

**Affirming Catholicism**  
Inspiration and hope  in the Anglican Communion

**Response to Consultation Paper,  
*Towards an Anglican Covenant***

**The Standing Committee of Affirming Catholicism**

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## Introduction

**Affirming Catholicism recognises the importance of clarifying the theological basis of the bonds of affection which have held Anglican Christians together, and welcomes the drawing out the practical and process implications of such ecclesiological reflection.**

1. Given that the Anglican Primates and a significant number of other bodies have asked the permanent bodies of the Communion to move ahead with the production of a Covenant, *Affirming Catholicism* welcomes the paper *Towards an Anglican Covenant* as offering a concise, comprehensive and dispassionate account of the issues involved for the Anglican Communion in developing the sort of Covenant suggested in *The Windsor Report (TWR)*. The issues are clear, well-expressed, to the point, and well-reasoned. *Affirming Catholicism* welcomes the emphasis placed on the idea of making explicit many of the implicit 'bonds of affection' ('unspoken conventions of mutual respect')<sup>1</sup> which have been presupposed through the history of the Anglican Communion, but which have often only been systematized in a piecemeal and often inadequate way. We agree that there is a need for the Communion, as spelt out by the Archbishop of Canterbury, to create 'a set of adequately developed structures which is able to cope with the diversity of views that will inevitably arise in a world of rapid global communication and huge cultural variety'.

### *The goal of covenanted relationships*

2. *Affirming Catholicism* welcomes the realism of *TAC* with its recognition of the many difficulties involved in the development and implementation of a Covenant (see e.g. §13): the dangers of centralisation (the creation of an Anglican papacy) and blandness (a vacuous statement) are both acknowledged. Similarly, there is a recognition that a Covenant will not be the panacea to all the problems of cultural and global diversity. Instead the stress is placed on the *goal* (§§8-10) of the covenant to promote unity: it is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Various models of covenant are briefly discussed (all of which require longer and more detailed theological exposition). Further theological reflection is required on the nature of covenants and how a covenant between autonomous churches might differ from a covenant between God and his people.

**Affirming Catholicism recommends that further theological reflection is made on the nature of covenants in general and a covenant between churches in particular.**

### *The importance of communion at a local level*

3. The origin of *TWR* in a particular crisis means that the basis for reflection has been a particular conflict which has been characterised by strong emotion and anger from certain protagonists. We believe that this has obscured the substantial degree of unity and communion that already exists across the Anglican Communion through parish level twinning, partnerships and diocesan

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<sup>1</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury, Reflections on the Anglican Communion, 27 June 2006.

links. *TWR* contains remarkably little reflection on the experience of communion that already exists through these and other relationships between dioceses and provinces, sometimes of markedly different theological views and opinions or in intensely difficult political situations. To give two examples: a link between the diocese of Salisbury and the Sudan has held fast even through a prolonged period of civil war in the Sudan; and the international Mothers Union has created friendship and cooperation across the Communion in ways which have transcended theological opinions or cultural differences. It is often the experience of unity and dialogue at these local and personal levels that serves to overcome conflict at an institutional level. Mission partners, parish and diocesan links across the world, and formal and informal contacts, therefore need to be taken into consideration before a more formal and binding 'international' covenant is entered into which might have the effect of devaluing these other levels of dialogue and cooperation. A formal Covenant which concentrated attention on high level, centralised structures would inhibit such local links from growing and prospering by isolating whole provinces from one another and have the ultimate effect of diminishing the real, lived experience of communion.

