

A Covenant for the Anglican Communion – A Response

1. In Our experience

My support for an Anglican Covenant is not only based on the belief that ‘covenant’ is at the heart of our faith, besides being part of the wisdom of the Windsor Report, but also from our own experience in the Diocese of Wellington where we use a form of Covenant agreement for all who hold a bishop’s licence: lay and ordained. This covenant is three-way between bishop, parish or other mission unit and the ordained or lay licenced minister. The diocesan experience we have had helps shape my thoughts as to what a covenant might be like. Also, this year at the diocesan synod we commended a Covenant for the Anglican Communion to the three Archbishops of our church for their consideration.¹

When we developed a diocesan covenant eight years ago it was for the purpose of better nurturing the ‘working friendship’ between the bishop, the licenced person and the parish, with each party having responsibilities and obligations towards the other. The traditional bishop’s Letter of Offer had in this writer’s view, become mired in legal minutia and while it is important to uphold the relevant canons we felt a more relational platform needed to be put in place as an instrument of commitment if we were to be a mission-focused church. Since 1998 all licences have been issued when a covenant is signed.

After eight years all those licenced [but for one priest] have covenants. An effort has been made to keep the document uncomplicated with language that is easily understood so that each party understands the responsibility they have. For those licenced prior to the introduction of the covenant agreement, entering into one has been voluntary.

There have been no complaints. More importantly, there exists a strong sense of unity and good will across what is a diverse diocese. We are in a ‘working friendship’².

Our experience indicates that a covenant can work in a diocese. It suggests to me and others that it could well be effective on the wider international stage.

And what of the one priest licenced prior to 1998 who is yet to sign a covenant?

¹ Synod Motion: That this Synod expresses to the Archbishops of Aotearoa, Polynesia and New Zealand: [a] Its preference to remain in full Communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury, [b] Its support for the concept of the Covenant as proposed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, [c] Its preference to participate as a full constituent member of the Communion under the proposed Covenant, [d] Its prayerful support for Archbishop Rowan and for all who are working for the unity of the Communion,

² “A Working Friendship” – an exhibition of collaborative art by Brueghel the senior and Reubens, displayed at the Paul Getty Art Museum, Los Angeles, 2006.

He is treated the same as everyone else and has indicated he will 'sign on'. For the present he represents what the consultation paper "Towards an Anglican Covenant" refers to as a 'second tier'.

2. Comments on the Questions Raised

With reference to "Towards an Anglican Covenant" and addressing paragraph 19, I offer the following:

2.1 A Covenant should relate to where we find ourselves in the present, and what we wish to become. Addressing the here and now affirms our awareness of who we are today and what we face not only in terms of internal issues but also what we are doing about addressing the world from the point of view of the five marks of mission. Our own covenant structure is helpful in the way it addresses this.

2.2 At the same time and aware that we walk the way of Christ who is ahead of us beckoning us ever forward and nearer into the divine presence, we are required to look forward. In doing so we are also acknowledging the church as a living, dynamic body. To look ahead is a hope-ful exercise, so a covenant that looks ahead could be an instrument of hope and would therefore be transformational.

2.3 It would be right for the covenant to be both aspirational and practical, in that it is incarnationally rooted in the present reality with certain aims³ that we should be endeavouring to achieve within the Communion regarding relationships, as well as the all-important primary focus of being a missional church, i.e. "To be and make disciples of Jesus Christ in authentic community for the good of the world"⁴.

The covenant should also present a forward-looking, hope-ful view with language that encourages the people of the Communion into the possibility of transforming attitudes and lives.

2.4 A global covenant containing both affirmations and commitments sounds worthwhile. To affirm our instruments of unity for instance, would underscore what we can hold to together. Affirmation is also related to renewal and is therefore desirable.

From our own experience, a covenant containing commitments brings clarity to the situation and focuses on the do-able. Inclusion of the articles of belief of the Anglican Communion would be beneficial from a commitment point of view.

³ RE Aim, old saying: They who have no aim miss the target every time.

⁴ Brian McLaren "A Generous Orthodoxy"

2.5 Should it speak of relationships between neighbours? Definitely. The Anglican Communion is about relationships between provinces, dioceses, communities of faith and individuals. A Covenant can speak to that and show the way by treating “respect” as a verb rather than a theory.

2.6 The Communion has a number of illustrations of good relationships. For example we are encouraged to pray for each other, we are encouraged to consider giving aid where needed and we have the gift of Companion Links between Dioceses.

The Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia shows how three different cultural strands [Tikanga] can commit to each other within one church. True there is no covenant as such but the constitution is in some ways not a dissimilar instrument. This three Tikanga church illustrates how well diversity in unity can work.

2.7 With regard to Paragraph 20 it seems to me that the Archbishop of Canterbury needs to be involved in the development of the covenant. Indeed, the developmental work of the Covenant would go on around him so that our prayer for him would extend to that which will become an important part of his ministry. It is also a way of emphasizing the ABC as a symbol of unity.

2.8 I would also favour a small representative group to do the drafting. The suggested CDG is the preferred option.

Such a group could of course develop the text via the internet as well as meeting from time to time. As well, it could invite electronic responses from Provinces at various stages, thus involving them as participants in the process. Momentum could be maintained by the setting of deadlines.

As well, the Communion would be asked to pray for the work-in-progress and the CDG as well as Archbishop Rowan.

2.9 The point is taken that progress need not be rushed, but not so slow that it ends up on an ecclesiastical siding somewhere or worse, that people grow tired of the process. So we would need to progress the matter with care, with the CDG offering a draft text for a conversation with the Primates, then an electronic draft for Provinces to respond to in 2007 so that an improved draft could be available for Lambeth in 2008.

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A Covenant for the Communion will provide a sound platform on which to build relationships not just for our own benefit but for the furthering of the mission of the church. At the same time it could provide a way of bringing people closer together committed to walking the way of Christ.