

RESPONSE TO WORKING PAPERS ON AN ANGLICAN COMMUNION COVENANT

The Rev. Prof. Stephen Noll
Vice Chancellor
Uganda Christian University
Mukono, Uganda

I have been asked to give a Response to the Working Papers produced by the Joint Standing Committee of the Anglican Consultative Council and Primates and of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission. These papers have to do with the idea of an Anglican Communion Covenant, most recently mooted in the Windsor Report and taken up by various parties in the Communion.

This is a subject which I myself addressed in a paper titled “The Global Anglican Covenant: A Blueprint” (posted at

>>http://www.globalsouthanglican.org/index.php/weblog/printing/the_anglican_communion_in_crisis/ << My comments on and critique of the two papers mentioned above will be best

illuminated by understanding the positive proposals that I have made for an Anglican Communion Covenant. Let me summarize them in the section below.

Constructive Propositions

The idea of an Anglican Covenant is not new but is implicit in the classic formularies: the Articles of Religion (Thirty-Nine Articles) and the Book of Common Prayer. Furthermore, the Lambeth Quadrilateral lays out a framework for Anglican identity which can be fleshed out in a contemporary Covenant. My proposals follow this framework.

Scripture

The oft-repeated contention of those who uphold Lambeth Resolution 1.10, including the large majority of Global South Christians, is that homosexual practice is “contrary to Scripture” and that adherence to the authority of Scripture *ex animo* is the first principle of Anglican and Christian identity. I believe this is true. Hence the issue must be front-and-centre of an adequate Anglican Communion Covenant.

1. The Covenant should include a section in which the Church affirms the Gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed through the testimony of the prophets and apostles.
2. In this context, the Covenant should state that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God written and contain all things necessary for salvation.
3. Finally, the Covenant should affirm that Scripture is to be interpreted in its plain and canonical sense, in consonance with the received reading of the historic Church.

Doctrine

The deviation of the North American churches has not only been in violation of the consistent and express teaching of Scripture but of a doctrinal essential, involving God’s ordering of the sexes and his provision of holy matrimony for human flourishing. The refusal of these churches reveals a much larger problem of whether Anglicans hold certain essential doctrines

to be true for their life and mission. This affirmation of historic and ecumenical Christian doctrine must undergird an effective Covenant.

1. The Covenant should affirm that the Church holds and teaches true doctrine in essential matters of salvation and in indifferent matters where specific, culturally conditioned judgements and applications are made.
2. The Covenant should affirm the catholic creeds, the Articles of Religion and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer as the doctrinal norm according to which further doctrinal developments are to be measured.

Mission Mandate

The mandate to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth has not been central in previous formularies, and the spread of Anglican missions has often been in spite of official structures of power. I propose to consider mission as a prior necessity to the sacraments. In New Testament terms, one first hears and believes the Gospel and then is baptized and admitted into the fellowship of the church (Acts 2:38-41; Romans 10:14).

1. The Covenant should state that in accordance with Christ's Great Commission, the Church is bound to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth and to plant and nurture, through the sacraments, churches in every place to witness to the Gospel.

Episcopal Governance

Episcopal oversight is rooted in the apostolic witness and the historic church, including all Anglican bodies. The Covenant should establish bishops as the primary teachers and guardians of the Church's faith and unity. It should refine the role of the "Instruments of Unity" in the following ways:

1. That the Lambeth Conference of bishops be the final arbiter of Communion doctrine* and mission.
2. That the Primates' Council be given enhanced authority in matters of inner-Communion discipline, with the power to approve appointments of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the General Secretary of the Communion.**
3. That the Anglican Consultative Council and its Office serve the Primates' Council in advancing Communion policy and mission.
4. That the Archbishop of Canterbury, as focus of unity, preside over the Primates' Council and Lambeth Conference and represent the Communion in ecumenical settings.

**The Conference would designate some Resolutions as authoritative teachings, which should be accepted by all member Provinces as part of the Covenant obligation.*

***I propose that the Primates function both as individuals and also as part of regional convocations, such as Africa, Asia and Australia, North and South America, and Europe.*

As should be clear, my proposals are not comprehensive, nor do I offer a particular text. But I do think the areas mentioned should be discernible in a Covenant and must be addressed clearly and forthrightly.

Evaluation of Discussion Papers

In the light of the following positive proposals, I here offer a brief critique of the working papers of the Joint Standing Committee of the ACC and Primates and the Inter-Anglican

Commission on Theology and Doctrine. I intend to focus only on those parts of the papers which take the Covenant idea in a different direction from what I have proposed above. I do not wish to get involved in those sections that describe the general idea of a covenant nor with the details of the process of approval.

Joint Standing Committee Paper

Secs. 4-6 lay out “challenges and opportunities” of the Covenant. It abjures the understanding of the Anglican Communion as “a narrowly confessional family.” I find this language most unhelpful. Everyone seems to agree that some sort of statement of beliefs, i.e., confession, is necessary, and narrowness is usually in the eye of the beholder. So the question is, how is this statement of common beliefs to be defined in a proper Covenant? My proposal is that Holy Scripture, plainly and canonically interpreted, along with the classic Anglican formularies, should be the touchstone. These essentials are neither too narrow nor too wide to be a reed bent to any passing wind of doctrine. I agree with the positive comment (**sec. 6**) that “a well-written and concise covenant would clarify the identity and mission of the Churches” of the Communion.

My differences with the emphases in the paper become most clear in **secs. 7-10**, which outline “relational,” “educational,” and “institutional” goals of the Covenant. These goals are too vague and process-oriented to be the heart of the Covenant. In my view, the goals or topics should be similar to those of the Lambeth Quadrilateral, focusing on the authority of Scripture and the historic formularies, the mission and sacraments, and the role of bishops in governance.

