

Baby's First Steps

Can the Covenant Proposal ever walk?

Canon Gregory K Cameron

Deputy Secretary General of the Anglican Communion

Secretary of the Covenant Design Group

There was a moment in May 2003 when the Anglican Communion Office staff came out of a very difficult session of the Primates' Meeting in Gramado in Brazil. 'That was pretty tough going, wasn't it?' I said to a colleague, who replied:, 'You haven't seen anything yet; just you wait until after New Hampshire!'. At that stage, New Hampshire meant nothing to me except that it was a state where an early primary for the presidential election takes place. "What's going to happen in New Hampshire?" I asked, and he said 'Well, the bishop they are going to elect is in an open gay relationship'. The rest is history...

That event during the summer changed the face of Anglicanism. The Primates, in May 2003, had taken a decision that they were meeting a little too often and decided that they would extend the gap between Primates Meetings' from one year to two years. They found themselves meeting six months later! At that point, October 2003, they decided that they would appoint the Lambeth Commission on Communion. I was appointed as Secretary to that commission, and, although my initial appointment was as director of Ecumenical Affairs, my work became increasingly less ecumenical affairs, and more in looking after what has been called the Windsor-Lambeth process.

Koinonia Ecclesiology

However, it is important not to forget the ecumenical context. Let us not pretend that the debates going on within Anglicanism are about an Anglican problem. Issues of human sexuality are indeed an ecumenical problem and each church is facing the same tensions, both over the relationship of the local church to the universal, as well as over the ethical issues that we are facing. Many of those churches are looking at how the Anglican Communion is solving its tensions, as mirrors or templates for the way in which they themselves will have to address those questions in due course.

It is the ecumenical world above all others that has developed that *koinonia* theology of the Church which has been so present in discourse in the Christian world during the 20th century. Two of the reasons why *koinonia* ecclesiology has become so prominent are because it offers some very distinct insights.

First, it offers an egalitarian model of the Church as opposed to a hierarchical one. Secondly, it offers a porous model of the Church rather than one which is strictly demarcated. 'Egalitarian' in the sense that a *koinonia* ecclesiology sees all members of the Church living in relationship with one another, rather than being subject to a particular structure or hierarchy: 'porous' because it allows the whole of the people of God, even across the different denominations, to be drawn together to a greater or lesser degree into the life which is at the core of the Church. Those two aspects of equality and porosity are ones which we need to hold on to very strongly.

There is a third personal reason which commends a *koinonia* ecclesiology: it reflects most clearly my own experience of Christian discipleship. It is that sense of encounter with Christ that we discover in another disciple, in another Christian, which is so profoundly important to my own experience of being a disciple. The tremendous experience for me which flowed from being appointed Director of Ecumenical Relations for the Anglican Communion was that suddenly I was able to meet with the whole *oikumene* of God's Church: I was able to meet with Anglican Christians from the USA, from New Zealand, from Singapore, from South Africa; I was able to meet with Christians from the huge diversity of the Christian families across the globe, from the Oriental Orthodox to the Pentecostals. Indeed, one of the deepest ironies for me is that having been appointed to a post whose brief is to build *koinonia* and to deepen fellowship, I find that my own Communion is beginning to squabble and endanger that *koinonia* we have with one another.

This reminds us that if we adopt a *koinonia* ecclesiology, the biggest criticism that can be offered of it is the failure of the Church to live by it. One significant criticism of the Windsor Report is that the Windsor Report is too idealistic in the presentation that it makes of our life together. Simon Goldhill's book, *Love, Sex and Tragedy: Why we should study the Classics*, has a chapter that looks at the classical history of Christianity with a very sharp gaze, and observes just how violent and quarrelsome early Christianity was. We're apt to forget that. We're apt to idealise the past and see the controversies of the present time as recent expressions of church life, when the truth is that as Christians we have a woeful record of failing to live up to the standards of *koinonia* which is the will of the Lord for the Church.

The Crisis of Anglicanism in the 21st Century

When we come to describe the current crisis, it was Archbishop Rowan Williams who, speaking to the Anglican delegates gathered at the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre about 12 months ago, said that the difficulty about the current crisis in the Anglican Communion is that as Anglicans we are failing to recognise the patterns of obedience to Christ in one another; there are patterns of obedience to Christ which are fundamental to Christian discipleship and that those patterns are no longer recognisable across the Communion. In the USA or the Global North the pattern of obedience is deeply committed to questions of justice and inclusion, and which can find a pattern of obedience based on strict faithfulness to Scripture just too limiting and too prejudiced. In the Global South the pattern of obedience is based on faithful adherence to Scripture, and there are many who see the discipleship of the churches of the Global North as one which is abandoning the standards of faith by which they live. The real challenge in the 21st century for Anglicans is whether we can recover a sense of recognising those patterns of obedience in each other once more.

