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Truth and unity in a divided Communion

Noel Cox

The Anglican Communion today stands at one of the most testing points in its long history. A fellowship that once prided itself on holding together breadth of thought with depth of faith now finds itself divided over first-order questions of doctrine, morality, and authority. What began as disagreements over pastoral practice and interpretation has deepened into a crisis touching the very identity of Anglicanism and the nature of the Church's unity.

The recent installation of Dame Sarah Mullally as Archbishop of Canterbury has brought these tensions into sharper focus. For many Anglicans, the



significance of this event extends far beyond the individual appointed to Augustine's chair. It symbolises a deeper shift in the Church of England's theological direction – one which some see as departing from the historic teaching of the Church as received from Scripture and upheld across the centuries. This has implications which extend far beyond the Church of England, as

the see of Canterbury is one of the key elements of Anglican identity. The ceremony at Canterbury Cathedral, while celebrated in some quarters as a moment of progress, has served as a catalyst for renewed debate about the Communion's future and the basis of its unity.

In response to developments over recent years, a growing number of provinces and dioceses have aligned themselves with the Global Anglican Future Conference (Gafcon) and the broader Global South Fellowship. Together, they represent not a small splinter group but arguably a clear majority of practising

Anglicans worldwide. This reality challenges any simplistic narrative that Gafcon is a marginal or extremist movement.

Yet Gafcon itself is not a monolith. It is a coalition of churches and leaders who agree on the authority of Scripture, the uniqueness of Christ, and the need to hold fast to the historic faith – but who do not always agree on every secondary question. Some provinces within the movement ordain women to the priesthood and even to the episcopate; others do not. Some differ on matters of liturgical expression or ecclesial polity. This diversity within Gafcon is itself a reminder that Anglicanism has never been about uniformity of opinion, but about unity grounded in shared essentials.

The movement’s central claim is that the foundation of communion lies not in institutional loyalty but in fidelity to the Word of God “translated, read,



Anglican Consultative Council

preached, taught and obeyed in its plain and canonical sense.” In Gafcon’s view, the Instruments of Communion – the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Primates’ Meeting – have failed to uphold that standard, particularly on questions of human sexuality and biblical

authority. The rejection of Lambeth Resolution I.10 (1998) by some Western provinces is often cited as the most visible symptom of this departure.

There is weight in this critique. The Church is not free to rewrite the faith once delivered to the saints or to reshape the gospel according to contemporary cultural norms. Fidelity to Scripture, the creeds, and the historic teaching of the Church is not optional; it is foundational. Where these are set aside, communion is already impaired in substance, even if not yet in form.

At the same time, there is a danger in allowing zeal for truth to eclipse the call to love and patience. If communion is reduced to agreement on every disputed matter, we risk turning the Body of Christ into a coalition of the like-minded. If separation becomes our first instinct rather than our last resort, we may abandon the possibility of repentance, reconciliation, and mutual correction. Even amid profound disagreement, Scripture calls us to “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

This does not mean a false unity built on silence or compromise. It means

speaking the truth in love, with humility, patience, and fidelity to Scripture. It means recognising that the Anglican Communion has never been a centralised Church governed from Canterbury, nor a loose federation held together by sentiment. It is a fellowship of autonomous provinces bound by a shared inheritance: the Holy Scriptures, the catholic creeds, the two dominical sacraments, and the witness of the ancient Fathers – interpreted through the classic formularies of the Church of England. Within that framework, Anglicanism has historically balanced jurisdictional independence with communion, allowing for differences of context and expression without compromising essential doctrine.



Primates' meeting

That balance is now under strain. Yet the genius of Anglicanism – its ability to hold together catholic order and evangelical zeal, doctrinal continuity and pastoral responsiveness – has not disappeared. It must simply be rediscovered and reasserted. This will require humility from all parties. The call to repentance is not one-sided.

