

A Mission-Shaped Communion

As Anglican disciples of Jesus Christ today we follow him and share in his God-given purpose. As we will see, Jesus of Nazareth had a twofold purpose: to *unite his disciples into one body* and to *send them out to make more disciples*. The whole New Testament shows that the Church is charged with the same two imperatives. To explore this twofold purpose for the Church, we will use the terms *communion* and *mission*. In making this contribution, we are seeking to fulfil our mandate as a Commission of 'deepening the communion between the Churches of the Anglican Communion',¹ so that we may become more and more, as Pope Francis has put it, 'a community of missionary disciples'.²

'Communion' and 'mission' are two mighty big New Testament ideas that sum up the meaning of the Church and point to what we, as Christ's Anglican disciples today, are here for on this earth. Communion and mission are awesome words to a Christian. They carry an aura of mystery and point to hidden depths within the Church of Christ. The Church, as a communion, reveals Christ to the world in three key ways: proclaiming the gospel, celebrating the sacraments, and manifesting God's love in pastoral care and loving service. These three ways – gospel, sacraments and service – are how the saving presence of Christ is manifested in the world and comprise the mission to which the Church is called. But mission and communion are not always held together and seen as inseparable.

'Communion' speaks of an intimate relationship of mutual indwelling – the indwelling of the baptised believer in God the Holy Trinity and the union or fellowship of Christians with each other in God. 'Communion' points to the community of life with God and with one another in the Church. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked, What is the meaning of our life with God if it is not at the same time a life lived with others? And what is the meaning of our fellowship with others if it is not grounded in our common life in God?³ In St John's Gospel 15.1-17 the extended image of the vine and the branches suggests that, by being joined to the true vine, the branches are inseparably connected to each other, and that is why Christ's command, 'Love one another as I have loved you', immediately follows.

In this passage from the Fourth Gospel, Jesus embraces his disciples as his 'friends': those who are not only loved, but respond with willing obedience based on intimate understanding and so love him and each other in return. Like Abraham, Moses and David in the Old Testament, they are 'friends of God' into whom holy Wisdom has entered (Wisdom 7.27). Can they be friends of Christ and of God while being distant or alienated from each other?

1 From the Mandate of the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order (IASCUFO).

2 Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (London: SCM Press, 1954), ch. 1, 'Community'.

The word 'communion' resonates immediately with the sacrament of 'Holy Communion', the Eucharist, which is the moment that, Sunday by Sunday and day by day (if we are so blessed), we come closest to the Lord and are strengthened in our unity with him. The link between ecclesial communion and Holy Communion suggests that all relationships of communion between Christians and between churches should be seen as holy, set apart for God in the context of worship, and therefore to be treated with reverence and sensitivity; not easily denied to one another, or wilfully severed except in extreme circumstances. The reality of community, both with God and with one another, through Jesus Christ, is at the heart of the gospel.

The key New Testament Greek word *koinonia* refers to *sharing together in a valued reality that is greater than ourselves*. *Koinonia* is translated in English Bibles as 'communion', 'fellowship' or 'sharing' (Acts 2.42; 1 Cor. 1.9; 10.16; 2 Cor. 13.13; Phil. 1.5; 1 John 1.3). There is no significant difference in the meaning of the two English words 'fellowship' and 'communion', though 'communion' has more mystical overtones and 'fellowship' is used in secular as well as in religious contexts. The Collect for All Saints' Day in the Book of Common Prayer, 1662, uses 'communion' and 'fellowship' synonymously ('O Almighty God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son ...'), as does the hymn that is sung particularly on that day, 'For all the saints, whom from their labours rest', as it speaks of the unity of Christians in Christ: 'O blest communion, fellowship divine!' It is a communion with God the Holy Trinity and with one another in the body of Christ and the two dimensions are inextricable.⁴

The word 'mission', on the other hand, points to God's just and loving purpose for the world and for all God's children – a purpose to draw all humankind into communion with God the Holy Trinity. By the same token, it points also and necessarily to the human instruments – lay people and clergy – whom God chooses to carry out that purpose. At first glance 'communion' and 'mission' may seem to refer to the inward and outward dimensions of the Church's life – communion being something that the Church enjoys within itself and mission being its outreach to those beyond – as though these were two separate, discrete activities. There is some element of truth in such an apportionment, but a hard and fast division into inward and outward aspects would be simplistic and unhelpful.

The living communion that constitutes the Church of Christ is not a closed communion, turned in on itself, but an open, receptive and hospitable communion, turned towards the world. The borders of the Church are not hard-drawn and impervious, but are intentionally porous to enable them to welcome all who are called by God to progress through the journey of Christian initiation into the life of grace, which is the life of communion. The boundary must be defined in a way that does not repel seekers, but instead invites persons to cross it. Through the process of Christian initiation, unbaptised adults travel through instruction in the faith (*catechesis*) through baptism and confirmation to full participation in the Eucharist. Infants and young children receive baptism first, being upheld by the faith of the Church and the undertakings of their sponsors or Godparents, and subsequently (we trust) progress through

4 Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission, *Church as Communion* (1990), §45; http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/catholic/arcic/docs/church_as_communion.cfm.

