

**Closing address by Dr Jenny Plane-Te Paa, USPG Annual Conference
24.6.09**

I have been recommending Miroslav Volf's book *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Abingdon).

There is a piece in Volf which is pertinent. It is where he talks about how sometimes, in our enthusiasm to reconcile conflicts arising over 'difference' we tend to take a meta approach by reflecting solely on the kind of society or, in our case, the kind of Communion we ought to create in order to accommodate individual or, indeed, communal heterogeneity or diversity. We focus on the '*social arrangements*' needed to take care of everyone's preferences – so, yes, let's have a GAFCON here, an AmiA there, an intervention in this place, and so on – but what Volf suggests is maybe we first need to explore what kind of selves we need to be in order to truly and enduringly live in harmony with others. In other words what kind of social agents do we wish to be in order that we are capable, not merely of accommodating or arranging for difference, but rather being those capable of envisioning and creating just, truthful and peaceful societies, and being those continuously responsible and equipped for that task of shaping the cultural and ecclesial environment within which such agents will thrive.

It is here that Volf is trying to get at the postmodern tendency of shifting moral responsibility away from the moral self towards socially-constructed individual agency or through floating responsibility inside a bureaucratic rule of nobody. So the problems of the Communion are managed by disengagement and commitment-avoidance rather than by unseverable vulnerable intimacy and struggle to understand the other as ultimately divinely- albeit differently-created. It is only in this way that there is never ever the possibility of anyone saying they have no need of the other. The Indaba process [see footnote] has provided a methodology that enables gentle and tentative engagement to occur.

I have worked at the top levels of some of the Communion's Commissions and working parties now for almost a decade. It has been an unexpected, unsought after experience of unspeakably challenging and at times deeply distressing proportions; equally as it has also been an experience of unexpectedly enriching and humbling proportions.

I have, on one hand, become especially afraid of those very few bishops and archbishops of this our beloved Communion who have demonstrably indicated their unwillingness to serve the common good, and also in a sense to betray their own baptismal and ordination vows by refusing to participate in eucharistic worship with other baptised Anglicans in their insistence that God loves only some, and who further insist that there is indeed a portion of humanity who are not worthy of full respect, dignity or inclusion.

I have not, on the other hand, been unduly distracted by the clamour of these aggressive alarmists because, as one immensely privileged to move around the Communion, what I also bear witness to serves to relativise everything, and so it is with absolute confidence that I can say there are far more Anglicans getting on with the pressing business of being God's mission people than there are those fretting over whether or not inclusion is a gospel imperative.

I have believed and have been saying for some time now that for the sake of the Communion it is imperative for us all to look beyond the vitriol, the hysteria, the noisy gongs, instead to notice anew all that has and all who have actually remained constant, to notice anew all those whose dedication, sacrifice, service and commitment to God's mission has not altered and will not ever be altered one tiny bit no matter how many threats, claims and abuses are being made at the level of male church leadership struggles.

I have been encouraged to look again at the exemplary work and witness of many thousands of unsung Anglican men and women, young and old, lay and ordained, those whose lives of selfless mostly voluntary service, will not and cannot ever be disrupted by the prospect of schism, by legal claims and counter claims or by indecently ferocious doctrinal arguments.

I am being reminded that none of these things can possibly disrupt or compromise lives given over freely, unquestioningly, to the care of the poor, the feeding of the hungry, the release of the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind.

I am being reminded of those who are variously described as 'low-key' clergy, those who are not necessarily involved in high powered diocesan committees or General Synod affairs, and by the patriarchal politics of primate meetings, but who are instead deeply, inextricably involved in every single aspect of God's mission and ministry in their local communities. I am speaking also of all the children of our church, the grandmothers and fathers, the millions of volunteer workers. I am speaking of the mission agencies such as CMS and USPG. You each have good cause to see yourselves reflected in all I am saying here.

