowu-Fearon**

To the General Synod of the Church of England 16 February 2017

I bring you greetings from the wider Anglican Communion; and they are real greetings in the Spirit-- warm and heartfelt. You – the Church of England – can never be just one of the 38 provincial churches of the Anglican Communion. As the very word ‘anglicana’ implies, there is a living tradition of faith in the Gospel as this church has received it, from the missionary work of St Augustine of Canterbury 1,420 years ago, to the particular experience of renewal in the English Reformation and beyond. The churches of the Anglican Communion find their common roots in the Church of England, and the tradition of this church, to the witness and mission of the apostolic church. There are still many Anglicans around the world who look to you as the ‘Mother Church’ – and they do this without sarcasm, cynicism, or misplaced anachronism. They feel they owe so much of their faith, at least in human terms, to the faithful giving of Christians in the Church of England over the centuries.

While the Diocese of Canterbury—with its archbishop, clergy, people and cathedral—may rightly be described as the ‘mother church, the Church of England as a whole is certainly the ‘elder sister church’ within the Anglican family. It is this image that I will use to talk about your relationship with the Anglican Communion. I want to describe the relationship of Church of England to the wider Anglican Communion today, and also to prescribe what that relationship might be.

Let me begin by saying that the Communion that you have shaped is vigorous and robust in fulfilling the apostolic mandate given by the Lord Jesus, to make disciples of all the nations. There are, of course tremendous challenges and problems, and I will note some later. But in so many ways, the wider Communion is filled with God’s life.

In the past year I think of the Spirit-filled decision of the Primates of the Anglican Communion to ‘walk together’, and to engage in mission together, despite unresolved tensions between them, particularly on issues of human sexuality.

I think of the gathering of the global Communion at the Anglican Consultative Council last April in Lusaka, Zambia, under the theme of ‘Intentional Discipleship’. We encountered the vibrant life and mission of the Church of the Province of Central Africa. We were strengthened by common prayer and common study of the Bible every day. We came together as a communion of churches in the extraordinary daily celebrations of the Holy Eucharist, and most memorably, the Sunday celebration with the Archbishop of Canterbury. (The service took only four and a half hours!) The 45 ACC resolutions ranged from mission and discipleship, to the place of women and men in the church, to ecumenical engagement with other Christian World Communions, and engagement with civil society, especially the United Nations’ organisations. The ACC came to a common mind on many issues. Inter-faith relationships, the environment, safeguarding and safe church. There was an expression of solidarity with churches undergoing persecution and suffering. The resolutions reflect a Communion that is robust and vigorous in its discipleship.

Within the Anglican Communion the Gospel is being proclaimed by church after church, in nation after nation and the Gospel is being received in faith. The Body of Christ is growing, if not everywhere, at least widely. There is much effective evangelism, mission and discipleship. The Scriptures are being translated and read. Schools are being built and children taught to find a path to a steadier life in this topsy-turvy system of not-very-benign economics and politics.

In many places communities are being strengthened in common purpose and action by Christian leaders. The churches in many divided and conflicted regions are proving to be sources of reconciliation –sometimes the only ones,—as we see in such inspiring ways in Burundi and South Sudan. Anglicans work with other Christians—in Africa, in Asia and elsewhere—with an openness and cooperative spirit; they reach out to people of other religions while rooted in their own Christian tradition.

Finally, we cannot forget that Anglicans, together with sister and brother Christians in many places, are persecuted for their faith to the point of martyrdom. They bear costly witness to Christ in the midst of horrendous violence, and are willing to speak the very name of Jesus in the face of murderous hostility.

In the midst of all of this, churches around the Anglican Communion are working together. In The Gambia, a mostly-Muslim country, Canadian Anglicans from Wycliffe College, Toronto -- working with Americans, Koreans and local people -- have founded the first Christian studies programme at a Gambian university. In East Asia, Anglicans from Singapore are giving a lead in primary evangelism, teaching, and community-building in Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. They are being joined in this mission work by Chinese and Indian Christians. In Haiti, Anglican and other churches are working with members of The Episcopal Church.

There are two broader expressions of mission together across the Communion. The first is the Anglican Alliance, which brings together Anglican expertise and capacity from around the world to engage in relief, development and advocacy, often with global ecumenical partners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The second area is the many companion diocesan relationships that criss-cross the Anglican Communion. Many English dioceses have long-standing links around the world, and have learned that blessing and enrichment flow in both directions where true companionship is developed. These partnerships give tangible expression to what it means to be a communion of churches. It is a great joy and surprise to see the extent of such diocesan cooperation, which flourishes even when the provinces to which the two dioceses belong may be divided by serious disagreement on issues of human sexuality.

