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'Towards an Anglican Covenant': A Response from InclusiveChurch

By Rev. Canon Vincent Strudwick

In spite of the dismay and anxiety we experience at the continuing discord within the Anglican Communion, 'InclusiveChurch' is conscious that throughout the Communion congregations are loyally going about their business week by week, passionately and profoundly committed to the Gospel as they have received and understand it.

From the very beginnings of the Church of England in the 16th Century, this understanding has contained what Richard Hooker called 'a harmonious dissimilitude' which from time to time has erupted in conflict,, eventually overcome by bonds of affection and a desire to search together for the truth of God.

The serious conflict we are now experiencing threatens to tear us apart from these historic roots of inclusiveness and from each other. By its very nature 'InclusiveChurch' wishes the Communion to stay together, but not by sacrificing the 'harmonious dissimilitude' which is our heritage.

It is our understanding that what has held the Communion together is an unwritten Covenant; that we shall be led to truth and unity in response to God's promises, drawing on the richness of our diversity in the fellowship.

If the proposed Covenant is indeed a written version of this, an aspirational call to renew our commitment to explore the truth together while we engage in the task of ministry and mission as we discern to be appropriate in our several Provinces, then InclusiveChurch is supportive. If however, the form of the Covenant that emerges is in fact a Contract, in the shape of a Confessional Statement which is designed to divide us and exclude those who cannot toe the line, then InclusiveChurch wishes to register its opposition.

We understand the Proposal document to be ambivalent in this respect. It is the Covenant Drafting Group that will decide what kind of Covenant we shall be offered. It is to this group therefore that we address this paper, setting out our position and our reasoning.

1 The Formation of the Church of England

The Church of England did not come sailing down the Thames in 1534 fully formed, nor has it been 'fully formed' at any time since that. During the whole of the 'long Reformation' we see a Church containing great diversity, occasionally putting down markers and guidelines, but essentially during the reign of Elizabeth 1, attempting to gather everybody 'in'.

A Puritan Divine complained of this, saying that the Church of England was like an 'Inn to which all are welcome' pleading that it should become more like its Calvinist cousins on the Continent, with a recognisable Confessional position.

Richard Hooker, writing to refute such Calvinist attacks, published the first volumes of his monumental work 'Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity' in 1593, and here as previously in sermons and debates, he seeks to counter the basis on which this confessional theology and practice is based. He challenges the view that a straight following of Biblical precedent is a sufficient way to run life in Society or the Church. The sufficiency and perfection of Scripture, he argues, is a matter of the perfect capacity to do what it is meant to do; and that is not to provide a template for everyday living in every generation.

Rather, in what Hooker calls 'the change of times' we come to a view of how to understand and exercise our discipleship by reference to Scripture, enlightened by how others have interpreted it 'in the tradition', and guided by the 'light of natural understanding wit and Reason, which is from God.' In making a judgement on this basis, we do not always have certainty, and then we take the course 'where greatest probability leadeth'

Here is a fundamental theological principle, and it lies at the heart of how we regard change. Much was said then about the danger of slavishly following the fashion of the times, what Hooker calls 'the looseness and slackness of men' but he counters that there are 'new grown occasions' where what has previously been normative, has to be re-thought.

While Hooker is not to be regarded as an unchallenged authority, he has been significant in creating the ethos of the Church of England from his reception into the life of the Church in the 17th century until the present day, and it is both to his theological method, and to that ethos, that InclusiveChurch appeals.

2 The Accidental Communion

The formation of the 'Anglican Communion' was an accidental outcome of British enterprise. The proliferation of plantations, colonies and trading posts was succeeded by Imperialist dreams, and Church of England missionaries were followed eventually by Bishops and the Book of Common Prayer.

Outward conformity to Episcopal governance and the Prayer Book concealed a great variety of understanding of Scripture and of Doctrine, which in different cultures and the changing times, have had different outcomes in the way the Gospel is understood and practised. There was no Communion ecclesiology and it was this very diversity which gave rise to a move towards some coherence, and the first Lambeth Conference in 1867.