Are we committed to learning how Christ is speaking to the different parts of our Church, and allowing Christ to speak to us through them? There are three hallmarks of the life of *koinonia* which need to be commended to the Church today. First of all - humility, which is an attitude of being ready to see Christ at work in the other, rather than in oneself. Secondly, generosity, which is giving the best interpretation to what others are seeking to articulate, rather than the worst. Thirdly, hospitality, which is ensuring that the Christian community that we build is one in which people feel safe to express what God has laid on their heart, rather than what they think they need to

say in order to qualify for membership. Humility, generosity, hospitality. These are fundamental to the experience of *koinonia*. These are fundamental to the worship that I experience as an Anglican travelling across the globe. They are fundamental to the success of meetings like this. It is only if we can meet in the expectation that we are ready to learn, to listen to what others are going to say to us, where we create a community where people are free to speak their mind, where we are as generous as possible in listening to what others have to say, that a meeting like this could be successful even if members of other groups like *Fulcrum* are here!

One of the fundamental things about *koinonia*, which was one of the fundamental insights of the Windsor Report, is that if this is true of the individual level of Christian discipleship, it should be true as well at the level of the way in which one church relates to another. What can be said of the way in which two Christians walk together should be true of the way in which two churches relate to one another as well. When the Lambeth Commission on Communion met, it recognised this as one of the fundamental problems in the life of the Communion today – that there was fundamentally a breakdown of trust, that the churches of the Global South no longer trusted the churches of the North in their discipleship, and that the churches of the North were becoming increasingly distrustful of the agenda and of the gospel values of the Global South.

Finding a Way Forward

How did the Lambeth Commission on Communion seek to change that? If you ask a group of Christians for the solution to any problem, they tend to put forward a solution which is a mirror of their own discipleship. Say to the Anglican Communion Legal Advisors' Network 'How do we solve the tensions in the Anglican Communion?' and they reply 'What you need is an international code of canon law.' Ask the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission the same question and they say, as they said in their meeting in September 2006, 'We need an Inter-Anglican Doctrinal Tribunal that will solve the tensions by offering an authoritative doctrinal assessment of any development.' As a canon lawyer myself I'm afraid I find all too appealing the idea of an international body of Anglican canon law.

It was an idea that the Lambeth Commission played with a great deal, to the extent that they commissioned some of the canonists within their membership to develop the shape of what an international code of Anglican canon law might look like. This goes alongside a process that the Anglican Communion Legal Advisors' Network is undertaking at the moment, where they are looking at the existing canon law of the 38 provinces and trying to say how Anglican canon law still coheres. They have found a remarkable coherence. The network has found in the order of 600 principles of canon law which are the same across 38 different Provincial bodies of canon law. That those patterns of canon law are so similar should give us a certain level of confidence about Anglican integrity and shared identity,. When the members of the Lambeth Commission came to discuss it, however, they were profoundly uncertain that such an approach was the right one. The feeling was that it was overly juridical, overly codified and not flexible enough to capture something of the life of the Spirit in the Churches. Rather, the Commission turned to the concept of Covenant as one which was far more dynamic, and far more rooted in the Christian tradition than ideas of

juridical codification. And so the idea of an Anglican Covenant was born in the Windsor Report published in October 2004.

The Anglican Covenant

Jewellers assess the quality of a diamond by the four 'C's: by its cut, its carats, its colour and its clarity. I'm not an expert on diamonds but I do want to offer you four 'C's of my own. Four words, each beginning with 'c', although three of them are not being proposed for the Anglican Communion.

1. Contract

How first of all is the idea of a covenant different to that of a contract? What is being proposed for the Anglican Communion is not a contract. This is where I would want to take issue with the sort of definition which says that a covenant is a solemn agreement to perform an action. A contract is when a person makes a solemn agreement with someone else - 'If you do this, I will do that' or 'I will do this, if you will do that'. It's a bilateral agreement to do something, to enact something, to complete something. Then the contract is completed – finished. When we complete the sale of a house, for example, the end of a contract is to finish a relationship, completing the sale of a house, with the parties going their separate ways. I don't think that what the Communion is asking for is a contract, a binding agreement that churches will perform this, or deliver that.

2. Confession

The second 'C' with which to contrast the covenant is a 'Confession'. Christians have already been through that period of history when the Church survived by producing confessions: the Thirty-nine Articles; the Westminster Confession; the Augsburg Confession, and so on. They were very useful and they contributed a great deal to the life of the Church, but the reality is that life in the Church today is far more diverse than it was in the 16th century and, on the whole, laity are far better educated than they were in the 16th century. The idea that a small group of people could write an exhaustive definition of Christianity to which 80 million Anglicans in all corners of the globe are expected to sign up is a very difficult task indeed. Furthermore, the idea of a confession is difficult because Christians never know what the next doctrinal disagreement is going to be about. We could write the fullest confession we could envisage and tomorrow we will find that someone in the Church is offering some new and radical interpretation which we just hadn't thought about.

3. Code

Finally, the proposal is not an attempt to develop a 'Code'. I have already mentioned on the idea of an international Code of Canon Law. I am persuaded that the Anglican Churches would benefit from a clearer understanding of the law which unites them rather than that which divides them. However, the idea of a Code falls prey to many of the ideas expressed in the idea of a confession. It's impossible to cope with all the circumstances that arise.

