

Responding to the Idea of a Covenant for the Anglican Communion
By the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations
December 8, 2006

- 1) IASCER welcomes in principle the idea of a covenant for the Anglican Communion, recognising its potential fruitfulness within our ecumenical life. In particular, we note that our ability to understand, enunciate and live out a coherent Anglican identity (allowing for appropriate diversity with appropriate unity) is important not only for us but for the conduct of ecumenical relations. In this respect, IASCER's lens is ecclesiological.
- 2) IASCER is eager to make a contribution to the process of developing a covenant. In addition to some general comments, our contribution has two particular dimensions:
 - Consideration of resources offered by our ecumenical life
 - Consideration of potential implications for our ecumenical life.
- 3) IASCER recommends ecumenical participation in the covenant design process.

General Comments

- 4) The foundation of our communion is God's gift of communion in which, through the sacrificial death and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ, humanity is redeemed and incorporated into the life of the Holy Trinity. In the church as eucharistic communion we are nourished and sustained in this life. This communion is one which transcends time and unites us with the saints and martyrs of every age. Communion is thus not something that we can construct or govern; it is something that we receive with gratitude and are called to live out in grace. IASCER hopes that a covenant will be grounded in trinitarian theology and will **portray** the Anglican Communion as a communion of churches whose life together is rooted in eucharistic communion as part of the one Church of God. There is an overwhelming imperative for Christians to live together in unity.
- 5) Different models of covenant are being advanced within the Communion. IASCER suggests a differentiated commentary that addresses the breadth of possible forms of covenant and the ecumenical implications of each.
- 6) IASCER recommends that particular attention should be given to the exercise of mutual accountability, consultation and restraint, as characteristics of life in communion.
- 7) Common principles of canon law, as articulated by the Legal Advisors' Network project, are an important foundation for a covenant. They make explicit what already exists among the churches of the Anglican Communion. While noting that canon law must be read theologically and used under grace, IASCER commends this work to the Covenant Design Group. An examination of forms of assent in use in the various Provinces of the Communion might also be beneficial.

- 8) IASCER welcomes the work in progress by the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission on the biblical treatment of covenant. Scriptural resources need careful consideration: the principle of covenant should be applied alongside, rather than governing, other biblical paradigms for unity and common life.
- 9) IASCER agrees with the IATDC that there is a need for some agreed way to discern how any covenant should be interpreted and applied, but is not convinced that the Doctrine Commission's suggested method (**i.e. the establishment of a body of theologians to clarify disputed doctrinal matters**) is necessarily the right mechanism.

Ecumenical Resources for the Covenant

- 10) IASCER notes that Anglicans have a variety of 'covenant' agreements with ecumenical partners, sometimes with people with whom we are not 'in communion'. How much more, then, should living in covenant characterize relationships within a communion family.
- 11) IASCER notes that 'to covenant' with someone carries different connotations to having a covenant with someone, and suggests to the Covenant Design Group that it could profitably explore working with the concept as a verb. The distinction between 'covenant' and 'concordat' might also be examined.
- 12) Most ecumenical 'covenants' have a declarative statement followed by a commitment section. IASCER recommends an analysis of how, and to what, Anglicans have committed themselves to in ecumenical covenants, particularly doctrinally, be undertaken to assist the Covenant Design Group. Resources on which to draw include regional bilateral agreements, diocesan covenants with ecumenical partners (particularly with Roman Catholics in the USA), agreements by which the Anglican Communion entered into communion with other churches, and documents which established the United Churches of South Asia. The Rule of Benedict may also be useful to consider.
- 13) A covenant might provide a way to discern and define together what matters are communion-breaking, and what matters should not be. IASCER commends the Agreed Statement of the International Anglican – Orthodox Theological Dialogue on 'Heresy, Schism and the Church' as a useful contribution in this area.

Ecumenical Implications of the Covenant

- 14) IASCER also has some concerns:
 - a) Some forms of covenant being advocated might turn the Anglican Communion into a confessional ecclesial community. This would have a major impact across the breadth of our ecumenical life, with potentially negative consequences for many of our oldest relationships.
 - b) The word 'covenant' could be used to mean too much and thus lose its real substance. A covenant cannot be so general as to have no reality; there must be more than a commitment to listen to one another
 - c) The concept of covenant will be heard differently by different ecumenical partners

- d) The covenant should not enshrine a particular moment in Anglican history, but enable the Anglican Communion in the future to enter into communion with other churches.

15) IASCER sees considerable potential value for our ecumenical life:

- a) A covenant could be helpful for our ecumenical partners in understanding what the Anglican Communion is.
- b) Expressed in a positive manner (rather than as a dispute resolution mechanism) it can assist Anglicans to live more fully in the Gospel as a eucharistic communion
- c) It can hold us to mutual accountability
- d) It can strengthen our mission