

From: The Principal

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7th December, 2006.

Revd Canon Dr. Gregory Cameron,
Deputy Secretary General,
The Anglican Communion Office,
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Dear Dr. Cameron,

Thank you for your kind letter of November 17th, inviting me to respond to the invitation of Archbishop Drexel Gomez to comment on the proposals for the Anglican Covenant (envisaged by the Windsor Report). I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the document, and trust that my reflections may be of some help to Anglican Communion Office, Joint Standing Committee (JSC) and the Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission. In writing a brief response, I would want to signal from the outset that I am sensitive to the contexts in which the perceived need for a Covenant has arisen, and am broadly supportive of the paper 'Towards an Anglican Covenant', drafted by the JSC. My comments are therefore more of the 'extended reflections' type that you invite, and I have numbered these below.

1. In common with other respondents, I suspect, I am more uneasy about the potential *use* of the Covenant than the actuality of the drafted text. Documents of this kind invariably contain the (potentially problematic) capacity to occlude their movement from textuality to instrumentality. And instruments, to be useful, require functions and authoritatively licensed users. So in one sense, I am not clear what the Covenant adds to the current instruments of unity within the worldwide Communion. I can see that it signals an intensification of the need to be in broad agreement on certain issues; to act with restraint, with provinces thinking more about the 'catholic' implications of their preferred local practice; and to strengthen the role of the Primates in the expression and delimitation of a common mind and shared practices.
2. Correspondingly, the question necessarily arises: who, or what bodies, will use the Covenant, and against what or whom, and how? Most of the dis-ease about the Covenant, I suspect, lies here – and not with the text itself. I think that the Communion will need to be reassured that the Covenant is not a specifically targeted text that is directed against apparent pain or problems (i.e., is neither palliative nor punitive), but is rather a document that arises naturally and organically out of our common life, and expresses our desire to clarify and deepen our bonds of affection. Put more sharply, it will serve the Communion better if

can be seen to express the shared wisdom that we seek, as well as being a celebration of our unity, diversity and collective witness to Jesus Christ and the gospel, rather than a text that is imposed unilaterally.

3. Closely linked to this observation, and underpinning my first two observations, I see our ecclesiology not only in terms of shared and agreed propositions, but also as a shared set of acquired skills and practices. We are formed not only by what we say, but by the manner and modes of our expression. In this regard, the censure of Bishop James Pike (forty years ago, in 1966) merits repetition:

‘When Episcopalians are questioned about the supposed orthodoxy or heterodoxy of one of their number, their most likely response is to ask whether or not [this person] wishes – sincerely and responsibly – to join them in a celebration of God’s being and goodness in the prayers and worship of the Prayer Book. Assuming [this person’s] integrity, they would not be likely to press the question beyond that point’. (S. Bayne, *Theological Freedom and Responsibility*, 1987, p. 21).

4. All of us in the Communion, I am sure, would accept the precedence and priority that can be placed upon urgent matters in relation to identity and decisiveness. However, our ‘common’ life and prayer together is also an expression of our commitment to patience; and an understanding that the relationship between practice and belief is a complex one within the Communion. As Stephen Sykes (amongst others) has pointed out, it is inconceivable that there has ever been complete agreement on the identity of Christianity. Part of the genius of our faith lies in its contestability. Moreover, conflicts can only really be made explicit and *managed* through processes of theological reflection – but, I should add, not necessarily resolved. So I would want to ask at this point: is it envisaged that the Covenant helps us to manage and reflect upon our difficulties, or to resolve them? The former produces clarity and charity, but not necessarily at the expense of diversity. The latter, it seems to me, could be a rather ambitious enterprise for any denomination to contemplate – but equally not impossible. Clearly, doctrinal discussions do reach a point of *consensus* when they become decisions. Although at this point, I would add that there is more to be said for the Anglican virtue of un-decidability than any of the JSC document seems to acknowledge.
5. This takes me back, neatly enough, to the questions around the use of the Covenant, rather than being concerned with the text itself. Indeed, I think a debate on the minutiae of the text, although clearly important, is only one of half the equation that needs to be considered. The fundamental question remains, namely how do we go about making decisions in relation to practice in such a way as to maintain the continuity of Christianity? Our ‘problem’, apparently, is that our identity partly resides in the celebration of breadth, and in a diversity of practice. And occasionally in a lack of clarity about how some local practices might impinge upon our collective catholic identity. I remain convinced, here, that we need to continue to carefully distinguish between essential practices (say

in regard to doctrine, unity, etc) and contextualised practices that are essentially secondary issues.

6. It seems to me that the promise and anticipation of the Covenant, in many ways, has already achieved some clarity in regard to the issues it seeks to address. There is more evidence – across the Communion – of patience, restraint and the practice of shared wisdom in the wake of the issues and circumstances that have prompted the Covenant document. This suggests that the very possibility of the Covenant (rather than its actuality) has already achieved much. Whilst a few perceive the document as a threat, and a few perceive it to be inadequate, the majority have already come to see that its gradual formulation is an opportunity to rediscover consensus in the midst of diversity, and rediscover the discipline (and therefore some limits) of what is entailed in journeying together within the Anglican tradition.
7. However, this same observation also prompts me to urge the JSC and Primates towards continued patience, and to plea for pausing, reflection and space before committing ourselves to any kind of premature foreclosure. If the mere *possibility* of the Covenant has already helped us move to a place of deeper collective self-discipline and critical self-reflection, then there is a powerful argument for *prolonging* this period, where a greater degree of wisdom and charity has already been found, even amidst some considerable tensions. I am reminded of Wittgenstein's metaphor of the rope, where he draws our attention to how its strength depends on the tiny individual fibres that overlap and interlace. Our Communion – a rich tapestry of threads and colours – is, I believe, rediscovering its strength and identity through these testing times. So I would hope that the Covenant document, when it eventually and ultimately comes into being, would be able to find a more reassuring and celebratory rhetorical cadence than it has at present – one that focussed less on the fear of unravelling, and more on the deeper reality of our becoming.

I hope that these reflections are helpful to the Archbishop, the JSC and to your office. My thoughts and prayers will continue to be with you as you work on the document, and on its implementation and implications.

Grace, mercy and peace be with, in the name of the Lord Jesus.

With warmest good wishes.

Yours sincerely,

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