

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSIONS: AN EMERGING ISSUE FOR THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION

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A recent study suggests that from 1970 to the present there have been almost 90 Truth Commission-related activities around the world following periods of armed conflict and/or major human rights abuses, whether historic or recent.¹ Using five major criteria—truth, reconciliation, preventing recurrence, reparation and healing (as well as an additional emerging criterion, participation), the same study identifies 29 "true" Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) from the Bolivia National Commission of Inquiry into Disappearances in 1982 to recent TRCs in Canada, Kenya, Mauritius, Solomon Islands and Togo, all initiated in 2009. This year Brazil initiated a TRC process, to bring the number to 30. Perhaps the most famous of these was the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995) chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The exclusion of other TRC-related activities from this list, for example, the Rwanda TRC and *gacaca* courts which included identification of persons to be prosecuted, is not meant to underestimate their significance; rather only that they had primary goals other than the six noted above. As they are also very important, they are not excluded from consideration here.

The study points out that as TRCs have evolved from the eighties to the present, they have become increasingly public (that is, have held public rather than private hearings), participatory and victim-focussed. Yet this study and others point out that there has been little empirical research on the genuine effects of TRCs, particularly on victims, where there is danger of retraumatization in some situations,² or on states, where old conflicts might be refueled, or the TRC report not acted upon, although there has been discussion of the apparent failure of the amnesty provision of the South African TRC. Perhaps from a sense that every situation is unique, there has also been little communication across TRCs, although some is beginning (for example, the Solomon Islands TRC Commissioners visited South Africa and Timor-Leste before the inauguration of the SI TRC by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 2009. TRCs have begun to produce substantial research literatures, some cutting across TRCs in different parts of the world.

It should also be noted that during the period covered, there has been an increasing movement towards forming TRCs in post-conflict or post-human rights abuse situations. For example, by decades, 1980-89 saw only two TRCs formed; 1990-99, 11 TRCs; 2000-2009, 15 TRCs. As current situations of conflict eventually move to peace, it is not impossible to imagine new TRCs emerging (as is happening in Brazil), perhaps in places such as Zimbabwe, Fiji or countries of the Middle East.

¹ Guthrey, H.L. (forthcoming). Truth commissions as victim-centred bodies? Examining how victims fit into truth telling-processes after conflict.

² Brounéus, Karen, "Truth-telling as talking cure? Insecurity and retraumatization in the Rwandan *gacaca* courts", *Security Dialogue* 39:1 (2008), 55.

It is useful to list the 30 countries embarking on TRCs between 1982 and the present: Bolivia (1982), Argentina (1983), Uganda (1986), Chile (1990), Nepal (1990), Chad (1991), El Salvador (1992), Germany (1992), Sri Lanka (1994), Haiti (1995), South Africa (1995), Ecuador (1996), Guatemala (1997), Nigeria (1999), Uruguay (2000), Peru (2001), Serbia and Montenegro (2001), Ghana (2002), Sierra Leone (2002), Timor-Leste (2002), Democratic Republic of the Congo (2003), Morocco (2004), Paraguay (2004), Liberia (2006), Canada (2009), Mauritius (2009), Solomon Islands (2009), Togo (2009), Kenya (2009) and Brazil (2012). Other Truth-related commissions or inquiries might also be mentioned for Rwanda (1999 and 2002), Australia (1996), Granada (2001), the Philippines (1986) and Northern Ireland (1997).³ In the US, states and cities (for example, Detroit and Greensboro, NC) have also embarked upon TRCs as a way to address racial discrimination with roots in Afro-American slavery.

Of the 30 "true" TRCs listed above, I estimate that 23 took place in countries in which the Anglican/Episcopal Church has a significant presence. If one includes broader truth-related activities, the number increases further. In some cases (for example, South Africa, Canada, Solomon Islands), the Anglican Church was one of those advocating the formation of a TRC to address historic or recent situations of gross human rights abuse (apartheid in South Africa, abuse of children in church-run native schools in Canada, the "ethnic tension" conflict in Solomon Islands). In some cases (Canada, Rwanda), the Anglican Church was implicated in the abuse. There may be situations (Sri Lanka) where TRCs have been ineffectual or politically manipulated and the Anglican Church has distanced itself from them. In some cases (South Africa, Solomon Islands), prominent Anglicans have become TRC Commissioners or Chairs. In some cases (Canada), the Anglican Church has very actively cooperated with the TRC and shaped its church programme accordingly. (It should be pointed out that these roles as Commissioners or facilitators of TRCs are often very stressful and those concerned have sometimes lacked the pastoral support of the church.) In still other cases, the Anglican Church has looked forward to and participated in a TRC with great expectation, only to be disappointed when the government buries the TRC Report and does not act on it. This has been the recent experience in Solomon Islands.

TRCs also raise many theological and ethical issues for Christians (not just Anglicans). If the state takes on this primary role of truth-telling and reconciliation concerning abuses of the past, what should be the church's role in the process? Integration, membership, or critical distance? Should the church continue to develop its own programmes of forgiveness and reconciliation or should it hand this role over to the state? What if the state (the TRC) fails? How might the churches shape state TRCs, so that they are effective, not harmful, and accomplish Christian goals of justice, reconciliation, peace, forgiveness and resurrection? Another emerging question is whether public-truth telling always results in healing. What is the role of the local culture and its values in the truth-telling, healing and reconciliation process? TRCs often bring together state, culture and church; what is the church's role in this mix?

³ Both lists are derived from Guthrey, Appendix 1.

The Anglican Peace and Justice Network (APJN) of the Anglican Communion believes that Anglicans around the Communion have already had a great deal of experience of TRCs. Some provinces, dioceses and individuals may now be intimately involved in them; some may have positive or negative experiences of past TRCs or state-sponsored truth-related commissions or activities. Some may be in country situations in which a TRC is under consideration; what should the church's position be? Sadly, it cannot be assumed that all TRCs are unambiguously good or that a TRC is always appropriate. Are we prepared to look at difficult or challenging post-TRC situations? Despite all this experience and so many questions, there has been little communication across the Anglican Communion about our experience of TRCs. The APJN believes this is one important priority for the next phase of its work. We therefore recommend to the Anglican Consultative Council that:

- (1) In light of the TRCs and truth-related commissions listed above (as well as others not listed), the APJN conduct a survey of how provinces, dioceses and individuals of the Anglican Communion have related with their national TRCs and similar activities; and
- (2) If there is sufficient interest by those surveyed, funding be sought and an international conference organized for those in the Anglican Communion (provinces, dioceses, individuals) who have been involved directly with TRCs and TRC-related commissions and activities, or who are considering involvement in TRCs, so that the worldwide experience of the Communion on this issue may be shared and helpful directions for the future be discerned.

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