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The Archbishop of Birmingham has said he understands those frustrated with ecumenical dialogue but stressed the long term aim is "full visible unity".

Archbishop Bernard Longley was speaking to The Tablet days before members of Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) gathered for their latest round of meetings in Hong Kong, which was due to start on Friday.

"I do understand those doubts, misgivings, and sometimes frustrations and disappointments particularly on the part of those people who have committed many years to dialogue and who at the outset thought the prospects of unity were much more realistic than they are now. New challenges, new obstacles have come in the way in the path of unity," the archbishop, who is co-chairman of ARCIC III, said. "At the same time that mustn't deflect us. And it hasn't deflected the Catholic Church from our commitment to search for a way towards the unity that we believe is the will of Christ for all the baptised."

He added that "the ultimate goal is full, visible unity", although "we should also aim toward the attainable goals on the way and a very important one is to deepen our witness together especially in public life".

Archbishop Longley said he hoped that the idea of an Anglican Covenant - rejected by a majority of dioceses in England - would not be completely lost as it "offered an opportunity" to strengthen the Communion.

The meeting of ARCIC III in Hong Kong is the second meeting of the third phase of ARCIC which is examining the question of moral decision-making within the local and universal Church. The other chairman is Anglican Archbishop David Moxon, from New Zealand: the two archbishops were friends while undergraduates at Oxford University.

Archbishop Longley explained that thorny questions such as women bishops would not be avoided. "The specific question of the ordination of women to the presbyterate and the episcopate in the Church of England is obviously a very important decision within the Church of England. We wouldn't ignore that," he said. The archbishop pointed out that one of the members of ARCIC was a woman bishop in Canada, Linda Nicholls.

On the question of the next Archbishop of Canterbury, Archbishop Longley hoped Dr Rowan Williams' successor "would continue the strong teaching role which Archbishop Rowan has performed so successfully".

Christopher Lamb - The Tablet