**Affirming Catholicism believes that it is important that proper account is given to the local and grass-roots initiatives of inter-Anglican co-operation which might be overlooked through over-emphasis on the centralised decision-making bodies (the "instruments of unity") of the Anglican Communion.**

*Anglican communion as dialogue and mutual accountability*

4. *TWR* presents a model of the church as founded upon unity, and assumes the normal state of the church is established on the basis of harmonious *koinonia* justified through the doctrine of the Trinity (§5). The "grace-given and grace-full mission from God, and communion with God, determine our relationship with one another. Communion with God and one another in Christ is thus both a gift and a divine expectation. All that we say in this report is intended both to celebrate that gift and to answer that expectation." It may be, however, that despite this ideal to which churches might strive, in any given period local churches are in fact characterized by conflict, struggle and disunity. The patristic experience, as well as the Reformation, provide often painful evidence that it is often only through conflict that truth is glimpsed. Instruments that promote debate, conversation and serious discussion about difference might be ruled out if an overly prescriptive covenant is accepted as the principle for unity. Those with different ideas about the nature of the church and the interpretation of Scripture might simply be excluded from debate, which (ironically, given the aims of the covenant) would promote schism and disunity. There are different stories to be told within the Anglican Communion, which embraces a family of languages and ideas about what it is to be the church. On the one hand, a "process" covenant which commits provinces to engage in shared dialogue on the basis of a basic degree of shared identity (as in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral) might strengthen the bonds of affection which already exist through the current Instruments of Unity. On the other hand, more rigid concepts of covenant may simply stifle discussion and debate thereby creating yet more division and disunity between those ruled out of discussion. A Covenant, especially where this implies legal instruments including the adoption

of some form of inter-provincial canon law, may not be the best way forward in the promotion of unity.

**Affirming Catholicism recommends that an effective covenant is likely to be one which promotes debate and dialogue through exchange and interchange rather than one which takes a more juridical approach.**

5. *TAC* suggests a timetable and programme of implementation (between six and nine years). Naturally, even after this time, there is no guarantee that the Covenant would be accepted and it might prove to be an immense and expensive waste of time. As the Archbishop of Canterbury has observed, acceptance or non-acceptance might lead to different categories of membership of the Anglican Communion. We therefore welcome the call for transparency and dialogue in the drafting and implementation of a Covenant (§22). We also recognise that the structures of the different provincial churches vary and therefore urge that proper attention should be given to the principle of synodality and lay representation both in the process of consulting on the possible contents of a Covenant as well as in drawing up the Covenant itself. The principle of synodality is an important part of our Anglican heritage. We believe therefore that it is vital to reconsider the appropriateness and representative character of the existing structures of Anglicanism (especially those identified in *TWR* as the Instruments of Unity). Further thought should be given to the relationships between the episcopal and primatial bodies which have developed since 1867 and the role and authority of the laity which has been central to Anglican polity from the beginnings of the Reformation. Indeed a Covenant might work better if it is a process signed up to by the participants in reformed instruments of unity rather than a novel confession of faith, an extra layer of canon law, or a new international body.

**Affirming Catholicism recommends a thoroughgoing debate about the appropriateness and effectiveness of the current Instruments of Unity in promoting unity among the whole people of God and furthering God's mission in the world.**

6. While recognising that some action needs to be taken in the present circumstances if the Anglican Communion is going to survive in anything like its present form, *Affirming Catholicism* would counsel extreme caution and care in introducing a specifically *Anglican* Covenant, particularly one which had a confessional component. It is crucial to note that in their own self-definitions most Anglican churches (including the Church of England) have usually resisted attempts to define Anglicanism, preferring instead to see themselves simply as part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, albeit purified of the worst abuses at the Reformation<sup>2</sup> and holding to the one ancient faith, rather than a specific confession. Lambeth 1930 saw the ideal of the Anglican Communion as the "catholic Church in its entirety". It can also be shown that even the most modest definitions of Anglicanism (including the 1888 Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral) have sometimes served to exclude creative ecumenism and to

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<sup>2</sup> For the Church of England, see, for instance, the preface to the Declaration of Assent (in *Common Worship*, p. xi).

destabilise the Communion (as with the Church of South India scheme). Defining something that has hitherto deliberately resisted definition may serve simply to create more division than doing nothing – particularly if the definition entails member churches having to ‘sign up’ to specific dogmatic statements crafted in response to current debates. It is vital that any Covenant drafting and implementation group aims for a Covenant which would promote the widest possible unity based on the historic formularies of faith. The recommendation by *TWR* of legal instruments granted to the Communion by the national churches also needs to be treated with the uttermost caution, since these will normally work to exclude churches, and it might make the Anglican Communion into a church rather than simply a communion of *churches*. This may well promote formal schism, rather than a more informal (though admittedly impaired) unity.

