

LAMBETH CONFERENCE 2008

**A Canterbury tale from a spouse's perspective.**

The diary of Mrs Jo Cundy, 15<sup>th</sup> July to 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2008.



*Above: Bishop Ian and Jo Cundy (centre) with visiting bishops and their wives, and the Dean, at Peterborough Cathedral just before the Lambeth Conference.*

**Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> July** – the experience begins with Evensong in Peterborough Cathedral and the commissioning of 8 bishops – 2 of 'our own' and 6 visitors here for the pre-Lambeth hospitality, and for them and us, the spouses, the reality has finally arrived

**Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> July** – the Lambeth experience today is one of queueing – both for registration (up to 2 hours!) and for dinner (up to 1 hour!) – things can only get better! Interestingly this mostly irritates the westerners, whilst our overseas visitors are far less worried about time and use the opportunity to meet people and talk to them.

**Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> July** – a strange and rather frenetic environment in which to celebrate my birthday! The spouses are meeting in the Sports Hall – large space draped and converted to a welcoming venue furnished with numerous round tables so that our sessions can have an informal feel and there are easy opportunities to talk and share. There are about 550 of us from all across the world, many visiting England for the first time, many with little or no English, and 7 are men. Translation facilities are available into 8 languages – French, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Arabic, Swahili, Korean, and Burmese – but a smile is also universal currency.

**Friday 18<sup>th</sup> July** – you need stamina for a conference like this, which starts daily in the enormous 'Big Top' with a Eucharist at 7.15 a.m., and can end, if you wish, with Night Prayer at 9.45 p.m. In a gathering like this we are encouraged to say the Lord's Prayer in our own language which creates a wonderfully literal experience of 'tongues'. Today the spouses began to 'tell their stories' to each other, and we heard an immensely moving contribution the wife of the Pakistani bishop of Peshawar – the faithful witness of a persecuted church in a war torn land on the border with Afganistan, an area ruled by the Taleban and Al Qaeda.

**Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> July** – a day of highlights. In the morning the opening service in Canterbury Cathedral was very splendid – multi-lingual, with a lively African music setting, and gospel procession with Melanesian dancers carrying the bible in a boat! The processions were impressive, and lengthy – it took about

20 minutes just to process in the 650 (approx) bishops, and then there were the civics, the ecumenical, the home team etc. In the evening, the Seoul MU Choir gave a concert – they looked amazingly colourful in traditional dress, and sang wonderfully – and we learnt about the tragedy of a divided Korea. Greetings from the MU in Peterborough were given and reciprocated.

**Monday 21<sup>st</sup> July** – our bible study groups are shaking down and becoming an interesting exchange of multicultural perceptions of John's gospel. In the spouses plenary we discussed our marriages and the different cultural traditions which create and shape them – those who romantically 'fell in love' sharing with those who met their husband for the first time on the day of their wedding.

In celebratory family mode, there was a wonderfully noisy antipodean birthday party in one of the dining halls tonight including Waltzing Matilda and a robust performance of a Maori Haka!

**Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> July** – we are settling into a routine of wall to wall morning activities which for the spouses involves a plenary and then bible study groups, and for the bishops the reverse order of bible studies and then Indaba groups which are based on the Zulu model of sitting under your mango tree and talking and listening for as long as it takes to resolve your issues – only in this context they are time limited!

A few windows on the world:-

A Sudanese wife in my bible study group explained that many of their church congregations meet in the open under a tree, if a church has not yet been built or if the church they had has been destroyed in the war.

A Kenyan wife talked of added responsibilities as a bishop's wife, becoming 'Mama' to the people and women of the diocese, and providing food to all who turn to the bishop when they are hungry or displaced as in the recent troubles, and of her lack of resources and money. Priests are often not paid, and a bishop's salary is very small, so growing some of your own food is essential.

A Melanesian wife spoke also of the duty to be hospitable, and their concern not to waste any food, and her shock at the wastage here in the conference dining rooms, both by individuals and in the kitchens.

Then there was the isolation of the Australian wife in a diocese with an area larger than the whole of the UK, only 130,000 people, 25 churches, and 16 stipendiary and 4 non-stipendiary clergy; and another Australian wife who had learnt to fly so that she could transport her husband around his diocese.

In Madagascar the bishop may have to walk for 8 hours to take a church service and will be away from his home and family for weeks at a time visiting distant parishes.

With the warmer weather, my bible study group has decided to meet outside under the trees. We are a mixed bunch of 4 Melanesians, 2 Sudanese, 2 USA, 1 Canadian, 1 Scot, and 2 English, and released from the cramped confines of a student cell, we have space to sing and dance.

**Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> July** – I joined an afternoon excursion to Chilham village and castle – quintessentially English for some of our overseas visitors. We were greeted in the church by all the children from the village primary school, in end-of-term mufti, who sang for us – 95 of them, which is about the size of the class of 5–8 year olds taught by the Kenyan wife whom I went with. Many of her children walk to school without shoes, and fall asleep on the floor because supper was minimal and there was no breakfast. For us, tea and cakes were served at small tables set up in the churchyard, and we toasted the long departed family beside whose headstones we sat!

**Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> July** – the 'London Day' – and the sun didn't just shine, it was hot! The morning focus was on the Walk of Witness to raise awareness of the urgent need to meet the Millenium Development Goals – a colourful crowd of 1,500 bishops and spouses etc., walking with banners down Whitehall to Lambeth Palace, and then a splendid stirring and heartfelt message of support from Gordon Brown in the true 'son of the manse' style! As we seated ourselves for lunch in marquee large enough for 2000 people, Jane Williams welcomed us 'to her home'! Then from one Palace to another, and on for tea at the Queen's Garden Party – cucumber sandwiches and raspberry tarts, roses and herbaceous borders, bands and beefeaters – wonderfully English and elegant!

**Friday 25<sup>th</sup> July** – the spouses theme today was on the environment and climate change, and the challenge to our corporate and personal responsibility. Evening Prayer was led by the Spouses Conference with Jane Williams giving some reflections from our sessions, and in her own inimitable way reminding the bishops that we, their spouses, were here, praying for them and providing the support for their ministries!

**Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> July** – photograph day! It takes patience, efficiency and good humour to organise first the spouses, who kept breaking into spontaneous song, ('Siahamba' and 'Amen' seemed reasonable choices, 'O come all ye faithful' and 'Jesus Christ is risen today' were less obvious!), and then the bishops whose numbers seemed to have swelled so that it was a squeeze to get them onto the stand.

In the evening, a candlelit pilgrimage round Canterbury Cathedral – an opportunity for a small group to explore and enjoy the place in peace and quiet and absorb its wonderful atmosphere, finishing with Compline around the site of the Becket shrine – just magical and deeply moving.

**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> July** – this was a less formal day. We accepted an invitation to revisit familiar territory in our former diocese of Chichester, and to join the congregation at Wadhurst in East Sussex. Bishop Eliud having sadly had to return to Kenya for a family funeral, we took with us Bishop Zak and Mama Catherine who were entertained by St Giles Northampton before the Conference, and they duly enlivened the service! We were entertained to lunch by George Pulman, our deputy Chancellor in this diocese, and enjoyed the sunshine in an English country garden.

**Monday 28<sup>th</sup> July** – we turned our focus to issues of peacemaking in situations of conflict, and after lively singing and pan-pipe music we heard

heart-breaking testimony from members of the Melanesian Brotherhood from the Solomon islands about their role in bringing peace in a period of violent conflict, about the disappearance and murder of 7 of their brothers, and about the lessons learned from that tragedy.

Then as we discussed in small groups, a Kenyan wife shared that following the violence after the elections she is now caring for 27 orphans, providing not just for the basic needs of shelter, food, clothing and education for these children, but dealing also with the trauma of these and other people who turn to the bishop for help.

**Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> July** – this was Excursion Day for all the spouses, with lots of variety on offer. I opted for the 13 mile walk along the Pilgrim Way into Canterbury. We had stops for reflection and prayer along the way, and ended with Sung Evensong in the Cathedral. A bit hot, tired and sore – but a wonderful sense of achievement, and lots of stories told and shared along the way!

**Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> July** – our focus was on issues of health and well-being, both on a global scale, and at a more personal and local level. As we shared stories around our tables, there was an opportunity to minister to each other with prayer and anointing with the oil of healing. (In this context, it was salutary to learn from Ruth Bakare – known to many of our MU members - that there is no oil available in Zimbabwe for cooking or for anointing).

**Friday 1<sup>st</sup> August** – after 2 weeks of sharing in our bible study group, one of the Sudanese at last feels safe enough to share her deep troubles and fears. We listen, we hold hands and pray, we have a 'big hug', and then the tension goes and we laugh in the extraordinarily releasing way that Africans do.

Institutional living would not be the same without the hazard of random fire alarms, and so far the hall of residence we are in has experienced three - two in the daytime, and one at midnight after a thunder storm!

Conference living would not be same without conference bags – we all have them, full of our worship books, hymn books, bible study books, headphones, etc. – some carried in the hand, some on the shoulder, and one seen carried African-style on the head!

**Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> August** – it is the final weekend and we have reached that 'end of term' or 'demob' feeling. We are drawing the threads together, and for the spouses the focus is on nurturing our unity, and then going out into our differing contexts 'to love and serve the Lord'. For the bishops the final Indaba groups need to draw together thinking on major issues and this will result not in a formal Report, but in a Reflections paper.

I went on a final excursion to St Mary's Abbey at West Malling to be gently welcomed and entertained by the lovely enclosed community of Benedictine nuns there. For me it was a return to familiar territory since Ian and I first went on retreat there some 30 years ago. I was conscious both of the privilege of being welcomed into their enclosure, and of the pleasure that our much anticipated visit brought to their very ordered and circumscribed lives, with new

faces and new stories to encounter. (I found myself reflecting that you probably have to have an 'off the scale' Myers Briggs 'I' type of personality to be an enclosed religious!)

**Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> August** – the final day and a full and relentless programme for both bishops and spouses, and the weather changed from glorious sunshine to something cool, grey and wet. Nevertheless, we ended on a real high, with an exuberant sense of commitment and unity at the final plenary, and a wonderful evening Eucharist in the Cathedral, with Archbishop Rowan speaking splendidly at both. And after that . . . we boogied! OK, it was raining, and we were inside instead of on the lawns in the Precincts, but the Cathedral laid on supper and a big band, and it all felt rather surreal, with African bishops swaying and dancing to Latin rhythms, and certain UK bishops displaying amazing skills and energy as they jived into the night!

**And now . . .**

I need time to reflect and absorb all that I have heard and learnt, and then to share the experience of the Lambeth Conference more widely, and, to quote the Archbishop, 'to share a story that can make things happen'!

Jo Cundy

The Bishop of Peterborough's office, tel: 01733 562492.