

Briefing Paper: The Nairobi-Cairo Proposals – An Overview for Canadian Anglicans

I. Introduction

In February 2023, the 18th meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC-18), meeting in Ghana, commissioned the Inter Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith, and Order (IASCUFO) to consider and propose possibilities on “structure and decision-making to help address our differences in the Anglican Communion” (ACC-18, res. 3(a)). This task was an extension from the Lambeth 2022 call to review the Instruments of Communion toward this purpose. IASCUFO held subsequent meetings in Nairobi and Cairo in 2023, and the *Nairobi-Cairo Proposals* (NCP) were developed through the ecclesiological reflection of the commission and broader consultation with the Primates’ Standing Committee, the Archbishop of Canterbury (ABC), and the Standing Committee of the ACC.

The *Nairobi-Cairo Proposals* were published in Advent 2024, and IASCUFO requested feedback and reflection from the Communion as a whole in anticipation of ACC-19 in Ireland in 2026. This feedback ranged from formal responses from member churches to responses from interested and engaged individuals throughout the Anglican Communion.

Following a meeting in Rome in late 2025, the NCP *Supplement Paper*, issued in Lent 2026, sought to acknowledge and incorporate some of this feedback. In particular, the second of the proposals was amended in light of concerns that were raised throughout this period of consultation. The NCP, therefore, need to be read not only in their original 2024 form, but also with the modifications specified in 2026, in order to be understood in their more mature expression.

This present briefing paper seeks to provide a basic orientation to the significant features of the NCP and its Supplement and to offer some observations about some specific elements that may be of particular interest from Canadian Anglican perspectives. It is intended first and foremost to assist those representatives from the Anglican Church of Canada who will be attending ACC-19 in engaging the discussions that will take place there, and also as a helpful resource for bishops and other church leaders who have interest and opportunity to participate in the life of the Anglican Communion.

II. Historical Review

There have been at least 5 major studies by the Anglican Communion in the last 35 years which addressed similar issues to the Nairobi-Cairo Proposals. They were made in the light of disputed issues amongst member Provinces, and the fact that some churches within those Provinces broke away. Most of the reports considered how and whether such disputes could be addressed at the international level. In each case, the Anglican Church of Canada responded to them. A short summary follows.

1. Belonging Together, 1992. Produced by the Anglican Consultative Council on the topic of the exercise of authority within the Anglican Communion.

It addressed the need to strengthen interdependence in the Anglican Communion in the light of the development of greater cultural diversity within it. Without examining structures, it said that they should be based on mutual service and common mission. It noted that koinonia is also strengthened by liturgy, the understanding of Scripture tradition and reason, and common life in various forms,

2. Eames Commission, 1994. Written regarding the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate.

It encouraged “the various Provinces of the Communion to maintain the highest level of Communion possible, given disagreement over the practice of the ordination of women” and recommended a time of “open reception” during which no one would be compelled to accept or reject such ordinations.

Canada rescinded its “conscience clause” in 1986 before this request was made.

3. The Virginia Report, 1997. A product of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, the report was welcomed by the Lambeth Conference of 1998.

It reflected on the nature of communion (drawing heavily on the theology of koinonia addressed in current ecumenical dialogues); authority and mission (how authority is exercised within the communion to support its mission, advocating for a balance between local autonomy and shared responsibility); subsidiarity (proposed ‘that central authority should only perform tasks that cannot be handled at a local level’; and the ‘bonds of affection’ which hold the Anglican Communion together.

Canada, commenting on the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury in a preliminary report received by CoGS said “It is important to continue to look to the Archbishop of Canterbury as a symbol of and spokesperson for the Communion as a worldwide fellowship. Some offered that the role in many ways depends on personal charism – who the person is.”

With respect to the question of possible jurisdiction at the international level, Canada said:

“[L]egislative authority in Canada is synodical. If legislative authority were to be exercised at the international level, would there be full participation of all orders, and, representatively, all peoples? Some questioned the need for such legislative

power at all, saying, ‘collegiality and consensus building are preferable to legislation.’ Others reflected on the gifts that come from the lifting up of diverse voices, and worried that it would be inappropriate for the Anglican communion to seek to exercise legislative authority at the international level that would cause it to speak with ‘one voice’ in ways that silence legitimately differing voices in the Communion.”

4. The Windsor Report, 2004. Prepared by the Lambeth Commission on Communion, appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury to study problems stemming from the consecration of the first non-celibate, openly gay priest to be ordained as an Anglican bishop in the Episcopal Church, and the blessing of same-sex unions in the Anglican Diocese of New Westminster.

