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Steven Hendrix | August 10, 2026

The Archbishop of Canterbury: An International Relations Perspective



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The Archbishop of Canterbury now exercises office at a moment when institutions are no longer taken for granted—either within the societies they serve or across the global communities they once helped to shape. The authority once associated with Canterbury has not disappeared, but it is now contested, fragmented, and often conditional.

The first months of any new ministry carry a certain grace period: introductions are made, relationships established, and the public learns the rhythms of a new leader. Archbishop Sarah has now largely passed through that period. The travel has begun, the first public interventions have been made, and the office is increasingly judged not by promise but by performance.

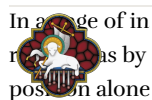
The office operates in a less deferential environment, where public authority must be established rather than assumed. The archbishop now leads an institution under scrutiny, internally divided, externally questioned, and operating in a world where many of the assumptions that once sustained religious authority no longer hold.

Covenant, TLC's Online Journal, regularly shares essays on the Anglican Communion that are informed by ecclesiology and missiology, the theological disciplines that shape how we understand the nature of the Church and its witness to Christ to the ends of the earth. What follows is a companion to this theological project, a brief which draws on international relations, dialogue, and global communications.

Institutional Trust

The first and most immediate reality shaping the office is institutional trust. This is often discussed in terms of safeguarding, compliance, and reform. These are necessary, but not sufficient. Across much of the Western world, the Church is no longer presumed to hold moral authority simply by virtue of its history or office.

A series of well-documented failures—some acknowledged, others still contested—have altered expectations of leadership. Where trust once preceded action, it must now be earned through it. Decisions are read not only for their substance, but for what they signal about accountability, transparency, and institutional integrity. Silence carries meaning. So does delay.



institutions. Governments, international organizations, universities, and media organizations are confronting similar questions of legitimacy and trust. The Church is not exempt from these pressures, but neither is it alone in facing them.

Fragmentation of the Communion

The second reality is the growing fragmentation of the Anglican Communion. This is often described in theological terms, but it is broader than that. The Communion is a global body operating in fundamentally different social, political, and cultural environments. The questions facing the Church in England are not the same as those facing it in Nigeria, Uganda, or the United States, nor are the answers easily reconciled.

What might once have been managed as internal disagreement now presents as structural divergence. Provinces increasingly define their positions according to local realities rather than a shared global consensus.

The challenge is less about resolving disputes than managing distance. Unity can no longer be assumed as uniformity. It must be understood as something more limited and more fragile. The task of leadership is therefore less one of command than of persuasion, relationship, and patient stewardship of disagreement.

The Shifting Center of Gravity

Growth within the Anglican Communion is now concentrated largely outside the United Kingdom, particularly in Africa and Asia. In those contexts, the Church is often expanding, socially embedded, and operating within very different political and cultural frameworks. In England and much of Europe, the pattern is the reverse.

This creates a structural imbalance. The historic center of authority remains in England, but the demographic—and increasingly the institutional vitality—of the Communion lies elsewhere. Communities that are growing in confidence and scale do not see themselves as peripheral, nor should they. They expect not merely consultation, but participation in leadership and decision-making. The future vitality of Anglicanism will increasingly depend upon churches that were once regarded as mission fields rather than centers of influence.

The challenge is not simply to preserve the Communion as it has been, but to navigate a reality in which its future is increasingly being shaped elsewhere.

Declining Institutional Religion

The fourth reality is the declining role of historic religious bodies across much of the Western world. This shift is often measured in attendance or affiliation, but the deeper change is cultural. The Church is no longer assumed to be a central reference point in public life or a primary source of moral authority.

Messages that once would have been received as guidance are now weighed alongside political, social, and digital voices competing for attention and credibility. This does not mean the Church has no voice. It means that influence can no longer rely upon inherited position. It must be established through clarity, consistency, and relevance.

The balance is delicate. Speaking too forcefully can be read as overreach. Speaking too cautiously can be taken as absence. The challenge is not whether the Church should speak, but how it can do so in ways that are both faithful and persuasive.

National Office, Global Expectations

The fifth reality lies at the intersection of national role, political context, and global moral expectation. The Archbishop of Canterbury occupies an office rooted in the constitutional life of the United Kingdom yet projected onto an international stage. In moments of crisis, voices from positions such as this are often

expected to speak



The office is therefore often perceived alongside other global moral figures, yet the authority underlying those expectations is diffuse and increasingly contested. The archbishop increasingly occupies a space once associated with figures whose influence derives less from formal authority than from credibility, consistency, and witness.

In many respects, the role increasingly resembles that of leaders of other global institutions whose influence depends less upon jurisdiction than upon the ability to convene, persuade, and articulate moral purpose across political and cultural boundaries.

Early engagement with Pope Leo XIV, together with subsequent international travel and public engagement, suggests an instinct toward ecumenical bridge-building and moral witness beyond the boundaries of the Anglican Communion itself. At a moment of war, displacement, and political fragmentation, such gestures matter. They suggest an understanding that the office of Canterbury can no longer operate solely as an English institution, but increasingly as part of a wider network of global moral leadership operating across faiths, traditions, and political divides.

At the same time, engagement with questions of migration, identity, inequality, or conflict is rarely received as politically neutral. This creates a dual tension: clarity on global issues may carry domestic consequences, while restraint at home may be interpreted elsewhere as absence or hesitation.

A Fragmented World

The final reality is the fragmentation of the world in which the Church now operates. Conflict, displacement, economic strain, and political polarization are no longer episodic disruptions but persistent conditions shaping the lives of those the Church seeks to serve. The institutions that once mediated these pressures are themselves under strain.

The expectation that religious leadership can provide coherence or moral clarity remains, but audiences are increasingly divided in their understanding of the problems themselves. Words intended to unify may be interpreted as taking sides. Efforts to engage across differences may be seen as dilution rather than bridge-building.

The Church's ability to act as a convening or stabilizing force is not given. It must be established—and re-established—across contexts that do not share the same assumptions or priorities.

Opportunity

These realities reflect broader changes in how authority—religious, political, and institutional—is understood and exercised. They converge with particular visibility in the office of Canterbury. Yet there is a corresponding opportunity.

At a time when few institutions—and fewer individuals—are able to speak across borders with credibility on questions of justice, human dignity, conflict, or stewardship of the planet, the platform of Canterbury remains unusually visible.

That visibility does not guarantee influence. But it creates the possibility. Authority in such a context is not asserted. It is recognized gradually through clarity, consistency, and presence over time. Leadership exercised with steadiness and discipline can broaden assumptions about who is recognized to speak with authority in public life. Leadership in such circumstances is less about defending inherited authority than demonstrating its continuing relevance.

Institutions survive periods of disruption not because they avoid change, but because they demonstrate an ability to adapt without surrendering the principles that justify their existence. The Anglican tradition includes



Engagement across faiths and traditions will not be peripheral to that mission. It will be central to addressing conflict, displacement, and the wider pressures shaping global life. The office of Canterbury faces these responsibilities at a demanding time, but also at a moment when clarity, steadiness, and discipline in leadership may matter more than they have in years.



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Steven Hendrix is a Guest Writer. He has served with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and his publications include over 100 professional journal essays including in Harvard International Review. He is an attorney in Civil Law (Bolivia, Guatemala) and Common Law (Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and DC) jurisdictions. He is married to the Rev. Julia Hendrix, rector of St. Anne's Church, De Pere, Wisconsin.