Pride, impatience, and self-righteousness corrode unity as surely as false teaching does. If the Anglican Communion is to emerge from this crisis renewed rather than broken, it will be by submitting together to God's Word, recovering our shared heritage, and bearing with one another in love.

For many ordinary Anglicans in parishes around the world, this struggle feels distant and bewildering. They long not for institutional realignment but for a Church that is recognisably Christian: rooted in Scripture, nourished by the sacraments, formed by prayer, and faithful to the gospel. Our calling at the parish level is to shepherd God's people through this season with honesty and hope – to teach the faith once delivered, to celebrate the sacraments with reverence, to love our neighbours, and to pray earnestly for the Spirit to lead us into all truth.

Here at St Thomas, we remain part of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, and through it part of the wider Communion. That means we inhabit a Church with theological diversity, including positions we may question deeply. But it also means we stand within a living tradition that has weathered storms before and, by God's grace, will weather this one too. Our task is not to retreat but to remain faithful: to Scripture, to the creeds, to the formularies, and to the mission entrusted to us.

The road ahead may be difficult, and further ruptures may come. Yet even this crisis may be used by God as a refining fire – to purify his Church, clarify her witness, and prepare her for renewed mission. May we meet this moment with

courage and humility, with conviction and charity, and with confidence that Christ remains Lord of his Church and will, by his Spirit, lead her into all truth.

What It Means to Be an Anglican: Worship, Discipline, and Daily Life

Noel Cox

Anglican identity is often described in terms of history, architecture, or temperament, but these descriptions rarely explain what it actually means to live as an Anglican Christian. The Anglican tradition does not rest on a single founding confession, nor does it define itself primarily through a centralised teaching authority. Instead, it offers a disciplined pattern of worship, a theological approach to life, and a way of inhabiting the world that balances reason, tradition and common prayer. Understanding these elements can help clarify what it means to belong to this tradition today.

1. Our identity begins in worship

The most distinctive aspect of Anglican life is its understanding that worship shapes belief. Anglicanism does not begin with a list of doctrinal propositions but with a shared liturgical life. The Eucharist, the Daily Office, and the liturgical year are the core practices through which Anglicans learn the Christian faith. To be Anglican is to be formed by this rhythm.



This means that attending worship is not optional enrichment but part of one's identity. The Eucharist is the principal act of Christian worship. Participation in it – thoughtfully, reverently, and regularly – grounds the Anglican life. It is in the Eucharist that Anglicans encounter Scripture interpreted, prayer expressed, reconciliation offered, and community formed.

The Daily Office – Morning and Evening Prayer – is also central, though nowadays more rarely found. Even for those unable to pray the Office every day, an Anglican approach to life appreciates the value of ordered, repeated prayer. The Office teaches patience, attentiveness, and a steady engagement with the Psalms and Scripture. This commitment to rhythm rather than spontaneity is part of what distinguishes Anglican spirituality.

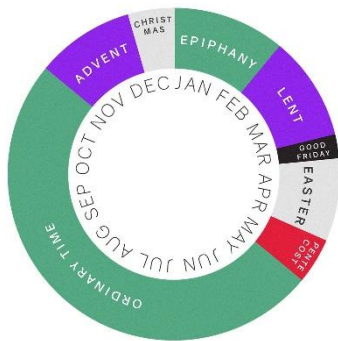
2. Liturgy teaches us how to think

Anglican liturgy is not simply a matter of inherited custom. It reflects a theological discipline. The structure of the Eucharist, the collect form, the lectionary, and the use of Scripture throughout the service all teach the faithful how to think about God and the world. They provide a framework that is intellectually coherent, spiritually deep, and historically grounded.

This is why Anglicans value clarity, order, and beauty in worship. These are not aesthetic luxuries; they are pedagogical tools. Ordered worship forms ordered thinking. Attention to detail in liturgy – including reverent handling of sacred vessels, disciplined silence, and careful proclamation of Scripture – is an expression of our belief that worship deserves our best.