Some time ago the Cameron family went to stay with another family. In the course of the weekend, the families decided that it would be a pleasurable thing to have a board game. The Cameron family and the Hardman family played *Monopoly*. This might appear to have been fairly straightforward, but then someone landed on the square marked 'Go'. Someone said that if you land on the square marked 'Go', you get £400, not £200. Someone else, during their first time round the board, wanted to buy Leicester Square. "You don't start buying property until the second time round the board," someone objected. It turned out that the Cameron received rules of playing Monopoly were very different to the Hardman received rules of playing Monopoly! The trouble with a code is that codes change to meet specific circumstances, and specific circumstances vary, particularly in a global communion where 44 churches, or 38 churches and 6 extra-provincial jurisdictions, have very different circumstances to address.

4. *Covenant*

So by proposing a covenant, the proposal is not that the Anglican Communion should adopt a contract, a confession or a code. What then is a Covenant about? Other essays in this collection give very powerful expositions, but at the heart of the idea of covenant is the biblical context in which a covenant is a promise to behave in a certain way, a solemn undertaking to by one to adopt a particular attitude towards another. It isn't so much a contract which is an agreement to deliver a specific action, but to have regard to a person in a particular way, to behave consistently towards them in a particular manner. It is quintessentially represented by the Covenant between God and the people of Israel – "I will be your God, and you will be my people."

This, I think, must be at the heart of any future Anglican covenant. The two concepts of communion and covenant must be inextricably linked. It's the way in which the Anglican churches behave with one another: meeting with one another as equals, with hospitality and with generosity, which will enable our Communion to survive and flourish in the 21st century.

This discourse is rather flippantly entitled "*Baby's First Steps*"! What is meant by that? The baby which I think that we're trying to encourage to mature is the baby of global Anglicanism in which the family of 44 churches can live together. The covenant could be the way to enable that living together to flourish.

The Covenant Process

In terms of formal process, the idea of the covenant was proposed in the Windsor Report and accepted by two of the Instruments of Communion at the Primates' Meeting in Dromantine, assuming that the Archbishop of Canterbury gave his assent to the proposal at that point. The thirteenth meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC-13) at Nottingham also gave its assent, so three Instruments of Communion are now on board. At the meeting of the Joint Standing Committee of the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates last March the paper '*Towards an Anglican Covenant*' was adopted. The paper asked for two things, firstly for the establishment of a Covenant Design Group which would carry the work of drafting a covenant forward, and secondly that the paper '*Towards an Anglican Covenant*' would itself become a consultation paper for discussion and contribution across the

Communion. A number of responses have already been received, for example, the Affirming Catholicism response and the Inclusive Church response. Many other groups and individuals are making responses to that paper. When the Covenant Design Group first met in Nassau, Bahamas, last week under the chairmanship of Archbishop Drexel Gomez, it already saw tabled in the order of 32 papers and contributions to the discussion. More are welcome.

The Design Group will make an interim report to the Primates at their meeting in Tanzania next month. The good news is that the Group made enough progress to be able to give a positive report to them. I very much hope that the Primates will choose to make that interim report part of the process and consultation that goes on in the Communion. We need a process by which all the Communion is drawn into discussion of the covenant. (Subsequent to the meeting at which this paper was given, the Primates met in Tanzania at the end of February 2007 and did authorize such a process.)

There is a question about who signs a covenant on behalf of the Provinces of the Anglican Communion. Should it be the ACC as the body which is most synodical within the life of the Communion and the only body which has a constitution for its Communion role, within which, already, is something about the terms of membership of the Communion. Should it be the Lambeth Conference, the gathering of the 850 bishops of the Anglican Communion, since those gathered are the chief pastors of their dioceses and therefore in theory most able to speak on behalf of their dioceses? Indeed, it has been argued that it is the Lambeth Conference which is the most representative body of the Communion since there is at least one person from each diocese present.

Is it the Provinces themselves who have to agree to the covenant? Any covenant that is going to work in the life of the Communion must be one in which each of the churches of the Anglican Communion find themselves described. That is probably the essential point. The covenant will only work if, when people read it, they are able to say 'yes, this is a statement about the church to which I belong and to which I wish to continue to belong'. And this is no mean task.

There is an old story about a particular Shaker congregation in North America which was riven with argument. The older people and the young people of the congregation were in bitter dispute because it seems the younger members of the congregation wanted too much riotous dancing in their worship. The older members found this very upsetting. The elders met to try to solve the problem. The solution they came up with was this: At future occasions of worship, the older members of the church should sit around the edge of the church, rather than in the centre. The young people should be allowed to dance in the centre. But as they danced around in the centre of the church, whenever they passed the older members they should stop and bow to them, and the older members in turn would stand and bow respectfully to the younger people. That, I believe, sums up the attitude of *koinonia*. That is the behaviour to which we must be committed in an Anglican covenant.