Denominationalism or Protestantism? Mission Strategy and Church in the Kikuyu Conference of 1913

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A century ago, in 1913, a conference held in Kikuyu, Kenya, sought to shape the future of Protestant missions there and thus the future of the growing church. The primary question was whether the young church in this African country, founded by the missionary agencies, should replicate the historic denominational churches of the West, or whether there should be a united Protestant church with no organic connections to outside bodies. Inadvertently, however, the conference opened a debate within the Anglican Church about its own nature and relationship with other churches.

The Kikuyu Conference of 1913 gave rise to discussion in church newspapers from India to the United States, yet it has now fallen into relative obscurity. Stephen Neill’s History of Christian Missions accords it a brief paragraph, ending with the statement that “the episode was of great value by reason of the education it gave to countless thoughtful people in the Church.” The recent History of Global Anglicanism gives a slightly fuller account. In contrast, Frank Weston, bishop of Zanzibar and one of the protagonists in the debate, saw the Kikuyu Conference as the most important conference since the Reformation.

The Conference at Kikuyu

On June 17, 1913, some sixty representatives of Protestant missionary societies met at the Church of Scotland mission at Kikuyu, not far from Nairobi, Kenya. The population of Kenya was still small—estimated at 4 million in 1913—and widely scattered. Missionaries, too, were few and scattered; John J. Willis, bishop of Uganda, recorded, “There is plenty of room for treble the number of men to work and still keep far enough apart to avoid friction.” In most areas, the church was still very young.

William Peel, the Anglican bishop of Mombasa, was elected chairman of the conference, and Willis, secretary. Both were missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), an Evangelical Anglican society. The first days were taken up with routine matters, but two items on the last day caused the ensuing storm of high feelings: first, a proposal drawn up with routine matters, but two items on the last day caused the ensuing storm of high feelings: first, a proposal drawn up by the conference for a “federation” of churches that would not have identical governance structures and patterns involved a two-year period of instruction and probation and “a common form of Church organisation,” although churches would not have identical governance structures and patterns of ministry. The conference agreed on “Regular Administration of the two sacraments, Baptism and Lord’s Supper, by outward signs” and specified that baptism must be by water outward signs” and specified that baptism must be by water and in the name of the Trinity. It was agreed that the sacraments would be administered by “recognised ministers of the Church occupying the district.” There was to be no universal form for either the services of the Lord’s Supper and baptism or other services. Each denomination would use its accustomed form, and “visitors” would be welcome to participate, but it was hoped that a simple common order would be developed that would be acceptable to all. The overall basis of unity would be acceptance of the Holy Scriptures and the historic creeds. Agreement to these general proposals was given by representatives of the major missionary societies: the (Anglican) Church Missionary Society, the Church of Scotland Mission, the Africa Inland Mission (an interdenominational mission, represented by an American, Charles Hurlburt), and the United Methodist Mission. The smaller denominations did not sign.
Anglican Thinking at Kikuyu

In his report on the conference, Willis gave details of his thinking on the issue of non-Anglicans receiving the Holy Communion in Anglican churches. Christian converts from other churches who were not in an area of their own denomination should be admitted to the Anglican service. The responsibility of agreeing to this practice was great, said Willis, but the responsibility of refusing the sacrament to a Christian was greater. But Willis ruled out the possibility of a minister who was not episcopally ordained offering the sacrament in an Anglican church, for that would be against the principles laid down in the Lambeth Quadrilateral. The controversial possibility that Anglicans would receive communion in non-Anglican churches from clergy who were not episcopally ordained was not addressed specifically but was implicitly approved by the agreement that the sacraments would be offered by clergy of the denomination active in the relevant area.

The proposals also raised the wider question of the orders of clergy of other denominations. Willis drew attention to the fact that they were clearly used by God and that their ministry was fruitful and in that sense was valid. In Willis’s opinion, clergy of nonepiscopal churches could be invited to preach in an Anglican church, but only on the same basis as a lay reader—by invitation of the clergy, with the bishop’s approval. Willis accepted the view that, for Anglicans, ordination of the clergy would remain the prerogative of the episcopate. It seemed unlikely that the Church of Scotland Mission, for one, would agree to that position, yet they were willing to accept the federation and work toward union.

