

An assessment

of the Response by the Drafting Group, Church in Wales,
to 'An Anglican Covenant', Covenant Design Group, February 2007

1. Context

- 1.1. The Church in Wales' Response to the Covenant Design Group's draft of 'An Anglican Covenant' (February 2007, henceforward *Response*) was drawn up by the Church in Wales Drafting Group (CWDG) and was received by the Church in Wales' Governing Body in September 2007. It informed discussion by the Governing Body on the Draft Covenant. In particular, it informed debate leading to a motion that the Governing Body should:

note the process taking place designed to produce a covenant for the Anglican Communion and that such a process will only be concluded when any definitive text has been duly considered through the synodical processes of the provinces of the Communion; and

invite the Bench of Bishops to finalise a response to the draft from the Covenant Design Group for submission to the Anglican Communion Office by the end of the year.

- 1.2. An amendment to 'welcome' rather than merely 'note' the Covenant design process was moved but was defeated substantially. This paper seeks to explain why a welcome for the Covenant design process is appropriate for the Church in Wales, and why such a welcome would place the Province at the heart of Anglicanism, rather than on its more radical fringe.

2. The Purpose of the Covenant

- 2.1. Much of the Church in Wales *Response* to the Draft Covenant is based on a mismatch between the concerns of the CWDG and the aims of the draft Covenant. The opening sentences of the *Response* read:

Our primary concern for the Anglican Communion is reconciliation. Whether the proposed Covenant is a means towards reconciliation or an expression of reconciliation is presently unclear (*Response*, p.1)

- 2.2. But what if the Covenant is neither of these things? What if, for instance, the Covenant's primary concern is *clarification* rather than *reconciliation*? Because the *Response* makes the assumption that the Draft Covenant is essentially concerned with reconciliation, its entire discussion moves in a particular direction. That

direction is at odds with the Draft Covenant because it assumes the Draft Covenant is attempting to do something which it nowhere says it is trying to do.

- 2.3. It is noticeable that the Report of the Covenant Design group starts at a different point from the Church in Wales' *Response*. The Covenant Design Group speaks of the value of the Anglican Communion, not as an end in itself to be preserved for its own sake, but as

An instrument through which the Gospel could be proclaimed and God's mission carried forward.

- 2.4. It goes on to say that the Covenant would aim to strengthen the interdependent life of the Communion by: a) articulating common foundations and, b) setting out principles by which our common life of communion in Christ could be strengthened and nurtured. The Covenant Design Group seems more concerned to put the Anglican Communion to work in the service of God's Kingdom whereas the CWDG is principally concerned to reconcile the Communion's disparate parts.

- 2.5. It would have been better for the CWDG to ask whether the Covenant is intended as *descriptive*: is it a kind of umbrella which comfortably covers everything currently called 'Anglican' without excluding anyone who wants to be 'in'? Or is it intended to be *prescriptive*: is it meant to offer a kind of identification guide which enables the observer to tell whether a particular manifestation of faith or life can or cannot be called 'Anglican'?

- 2.6. The CWDG's assumption appears to have been that the Covenant needs to be descriptive and affirming of what *is* rather than prescriptive about what *should be*. In other words, the CWDG's view seems to conform closely to Archbishop Barry Morgan's vision of a Covenant which confines itself to setting out our mutual inter-dependence and would be:

totally different from the kind of covenant that some people want – a kind of prescriptive one, setting up an inter-provincial constitution that would set out theological boundaries and perimeters for individual provinces in both belief and behaviour, policed by a central curia of the primates or Archbishop of Canterbury . . . It would cut at the root of the Anglican Communion as it has been traditionally understood with to my mind, disastrous consequences (Speech to GB, Sept 2006).

- 2.7. The CWDG appears to be content that the remarkable diversity within Anglicanism today is a good thing and is to be affirmed:

It is valuable to recognise the diversity that is a reality in the Anglican Church (*Response*, p.3).

