

Sarah Meyrick talks to the Anglican Communion's outgoing secretary-general

THE Most Revd Dr Josiah Iduwo-Fearon, who will step down as the Anglican Communion's secretary-general after the Lambeth Conference, is frequently described as a "bridge-builder". This had been his prayer when he took up the post, he said last year, when his resignation was announced (News, 21 September 2021).

He believes that his prayer has been answered. "There are still divisions within the Anglican Communion; but there is very little of the bitterness and rancour that existed previously."

Reflecting on his time in office now, Dr Iduwo-Fearon says that he came to the position — and he was the first African to hold the post — as a continuation of his calling to reconciliation work.

Before his appointment as secretary-general, he served the Church of Nigeria as Bishop of Kaduna and Archbishop of the Province of Kaduna. He is also a former Bishop of Sokoto, Warden of St Francis of Assisi Theological College, Wusasa, and Provost of St Michael's Cathedral, Kaduna.

There were significant frustrations, he said; and he talks of "a dictatorship" in the Church of Nigeria.

"As a diocesan bishop and the provincial Archbishop, I just felt we were not making any progress within the Anglican Church in Nigeria," he says. "We're not even allowed to express opinions. Even when you do, no one would take you seriously. So I felt: 'Look, I'm 65. I need to use the latter part of my life doing something more creative,' and so I sent in my resignation."

He assumed that his future lay with the Kaduna Centre for the Study of Christian-Muslim Relations, a cause close to his heart. He had worked tirelessly to bring about an end to the conflict between rival groups in the region.

"But what actually came to my mind when I was thinking and praying about it was: 'Look, you spent all these years working for understanding between Christians and Muslims. . . Look at your own family, the Anglican Communion."

"That was what really opened my eyes, and I felt that the Lord was calling me to do this job. So I came with a main purpose: to get my family talking *with* one another, not *at* one another . . . to promote the culture of understanding and respect for difference."

HOW does he feel, seven years on? "Number one: I'm excited by the growth within the Communion," he says. "This is one of the things I'm giving thanks for." He refers to the creation of new Provinces: in Sudan in 2017, Chile in 2018, and Alexandria in 2020. "I felt some of the Provinces were too large," he says. "We've got to start from the grass-roots level, the local church. As far as the community is concerned, the local church is the Province, and, within the Province, the local church is the diocese."

This is a response to flourishing at the grass roots and congregations springing up in new areas. The latest of the new Provinces is the



Troubled waters 'calmer'

Portuguese-speaking Province of Angola and Mozambique, something that has taken 20 years to achieve. "It is fascinating. I went there to run a retreat for the newly elected Bishop. It was all in Portuguese. I don't speak Portuguese, but I had one of the priests to do the translation. But, at the consecration, you could see the joy on the faces of the people because everything was done in Portuguese."

"So, for me, I really give thanks to the Lord that we are beginning to show evidence of growth, evidence of understanding, and evidence of beginning to talk with one another."

He pays tribute to the Archbishop of Canterbury. The two have been friends for many years, and have a shared enthusiasm for reconciliation. "We've been very complementary," he says. "I haven't had any difficulties working with him. He would ask serious questions. Once you convince him this is what you want to do, he gives you all his support."

The pandemic has made it very difficult to spend time with people at the local level, he says. On the other hand, Zoom has opened doors and created connections. "The positive side is that we have learned to operate virtually. And that has actually helped us to maximise the use of our funding," he says. "We've been able to help the various parts of the Communion to develop their communication gadgets."

Money has been pumped into facilitating communications, particularly with the global South, something that is particularly timely given the continuing uncertainty of travel and the need to cut flying in the light of the climate crisis.

IS HE feeling positive about the Lambeth Conference? Expectations are high, he says, and this is largely because of the pre-Lambeth online preparation (23 October 2020, 10

June 2021). "It was deliberate. We did not allow bishops from the same Province or from the same region to just be on their own. We worked on integration. And the outcome during the conversations was that people discovered that there are so many things we have in common."

The groundwork has paid off, he believes. "The pre-Lambeth conversations have helped bishops to establish some relationship with one another. I've been to one Lambeth Conference, in 1998, and, even though we are hundreds of bishops, you can still feel lonely. The pre-Lambeth conversations have helped us to reduce that level of loneliness. So that's a good thing."

"Number two, most of the bishops already have an idea of the themes and what we're going to discuss, and what we're going to study together."

"So, there is an ongoing Lambeth Conference right now. The Lambeth Conference began last year."

Relationships are the key. "That's my thing, and that's the Archbishop of Canterbury's thing," he says. "The bottom line is relationship. Do I have a relationship with you? Do you have a relationship with me? With a relationship, we can live with our differences. I can see that is happening, and I must say I'm very excited."

The digital connections also make it possible for those in difficult areas of the world to participate, even where conditions prevent travel.

I can speak for my own country: the Anglican Church in Nigeria is Putin

"We're making arrangements for them to be able to join us online; so no one is going to be a loser."

MUCH has been made of the news that the emphasis at Lambeth 2022 will be on prayer and reflection, and that the traditional resolutions to emerge afterwards will be replaced by "calls" (News, 10 June 2022).

That is no great change, Dr Iduwo-Fearon counters. "Every Lambeth Conference has had a huge proportion of its time together on prayer and reflection. The Lambeth Conference is not an Instrument where you go to teach bishops. The bishops come with their experiences. They reflect as they study together, as they listen to experiences being shared, and various dimensions of interpretation and experiences. And then the bishops in council come up with how they feel the Lord is leading them as an Instrument within the Anglican Communion."

Whether you call them "resolutions" or "calls" is immaterial, he says. What matters is the sense of ownership by the bishops in council: "If the bishops endorse and buy into it, they own it. You can be sure when they get back to their local church, which is the diocese, there will be implementation. What we want is implementation."

None the less, there are bound to be areas of disagreement. What happens if the calls that the bishops take home from Lambeth land badly in their dioceses?

"My initial response will be to pray," Dr Iduwo-Fearon says. "This is informed by my understanding of who we are. We are not one Church, like the Roman Catholic Church. We are a Communion of 42 Churches. It's like the World Council of Churches."

"We are all Anglicans. We have certain agreements. We have parameters, what we all agree together within our family. But every recom-

mendation — whether you call them calls or resolutions — must be implemented in context."

He refers to the decision of the Lambeth Conference of 1978 to allow people in a polygamous marriage to be baptised and confirmed. "My own part of the Communion is yet to endorse that," he says. "Every call or resolution has to be looked at and implemented at the local level, and that is the diocese. So the responsibility is on the bishop and his own council, to study to see how that affects mission, because that is what we are in the world for. That's why [the Conference theme] is 'God's Church for God's world'."

It shouldn't be forgotten that the bishop is the chief pastor and chief servant of their diocese, he says. "We will hold the bishop responsible for the implementation, because bishops are the instruments of unity at their local level, and that is why they represent their family at the Lambeth Conference."

BUT isn't it true that parts of the Communion would prefer greater clarity on certain issues? Dr Iduwo-Fearon laughs. "I come from a family of five girls and two boys. Unfortunately, I happen to be the youngest. We don't all agree on many things. However, amongst my five sisters, one of them is very, very close to me. When we have issues, often the two of us take the same position without even discussing it. We've been together for 70-something years."

"There is a big problem within the family, the Anglican Communion, and that is the desire to want Diocese A to be like Diocese B. But that's not Anglicanism. In the Roman Catholic Church, they have a central office, they have a Pope. We do not have a Pope."

It is perfectly possible, therefore,

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