However, in spite of the Windsor Report's attempt to codify and sanctify subsequent Conference and other statements and decisions, the Communion as it has been, is best described by Professor Sir Henry Chadwick. In 1993 he described it as 'a fairly loose federation of kindred spirits, often grateful for mutual fellowship, but with each Province preserving the right to make its own decisions.' We note though, that the process of decision making varies enormously, and

in some Provinces, it is 'hierarchical' while in others democratic. The theological and ecclesiological divisions in the Communion, both in its history and today, are not solely marked by Provincial boundaries, but 'fault lines' run within Provinces.

With the strengthening of local difference in the post colonial era, and in spite of attempts to provide better structures for communication and mutual support, local Provincial decisions have reflected the variety of theological principles and ecclesial decision making processes, in different parts of the Communion.

In the last twenty years, these have given rise to confrontation and division, which the Covenant seeks to address.

InclusiveChurch fears that a 'Confessional Covenant' will reflect a methodology and ethos alien to the tradition of the Church of England, and to many faithful members in a variety of Provinces throughout the Communion. Such a 'Covenant' would not be 'In Place of Strife' but would intensify it, as Churches within Provinces sought different governance, and proliferated 'party'.

3 What then is the point of any Covenant ?

InclusiveChurch believes that a Covenant which explicitly affirms our historic relationship, the dignity of our difference, and the commitment to work together, within our several Provinces on an agenda for unity and truth, would serve the cause of the Communion, and our mission in the world-wide Church.

In the Proposal Document, among the differing understandings of 'Covenant' is the concept that a Covenant is between God and his Church. God's promise has been made that we shall be led into all truth, and the promise has an eschatological goal.

Those who respond in obedience must surely attempt to do so in unity because we need each other and our conflicting views in this tremendous task. The starting point for those who enter the process should not be the requirement to accept doctrinal opinion, sacramental devotion, or ministerial practice which may be present in this or that Province. Rather, that believing that we hold the essentials of the faith together, we covenant within the Communion to continue to work in matters of important difference, with the charity and respect that our historic relationship has bequeathed.

4 The process

The process of agreeing a Covenant is in many ways as important as the end result. Through the process, a real opportunity exists for greater understanding to develop between provinces, dioceses and individual Anglicans. The discussions and debates involved in agreeing a final version will touch on many areas of our common life, and these discussions have the potential to open up new areas of relationship and understanding across the Communion. Now more than ever, this chance for growth should not be missed.

We understand that a Covenant Working Party has been appointed consisting of 8 members under the chairmanship of the Archbishop of the West Indies. We look forward to learning the make up of the Working Party but hope that it reflects faithfully the range of views on the final document.

It is essential that the deliberations of the Working Party are seen to be open, accessible and consultative. We welcome the suggestion that a wider "Correspondence Group" should receive and be invited to comment on all papers. We believe that all meetings of the Working Party

should be equally open and accessible, that minutes should be available on the internet, and that comments and views of ordinary Anglicans as well as the Correspondence Group should be taken into account.

InclusiveChurch is deeply committed to dialogue across and beyond the boundaries of geography, theology and ecclesiology. We believe that the Covenant proposals offer a chance for structured and creative dialogue to take place and hope that the development of the proposals will make the most of this chance.

In his book 'Christian Believing' (1976) Maurice Wiles, Regius Professor at Christ Church Oxford, and sometime Chairman of the Church of England Doctrine Commission, wrote this: What is important for the Christian community at large is not that it gets its beliefs absolutely clear and definite; it cannot hope to do that if they are really beliefs about God. It is rather that people within the community go on working at the intellectual problems, questioning, testing, developing and seeking the practical application of the traditions that we have inherited from the past'

As we have received it, that is our heritage. It is how we have 'made Church' together. If we cannot continue to do it without a 'Covenant', then let us have a Covenant, but an inclusive Covenant that commits us to that working relationship, and not to any set of doctrinal or ecclesial opinion.

It should be a commitment to continue to participate in the Instruments of Unity of the Communion, and to continue to admit to sacramental and full participative fellowship, members of all the Provinces who sign the Covenant

It is this commitment to engage, that will save the Communion from becoming just 'a federation with a history' and transform it into a dynamic model of Church, distinguished by its inclusiveness.

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