3. Scripture, tradition, and reason guide our discernment

The Anglican approach to belief is often described through the “threefold cord” of Scripture, tradition, and reason. While Scripture is primary, tradition interprets Scripture, and reason helps us understand both. This triad is not a formula but a method. It prevents narrow literalism, unchecked subjectivity, or the assumption that novelty is automatically improvement.



For Anglicans, faith is not static. It requires reflection, debate, and learning. Yet this openness to reflection is not limitless. The Anglican commitment to the creeds, the sacraments, and the historic episcopate provides stability. These core elements ensure that Anglican discernment remains recognisably Christian, even when addressing new questions.

4. The parish is where Anglican life is lived

Anglicanism is fundamentally local. The parish is not simply an administrative unit. It is the context in which worship, pastoral care, and formation take place. Being Anglican means belonging to a community rooted in a particular place, with responsibilities to that place.

This local belonging requires participation. It means contributing to parish life, supporting its ministries, praying for its members, and engaging in its governance. Anglicanism is synodical: decisions are made through shared processes involving clergy and laity together. The Anglican layperson is therefore not a passive observer but an active participant in the ordering of the Church’s life.

5. The sacraments shape our pattern of life

Anglicans affirm the two dominical sacraments – Baptism and Eucharist – and acknowledge the sacramental character of Confirmation, Marriage, Reconciliation, Ordination, and Anointing. These sacraments mark significant passages in the Christian life, but they also shape everyday practices. Baptism calls us to repentance and new life; the Eucharist nourishes perseverance; confirmation strengthens us in witness; anointing reminds us that illness is met with solidarity and prayer. To be Anglican is to understand that God works through material means and that grace is not abstract but embodied.

6. Being Anglican influences our conduct

Anglicanism does not prescribe a rigid moral code, but it insists that moral life is rooted in Christian discipleship. Our ethical decisions arise from love of God and neighbour, informed by Scripture and the tradition of the Church. This means that Anglicans strive for integrity, justice, humility, and generosity. They recognise the dignity of others, not as a social convention but as a theological truth.

This also requires restraint. Anglican life values patience, listening, and careful judgement. Quick reactions and ideological rigidity are discouraged because they undermine communal discernment. Anglicans approach disagreement seriously and respectfully, seeking understanding rather than victory.

7. Anglicanism has a public dimension

Because Anglican identity is shaped by worship, it cannot remain private. Anglicans are called to contribute to the common good – in civic service, professional life, voluntary roles, and in daily encounters. Anglican tradition has always recognised that faith has social consequences. It encourages engagement with public issues, not as partisan activism but as part of the Church's responsibility to speak with moral clarity.

This public dimension is visible in historic institutions such as the Order of St John, in the constitutional role of the Church in certain nations, and in the charitable and educational work carried out by Anglicans around the world. Though contexts differ, the principle remains: Anglican faith leads to service.



Trinity Anglican Seminary, Pennsylvania

8. Anglican identity balances continuity and change

Anglicanism is neither rigidly fixed nor endlessly adaptable. It preserves continuity through the Prayer Book tradition, the episcopal structure, and its relationship to the wider Christian heritage. At the same time, Anglicans recognise the need to respond to new

contexts through careful discernment rather than impulsive reaction.

This balance requires maturity: a willingness to hold together people of differing views while maintaining the integrity of the Church's central commitments. It means avoiding schism and resisting the temptation to treat every disagreement as a crisis of identity.

9. To be Anglican is to live a coherent life

Finally, Anglican identity is coherent: worship shapes belief; belief shapes conduct; conduct expresses discipleship. The rhythm of prayer influences how we work, decide, speak, and serve. Anglicanism is not simply a style of worship or a historical inheritance. It is a way of life – steady, reflective, rooted in prayer, committed to community, oriented toward service, and confident in God's faithfulness.