**Affirming Catholicism recommends that an Anglican Covenant focuses on the widest possible sense of catholicity and does not promote a sense of denominationalism and exclusiveness. In particular it should avoid introducing any confessional element into the Anglican way and instead should focus on creating inclusive processes which bolster communion by promoting dialogue and mutual engagement.**

*Anglican Covenant: avoiding denominationalism and promoting ecumenism*

7. Furthermore, *Affirming Catholicism* also considers that it is crucial to ensure that ecumenical discussions and agreements are not hindered by an increased stress on denominationalism. Partly because of the provenance of *TWR* most of the authorities cited are internally Anglican and are given a quasi-legal status, with little awareness of the wider historical and Christian tradition. To stress the *Anglicanness* of the Anglican Communion might be detrimental to ecumenical development: many of the agreements that have been enacted in recent years between churches (e.g. the Porvoo Agreement and the coming together of the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the USA) might not have been possible if a global Anglican Covenant had been in existence. In both *TWR* and the many responses there is a remarkable absence of serious ecclesiological thought, particularly on the nature of catholicity, the role of ecumenical partners, and the relationships between the local and universal.

**Affirming Catholicism recommends the widest degree of ecumenical participation in the drafting and implementation of a Covenant, which it understands as part of the wider mission of God through the whole catholic church and not simply through the Anglican Communion.**

8. *Affirming Catholicism* notes that the historical origins of Anglicanism lie in ‘provincial autonomy’ and the unilateral actions of the English national church. This is undoubtedly part of the ‘Anglican’ heritage. Attention to such an ecclesiology (which is shared with other churches which developed out of the European Reformation) must be incorporated in any Covenant. The chief requirement of any workable Covenant will be that it offers sufficient diversity to allow for local adaptation and disagreement. It might thus be best designed negatively, as a document which defines the limits of disagreement and the means for conflict resolution rather than seeking to confer a degree of

homogeneity on Anglicanism through positive content (e.g. new articles of religion). Besides, as many Lambeth Conferences have stressed, contextuality is such a cherished principle among Anglicans that no Covenant could be seen as anything other than provisional and limited.

**Affirming Catholicism recommends that any Covenant should allow as much diversity as possible and should be regarded as a modest and pragmatic settlement focussing on the process of dialogue rather than as a timeless confession of "Anglicanism".**

9. *Affirming Catholicism* notes that a 'mere provincial Anglicanism is no religion wherewith to convert the world' (J. N. Figgis). This leads to a more difficult and fundamental question: the church ideal of the English reformers (and for many of the churches throughout the Anglican Communion) was to create a unitary national church. There was a sense that the Church of England was simply the catholic church of the land. While other churches in the Anglican Communion have witnessed to catholicity in very different ways, sometimes as very small churches alongside much larger denominations, questions need to be raised about how best the Christian presence is expressed in an often hostile global environment. Bolstering small and often isolated churches with a new sense of Anglican identity may set them apart from their shared mission with other Christian bodies. Energy expended on affirming Anglicanness and the consolidation of the Anglican Communion as a kind of global 'catholic church' (rather than a loose federation) may be better expended on new and creative dialogues with other partners in God's mission in the promotion of a wider vision of catholicity. It may sometimes be better for "Anglicanism" to disappear for the sake of the wider mission of God.

**Affirming Catholicism believes that an Anglican Covenant, if it further demarcates Anglicans from other Christians at the expense of ecumenical dialogue, may be detrimental to God's mission.**

This response is made by the Standing Committee of Affirming Catholicism

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The paper is the result of a working group, which was chaired by The Rev'd Dr Mark Chapman, *Vice-Principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon.*