I am speaking of those who volunteer to do anything at the ring of the church bell but who are either totally unaware of the current tensions or are totally perplexed by them. I am speaking more and with profound admiration of those who are actually teaching us all through their prior unshakeable commitment to '*good works*', that their way of demonstrating an appropriate and yet dignified disdain for those calling and acting for disunity is not to confront, nor to disparage, but rather to continuously exemplify grace filled, charitable and quietly patient servanthood behaviour.

I am reminded here again of Volf, that it is only in our demonstrable capacity and willingness to let go of outrage, of our despair and of our determinations to hold on to memories of wrongdoing or hurt that we can in fact act with grace. Yet he says this is never an uncritical action – it must be governed by the logic of grace which is to do with first finding our proper selves in God who is love. There, and only there, can we fully flourish by what God's love does in and through us; we cannot help but exercise our God-given capacity for forgiveness, compassion and reconciliation, for life-giving acts of grace.

We become capable, as Luther suggests, 'of living in Christ through faith and in our neighbour through love. By faith we are caught up beyond ourselves to God. By love we descend beneath ourselves into our neighbours. Yet we remain always in God in God's love'.

One of the most precious and privileged insights that one gains from being able to move across the global Communion is that no matter the continent, the language, the socio-political or cultural context, there is at a profoundly important level actually very little difference *that really matters*, there is very little which radically differentiates the ways in which the *ordinary every day* Anglican people of God gather in abiding faith and witness.

Actually it occurs to me that if we were capable on any given Sunday of undertaking to do one of those Google Earth satellite snapshots of global Anglicans, what we would inevitably see is ourselves as the great earthly cloud of witnesses at our local incarnational best; what we would see at work and at prayer is *deeply, profoundly, indissolubly, communion*.

It is the exact same here today, in this room full of USPG Anglicans and our ecumenical friends; here, too, we are now gathered as a small portion of the global tribe of God's imperfect, vulnerable, ambitious, generous-spirited, self-serving, sacrificial, complex, contradictory, faith-filled and, to the largest extent, indecently obedient Anglicans.

Communion, as I witness it and as I have experienced it throughout my lifetime, is US, embodied in and for each other across the endless chasms of distance and difference. Communion is both noun and verb – it names both who we are and what we do. Communion is thus simultaneously the recognition of our common humanity and the relationality that that presupposes – it is about us all being created equally of God, equally as it is our responsive embrace of God in each other. It is therefore our way of loving and our responsibility for loving, just as we ourselves are loved so unconditionally by God. Communion is thus us living out in the deepest and most intimate forms of Christ-like relationality what we say, even as we pray, that we deeply truly believe in one God, in one Lord Jesus Christ, in one holy and apostolic church.

My sense is that, if we could regain even a modicum of that deep deep sense of sacred relationality, our beloved Communion would never require of us so much critical attention as has been the case over the past few years – that attention has been far too costly to the work of mission; it has been far too costly to the lives of those who are the least among us; it has been far too costly to those yearning for our discipleship witness of God's world – so my plea is: let us refocus our eyes upon the cross, our hearts upon the love of God for us and on our love for one another, our minds upon the call of God, and our spirits upon the incalculable gift of faith entrusted into our care.

Loving God, we look with uncertainty
beyond the old choices for clear-cut answers
to a softer, more permeable aliveness,
which is every moment at the brink of death.
For something new is being born in us
If we but let it.
We stand at a new doorway,
awaiting that which comes,
daring to be human creatures,
vulnerable to the beauty of existence
learning to love.
Amen

Note: Indaba discussion groups were used at the 2008 Lambeth Conference. Archbishop Rowan Williams said of them: 'We have given these the African name of indaba groups, groups where in traditional African culture, people get together to sort out the problems that affect them all, where everyone has a voice and where there is an attempt to find a common mind or a common story that everyone is able to tell when they go away from it. This is how we approached it. This is what we heard. This is where we arrived as we prayed and thought and talked together.'