- 2.8. But this is the very thing which needs to be decided. Is the *actual* diversity within Anglicanism today – not an ideal diversity, but the specific diversity which currently exists – valuable or worthless, to be embraced or to be reformed?
- 2.9. In the past century and a half Anglicanism has become diverse to a degree which invites the adjective ‘amorphous’. This bewildering and sometimes contradictory diversity of belief and practice is claimed by some apologists as Anglicanism’s greatest asset. It has not always been so. The foundation stone of the Elizabethan Settlement was laid in an Act (not of Diversity but) of Uniformity (1559). The issuing of Royal Injunctions (1559), the production of Articles of Religion (1563), and the publication of the *Book of Homilies* (1571) all testify to the concern of the Elizabethan church precisely to set out ‘theological boundaries and perimeters in both belief and behaviour’.
- 2.10. The Anglican Communion has become a hospitable umbrella organisation, sheltering a wide variety of beliefs, practices and liturgies. Should we then claim our necessity as a virtue, and maintain that this contradictory and disparate body is a good example of what the church ought to be? The Covenant process is obliging us to consider whether that attitude is adequate or right. The Covenant process forces us to ask: a) is the church as it currently exists essentially right and good because it has been guided by God to become what it is (diverse, in our Anglican case)? Or, b) is there a classical form for the church, given in its origins, to which we should, in some measure at least, conform (the historic formularies, in our Anglican case)? The *Response* implies a positive answer to a), and the Draft Covenant implies a positive answer to b). The positive answer to b) entails a negative attitude to some forms of diversity currently existing with Anglicanism.
- 2.11. There seems little scope for bringing together people who want diametrically opposed outcomes from any future Covenant. The Covenant *could be* a descriptive and inclusive affirmation of the current diversity within the Communion, or it *could be* a guide to identifying some forms of belief and activity as unacceptable within Anglicanism. But it *cannot be* both.

3. The Foundations of the Covenant

- 3.1. The CWDG *Response* expresses very evident concerns about a move towards confessionalism which the group perceives in the Draft Covenant. By ‘confessionalism’ the CWDG means a fixed form of doctrine which excludes wider insights, stifles ‘creative dissent’ (p.3) and ignores the generous-hearted spirit of pilgrimage which is the essence of Anglicanism.

We have here [§3 of the Draft Covenant] the elements of a Confessional church. The present tensions indicate the difficulty of defining what we mean by core doctrine. To what extent do we allow space for development? (p.2).

It is clear that we do want to be definite about revelation in Scripture and in Christ and not fall into relativism, but to do this without becoming *Confessio Anglicana* (p.3).

- 3.2. This same concern surfaced in some of the discussion to do with the Covenant during the Governing Body meeting in September 2007, both in the debate on the Draft Covenant and during the informal evening workshop on the Anglican Communion. During the latter meeting, for instance, the Bishop of Bangor recalled the questions of Lutheran partners in the Porvoo relationship about what, for Anglicans, has *status confessionis*. There is an implied insistence in the CWDG *Response* as well as in the Bishop’s remarks that Anglicanism has never had a formal Confession of Faith (as Lutherans or Reformed might understand such) and that any move in that direction now should be vigorously resisted.
- 3.3. The CWDG *Response* objects in particular to the reference in §2 of the Draft Covenant (‘The Life we Share’) to ‘the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons’ as means by which the Anglican Communion has ‘borne witness to Christian truth’ (*Response* p.2). The *Response* critiques these historic formularies because they are not currently authoritative documents for every member of the Anglican Communion. In their place the *Response* would put the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral. The *Response* returns to this topic in its ‘Concluding Remarks’:

We prefer to see unity in terms of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, without the reference to the Ordinal and the 39 Articles, in the section *The Life We Share* (p.6).

- 3.4. This aspect of the *Response* raises again the issue mentioned above in §2.10. Granted that the historic formularies of the Church of England (in Wales including the *Llyfr Gweddî Gyffredin* of 1664) have been accorded less and less authority over the past century and a half, how do we evaluate that decrease in esteem? It might

be a very proper development as the Communion moves away from the Reformation controversies which generated the formularies. Or it might be a distortion of the authentic nature of Anglicanism.

- 3.5. It could indeed be argued that the lack of doctrinal clarity within Anglicanism is precisely what has allowed determined groups, from the Oxford Movement onwards, to place 'facts on the ground', and then oblige the church as a whole to redraw its boundaries to include the group's liturgical novelties, doctrinal innovations or ethical shifts – or risk excluding numbers of energetic adherents. And it might be asked whether the bewildering diversity within Anglicanism which has resulted from this ecclesial shape-shifting is the sign of strength which it is often claimed to be. It might rather be the symptom of a fatal weakness in a church whose ill-defined doctrinal centre and almost non-existent system of discipline leaves it vulnerable to manipulation by those willing to defy the boundaries and dare the church to say them nay.
- 3.6. Further, the substitution of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral *in place of* the historic formularies is not adequate as a defining centre. The Quadrilateral, after all, was drawn up as a basis for ecumenical dialogue, not for the internal ordering of the Communion. The Prayer Book, Articles and Ordinal were, however, precisely intended as the guidelines to shape and nurture this church as a distinctive expression of Christian life, committed to the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).
- 3.7. Does the Draft Covenant raise the spectre of becoming a confessional church? And would it be so terrible if that were the case? The ordination to the episcopate of a man in a non-celibate relationship with another man, and the authorisation of same-sex blessings in the diocese of New Westminster (to say nothing of the widespread 'blind eye' treatment of same-sex blessings in many US dioceses) - these actions have precipitated a crisis in the Anglican Communion. These actions are the latest in a long series of innovations pushed forward by means of 'facts-on-the-ground' followed by acquiescence, then by acceptance and finally by acclaim. This time, though, the process has failed to proceed smoothly because the acquiescence has not been forthcoming. A Covenant, well-drafted and firmly based on agreed principles, should make the Communion less vulnerable to manipulation