instruction to confirmation and first communion (or in some Anglican churches, communion followed by confirmation). Thus adults and children alike are being drawn, step by step, 'from one degree of glory to another' (2 Cor. 3.18), deeper into communion with God and the Church.⁵ This calling, drawing and leading towards communion with God and one another in the body of Christ, within a sacramental continuum, is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The word 'mission' is often used colloquially as shorthand for evangelism or outreach to the unchurched. It usually refers to the Church being 'sent' into the world to bring Christ's message of salvation to those who have not yet embraced it, to preach the gospel. Even where there is a richer, more adequate understanding of evangelisation, including Christian education and instruction (*catechesis*), 'the defence and confirmation of the gospel' (i.e. 'apologetics'; Phil. 1.7), and service to the poor, the sick and the dispossessed, the focus of the word 'mission' is generally on the unchurched. But while outreach to non-Christians is a vital aspect of mission, it is not the whole of it. To identify mission with evangelism, without remainder, is an incomplete understanding of mission. Mission must include all that the Church is sent to do, including activities that, on the face of it, seem to belong to its 'internal' life. If we ask, 'What is the Church placed here on earth to do?', the answer must surely include: 'To offer worship to God; to celebrate the sacraments; to pray for the needs of the world' – worship, sacraments, intercession. Worship in spirit and in truth is what God desires (John 4. 23-24), because God knows that to be brought into a state where we adore God's grace and glory is our greatest good.

Christian worship clearly includes a ministry of word and sacrament, inseparably connected. To teach the faith and so to help to form disciples, baptising them into the body of Christ (Matt. 28: 19-20), brings together word and sacrament at the very heart of the Church's mission. So, to celebrate the liturgy, which is filled with word and sacrament, is part of the Church's mission. The mission, in one major aspect, is liturgical. Christian initiation, sacramental through and through, as it is, and culminating in the Eucharist, is infused with worship, just as it is infused with faith. So it is something of an impoverishment to think of mission purely as an activity that the Church does to those outside, or even to regard it as simply the outward facing aspect of the Church. What goes on at the heart of the Church's life – the celebration of the Eucharist with all its elements of praise, prayer, penitence, ministry of the word, confession of faith, intercession, sacrifice of thanksgiving, communion and dedication – belongs to the mission that God has entrusted to the Church. The outreach aspect of mission can only be the expression of the deepest meaning of the Church as the mystery of communion. It must spring from the eucharistic centre, for the Paschal (Easter) mystery of the death and resurrection of the Son of God, shown forth or proclaimed in the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11.26), is the heart of the message.

Perhaps the most important thing for us to remember about 'mission' is that it does not belong to the Church. In mission the Church is not serving itself, but the Kingdom or Reign of God. Strictly speaking, the phrase 'the mission of the Church' is inappropriate, though it remains a piece of useful shorthand. It is God, not the Church, who has the mission. The mission belongs to the triune God. It is the mission that God has to gather

5 See further Paul Avis (ed.), *The Journey of Christian Initiation: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives* (London: Church House Publishing, 2011).

the whole created order into unity in Christ (Eph. 1.10). The Church is called to serve that mission as a privileged instrument, and as a sign and foretaste of what God's mission in the world intends to accomplish. So we should speak, not of 'the Church's mission', but rather of the Church's calling or role in the mission of God (*missio dei*).

The mission of God is a trinitarian event of 'sending'. The Father sends the Son; the Father and Son together send the Spirit. Father, Son and Holy Spirit send the Church, and in sending the Church empower it for its task (John 14.26, 15.26, 16.7, 20.21-22).⁶ The mission of God is focused decisively in the coming of Christ; it is concentrated in the whole Christ event. For Christian faith, Jesus Christ, that is to say his identity and history, is the focal point, the culmination and the criterion of God's mission and purpose. Christ has come, once and for all, for the salvation of the world.

The credibility of the message, the proclamation of the gospel (*kerygma*), is strong when his own are 'one', as Jesus prays in John 17.21-23, but it is seriously compromised when his own are divided, for then how can the world 'know' that the Father has sent him? When the Church is visibly split it cannot speak with one voice and its divided state and divisive actions belie its message of reconciliation and communion. The remarkable Episcopal theologian, William Porcher DuBose (1836-1918) held that Christian unity is 'of the essence of Christianity' and that Christianity and unity are 'identical things'.⁷

The inseparable biblical connection between communion and mission is revealed particularly clearly in the Fourth Gospel. There Jesus is portrayed as coming to unite (11.50-52) and as dying to make one (10.11, 14-16). He embraces his disciples in communion with the Father and with himself. Communion and mission are the twin imperatives for the Church, two sides of a coin. They should never be divorced. There has probably never been a time in the life of the Church when mission and communion together were not top priority, but they have never been more urgent than today when fellowship or communion is at a premium in the individualistic developed world and when militant secularism and aggressive atheism would like to bury the Christian faith once and for all.

The right way forward for the Anglican Communion in this challenging climate is to hold communion and mission tightly together in a single vision as *mission in communion*. This means acting as one body in carrying out Christ's command, to 'go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation' (Mark 16.15, longer ending). The kind of communion that Jesus Christ prayed for to his Father on the eve of his Passion is a communion that moves out in mission; and the mission that he commits to his disciples is a *mission in communion*.⁸

6 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), p. 390.

7 Cited by Robert Boak Slocum, *The Anglican Imagination: Portraits and Sketches of Modern Anglican Theologians* (Burlington, VT; Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), p. 29.

8 For more detailed exposition of this theme see the AMICUM report, *Into All the World: Being and Becoming Apostolic Churches; A report to the Anglican Consultative Council and the World Methodist Council by the Anglican-Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2014), pp. 11-14 (§25-36) and Paul Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2010), chapter 10, 'Forging Communion in the Face of Difference'.

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