

# Lambeth Conference is here

**Pat Ashworth** looks at what will happen in Canterbury over the next ten days

THERE will be 660 bishops present at Lambeth 2022: marginally more than in 2008, and with 83 spouses also in attendance. They will be joined by 45 ecumenical guests, teams of volunteers, and some 57 interpreters: some professional, and some volunteer. The Conference will be conducted in nine languages: English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Korean, Japanese, Juba Arabic, Swahili, and Burmese.

For the first time in its history, it will also be online, with a bespoke platform, including translation, for all delegates to access. Half a million words have already been translated, and, out of a resolve to reduce the use of paper, all the documents and videos will be online. "Interest has blossomed because the website has been much more informative, with lots of material recorded," the chief executive of the Lambeth Conference Company, Phil George, said last week.

Formerly head of operations and executive director of New Wine, he accepted the job of managing the Conference in September 2017, when it was scheduled for 2020. From having "no staff and no mandate" five years ago, he has worked

The Sibson Building,  
University of Kent

with a dedicated team of six, all of whom stayed on during the months of lockdown.

Half the participants have been enabled to come because of a bursary scheme that he describes as "remarkable, a blessing". Donors have raised several millions, kick-started with a generous donation of £900,000 from the Benefact (formerly Allchurches) Trust. The median donation to fund tickets and flights has been £1000.

Getting visas had been challenging, Mr George acknowledged: the current UK backlog in passport applications had caused delays that meant more than 100 bishops and spouses had not received their visas last week. A team flew to Nairobi to pick them up, and managed to return with everything sorted.

Five hundred bishops, in groups of 20, have been meeting via Zoom for many months: a phased "conference journey" of prayer which has laid and prepared the ground and built relationships — so much so, that, on day one, after arrival and before the bishops retreat, they have requested to meet each other face to face. They will have a great deal to pack in during the 11 days of the meeting, including 32 seminars.

A raft of Covid-19 protocols is in place with the University of Kent. All members of teams are being asked to test before they arrive, and regularly during the time they are there. Testing kits and, "out of respect", face



masks will be in all delegates' rooms. A team of nurses, doctors, and paramedics is also on standby. "We want to be pragmatic, but without being draconian," Mr George said.

The main meetings venue will not be the canvas tent of 2008: the Conference will, instead, be the first to use the permanent indoor tennis centre — a brand new stadium — for conference purposes. And memories of communal bathrooms in the student accommodation on the 5000-bed campus are long faded: bishops will be relieved that all rooms are now en suite.

## Looking back to Lambeth 2008

THERE is a touch of *déjà vu* about contemplating Lambeth 2022. My own opening words for a first report from the 2008 Conference were: "It's a bit like a phoney war at the moment, with bishops on retreat. . . Uganda is the only Province not represented: one Rwandan bishop is here, and certainly one Nigerian."

The Primates of those three African countries issued a joint statement in May reiterating their plans to be absent from this Conference, too, as the Communion had "failed to address with remorse and repentance the issues that necessitated our absence" in 2008. And the Conference would, it suggested, be focusing on "peripheral matters" such as the environment, poverty, and economic disadvantage (News, 7 June).

In that year of 2008 — in the wake of the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly partnered gay bishop — briefing papers on "The Anglican Way" spelled out the complexity of the tensions and drifts in the Communion.

They emphasised mutual accountability, observing: "The cost of genuine dialogue is considerable. . . If conservative voices are not to be driven out, it must be possible for an admonition about recent issues to do with homosexuality to be delivered, clearly argued from biblical sources. . .

"On the other hand, if progressive views are not to be ignored, new knowledge has honestly to be confronted. . . It has to be recognised as a cost of the engagement of the gospel with the world, that Christians remain open to changing ideas with their attendant uncertainties and controversies."

Those documents grappled with how the Church judged which things lay closer to the heart of the gospel than others. There were reminders of the changed context and landscape since Lambeth 1998, where "too often, attempts to dis-

cuss theological differences degenerated into the parties' issuing a series of assertions and counter-assertions at each other."

The Archbishop of Cape Town at that time, the Most Revd Njongonkulu Ndungane, had warned four years earlier: "I fear that, if we struggle to deal maturely with our own internal differences, we will undermine our standing and ability to act in other areas of conflict. Our calling to bring good news to the poor, in a world where half the population live in poverty, must not be jeopardised."

The late Michael Perham, Bishop of Gloucester, was on the representative group of bishops charged with creating the 44-page *Reflections* document that sought to capture the spirit of what was said and, as far as possible, held in common by the bishops at the Conference. The agenda had been broader than the issues surrounding homosexuality, he observed afterwards.