Many of the seeds of missionary vigour were first planted by the Church of England over the past 300 years. I think of the English missionaries and mission societies, the laity, priests and bishops, who worked for the building up of Anglican churches around the world. Their prayers, their formation, and their sacrificial offering of material resources were vital. This is a wonderful, if complex, story that I hope will never be forgotten. But it is also a story that continues within new contours today.

I hope you realise this, because it is a fact that the Church of England today is giving necessary, effective and beautiful gifts to the wider Communion. You have taken the lead in some innovative evangelism such as Fresh Expressions, cathedral-related outreach, and your current focus on Reform and Renewal. You maintain a substantive focus in theological education that leads the Communion. English members serve on our ecumenical bilateral dialogues, and on the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order, giving significant leadership. The Council for Christian Unity, and the Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England engage with the Unity, Faith and Order work of the Anglican Communion more than any other province. The English members of the ACC provide important leadership; the vice chair of the ACC Standing Committee is Margaret Swinson from the Church of England.

You provide extensive material and personnel resources for churches and larger societies engaged in meeting ecclesial and human needs – through the mission societies such as the CMS, USPG, but also through larger English ecumenical organisations such as Christian Aid. Closer to home, I must note the Anglican Communion Office in London. Our work is upheld by its staff, many of whom are your members. The ACO could not function without the financial support of the Church of England.

Finally, I remember with thanks before God the sacrificial and costly ministry of the Archbishop of Canterbury. In his own person and ministry Archbishop Justin is a focus of unity and common concern for the Anglican Communion. He has visited every single province of the Communion, and has formed personal and collegial relationships with each primate. The Anglican Communion remained intact during the Meeting and Gathering of Primates a year ago in Canterbury. Next to the Holy Spirit, this is due to Archbishop Justin. As an Instrument of Communion, the Archbishop of Canterbury is rooted within the Church of England. His ministry, with you, in service of the Anglican Communion expresses most powerfully what it means to be the ‘elder sister church.’

I said that the Anglican Communion is vigorous; but it also faces challenges. Some are faced by all churches: economic displacement and political uncertainty; family dissolution; refugees and migration; grinding poverty, persecution. Political turmoil and inter-faith tension are growing problems. Some places are acutely unstable, and in too many places terrible violence is at work. All of these challenge the faith of the Church deeply, and call us to mission in new ways in uncertain contexts.

And let me say this: there is also the dispiriting and destructive dynamic of Anglican conflict over human sexuality that is so divisive between the provinces of the Anglican Communion, as well as within them. Our differences on this question can lead us to question the faith of one another, and can impede our common mission with one another to the world.

At this session of the General Synod, you have been reflecting on the pastoral issues of the place of gay and lesbian Christians—and their relationships—from your unique English context. You have been engaging with the House of Bishops’ Reflection Group on Sexuality, which has entailed revisiting the pastoral provision for same-sex couples and repenting of homophobia, which is simply the position of the 1998 Lambeth Conference. I know that the issue of same-sex marriage is highly emotive within the church. I understand

the depth of passion on all sides of the debate, and I understand that any decision will leave some feeling disappointed and wounded by the outcome.

In my own African context, and more specifically my Nigerian context, the single most pressing issue around human sexuality is the criminalisation of homosexuality. While Lambeth 1.10 condemns homophobia, successive Primates' Meetings have gone further and have vigorously condemned not just homophobia, but governments who have advocated the criminalisation of homosexuality, which includes imprisonment and even the death penalty in some places. In Canterbury last year:

- The Primates condemned homophobic prejudice and violence and resolved to work together to offer pastoral care and loving service irrespective of sexual orientation. This conviction arises out of our discipleship of Jesus Christ. The Primates reaffirmed their rejection of criminal sanctions against same-sex attracted people:
- The Primates recognised that the Christian church, and within it the Anglican Communion, has often acted in a way towards people on the basis of their sexual orientation that has caused deep hurt.

The struggle for the legal, social, spiritual and physical safety of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters is our issue in Nigeria and other places in Africa. The prophetic task for African Anglicans is to denounce violence and civil disabilities that are supported by members of our own communities and leadership. This is about changing attitudes, and we need the space to do this work on our own. We need to receive and re-receive the courageous stance of the Church of England against criminalisation of homosexuality in the 1960s.

However you have been led by the Spirit in your reflection on the place of gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in England, I pray that your decision may be received in such a way by the provinces of the Anglican Communion that will help our equally vital agenda to change attitudes that will make people safe.