To live as an Anglican is to inhabit this pattern with intention and trust, knowing that it forms us into a people who can worship with integrity, serve with humility, and witness with confidence.

Why the Parish Exists: Mission, Worship, and Local Presence

Noel Cox

The parish is one of the most recognisable and enduring features of Anglican life, yet it is surprisingly seldom examined. Many Christians participate in parish life for years without fully considering what a parish actually is, why it exists, or what theological and pastoral commitments underpin it. In an era that increasingly assumes that belonging is voluntary, fluid, and based on personal preference, the parish stands apart as a structure rooted in place, responsibility, and continuity. It is worth articulating why it continues to matter.



St Theodore of Tarsus, the 7th century Archbishop of Canterbury who extended the parish model throughout the Church in England

At its core, the parish is territorial. This distinguishes it from associations defined by affinity or interest. A parish is not formed because a particular group of people choose to associate with one another. Rather, its boundaries are defined geographically, and its responsibilities extend to all who reside within those boundaries, regardless of their level of involvement. This feature can appear counter-cultural, yet it is central. It signals that the Church's care, prayer, and pastoral attention are not limited to those who "opt in." They apply by virtue of place, not preference.

The first and most fundamental responsibility of a parish is the stable provision of worship. Worship here does not refer to a style or mood, but to the regular, public, and corporate offering of the Church's prayer. Stability is integral to this purpose. The parish exists so that, week after week, the Eucharist, the Daily Office, and the pattern of the Christian year are maintained in a particular place. This regularity expresses the conviction that worship is not incidental to Christian life but central to it. It also communicates that the Church's prayer continues regardless of numbers or trends: worship is offered because it should be offered, not because a particular individual or group desires it.

This stability also provides continuity across generations. The parish holds the local memory of baptisms, marriages, funerals, and seasons of communal life. It links the present congregation to those who came before and those who will follow. Even as clergy change, congregations evolve, and neighbourhoods shift, the parish ensures that the Church's worship and witness remain anchored in a recognisable and enduring form.

The second major function of the parish is pastoral responsibility. Because the parish is territorial, its pastoral duties apply broadly. The Church is available to the resident whose family has suffered a bereavement, to the person who seeks prayer despite having never attended a service, and to those who are isolated or vulnerable. This pastoral availability is not contingent upon membership or contribution. It arises from the Church's understanding of itself as responsible for the care of all in its area. In practice, this means that the parish becomes a place where the sorrowing can find comfort, the questioning can seek clarity, and the lonely can encounter companionship.

A third function is Christian formation. This includes preparation for baptism and confirmation, study groups, individual instruction, and the many informal conversations that arise naturally within parish life. Formation is not merely intellectual. It is a way of shaping Christian understanding through worship,

teaching, and community. The rhythms of the liturgical year provide a steady framework: Advent teaches expectation, Lent encourages reflection and repentance, Easter instils hope and renewal, and the long weeks of Ordinary Time foster steady discipleship. Through participation in this cycle, parishioners grow in understanding, practice, and confidence.

The fourth function is public presence. A parish church is a visible sign of Christian commitment within a neighbourhood. Its building, grounds, activities, and ministries express the Church's wish to remain engaged with the life of the community. This presence carries responsibilities. Parishes must maintain their buildings with care, steward resources responsibly, and offer their spaces for community use where appropriate. This visibility also creates opportunities for



civic connection. The parish may host local gatherings, contribute to community initiatives, or participate in ceremonies marking significant local or national events.

When these functions are considered together, it becomes clear that the parish is not a remnant of a bygone era. Rather, it remains a coherent and necessary structure that enables the Church to worship faithfully, care responsibly, teach consistently, and remain visibly present in the community. Its purpose is rooted not in the preferences of the moment but in the long-term commitments of the Church. The parish ensures that worship will be offered here, that pastoral care will be available here, that formation will take place here, and that the Church will have a meaningful presence here.