Then there was the final gathering of the Kikuyu Conference. According to the account of the two bishops, the Presbyterians had
kindly offered them the use of a building, and they had invited all Christian people to share in the Lord’s Supper.

**Heresy Charges**

The response of Frank Weston, the neighboring Anglican bishop of Zanzibar, to news of the conference lit the fire. Weston was a missionary of the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA, a “Catholic” Anglican Society). In an open letter to the bishop of St. Albans entitled “Ecclesia Anglicana: For What Does She Stand?,” Weston stated that the Anglican Church was not fit to send missionaries because of its internal “exceedingly chaotic system of Truth.” The actions of the two CMS bishops, according to Weston, were symptomatic of this chaos, and he charged them before the archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, with “propagating heresy and committing schism.”

There seems to have been an underlying assumption that the Anglican form would predominate.

Weston was a product of the Tractarian search for holiness. He had gone to Oxford in 1890 and to Zanzibar with the UMCA in 1898. Peel and Willis were inspired with the vision of holiness of the Evangelicals, with its intensity and emphasis on total commitment to Jesus Christ. Willis and Weston developed a relationship of mutual respect despite their theological differ-
Ences, and on Weston’s death, Willis wrote that he thanked God for the Kikuyu Conference’s having brought him into contact with this man, “whom one could wholeheartedly honour and one could not but love.”

To Weston, the proposed federation and the final service were a betrayal. He saw his role as building “the Catholic Church in Africa,” with the Church of England the successor of the ancient church, its bishops in direct line with the apostles. “The Episcopate then is essential to the Church’s life and Bishops are the organs through which the mystical Body functions,” he stated. Moreover, the “Mass becomes the necessary centre of worship.”

For Weston, the conference was a triumph for Pan-Protestantism and a disaster for Pan-Anglicanism.23

Weston’s concern over the implications of the conference, and also over the spread of modernism in Britain, led him to write his open letter to the bishop of St. Albans, which received wide publicity. In the letter he listed his objections to the Kikuyu proposals. Those proposals contained no insistence on the episcopacy or on the need for a priest to conduct Holy Communion, no mention of confirmation or absolution, which he termed sacraments, or of the Athanasian Creed specifically. Except in a general sense, he protested, “it does not know the Catholic Church or the Communion of Saints.” Specifically, he accused the two bishops of heresy “in their teaching of the meaning and value of Episcopacy,” which was to him the very esse of the church, God’s special gift to his body.24

The Kikuyu proposals did not specifically address episcopacy, but it was certainly not eliminated by them. Weston later admitted that he had been misinformed; he had understood that the two bishops had already agreed to enter into a formal federation.25 There seems to have been an underlying assumption that the Anglican form would predominate, as Willis suggested in his report to CMS when he stated that the Anglican Church in Kenya had been the first in the field and was the largest denomination and the only one working in the cities. On its western border was the “self-governing” Anglican Church of Uganda. Willis recorded, “Therefore in any discussion of missionary policy it is natural that the Church of England should exercise a large influence.”

Episcopacy Affirmed

The archbishop of Canterbury corresponded with the three bishops and met separately with Weston and Willis in February 1914; Peel, who was in India, was unable to travel to England because of ill health. The archbishop concluded that there were no grounds to try the two bishops on the twin charges of heresy and schism and proposed to refer the matter to a Central Consultative Body set up by Lambeth (a conference of the diocesan bishops of the whole Anglican Communion every ten years, called by the archbishop of Canterbury whose official residence is at Lambeth in London). The unanimous final report of the Consultative Body and the archbishop’s response were published in April 1915.27 The Anglican Church was for the first time dealing specifically with the issue of Anglicans seeking intercommunion with other denominations, a landmark in the history of mission and of Anglicanism.28

On the matter of federation, the reply of the Consultative Body emphasized three issues.