In the midst of our internal differences and disagreements on the question, let me tell you one thing I think is true about the Church in general: our internal life as the Body of Christ continues to be animated by the Spirit of God, as we expend ourselves outward on behalf of the lives of others. That is part of what it means to be a 'missional church'. And its truth is borne out by the very history of the Church of England over the past 300 years at least: vigour was kindled and then took form in looking outward. The theological and social debates in the Church of England in the 19th and early 20th centuries were given their creative life through the engagement of missionary bishops and leaders in their midst. This fertile energy of outward mission kept the Church of England focused on the power of Christ's call and equipping for some years to come. Has this now faded? I cannot help but thinking that the route to the Church of England's internal health is, as with any church, through her self-expenditure for the sake of the world, and hence the Communion's life in a particular way – an 'elder sister' for her siblings.

So, I believe the Church of England has a prescriptive vocation that I want to suggest to you today. It is to take your gifts, and make them the centre of your local energies: evangelism, pastoral care, growing congregations, theological education, ecumenical passion and acuity, resources, and diocesan labour. Nurture all these gifts; share them

amongst yourselves; share them around the world; share them with your entire younger sister churches of the Anglican Communion, not as a favour, but as the very source of your own life, which it is.

The 1920 Lambeth Conference met with the horrors of the First World War still fresh in the collective memory. A great sorrow had set in within the Church. The bishops at the Conference, however, were called to a new hope -- sober, realistic, but also vital. It was hope aimed at the Church's outward movement. In their Conference's Encyclical Letter, the bishops offered a vision of our mission, which is still true today, a vision that derives from God's own life and purpose. Here is what they said: (I have modernised the gender specific language):

"[God] made [human beings] for love, that they might love Him and love one another. They rejected His purpose, but He did not abandon it. [God] chose a nation, and made it in a special sense His own, that within it the love of God and [human beings] might be cultivated, and that thus it might enlighten the world. Into that nation [God] sent forth His Son, both to reconcile the world to Himself and to reconcile men [and women] one to another. And [God's] Son formed a new and greater Israel, which we call the Church, to carry on His own mission of reconciling [human beings] to God and [to one another]. The foundation and ground of all fellowship is the undeflected will of God, renewing again and again its patient effort to possess, without destroying, the wills of [people]. And so [God] has called into being a fellowship of men [and women], His Church, and sent His Holy Spirit to abide therein, that by the prevailing attraction of that one Spirit, [God himself], the one God and Father of all, may win over the whole human family to that fellowship in Himself, by which alone it can attain to the fullness of life. This then is the object of the Church".

This is the 'history of the world' in which our church has its place: to 'win over the whole human family' into the communion of God in Christ. This history is about moving outwards in the name of Jesus; moving outwards in fellowship or communion, as it grows larger and larger. Everything we do is to be measured by this calling. Everything this session of the General Synod will do is to be measured by this calling.

The disagreements and struggles that the Church of England is facing in this era are not unique. But they are also not easily resolved in some institutional or structural fashion. Let me tell you: I have been around the Communion, around the world and there is no one way to thread this needle at the moment. That doesn't mean that the issues are not important; it means we are not up to the task of resolving them faithfully right now. So what do we do? We do what we have been gifted to do, what we do best: give ourselves to our sisters and brothers in the Communion and beyond, in the name of Jesus Christ. We give of ourselves, so that we are in an outward posture to be led by the one who bears that name, the Lord himself, who leads by serving, and whose followers discover in their own service, that they are taken somewhere they had never expected. This is not evasion; this is faith.

Because churches, like Christians, do not exist on their own, but are granted grace to be a community, a communion, for the sake of the great ministry of Jesus who gathers all peoples to himself. We will be better prepared to engage the shape of this ministry of gathering – its institutional demands, which are real – as we first give ourselves over to it as a priority. This may mean setting aside certain difficult matters for now; it may mean self-restraint of a sacrificial kind for now; it may mean patience of a painful kind for now.

But if the 'now' for which this is done is the 'now' of outward-orientated service, God promises us, not only clarity for the future, but 'joy' in the present of the deepest kind.

In summary, the apostolic faith in this land was lived, expressed and proclaimed in an English, or anglicana voice. From this place, this expression of Christianity was planted outwards around the world, and became a great family of churches in the Anglican Communion. While the Diocese of Canterbury may be 'mother church', the Church of England is the 'elder sister church' within this family. You have nurtured, and you continue to nurture and support us all.

What you do matters; what you do in this session of General Synod matters, not just in England, but around the Anglican Communion; not just for the Anglican Communion, but for the whole ecumenical family, our sisters and brothers in Christ, wherever and whoever they may be, and for the mission of God in the world. Your struggles are our struggles; your achievements are our achievements. Know that the churches of the Anglican Communion continue to keep you in their prayers.