of this type, because some boundaries would be clearly marked and agreed upon. It would certainly establish some common ground on which ideas can be debated.

- 3.8. The agreed principles for such a Covenant should be drawn from the historic formularies of the Church of England: ‘the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons’ to which the Draft Covenant §2 helpfully refers. This is scarcely a radical proposal. Even if we do not subscribe *verbatim* to every Article, we can and should as Anglicans accept that the historic formularies authentically bear witness to the faith uniquely revealed in the scriptures, as the Church in Wales requires those instituted to parochial ministry to affirm. Indeed the Draft Covenant is saying no more here than that to be Anglican is to affirm that the historic formularies bear witness to Christian truth. It has introduced no new yardstick and no novel or unexpected texts. If the Communion is not confessional now, before accepting such a Covenant, it will not become so merely by affirming with renewed clarity what it has always claimed to believe.

4. The Functioning of the Covenant

- 4.1. In the implementation of any Covenant lies the foundational difficulty for many observers. In part the reason for this is cultural: in a post-modern context, claims to exercise power in the cause of truth are automatically suspect. In part it is ecclesio-political: the Anglican Communion has developed a delicate balance of role between its Instruments of Communion, and according ‘curial’ power to any one of these to enforce a Covenant would betray the true spirit of Anglicanism. In part the reason is self-protective: nobody wants a powerful body which can unchurch provinces, dioceses or individuals, unless of course it can be guaranteed to affirm what they themselves already believe and do.
- 4.2. The issues raised by giving ‘teeth’ to any Covenant are enormously wide-ranging and complex. The ramifications reach to many currently unexamined areas of the Communion, among them (and this list is not exhaustive): the role of Canterbury; the relative roles of Primates and the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC); the meaning of provincial autonomy; the co-ordination of Canon Law in different provinces.

- 4.3. The *Response* of the CWDG makes, in this context, some helpful comments about the role of bishops: ‘We see the role of bishops as more that of providing an oversight which forms clergy and laity for the needs of the day, and for faithful and costly mission, rather than as being authoritative leaders and teachers who require obedience.’ (p.6). Following from that view of episcopal office, it wishes to accord the central role to the ACC, as ‘it is only the ACC that approaches a synodical status. We see the ACC as pivotal and the Anglican Communion as primatially-led but synodically-governed by the Primates within the ACC’ (p.5). The *Response* makes a very pertinent point concerning §6.6 in the Draft Covenant, which deals with the exercise of discipline. Where the Draft Covenant states that ‘In the most extreme circumstances . . . we will consider that such churches have relinquished for themselves the force and meaning of the covenant’s purpose’ the *Response* asks ‘Who are the ‘we’ in paragraph 6?’ (p.5). Resolving that particular ambiguity would be very significant in explaining just what the Draft Covenant is envisaging.
- 4.4. A Covenant such as the one envisaged in the Draft Text of February 2007 clearly requires some mechanism for ensuring compliance. What that mechanism should be is a matter of great importance. But it is a secondary issue which follows on from the question of whether there should be a Covenant at all. It has here been argued that a Covenant, rightly ordered, would benefit the health of the Anglican Communion. The application of that Covenant will necessarily raise many other issues. But it is worth persevering with those issues, perplexing though they are, because of the benefits which a Covenant for the Communion can ultimately bring.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1. The incoherence of Anglicanism worldwide, doctrinally and ethically, has reached a point at which the Anglican Communion is rapidly losing credibility as a Christian body.
- 5.2. Fragmentation is already a reality. The *status quo* in which the Communion is a family held together by bonds of affection has broken down, and no means appear to be to hand in the existing structures which can repair those bonds.
- 5.3. In this situation of fragmentation, some new means of expressing and affirming the old values of Anglicanism is needed if the Anglican Communion is to remain a

living and vital part of the one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. The Draft Covenant offers a realistic path towards rediscovering a living and vital Anglicanism. It should be welcomed, now, before it is too late.