

FROM CANTERBURY TO A CONCILIAR COMMUNION?

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Abuja, GAFCON, and the Emerging Reshaping of Global Anglicanism

Abstract

The Anglican Communion is passing through one of the most consequential periods of structural and ecclesiological change in its modern history. The establishment of the Global Anglican Council at the Q26 gathering in Abuja, Nigeria, in March 2026 represents more than another episode in the long-running theological disagreements between Canterbury and conservative provinces of the Global South. It raises a more fundamental question: What constitutes the Anglican Communion, and must global Anglican identity continue to be institutionally centred upon the See of Canterbury? This article examines the emergence of the reordered Global Anglican Communion, the significance of Abuja in this development, Canterbury's response through the Nairobi-Cairo process, and the possible future configuration of worldwide Anglicanism. It argues that the present crisis may ultimately produce neither the disappearance of Anglicanism nor a simple replacement of Canterbury by another geographical centre, but a more conciliar, polycentric and confessionally contested understanding of global Anglican communion.

Keywords: Anglican Communion, Canterbury, GAFCON, Global Anglican Council, Abuja, Church of Nigeria, Global South, ecclesiology, Nairobi-Cairo Proposals.

Introduction

Something significant is happening within worldwide Anglicanism. It would be inadequate to describe the present situation merely as another disagreement between conservative African churches and the Church of England. The questions now before Anglicans are constitutional, ecclesiological and historical.

For generations, the Archbishop of Canterbury has occupied a unique position as a focus of unity within the Anglican Communion. Canterbury did not exercise papal jurisdiction over autonomous Anglican provinces, yet communion with the See of Canterbury became one of the principal historical markers by which membership of the worldwide Anglican Communion was recognized.

That assumption is now being openly challenged.

In October 2025, GAFCON declared that it was taking leadership in what it described as a reordered “Global Anglican Communion.” Provinces participating in this movement were encouraged to amend constitutional provisions referring to communion with the See of Canterbury, while assent to the 2008 Jerusalem Declaration was proposed as the confessional basis for membership. GAFCON’s chairman, Archbishop Laurent Mbanda, expressed the movement’s position in unmistakable terms: it had not left the Anglican Communion but understood itself to represent its authentic continuation.

The developments that followed in Abuja in March 2026 moved this argument from declaration toward institutional embodiment.

Abuja and the Emergence of a New Structure

From 3–6 March 2026, Anglican leaders gathered in Abuja for the G26 conference. According to the subsequent Abuja Affirmation, 347 bishops and 121 clergy and lay leaders representing 27 provinces participated in the gathering, hosted by the Church of Nigeria.

The most significant development was structural.

The former GAFCON Primates Council was dissolved and replaced by a Global Anglican Council. Archbishop Laurent Mbanda was unanimously elected chairman, Archbishop Miguel Uchôa vice-chairman, and Bishop Paul Donison general secretary.

More important than the personalities involved is the ecclesiology reflected in the arrangement.

The new Council incorporates primates alongside bishops, clergy and lay members with voting rights. Its chairman is expressly not described as *primus inter pares*. GAFCON explains this as a deliberate movement toward conciliar leadership rather than concentrating the identity of worldwide Anglicanism in one episcopal office.

The Council is also assigned responsibilities that go beyond those of an informal renewal movement. According to the Abuja Affirmation, it will recognize existing provinces and dioceses seeking participation in the Global Anglican Communion and authenticate newly formed provinces and dioceses seeking recognition as Global Anglicans.

This is therefore no longer simply a network protesting decisions made elsewhere. It increasingly possesses characteristics associated with an ecclesial structure: a confession, leadership, mechanisms of recognition and an emerging understanding of communion.

Why Abuja Matters

Abuja's importance should not be underestimated.

The city hosted the gathering at which this new conciliar structure was established, while the Church of Nigeria provided the ecclesiastical environment in which the reordering was formally articulated. Whether Abuja ultimately becomes the permanent administrative headquarters of the Global Anglican Communion requires confirmation by formal documentation. Nevertheless, Abuja has already acquired considerable symbolic importance in the movement.