- In regard to clergy of other denominations preaching in Anglican churches, it took the view that it was the prerogative of the bishop to authorize anyone to preach, having considered the preacher’s qualifications. It felt that the Kikuyu statement did not sufficiently safeguard this position.
- Regarding admission of non-Anglicans to Holy Communion, it cited the rubric in the Book of Common Prayer on persons confirmed or desirous of confirmation but allowed that “the evidence is abundant to show that exceptions to the rule have been allowed in special cases.”29 Permission was at the discretion of the bishop and would be given only in exceptional circumstances.
- The Consultative Body was more definite on the issue of Anglican Christians being allowed to receive Communion in nonepiscopal churches, which it could not regard as “consistent with the principles of the Church of England.”

Essentially, while commending the good intent of the two CMS bishops, the council affirmed the nature of the Anglican Church as episcopal in keeping with the Lambeth Quadrilateral and ruled out any scheme of reunion that did not take its episcopal character into account.

The consultative council was clear that the Communion service held on the final day of the conference should not be seen as a precedent. Recognizing the “purity of its motive” and spirit of love, they refrained from making any judgment on Willis and Peel. The service had surely been “acceptable to Him to Whom it was offered,” even though it did not conform to the principles of the Church of England.

The archbishop of Canterbury’s response substantially covered the same ground as the consultative council, which it explicitly reiterated on specific points.30 His position satisfied neither the bishop of Zanzibar and his supporters nor the bishops of Uganda and Mombasa and theirs. Davidson did not go as far as Weston would have liked, for he would not regard all non-Episcopalian as extra ecclesias, but he clearly reiterated the position that episcopacy was what “we believe to be the right method of Church government,” warning that Anglicans had no liberty to contemplate a move away from that position. The statement noted that the two bishops concerned believed that they were acting in accord with resolutions of former Lambeth gatherings, and especially those of the 1908 Lambeth Conference. Therefore their intentions, if not their actions, were to be commended. He viewed the proposed federation as compromising Anglican unity by placing parts of the Anglican Communion under another authority, that of the proposed “Representative Council.”

On a different note, the archbishop’s statement drew attention to a vital missionary principle, namely, that the Gospel was incarnated in the very fabric of a society:

It is the paramount duty and privilege of those who are already Christians to promote the upbuilding of the Church of Christ
among all nations and kindreds and peoples and tongues. The Church so upbuilt must, in every land be, or become, what we call for shortness sake a Native Church, a Church, that is, into whose structure the characteristics of the people of that land are for the common good of the whole Church of Christ taken up and interwoven.

It is instructive to see that this position was articulated so clearly, particularly in view of the criticisms often made of missions for imposing their "home" culture, and of the Anglican Church for reproducing an English church.

The archbishop then referred the matter to the next Lambeth Conference, which, because of the war, did not meet until 1920. This conference slightly broadened earlier statements but still held episcopacy to be essential.33 The proposed federation in Kenya had received a death sentence, and a future united "native church" looked unlikely, at least for the time being.

New Proposals for Federation

A second Kikuyu Conference was held in 1918, after the devastation of the Great War, in which many Africans in Kenya and Tanzania and a number of missionaries were caught up. Tens of thousands of Africans died in German East Africa and beyond. Weston was invited to attend the 1918 conference, although not as a voting delegate, as he was from outside Kenya. Peel had died before this conference, and Richard Heywood was now bishop of Mombasa. Willis was elected chairman. Weston outlined his principles for reunion, stating that any union must be predicated on acceptance of episcopacy and episcopal ordination. His own recollections of the speech were that he started by laying down that the "existence of the Catholic Church of Christ, which he intended to be one universal brotherhood, must be acknowledged by all." He then explained that episcopacy was of the essence and "the only form of ministry that can be historically justified."32

At the 1918 conference the nonepiscopal missions recorded their concern that a united church would be too broad to be united in heart and mind and might include some "who were really tending towards at least some doubt of the integrity of Scripture and the deity of our Lord."33 Nor were they willing to accept a system that "failed to honour the authority conferred by their own Churches." They were, however, willing to form a body in which different missionary organizations would cooperate in certain activities. In anticipation of such a suggestion, Willis and Heywood had prepared proposals for formation of a body that would allow common representation to government and united activity in providing educational and health services.