The report did not adopt a view on homosexual practice but nevertheless recommended a moratorium on further consecrations of actively homosexual bishops and public Rites of Blessing of same-sex unions, and called for all involved in Bishop Gene Robinson’s consecration “to consider in all conscience whether they should withdraw themselves from representative functions in the Anglican Communion.” However, it stopped short of recommending discipline against the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Church of Canada.

The report also recommended solidifying the connection between the churches of the Communion by having each church ratify an “Anglican Covenant” that would, in part, commit them to consulting the wider Communion when making major decisions.

The Canadian church accepted a period of moratorium, being present but not voting at a number of meetings at the Communion level. Of course, the majority of Canadian dioceses would later go on to approve of the blessing of same-gender unions and the celebration of same-gender marriages.

5. The Covenant Design Process was established in response to the Windsor Report. A proposed Covenant was sent to all member churches in 2009 with a request that they adopt it.

The Covenant text contained a description of the Instruments of Communion, including the following regarding the Archbishop of Canterbury: “The Archbishop of Canterbury, with whose See Anglicans have historically been in communion, is accorded a primacy of honour and respect as first amongst equals (*primus inter pares*). As a focus and means of unity, he gathers the Lambeth Conference and Primates’ Meeting, and presides in the Anglican Consultative Council.”

The Council of General Synod prepared a preliminary response, noting:

“We recognize that the community falls into disputes, and may need to have agreed upon means of resolving those conflicts as we stay at the table. However, we are troubled by Sections 5 & 6. Section 6 is an attempt to describe those means, but these sections have aspects which are non-synodical and raise serious concerns that will require broad consultation both in the Anglican Church of Canada and throughout the Communion. We are particularly concerned about 6.6. and the potential role and power of the Primates’ Meeting. We stress, as noted in para 31 of our response to Windsor, that this process needs to unfold over a much longer period of time, lest we create structures only in response to a particular crisis.”

In the end, not enough Provinces adopted the Covenant for the process to proceed.

Understanding this progression is helpful context for the Nairobi-Cairo Proposals, and for how they might be received in the Canadian context. It would seem they are a deliberate effort to step back from some earlier attempts to develop a juridical authority at the Communion level and instead encourage a loosening of the structures to allow for greater diversity amongst member Provinces while still retaining international structures of collegiality and consensus building.

III.1. Proposal 1 – The Basis of the Communion

Proposal 1 touches on the heart of Anglican ecclesiology and is essentially an attempt to redefine and refocus what the Anglican Communion is, both theologically and structurally. It more or less repeats recent Anglican reflection on this subject to stress that the Communion is not itself a church, but rather a family of interdependent but self-determining national or regional Provinces. Each of the churches of the communion seek to balance their shared inheritance of the catholic and apostolic faith historically expressed through Anglican formularies on the one hand, with the need and duty of each church to respond and adapt to the local culture and context in which it finds itself. They do this in relationships and consultation with one another, held together in varying degrees by shared history, shared mission, and shared structures of unity and common council.

As the Communion has grown and changed, the way these bonds of communion are experienced and exercised has also been evolving. As fresh areas of diversity in teaching and practice in various areas of ecclesial life and ministry have continued in our time across the Communion, one might say that those bonds have become stretched to a limit. Proposal 1, therefore, seeks to respond to this perceived reality by describing the Anglican Communion as a less tightly defined body, perhaps with not so much doctrinal gravity or juridical weight. It does this by altering the wording of the Lambeth 1930 definition of the Communion, and particularly by “decentering” communion with the See of Canterbury as the core criterion (though, importantly, not eliminating it). The intended result is not to

dissolve communion, but to allow additional space for a greater degree of structural and theological latitude within it – at least for a time.

Affirmations:

Though many Anglicans may give at least nuanced thanks for their particular historic rootedness, the default centrality of the Church of England within the Communion has become increasingly complex as the now global churches have recognized the need to move towards decolonial understandings and structures. A shift towards greater mutuality among Provinces to reflect the “polycentric” dynamics of being a global communion does seem like a potential positive, particularly as they might be manifested in the changes sought by Proposal 2.

