

## The Anglican Communion Covenant – A Closer Look

Our first talk gave the background to the stresses in the Anglican Communion and explained how the covenant had been developed in accordance with the recommendations of the Windsor Report to help address the deep roots of the problem. Now we get to grips with the covenant itself.

The covenant document is required reading. This paper indicates in a very general way its content; and then looks in detail at section 4, which is proving the most controversial part.

Eventually after wider consultation and discussion a motion in relation to the covenant is likely to be put forward at our Synod and the result forwarded to General Synod as our Province defines its position.

A. There is an Introduction to the Covenant Text which is itself not part of the Covenant, but sets the scene for it. It begins by quoting 1 John 1: 2-4. It presents the key word 'communion' in relation to God's revelation, to apostolic witness and to the common life of believers in communion with 'the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ' – which means that 'communion' is not a minor theme of scripture but central to the movement of the Holy Spirit from God and to God.

1. Communion is not merely an abstract human concept but a true participation in divine life displayed through the life of the church.
2. God's purpose in calling us into communion in Christ extends to all humankind.
3. The gift of communion entails responsibilities for our common life; the Body of Christ is built up by mutual love, grace, and submission.
4. The Universal Church contains various families. The Anglican Church has a particular identity and spiritual gift. Mutual commitment and discipline is needed to maintain the life of divine communion in this era of instability.
5. We will covenant together to be faithful to God's promises in the shared historic faith, in common worship, mission and life together.
6. To covenant together is not to change Anglicanism, rather to renew commitment and affection to one another in Anglican faith and order.
7. Affirms the centrality of God's word, of worship and prayer, apostolic mission and Christian unity.
8. Affirms the continuity of the life of the church in the purpose and grace of God, issuing in our mission to the world, carried out in shared responsibility, stewardship and interdependence.
9. Concludes with a prayer for the life and witness of the Anglican Church in the redemptive power of God.

All this by way of scene setting – and not even part of the covenant!

We might ask, what is the church not, in the light of this introduction. It is clearly not an institution of merely human origin, not a political grouping, not an administrative arrangement. It is more than a convenient gathering of individuals of common Christian sentiment. It is a communion; and the introduction seeks to root that term theologically in concepts like revelation, divine life, divine covenant. From this flow concepts of responsibility and interdependence; and the Anglican covenant is justified as an instrument of renewal and mutual re-commitment in a time of fragmentation. The introduction is an essential mean to call us to a serious and coherent understanding of

how communion is a key aspect of the life of faith and therefore to be guarded and supported.

## B. The Anglican Communion Covenant

The preamble introduces the idea of affirmations and commitments made by the Churches of the Communion. The purpose of these affirmations is

1. more effective proclamation of the grace of God
2. more effective response to needs of the world
3. to maintain the unity of the Spirit
4. to attain together to the full stature of Christ

There are four sections to the covenant

### The first is "Our Inheritance of Faith".

Note that both the canons and formularies of individual provinces, and the international agreements and reports of Anglicanism, are theologically founded, and that the affirmations of section 1:1 are meant to be consistent with these agreements, this inheritance of Faith. This section is meant to be a summary of what the Church has received, lived by and developed through.

1:1 affirms Trinitarian faith in the terms of the Creeds

1:2 affirms the 'catholic and apostolic faith'. The importance of contextualization is acknowledged on the one hand, and the historic testimony of the 39 articles and BCP on the other.

11.3 to 11.6 reflects the Lambeth Quadrilateral ie: four points fundamental to Anglican Faith affirmed in the late nineteenth century in response to the Roman declaration of the nullity of Anglican orders.

11:3 Scripture as containing all things necessary to salvation, the role and ultimate standard of faith.

11:4 the Apostles' and Nicene Creed.

11:5 the two sacraments ordained by Christ – baptism and the supper of the Lord – with Christ's words of institution and the elements ordained by him.

11:6 the historic episcopate, locally adapted.

11:7 affirms the Prayer Book tradition, 'the shared patterns of common prayer and liturgy'.

11:8 affirms the mission of the church derived from the apostles.

Section 1:1 then points to common elements in our inheritance, theological, liturgical and administrative.

Section 1:2 goes on to affirm the Anglican way of living out this inheritance – ie. how are we going to use these resources. It understands these elements as theological sources rather than as confessional standards.

- 1.2.1 commits to acting in continuity and consistency with Anglican Common Councils and agreements about scripture, faith, order and tradition.
- 1.2.2 emphasises an Anglican pattern of Christian theological and moral reasoning answerable to scripture and tradition.
- 1.2.3 affirms the centrality of the death and resurrection of Christ, the renewal of humanity and creation in Christ and the call to holiness these entail.
- 1.2.4 calls for theologically informed communal reading of scripture.
- 1.2.5 expands on this, demanding faithful and coherent interpretation of Scripture in the expectation that hereby the Church and world will be renewed.
- 1.2.6 recognises the importance of prophetic leadership.
- 1.2.7 upholds the obligation to sustain Eucharistic communion ‘in accordance with existing canonized disciplines’.
- 1.2.8 affirms the discernment of the Spirits teaching.

