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Editorial
Lambeth Conference: good news for Williams

By focusing on the spiritual, Anglicans have reaffirmed their mutual bonds

When the Archbishop of Canterbury delivers his final address tomorrow to more than 650 bishops attending the Lambeth Conference, he can allow himself a note of joy and quiet pride. The conference has gone far better than he or even the most optimistic Anglicans could have imagined. There has been no formal schism. No one made a show of walking out. There have been no angry public speeches, accusations or defiant votes. Those attending have found in their hearts a way to remain in communion with each other, whatever the divisions on doctrine, biblical literalism and the ordination of gay priests.

Credit for much of this must go to Rowan Williams. By focusing on the Anglican Communion as a Christian community and not as a political organisation, he has ensured that the bulk of the discussion has been on those issues where Christians believe their message to be vital: poverty, global harmony, faith, prayer and charity.

Raw politics has been avoided, and the most contentious issue - Anglican attitudes to homosexuality - has, rightly, not been allowed to monopolise episcopal time and attention but kept in the context of beliefs, and commitments seen as core to the 38 self-governing provinces.

Dr Williams wanted to use this core, summed up in the proposed covenant, to keep a balance between a unitary structure, as in the Roman Catholic Church, or a loose grouping of independent churches akin to the Lutheran federation. This would allow a degree of latitude to each Church while giving the others a right to expect common standards and practices. The covenant was not agreed at the Canterbury gathering, and may not be formalised for another ten years. But it is a vehicle for preventing politicised issues, such as gay bishops, from defining the positions of the provinces.

Whether by design or by accident, the Archbishop was helped by the absence of the traditionalists who decided before their earlier meeting in Jerusalem to boycott Lambeth. By doing so, they avoided confrontation, but also removed the elements of grievance and contention. Indeed, the sharp criticism of Dr Williams's leadership and the provocative claim that his office was a 'remnant of British colonialism', voiced in The Times by the Archbishop of Uganda, were blunted by coming from outside the mainstream.

The other inspired innovation was to avoid contentious votes and adopt instead the African indaba, a way of resolving conflicts in small groups around a metaphorical campfire. The camaraderie, however, should not mask the fact that divisions remain, and not only within the Church. On issues such as gender and sexuality, the Anglican Church remains, in this country, still at odds with the generally accepted social climate. Dr Williams should not allow the Lambeth truce to impede those seeking a more liberal and open approach. Time may change attitudes, but he needs still to point the way.

The outcome has, admittedly, been a setback to convergence with Roman Catholicism. But this was always less urgent than preventing acrimonious splits within Anglicanism. By concentrating on the spiritual, his forte, Dr Williams - albeit a willier politician than realised - has lifted the sights of a Church in trouble. He may even have led it into calmer times: no small achievement for a much maligned primate.

This is a mailing from St Matthew's, Westminster, which seeks to keep people informed of press comment in the UK concerning current issues in the church.