In a time when many institutions struggle to articulate their purpose, the parish offers a clear and enduring rationale. It is a place where Christian life is lived out, not in abstraction, but in the ordinary patterns of local community. It connects faith with geography, prayer with daily life, and the Church's identity with its responsibility to the world around it. For all these reasons, the parish remains both relevant and necessary.

The Nature and Role of Confirmation — Its Decline, and Why Renewal Matters

Noel Cox

Confirmation has, for most of Christian history, held an essential place in the formation of disciples. Within Anglicanism, it has endured as a rite that unites

personal faith, ecclesial belonging, and the strengthening work of the Holy Spirit. Although its practice has diminished in recent decades, its theological significance remains undiminished. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that the Church's mission is weakened when Confirmation recedes from parish life, and strengthened when it is consciously restored.

1. The Nature of Confirmation

Anglican teaching has always understood Confirmation as the bishop's laying on of hands, accompanied by prayer that the Holy Spirit will strengthen the baptised for mature Christian living. Its roots lie in the New Testament's witness to the apostolic laying-on-of-hands for the gift or strengthening of the Spirit, and in the early Church's practice of completing baptismal initiation through episcopal prayer and anointing.



In the Anglican tradition, Confirmation is not a second baptism, nor an ecclesiastical graduation, nor a reward for moral achievement. Rather, it is a conscious and public affirmation of the faith into which one has already been baptised, and a renewed commitment to discipleship

within the Body of Christ. It articulates the mutual interplay between divine grace and human response – a dynamic at the heart of Anglican sacramental theology.

The bishop's role is essential. By presiding at Confirmation, the bishop expresses the unity of the diocese, the apostolic character of the Church, and the fact that Christian commitment is always lived in communion rather than isolation. The rite thereby binds personal faith to the wider community of believers.

2. Confirmation in the Life of Anglicanism

Historically, Confirmation served as the bridge between baptism and admission to Holy Communion. Even though baptised children are now admitted to the Eucharist before Confirmation in many provinces, the rite retains a distinct purpose: the intentional and informed ratification of Christian commitment. At its best, Confirmation becomes the point at which candidates reflect seriously on belief, vocation, worship, and moral life, and are equipped to enter more fully into the Church's mission.

The catechetical dimension is central. Preparation for Confirmation creates a structured setting for teaching the essentials of the Christian faith, engaging with Scripture, learning to pray, and discerning gifts for ministry. Parishes that approach this work with deliberation often find that Confirmation preparation becomes a moment of renewal for the whole congregation. It reminds the community of its responsibility to support one another in faith and of its own baptismal identity.



Confirmation at St. Barnabas Anglican church in North Hatley 26 May 1957.

3. Why Confirmation Has Declined

The decline in Confirmation across the Anglican Communion, including within the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, is multifaceted. Several influential factors can be identified:

(a) Changing practice regarding admission to Communion

When Confirmation ceased to function as the gatekeeping rite for admission to Communion, its distinctiveness was sometimes obscured. Theologically, the renewed emphasis on Baptism as the full sacramental incorporation into the Body of Christ was correct and long overdue. Yet this development unintentionally led some to regard Confirmation as optional, supplementary, or even unnecessary.

(b) Erosion of catechetical structures

In many parishes, systematic Christian formation has weakened. Without established avenues for teaching the faith, clergy and lay leaders have fewer opportunities to invite and prepare candidates. In the absence of catechesis, the meaning of Confirmation is easily lost.

(c) Shifting cultural expectations

Confirmation once functioned as a social marker of maturity or belonging, particularly among youth. As the Church's cultural foothold has diminished, a generation has grown up without the normative expectation of Confirmation. Adults seeking Confirmation sometimes feel uncertain about approaching the Church, despite the rite being particularly well-suited to adult discipleship.