Questions:

While it may be that Proposal 1 is simply trying to name honestly a change that has already come into effect in the thinking of many in the Communion, the relaxing of some of the historic bonds does inevitably lead to the question of what corresponding steps might be taken in other areas to uphold and deepen communion along spiritual and relational lines. It would seem to follow that the need to intensify energy and resources for relational and non-juridical means of building and sustaining communion is clear. The critical role of the Networks of the Anglican Communion, or of ‘unofficial’ initiatives such as the Consultation of Anglican Bishops in Dialogue, for example, are heightened. To fail to adequately support these kinds of bonds of communion would seem to be catastrophic at a time like this in the life of the Anglican Communion. We would like to see more attention given to this fact by IASCUFO and at ACC-19, and wonder if there are plans to do so.

Concerns:

The definition of a theology of communion, and of the Anglican Communion, are highly complex subjects. These are matters at the very heart of ecclesial identity, vocation, and self-understanding. To contemplate this level of change after a relatively short period of study, reflection, and discernment (one triennium between ACC-18 and ACC-19) seems like it may be rushed. This analysis is strengthened by the fact that the NCP Supplement was only released in March of 2026, without sufficient time for its clarifications and revisions (though very helpful!) to be fully digested by member churches. Perhaps a more prudent course of action would be to bring the aspects of Proposal 1 to ACC-19 for discussion and further feedback, rather than to push for affirmation and decision before there is sufficient clarity and consensus to do so.

III.2. Proposal 2 – The Instruments of Communion

While Proposal 1 focuses more on the “What” of the Communion, what we find in Proposal 2 is much more about the “How.” Proposal 2 reaffirms that the Instruments of Communion

– namely the Lambeth Conference, the Primates’ Meeting, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Archbishop of Canterbury – do not have legislative or coercive authority, but rather moral, relational, and persuasive. It also attempts to provide a clearer sense of the differentiation between the Instruments, and of each of their particular purposes in relation to the others. Within this is a strong impulse to enhance the role of the ACC as the representative synodal structure, without allowing for that Instrument to become a centralized disciplinary body.

The most specific changes advocated by Proposal 2 have to do with the ministry of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Put simply, we could say that it calls for the ABC to be understood less as the defining centre of the Communion and more as a pastoral servant of the Communion’s unity in diversity.

Affirmations:

The Anglican Communion has already seen anticipations of a more regionalized and conciliar sharing of the global charism of the ABC in recent years, for example with the Regional Primates. Efforts to continue to articulate this sense of synodically shared ministry and the inclusion of more geographical perspectives seems to be a healthy evolution in line with the decolonial and polycentric goals mentioned above. The notion that the leadership of the Communion should look like the Communion is compelling, and these changes help move things more in that direction.

In some respects, the conversations within the Anglican Church of Canada around the exercise of Primatial ministry together with the Provincial Metropolitans and National Indigenous Archbishop could be seen to mirror some of the same kinds of developments in ecclesiology and would seem to resonate with Canadian Anglican sensibilities in this regard. Canadian Anglicans might offer their own unfolding experience of this kind of adaptation to the needs of the present realities of regionality as a helpful sounding board on this point.

Questions:

These changes in the tone and exercise of the ministry of the Archbishop appear as though they could be made without having to alter the theological basis and definition of communion within the Anglican Communion. Understood in that way, they could be positive and influential shifts on their own and separate from those wider discussions in Proposal 1. Would it be possible to bring Proposal 2 forward for consideration and decision without doing the same with Proposal 1?

Concerns:

While there can be some good arguments made for structural changes to the way the Archbishop of Canterbury’s ministry is carried out in relation to the other Instruments of

Communion, it is important that these not be framed as weakening the ABC, nor as decoupling the personal and episcopal elements of the office, but rather as sharpening their focus along more pastoral lines. Having an historic, apostolic, and sacramental/episcopal office that serves as both a symbol and means of unity in the Communion has long been understood as an integral feature of the Anglican ecclesiological way. For a whole host of reasons – intra-Anglican and ecumenical alike – it seems very important not to discard this, even as it may be deemed necessary and beneficial to see some elements of the role shared more collegially to enhance the global character of the ministry.

IV. Conclusion

A key element in the Anglican story is the seemingly perpetual seeking of balance between unity and diversity, autonomy and interdependence, the local and the global. The Nairobi-Cairo Proposals are another chapter in that narrative. We are still learning how to be a global communion of many churches that began within the experience of a few very localized churches, and it turns out this is no easy calling. Naming the challenges and adapting our systems to what is in front of us is not abject failure but honest realism. But this is always done within the promise that communion is first and foremost God's gift and then also our calling. May that truth guide our Communion as these necessary conversations continue.