Historically, Anglican Christianity expanded internationally from England through missionary societies, colonial relationships and subsequently autonomous provincial churches. Canterbury consequently remained the historical reference point even after those churches became juridically independent.

The present development represents an extraordinary reversal of perspective.

Anglican Christianity, once transmitted from Britain into Africa, is now encountering a powerful movement from Africa and the wider Global South seeking to reshape the structures by which global Anglicanism understands itself.

This should not be reduced simply to an “African revolt against England.” The movement includes Anglicans from several continents. Nevertheless, the demographic expansion and theological confidence of African Anglicanism make Africa indispensable to understanding the present transformation.

Abuja therefore represents more than geography. It symbolizes a changing centre of gravity.

Is Abuja Replacing Canterbury?

It would, however, be a mistake merely to substitute one city for another.

The deeper argument emerging from GAFCON is not necessarily:

Canterbury must be replaced by Abuja.

It is closer to:

No single historic see should possess an indispensable constitutional position in determining worldwide Anglican identity.

This distinction is crucial.

If Abuja develops into a permanent administrative centre while the Global Anglican Council remains genuinely international and conciliar, the resulting system would differ considerably from simply creating an African equivalent of Canterbury.

Under such an arrangement:

Abuja could provide administrative infrastructure;

the Global Anglican Council could exercise collective leadership;

the provinces would retain their historic autonomy;

and shared confession particularly Scripture, the historic Anglican formularies and the Jerusalem Declaration would become the principal basis of communion.

Such an ecclesiology would shift the question of Anglican identity from “With which see are you in communion?” toward “What faith and order do you confess?”

That would constitute a profound development in Anglican self-understanding.

Canterbury’s Response

The Canterbury-based institutions have not accepted GAFCON’s claim to have replaced or reordered the historic Anglican Communion.

Following the Abuja developments, the Anglican Communion Office pointed instead to years of discussion concerning Anglican identity, structures and leadership, particularly the Nairobi-Cairo Proposals. The proposals themselves acknowledge the need to reconsider global Anglican leadership in a post-colonial context and explore broader and more diverse forms of shared leadership.

This is important because structural dissatisfaction is therefore not confined to GAFCON.

At ACC-19 in Belfast, held from 28 June to 4 July 2026, the Anglican Consultative Council received the Nairobi-Cairo Proposals as resources for continuing discernment and called for further dialogue over the following three years.

Consequently, both sides of the present Anglican divide recognize, although for very different reasons, that the inherited structure requires reconsideration.

GAFCON argues that the existing Instruments of Communion have failed and has proceeded to construct an alternative.

The Canterbury centred Communion argues for continued discernment and reform of the existing structures.

This is one of the most fascinating aspects of the present moment: Canterbury and its critics are simultaneously discussing a future in which less may depend upon Canterbury.

Schism or Realignment?

The terminology used to describe these developments is contested.

Some observers describe what happened at Abuja as schism. Others within GAFCON explicitly reject that description and speak instead of continuity, reordering and realignment. Reuters reported GAFCON representatives arguing that the movement was not abandoning Anglicanism but reorganizing it around biblical authority.

The distinction is more than semantic.

GAFCON's argument is essentially ecclesiological: those departing from received Christian teaching have impaired communion, while those maintaining historic doctrine remain continuous with Anglican faith.

Canterbury's institutional understanding operates differently: the historic Communion remains constituted through autonomous member churches related through its established Instruments of Communion.

We therefore face two competing definitions of continuity.

One emphasizes historical-institutional communion.

The other emphasizes doctrinal-confessional communion.

Neither controversy can be adequately understood without recognizing this fundamental difference.

The Anglican Communion Has Never Been a Papacy

It is also necessary to remember something frequently obscured in popular discussions.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has never been an Anglican pope.

The provinces of the Anglican Communion are autonomous churches. Canterbury historically exercises enormous moral, spiritual and symbolic influence, but the Archbishop of Canterbury cannot ordinarily legislate directly for Nigeria, Uganda, Rwanda, Australia, Canada or the United States.