On the last day of the 1918 conference, the group formed the Missionary Alliance for Kenya, which included the Africa Inland Mission, the Church Missionary Society, the Church of Scotland Mission, the United Methodist Mission, and the British and Foreign Bible Society. The Bible society, however, subsequently withdrew, since it was not a church-founding organization. Hope for a future united church was dimmed but not lost. Perhaps the most influential activity of the Missionary Alliance in Kenya, and later in Tanganyika, was to establish schools that became significant in the education of African leaders and were an important factor in the preparation of Africa for independence from colonial rule. In 1926 the alliance became the Missionary Council for Kenya. Tanganyika followed suit in forming a missionary council, and these councils later became national councils of churches.

During the 1930s the Anglican, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches discussed plans for a union. In 1933 a committee drew up a proposal that closely followed the South India model and accepted the threefold order of ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons without questioning the validity of the orders of those presently ordained in nonepiscopal churches. Nor was it obligatory that the bishops be in the historic apostolic succession.34 The Second World War put those plans into abeyance. There were further moves in the 1960s, both in Kenya and Tanzania, but these foundered as denominational loyalties by then were strong. Pan-Anglicanism, Pan-Presbyterianism, and Pan-Lutheranism had won the day.

Observations

The Kikuyu Conference of 1913 is of contemporary interest for a number of reasons. In addition to the question of mission strategy, it contributed to the long debate on the organic unity of the body of Christ. It also had a part in the Anglican Church’s clarifying its own parameters and the fundamentals that it believed should be maintained in any scheme of unity, with the episcopacy as a prime factor. The Kikuyu conferences contributed to the development of structures for internal debate within the Anglican world. The Anglican Consultative Council, formed only during the 1968 Lambeth Conference and composed of representatives of all the “provinces” (or national churches) of the Anglican Communion, held its first meeting in 1971 at Limuru in Kenya, not far from Kikuyu.

In East Africa after 1913, Pan-Protestantism lost. Overall, the Kikuyu conferences helped to strengthen the concept of worldwide denominations at the expense of freestanding “mission church” federations. This outcome was largely a result of the internal disagreement in the Anglican Church, but other denominations shared the same fears of being severed from their roots. In the Indian subcontinent, in a different context, as is well known, the Church of South India followed a different path. A case can be argued for the value of each of these forms of church development, with God being sovereign over all.

In East Africa, a national church with historic and emotional connections to a wider fellowship has perhaps proved to be of strategic benefit.
Notes
1. The Church Missionary Review (CMR) covered the conference and its aftermath in great depth and published many of the documents. Articles from various journals are cited in CMR, April 1914, pp. 236–40.
8. Ibid.
12. The Quakers (Society of Friends), who had a mission in western Kenya, did not accept this policy.
13. Chadwick, “How It Arose and What It Did,” CMR, January 1914, p. 27.
14. These smaller denominations were the Seventh-day Adventist Mission, the Gospel Mission Society, the German Lutheran Mission, and the Friends Africa Mission (Quakers). German Lutheran mission societies worked principally in Tanzania, which was a German colony until World War I, and had little work in Kenya.
15. Willis, “The Proposed Scheme of Federation,” CMR, January 1914, p. 34.
16. The four guiding principles of the Lambeth Quadrilateral can be found at www.anglican.ca/about/beliefs/lambeth-quadrilateral.
17. The churches of North India, South India, and Pakistan found ways of overcoming this restriction; their pattern would later be discussed in East Africa.
18. Zanzibar was at that time an independent state ruled by Arab sultans under a British protectorate. The bishop was also responsible for work in the UMCA areas of the mainland of what was then German East Africa.
31. The 1888 Lambeth Quadrilateral had laid down as one of the four foundations of Anglicanism, “the Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of his Church.” In 1920 Lambeth changed the wording to state that the “visible unity of the church” involved the acceptance of a ministry accepted by the whole Church, with “the commission of Christ and the authority of the whole body.” It concluded that the “Episcopate is the only means of providing such a ministry.”
34. Ibid., 154.
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