This section is thus about how we live out the inheritance of faith respectful both of the word and spirit, of the tradition and the prophetic role of the church. The assumption is that there are authentically Anglican ways of doing these things.

Section 1 was about Anglican foundations.

Section 2 is about the life we share, our vocation to communion as Anglicans.

- 2.1.1 affirms communion as God’s gift, as ground for the Church’s witness and its character as a sign of God’s reign.
- 2.1.2 affirms that we are a historic community called now into ‘a more fully developed communion life’.
- 2.1.3 acknowledges the fallenness of the church.
- 2.1.4 announces the requirement that the church fulfil its mission and vocation in establishing God’s reign.
- 2.1.5 affirms that the Anglican Church is only a part of the universal church and that we seek the day when ‘all may be one’.

Subsection 2.2 commits the church, in the light of the foregoing principles, to certain actions and goals.

- 2.2.1 requires us as Anglicans to join in mission in mutual accountability and resource sharing.
- 2.2.2 recognises the mission of God in Christ can be summarized in the five fold Anglican Mission Statement which is quoted (2.2.2 a to e).
- 2.2.3 calls for humility
- 2.2.4 for the renewal of mission structures and vocation.
- 2.2.5 affirms that mission must be rooted in true worship and Eucharistic communion.

This section thus shows that the Church’s nature is founded in our communion in God and that this communion is central in the fulfillment of God’s mission.

In effect the document is intertwining the fact of communion in the whole movement from God, and to God, of God’s salvation; it is re-inforcing the importance, the supreme value of communion as integral to the redemption of the world in and through Christ. It

is trying to make us aware how precious and central this gift, and therefore how important it is for us to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. In this sense the covenant is not a set of doctrinal standards, but a theological account of life in communion in Christ.

Section 3.1 now addresses more specifically “Our life and Communion in Christ”.

- 3.1.1 affirms our incorporation into the body of Christ and the consequent call to pursue unity in Christ.
- 3.1.2 states each signatory churches resolves to live in a communion of churches. This is a communion in autonomy and accountability. Each province is independent and responsible (autonomy), but through the Holy Spirit a shared common life is enabled (accountability). The unity of the Anglican Church is not secured legalistically but by a mutual loyalty sustained through the instruments of communion.
- 3.1.3 affirms the ministry of bishops, priests and deacons in the mission and unity of the church.
- 3.1.4 describes the functions of the four ‘instruments’ of Anglican Communion which assist in the living out of our shared common faith and life.

Section 3.2 becomes increasingly pointed about the expectations of the covenant for actions which build up the common life of the communion.

3.2.1 Each church, reliant on the Holy Spirit commits itself to ‘have regard for the common good of the communion, especially to receive counsel from the instruments and to ‘endeavour to accommodate their recommendations’. The following points expand on what is necessary for this.

- 3.2.2 respects constitutional autonomy and upholds mutual responsibility and interdependence in the Body of Christ.
- 3.2.3 calls for prayerful and intelligent mutual discernment of the will of God.
- 3.2.4 requires churches to seek a common mind about matters of common concern.
- 3.2.5 (an important clause) asks for the exercise of diligence care and caution in respect of any actions which by its intensity substance or extent’ could threaten the unity and the mission of the communion.
- 3.2.6 commits to good faith mediation.
- 3.2.7 asks us to uphold the highest degree of common for Christ’s sake.

This important section attempts to balance the imperatives of autonomy and interdependence, on the one hand being led by the Spirit into all the truth and on the other recognizing this inherent necessity of seeking unity in communion. 3.2.5 asks for a heightened awareness of the impact of one church’s actions upon the well being and faith of other churches.

Section 4 - “Our covenanted life together” - has aroused the greatest controversy. It concerns the practicalities of the implementation of this covenant. It is this section that we need particularly to respond to.

- 4.1.1 the adoption of the covenant is a commitment to relationships in submission to God.

- 4.1.2 expresses the recognition that sections 1 – 3 of the covenant adequately express the nature of Anglican life, faith and communion and therefore are foundational requirements for relationship among covenanting churches.
- 4.1.3 another important clause, states that commitment to the covenant does not mean any province submits to any church body beyond its borders. Nothing is altered in any province's constitution and no limit is put on its autonomy of governance.
- 4.1.4 all members of the Anglican Consultative Council (ie. all the current communion) are invited to sign up.
- 4.1.5 The instruments of Communion may invite further churches to sign up.
- 4.1.6 The covenant is activated for a church when adopted.

4.2 This section is about the maintenance of the covenant and the disputes resolution procedures if there is *a very serious dispute* between parties.