Sec. 17 mentions the “lapidary nature of the Lambeth Quadrilateral.” I do not think it is as lapidary as they imply, but I do think that the Covenant will need to flesh in more precisely certain matters of biblical authority and interpretation and the role of the Articles in Anglican doctrine.

Sec. 19 asks: “Should the Covenant set out the articles of belief of the Anglican Communion?” By all means! These should not be a question but the starting point and first principles of any Covenant. However, the Covenant should not try to write a new theological statement but begin from already universally established standards like the Articles and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission Paper

My engagement with this paper begins at **sec. 1.10**. I contend that the notion of a covenant is implicit in Cranmer’s formulation of the Articles and the Book of Common Prayer, which was supposed to be accompanied by a revision of the canon law, which project, unfortunately, was cut short by bloody Mary. When Anglican churches were formed overseas, they usually adopted the two basic formularies, even when they were translated into the vernacular. Hence there is a theological uniformity in the Communion that transcends churchmanship issues. The undermining of the Articles and the revisions of the Prayer Book, especially in the West, have been a major source of the theological chaos that has ensued.

Secs. 1.10-11 propose that the distinctive Anglican covenant should be “relational” (see similar comment in JSC sec. 8). Of course, a covenant is relational by definition, but relations are based on convictions, and in this regard I do not know what kind of “new, strange, unhelpful obligations” the Commission fears in this regard. Any covenant that promotes “relationships” apart from obligations of faithfulness to the authority of Scripture and to

classic doctrine will be sentimental and ineffective. I agree that there are “deep scriptural roots” in the Anglican understanding of authority. The problem is that one group of Anglicans has chosen to reject those roots.

I agree with **sec. 2.2** that a “descriptive” covenant will not suffice. If I may point a finger, the IATDC paper itself, following the Windsor Report, is descriptive and process-oriented, rather than tackling the content of the Covenant. While narrative and visionary elements may preface or conclude a covenant, the heart of a covenant is rule-oriented (the authors fail to note the dominant motif of law in the book of Deuteronomy). The idea that a Covenant should merely retain “the memory of Anglican historical traditions” is not enough and recalls the relegation of classic formularies in the 1979 Episcopal Prayer Book to a “Historical Document” section, a kind of Anglican geniza of musty old texts.

It may be true as noted that of the two models offered, one (Windsor Report) is juridical, i.e., process-oriented, and the other is motivational (IASCOME). I am proposing a third model, which is *constitutional*, focussing on the first principles of our identity and polity. What is needed is a theological covenant, *norma normans*, based explicitly on the authority of Scripture.

From the end of sec. 2.3 through the rest of the paper, the dominant concern seems to be how to avoid conflict in the Communion. Let me affirm that a Covenant should indeed serve to avoid conflict ahead of time or to resolve it once it occurs. If we are all working from the same page, then reasonable differences can be ironed out by patient dialogue and negotiation. Many matters that are adiaphora can be judged and applied to new situations.

However, that is not the current state of the Anglican Communion. The Windsor Report and the two documents at hand treat the crisis of the Communion as a problem that can be resolved by a little more talking, a little more listening, in order to reach some mystical consensus. In my opinion, this is a false analysis of the context of our current situation. We are dealing today with one party which has deliberately departed from the historic faith of the church and from the express moral norms of Scripture. The other party, as best it can, has responded with calls to repentance, and when those have gone unheeded members have broken relations and offered shelter to the refugees of the errant church.

The current crisis has provoked the call for a Covenant, but the crisis cannot be resolved by the Covenant. Put another way, a Covenant based on biblical fidelity and historic orthodoxy cannot be negotiated by a party that has explicitly rejected that authority. To insist that those who have caused the crisis be equal partners in the formation of the Covenant is to kill it in the cradle.

The very biblical examples given of conflict resolution in **sec. 4.6** tell against inclusion of those who have broken biblical and Communion norms. Matthew 18:15-18 suggests a careful process of inner church discipline, beginning with private exhortation and ending with public excommunication. The Windsor Report documents that the first stage of this process has already happened, and still the North American churches have not repented. Acts 15 points to God’s opening up missional doorways unforeseen by the Church in Jerusalem, but the apostles were also clear that such new ventures do not nullify universal biblical moral norms (Acts 15:29).

I am by training a Scripture scholar and I have been writing on the subject of hermeneutics and biblical theology for 15 years in the context of the current sexuality crisis. No progress has come from “listening” and “conversation” with the biblical texts. Prof. Robert Gagnon has written the definitive book on *The Bible and Homosexuality* (2002), which to my knowledge has never been remotely engaged, much less rebutted (see www.robagnon.net). So I find calls for continued listening collectively to Scripture to be inappropriate given the determination of the sexual liberals to go their own way.

To conclude, those who have brought this crisis on the Communion have already “walked apart.” Any attempt to include them in a Covenant will be an exercise of unreality. A Covenant that could square the circle and overturn the consistent biblical teaching that sexual activity is to be confined to heterosexual monogamous marriage will be a Covenant that cannot serve the need of the Anglican Communion to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth in the 21st century. As **sec. 6.3** says, Anglicans from many diverse backgrounds do indeed need to be bound together in the Spirit, but such unity of the Spirit requires discernment of the Spirit, and the past decade has made apparent that one group of Anglicans according to the flesh are no longer enjoying koinonia with the rest of the Communion. We must face this truth, or we shall see the Communion dwindle to insignificance under the judgement of God.

8 December 2006