"The Archbishop of Canterbury had asked that it would be about 'equipping bishops for mission and strengthening Anglican identity', and I think we did engage honestly with this agenda in relation to mission and evangelism, human and social justice, the environment, ecumenism, relations with world religions, the scriptures, and the nature of Anglicanism. . .

"But, inevitably, the focus was on the unity and threatening disunity of the Anglican Communion, and on measures that might enable us to hold together." In a "gracious season of restraint", the Conference accepted three moratoria relating to partnered gay bishops, the blessing of same-sex unions, and incursions into other dioceses and Provinces.

The moratoria of 2008 replaced the resolutions of 1998: definitive announcements such as Resolution 1:10, declaring homosexual practice to be "incompatible with scripture".

*Continued opposite*

*Continued from previous page*

to take a collective decision and apply it locally, he says. "That particular thing we're all agreed on, it has to be implemented in context."

That said, it is well known that the bishops and archbishops of Rwanda, Uganda, and Nigeria are boycotting the Conference (News, 7 June). Their stated objections include "the recognition of homosexual relations" and alleged "biblical revisionism".

"Boycotts do not proclaim Christ," Archbishop Welby and Dr Iduwo-Fearon wrote in response. "Those who stay away cannot be heard, they will lose influence and the chance of shaping the future. All of us will be the poorer spiritually as a result of your absence." Archbishop Welby has made it clear that the door remains open.

What are Dr Iduwo-Fearon's thoughts now? He wishes that the three Primates — all leading members of GAFCON — would follow the example of the Primate of Kenya, the Most Revd Jackson Ole Sapit. "I remember in Jerusalem, at the last GAFCON meeting. He was asked, after a decision was taken, 'Archbishop, are you going to implement this?' He said, 'Look, I'm here as Jackson. I will take it back to the Anglican Church in Kenya. We will discuss, we will debate, and we will take a decision.'"

Dr Iduwo-Fearon wishes the Churches in Nigeria, Uganda, and Rwanda would allow open debate. "My theological position is Evangelical. But that does not stop me from sharing with the person who is not Evangelical. We have different persuasions; it is Christ who holds us together."

"One of the characteristics of being an Anglican is that Anglicanism encourages debate. We debate. We disagree. We agree, and yet we come together. . . let it be discussed."

So why won't they? "I have just coined a word," he says, with a broad smile. "I was thinking of the Putinisation of certain sections of the Anglican Communion. It is exactly what is going on in Russia today. I can speak for my own country: the Anglican Church in Nigeria is Putin."

One of the contentious issues at the Lambeth Conference is the decision of the organisers not to invite same-sex partners of bishops (News, 22 February 2019, 17 June). Some are known to be accompanying their partners to Canterbury, none the less, and the University of Kent has said that it will make them welcome. Will they be able to take part in the spouses' programme?

Dr Iduwo-Fearon recognises that this is not straightforward. "It's a difficult balance, not to make anybody feel ostracised, and, on the other hand, not to offend anybody," he says.

"First and foremost, let me make the position of the Archbishop of Canterbury quite clear, because he is the chief host. I'm only the MC.

"He has not invited the spouses of

bishops in same-sex relationships. However, the university has invited them and given them accommodation. So they will be free to join their [partners], but they will not be a part of the Lambeth Conference. They can come in as observers and guests, and everyone is welcome to the Lord's table. It will be only Christlike to say you can take communion, or you can listen to a sermon, or you can sit at the balcony or listen to what is going on there."

HIS successor as secretary-general is to be the Rt Revd Anthony Poggo, a bishop formerly in the Church of South Sudan and currently the Archbishop of Canterbury's Adviser on Anglican Communion Affairs (News, 14 June).

This means that Bishop Poggo and Dr Iduwo-Fearon have been working closely together for some time, and provides an element of continuity. Is there anything that Dr Iduwo-Fearon is handing on that he regrets not being able to complete during his time in office? "The thing I thought I might succeed in doing is to get the ones I call the Three Musketeers [to change]," he says.

"It's very, very frustrating. . . You need to look at situations in the light of what is current. That is what the gospel is about. You have to contextualise."

It is no surprise that he will not be returning to Nigeria at the end of his term in office. He has a UK passport and a wide range of invitations to continue his ministry here. "There are churches in America that won't touch Josiah with a long spoon; and there are churches here that are very open," he says. "The world is my pulpit."

“That is what the gospel is about. You have to contextualise