This unusual structure allowed considerable diversity to exist within Anglicanism. Yet it also created the present difficulty: when profound doctrinal disagreement arises, there is no universally recognized juridical mechanism capable of giving a final judgment binding upon every province.

The current crisis therefore exposes a structural question that Anglicanism has postponed for decades:

Is the Anglican Communion fundamentally a fellowship held together by historical relationships, or must it possess a sufficiently defined common confession capable of establishing the boundaries of communion?

GAFCON has given one answer.

The Nairobi-Cairo process is searching for another.

The Future: Two Communions or One Polycentric Family?

Several outcomes remain possible.

A complete institutional separation may emerge, producing two identifiable worldwide Anglican communions: one maintaining the historic Instruments associated with Canterbury and another recognizing the structures of the Global Anglican Council.

Another possibility is differentiated communion, in which provinces remain Anglican and retain varying degrees of relationship without participating equally in the same structures.

A third possibility is that the crisis eventually forces the historic Anglican Communion itself toward substantially more decentralized leadership, thereby producing a model considerably different from the Canterbury-centred arrangement inherited from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The most probable future, in my judgment, is increasingly polycentric Anglicanism.

Under this model there may no longer be one universally accepted institutional centre. Canterbury would retain immense historical importance. Abuja and other Global South centres could acquire substantial ecclesiastical influence. Provinces would remain autonomous, while different networks and councils exercise varying degrees of recognition and authority.

Such an arrangement would undoubtedly be untidy.

But Anglicanism has rarely achieved unity through juridical uniformity.

Africa and the Future of Anglicanism

One conclusion is already difficult to dispute: Africa can no longer be treated as the periphery of Anglican Christianity.

The old missionary geography imagined Europe as the centre and Africa as the mission field. Twenty-first-century Anglicanism increasingly reverses that assumption.

African provinces now possess demographic strength, theological institutions, episcopal leadership, missionary ambitions and growing international influence.

The significance of Abuja therefore lies partly in what it represents historically.

Canterbury played an indispensable role in the history through which Anglican Christianity became global. But the churches that once received missionaries are increasingly producing missionaries, theologians, bishops and ecclesial movements capable of influencing Anglicanism worldwide.

The child has matured and now participates in determining the architecture of the household.

This need not be interpreted as the defeat of Canterbury or the triumph of Africa. It may instead represent the inevitable maturation of a church tradition that has genuinely become global.

Conclusion

The events surrounding **GAFCON**, Abuja and the creation of the **Global Anglican Council** represent one of the most important constitutional developments in contemporary Anglican history.

Their ultimate significance will not be determined merely by declarations, conference attendance or the location of an administrative headquarters. The decisive questions will be whether provinces formally incorporate these arrangements into their constitutions and canons; how many churches recognize the Global Anglican Council; whether the Canterbury-centred Communion substantially reforms its own Instruments; and whether meaningful ecclesial relationships can survive between the emerging structures.

The next several years will therefore be decisive.

GAFCON V, scheduled for Athens in 2028, will provide an important measure of whether the structures established at Abuja have matured into a durable global ecclesial order. At the same time, the three year process authorized by ACC-19 will show how far the historic Anglican Communion is prepared to reconsider its inherited structures.

We should therefore resist premature declarations that Canterbury is finished or that the Anglican Communion has simply divided into two churches.

Something more complicated and perhaps historically more important is occurring.

The Anglican Communion is being compelled to answer questions it has long been able to postpone: What makes us Anglican? What constitutes communion? Where does authority reside? And can a worldwide church born from the English ecclesiastical tradition finally develop structures that reflect the demographic and theological realities of a genuinely global Christianity?

Abuja has now become an important location in that conversation.

Canterbury remains historically indispensable.

But the future of Anglicanism may belong neither to Canterbury nor Abuja alone.

It may belong to a conciliar, global and increasingly polycentric communion in which Anglican identity is determined not primarily by geography, but by the difficult relationship between common faith, historic order, provincial autonomy and communion in Christ.

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