

**Seeking The Language of Unity
Covenant in the Anglican Communion**
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A Discussion Starter
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In February 2005 the primates' issued a Communique commending the Windsor Report's "Proposed Anglican Covenant" to the Church and requested that Provinces give it consideration in advance of Lambeth 2008. At fully ten pages in length the 'new' proposed covenant is viewed by many as being overly legislative, contractual and uncharacteristic to the nature of the relationship we have known of being in Communion with one another. However, other voices in the church are also saying that Anglicanism can no longer expect to continue to be guided by covenant given the present climate of distrust and the assertion of greater provincial autonomy. The quest for a new language of unity has begun and the trend seems towards a more contractual form that is explicit and specific about the terms of the relationship. Such a preference for increased specificity also introduces a greater challenge to find the language of a common ground for all.

It is striking to consider, even just at a glance, both the simplicity and brevity of the following statement, which in 1893 stood as sufficient to establish full participation of the Church of England in Canada within an Anglican Communion worldwide.

WE, the Bishops, together with the Delegates from the clergy and laity of the Church of England in the Dominion of Canada, now assembled in the first General Synod, hereby make the following Solemn Declaration:

WE declare this Church to be, and desire that it shall continue, in full communion with the Church of England throughout the world, as an integral portion of the One Body of Christ composed of Churches which, united under the One Divine Head and in the fellowship of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, hold the Faith revealed in Holy Writ, and defined in the Creeds as maintained by the undivided primitive Church in the undisputed Ecumenical Councils; receive the same Canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as containing all things necessary to salvation; teach the same Word of God; partake of the same Divinely ordained Sacraments, through the ministry of the same Apostolic Orders; and worship One God and Father through the same Lord Jesus Christ, by the same Holy and Divine Spirit who is given to them that believe to guide them into all truth.

And we are determined by the help of God to hold and maintain the Doctrine, Sacraments and Discipline of Christ as the Lord hath commanded in his Holy Word, and as the Church of England hath received and set forth the same in 'The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, according to the use of the Church of England; together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, pointed as they are to be sung or said in Churches; and the Form and Manner of Making, Ordaining and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests and Deacons'; and in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion; and to transmit the same unimpaired in our posterity.

In 1893 such wording was sufficient to establish full participation in the Communion because Anglicanism extended a roominess of acceptance and fellowship predicated on mutual trust and common affection. The substrata of commonality was a colonial self-understanding and a sameness rooted in language and practice. The global reality was supple and broad enough to allow divergent views to find a home under a protective roof. Guided by the wisdom of Isaiah, “Come let us reason together though our sins be like scarlet,” it was a church that was covenantal and mission-driven. Richard Hooker, Anglicanism’s chief apologist envisioned the church to be like an inn where all are received joyously; existing as “an integrated life of relationships which are continually being transformed by the abiding Spirit of Christ’s authority who enables its structure to become a supple and enduring framework holding the Communion together at a greater depth.” (Laws of Ecclesiastical Polit I.1.2)

In the wake of the new realities of the Communion that were made manifest, for instance, in the behaviour and demands leading up to Nottingham last summer, the elasticity of an earlier implied covenant seems no longer adequate to either define nor persuade the civil functioning, trust and fellowship of the global church. Harold T. Lewis in his essay, Covenant, Contract and Communion: Reflections on a Post-Windsor Anglicanism, notes that the Anglican Communion, “has ceased to be guided by covenant. Instead, it is beginning to be guided by contract, which understands the church to be rigid. In an assiduous and tenacious reverence for and reliance on laws - biblical, constitutional, canonical - *Ecclesia Anglicana* is exhibiting an unprecedented sense of distrust among the provinces that make up the Anglican mosaic today.” (ATR /87:4, pg.604)

One can lament the loss of what we have known. Covenant has been the core experience of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is the language of relationship at the heart of our faith. A “contract ” is not synonymous (as some dictionaries suggest) with the nature of “covenant.” Harold T. Lewis observes that in a legal contract, “the only pertinent relationship between the parties has to do with the specific matter outlined in the contract itself.” He illustrates that a mortgage specifies everything in black and white. There is no love between the bank and us. The obligation of the parties is limited to what appears in the text and all must be spelled out.

A treaty is no more helpful as an instrument in that the emphasis falls on the existence of sovereign states electing to establish terms of trade or peace through a formal written agreement.

The church may yearn for the simplicity and underpinnings of all that covenant implies but in the present climate the formality and extensiveness of the “Proposed Anglican Covenant” may in fact be the necessary shape of the kind of agreement that will enable the reaffirmation of a globally diverse and yet common Christian enterprise.

Let me illustrate. Three years ago a relationship was struck between the parish where I serve and a number of other public agencies in the dream of creating a cooperative centre of community care. No formal agreements were written. Minutes of meetings were circulated. The delight of mutual participation in a great vision bound us together. And then last autumn an issue relating to the proportioning of costs suddenly revealed significant differences that erupted into a recoiling into the protection of self-interests. Attempts were made at resolving the differences but the good-will of the relationship had significantly deteriorated. There was fear among all that the whole enterprise might dissolve. But at another level one could see that important positions, previously taken for granted, were being asserted. After a month and a half of little contact we again met recently, though this time with lawyers present. We decided that we did not want to encounter any more surprises which might destroy our collective intent. It was time to write some things down clearly, with all contingencies considered in advance, so that the creative freedom we have known could be restored without suspicion. The conversation occurred. Each expressed again their individual hopes and their reasons for wanting to participate in the whole. The lawyers listened, asked the questions to clarify various aspects, and then went off to write between themselves whatever was necessary to allow us to move ahead with confidence and hope. The whole experience I recognize was in fact a necessary stage not merely to formalize a relationship but for putting in place the conditions for the ministry of each and the potential created by the collective whole to flourish again.

The Anglican Communion has recoiled, in some measure, into assertions of provincial certitude that appear at times to be more about the right to self-determination and the claim on influence than solely about theology. Great pain has been caused and a climate of distrust and suspicion has led to polarities

and the soliciting of alliances. Gail Ramshaw in a chapter on “Covenant” in her book, Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary, notes that the covenants of Josiah and Nehemiah were mainly political attempts to employ religious language so as to consolidate power. (pg.104) Indeed, one must be introspective about the motives by which new definitions of covenant are written and for whom.

A process has begun towards the writing of a new covenant - not like the old one. The cost to the Body of the church has already been great. However, the promise of forming a new covenant is that it might establish a greater and lasting intimacy. Having considered a number of the recent ecumenical agreements where great care has been taken in the fashioning of those documents one might note that they are sometimes entitled ‘covenants.’ Nevertheless, they are carefully worded statements that put into black and white the necessary affirmations and clarifications to ensure a mutual certainty that releases the freedom to collectively serve side by side in the name of Christ. I have come to the conclusion that the “Proposed Anglican Covenant” is likely not far from what is needed for us to enter the future as a Communion. The theologians and chancellors will assist the church in refining the language of what will be a more detailed and negotiated nuptial.