- 4.2.1 states that the covenant allows us to recognize that we are in communion with each other as Anglicans and outlines the core elements of Anglicanism which sustain that communion and for which we are accountable to each other.
- 4.2.2 the functioning of the Covenant shall be monitored by the "Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion". (note: unfortunately there is some political controversy over what this body actually is, as it is not one of the instruments of communion\_
- 4.2.3 questions may arise about the covenant or the compatibility of local developments with the covenant. If so, the provisions of section 3:2 must be conscientiously followed. Such questions may be raised by any church or instrument of communion.
- 4.2.4 after following the procedure of section 3.2 it may be that a shared mind has still not been reached. Then the matter is referred to the Standing Committee which will consult and take advice as appropriate, facilitate agreement, and consider relational consequences. Consequences may follow.
- 4.2.5 Standing Committee may request a church to defer a controversial action. It may, if this is refused, recommend to any Instrument of Communion 'relational consequences' – ie. limitation or suspension of participation in communion common life.
- 4.2.6 on advice from the ACC and Primates meeting the Standing Committee may declare a church's action to be 'incompatible with the covenant' Standing Committee shall make recommendations as to relational consequences flowing from an action incompatible with the covenant. It would define the limitation or impairment of communion caused by the action, and the practical consequences in terms of relationships and involvement in communion life. It would be up to each Church or Instrument to determine whether or not to accept the recommendations.
- 4.2.7 only those churches which have accepted the covenant will be involved in this decision making about the covenant.
- 4.2.8 participating churches undertake to make administrative arrangements to oversee the maintenance of these affirmations and commitments.

4.3 Withdrawal Churches may withdraw from the covenant. This may, but does not necessarily, trigger the disputes procedure. It does not in itself imply withdrawal from the Instruments.

- 4.4.1 a weird clause.
- 4.4.2 a procedure for altering the covenant.

### Some Concluding Remarks

Sections 1 – 3 merit serious attention because they give an account of Anglicanism in relation to God's revelation of Godself and the mission of God in which we participate by the Holy Spirit.

The covenant does not set out doctrinal standards, but rather the sources and character of Anglican belief, life and Christian reasoning, which have served us in the past and which can serve us for the future. It's a document of practical guidance. The more adequate one finds its account of Anglican practice, the more compelling the case for the covenant might be.

A series of possible responses to sections 1 – 3 presents itself.

Some might want doctrinal standards spelt out in a tighter way. Some might in principle decline a document based on past practice as prescriptive for our day. Some might accept the premises but waive the conclusions. Some might simply decline the account given.

To the first position it could object that Anglicanism has never been a confessional church; to the second it could be said Anglicanism is after all a church of canons and formalities; to the third the question should be put, do you really understand what you have read; to the fourth, are you treating a document that has been hammered out so arduously with sufficient respect, and intellectual integrity, and do your alternatives address the substantive issues.

Section 4 is the nub of current discussion. Many fear it sets up a body that can dictate to individual provinces. But the logic of the document is different to this. The Covenant shows how integral communion is to the Gospel; it shows what makes for communion and it tries to outline a way of dealing with the situation when communion is broken. Communion is relational, not institutional, a matter of loyalties, not legalities.

What the covenant envisages, in a case of a breakdown of communion based on divergent practice, is a process of discernment issuing in recommendations. No mechanism exists to interfere in the internal life of the church. Adherence is entirely voluntary – because this is the character of communion.

What of punitive consequences? These are limited to suspension from international bodies and relationships in the Anglican Communion. They cannot interfere with the decisions of provinces directly. And in fact are they rightly called punitive? The covenant calls them relational.

To understand this we need only consider what is happening on the ground now. Some Bishops and Archbishops are already withdrawing from the various committees of the communion in protest at breaches of communion. Some Dioceses are abandoning their provinces and joining other provinces. Lawsuits are rife in the USA. Alternative networks of Provinces are developing in some places. Over a quarter of Bishops

boycotted the last Lambeth. We face an unregulated breakdown of the communion with dramatic relational consequences.

What the covenant envisages is a disputes procedure to bring some order, discernment and wisdom into our relationships. Its justification for reserving a power to suspend covenanting churches from the instruments is that, by ignoring the counsel of the instruments, churches in breach of the covenant have taken a position where it makes so sense for them to represent the communion.

What the covenant does to a dissenting church is to spell out to it the cost of 'going alone'. It does not prevent 'going alone' or 'walking apart' – but a church which does so, does in full knowledge of the issues and the impact on other churches.

If we apply this to the classic case of the Reformation, we see a situation where the call of conscience drove the Anglican Church to walk apart from Rome. The schism was and is immensely regrettable. On the whole we would still say it was necessary at that time. Nothing in the covenant prevents such costly walking apart. It will be shown who was right and who was wrong on the last day.

Back when the Windsor Report was written it was foreseen that the Anglican Communion could well break down under the present circumstances. The covenant was therefore recommended in the Windsor Report as a way of holding the communion in a meaningful conversation and giving the issues sufficient time and attention. The breakdown appears to be going ahead, though this is not certain. Is the covenant the way forward? Our Diocese will express its mind to General Synod and this consultation is part of that process