(d) Theological misunderstandings

In some settings, Confirmation has been misconstrued as a mere cultural relic, a formalism, or an irrelevant duplication of baptismal vows. Such misunderstandings fail to appreciate the distinctive pneumatological dimension of the rite – the explicit invocation of the Holy Spirit for maturity and perseverance.

(e) Practical constraints

Larger dioceses, fewer clergy, and stretched episcopal schedules often make it difficult to maintain a regular pattern of episcopal visitation. When Confirmations occur infrequently or are consolidated into large regional services, parishes may lose the sense of the rite as an integral part of their pastoral life.

4. Why the Church Must Recover Confirmation

Despite these challenges, the case for renewing the place of Confirmation is strong. Its recovery is not nostalgic; it is missional and doctrinally sound.

(a) Forming intentional disciples

In a fragmented and distracted age, public acts of mature commitment to Christ are counter-cultural and deeply needed. Confirmation provides a framework for intentional discernment and accountability. It calls candidates to examine their lives in the light of the Gospel and to commit themselves to the rhythm of worship, prayer, and service.

(b) Renewing parish life

A parish with active Confirmation preparation often experiences revitalisation. The presence of candidates prompts reflection among the wider congregation on their own baptismal promises. Sponsors deepen their engagement. Clergy regain a natural context for teaching and pastoral conversation. Even small groups of confirmands can transform the energy of a parish.



(c) Strengthening ecclesial identity

Confirmation visibly connects the parish to the diocese, the province, and the wider Anglican Communion. Through the bishop, it embodies the apostolic continuity of the Church. In an environment that easily regards faith as individualistic, Confirmation insists that Christian identity is always ecclesial.

(d) Enriching sacramental theology



By emphasising the Spirit's work, Confirmation provides an important balance to baptismal theology. It affirms that Christian life is a continual process of growth and that the Spirit must be invoked anew for strength, perseverance, and witness. Far from being redundant, Confirmation clarifies the dynamic cooperation between divine initiative and human commitment.

(e) Offering a clear pathway for adults

A growing proportion of candidates across the Communion are adults who were baptised as children but never catechised. For them, Confirmation is not a formality but a profound act of Christian self-identification. It offers an accessible and meaningful entry point into Anglican life, particularly for newcomers and those returning to the Church.

5. A Significant Celebration – 29 Candidates Confirmed

These wider reflections found concrete expression in the diocesan Confirmation service held on 7 December, at which 29 candidates were confirmed by Bishop Ross Bay. This was a joyful and encouraging event for the Diocese of Auckland, demonstrating clearly that Confirmation remains a living and vital part of our common life.

Two of these candidates were sponsored by our own parish of St Thomas Tāmaki: Kartini Clarke, presented by the parish; and Andrew Armstrong, presented through the Mission to Seafarers, representing the wider chaplaincy and maritime community.

Their participation was a source of great encouragement to the parish and to those who have accompanied them in preparation. The breadth of candidates at the service — across ages, backgrounds, and communities — testified to the continuing power of Confirmation to draw people into deeper faith and belonging.

6. A Call to Renew Our Practice

As we reflect on the recent Confirmation service, we have an opportunity to reassess the place of this rite within our parish mission. Confirmation is not merely a remnant of earlier Anglicanism. It is a gift entrusted to the Church for the strengthening of disciples, the shaping of Christian character, and the deepening of our shared identity in Christ.

Parishioners who have not been confirmed, those who were baptised but never had the opportunity to explore their faith intentionally, and those who simply feel drawn to reaffirm their Christian commitment, are warmly invited to speak with the Vicar. A new cycle of preparation is planned, and interest from across the parish is welcomed.

In a time when the Church is called to be visibly hopeful and deeply rooted in its faith, the recovery of Confirmation – practised thoughtfully and taught well – is not optional. It is a renewal of one of the Church's essential ministries of formation. May the Holy Spirit, who strengthens the hearts of believers, continue to guide and uphold those confirmed on 7 December, and inspire many others to take this significant step in their own journey of discipleship.

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