

A Response from the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church to The Draft Anglican covenant

October 28, 2007

[Episcopal News Service] The Covenant Design Group has requested comments on the Draft Anglican Covenant to assist in the further consideration and revision of the Draft Covenant by the churches of the Anglican Communion. The Episcopal Church, at its General Convention of 2006, committed itself to this covenant development process and requested that its Executive Council engage in this process. (See General Convention Resolution GC2006-A166, which is attached.)

The present document contains the response of the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church to the Covenant Design Group's request. We submit it with the sincere hope that it will be useful to the Covenant Design Group, to members of The Episcopal Church, and to our sisters and brothers in Christ across the Anglican Communion as the future shape of our Communion is considered.

We are mindful that the recent actions of The Episcopal Church have been among the precipitating factors in the current movement to consider a covenant for the Anglican Communion. For that reason, it is appropriate that we express here several matters that may have become obscured in the tensions of the moment.

The Episcopal Church deeply and sincerely desires to continue in the life of mutual responsibility and interdependence with the other churches of the Anglican Communion. The word "communion," in its earliest form in Latin, signified "mutual participation." We believe that such mutual participation is God's desire for the Anglican Communion in our shared work of evangelical witness, our shared efforts to eradicate the scandalous inequities and injustices that plague our world, and our shared sacramental life. We further believe that communion in Anglicanism has historically embraced a shared commitment to theological breadth and comprehensiveness.

The tensions of the present moment notwithstanding, we believe that there is a strong common identity that unites Anglicans worldwide. Anglicanism flourishes in geographical and cultural contexts of remarkable diversity. Yet we share a distinctive character that is familiar wherever it is found. Anglicans embrace a provisionality that argues for freedom in non-essential matters and humility in those matters where faithful Christians may err. We share a profound desire that the church be comprehensive of all sorts and conditions of people, and that it bring both justice and the saving grace of Jesus Christ to all. At our best, we are characterized by a genuine pastoral sensitivity to those with whom we have differences and by a profound respect for all people. In our lives together, we delight in a particular love of liturgical worship and the sacramental life of the church in all its various expressions. We see evidence of this common identity in the joyful fellowship and the mutual love that seems to arise wherever Anglican Christians meet.

The current consideration of the future shape of our Communion comes at a providential moment in history. Movements for liberation in the last century have given voice to a multiplicity of new perspectives in our Communion. Marginalized colonial missions of the past are now distinctly realized member churches of the Anglican Communion. At the same time, economic globalization and instantaneous global communication are linking together the lives of this diverse group of churches more closely than ever before. What was once a colonial expression of Anglicanism is becoming a postcolonial world-wide communion.

In this age of globalization and post-colonialism, our Anglican identity fosters a powerful and creative dynamic between the particular and the universal, the local and the global, the contextual and the catholic. The question then, before Anglicans today, is: how can we live more deeply into what God, in Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is calling us to be in the variety of our local circumstances while, at the same time, remaining in unity with sisters and brothers in Christ who live in different circumstances? How can Anglicanism move beyond the confines of a mono-cultural privileged, English-speaking church of the West to a multicultural and global plurality of post-colonial churches without losing a sense of our common purpose and identity? What role can an Anglican covenant play in negotiating the life of the Anglican Communion lived between the local and the global?

And so we ask: how might a covenant enhance or impede the spread of the gospel and the reign of God through the Anglican Communion today? A covenant can describe structures, relationships, or a process by which members of the communion settle disputes. At the same time it must witness to the reality of the plurality of voices, cultures, and nations that now make up the Anglican Communion.

We can say with confidence that The Episcopal Church deeply desires to maintain and strengthen the Anglican Communion. Our hope is to achieve this end in a way that is consistent with our understanding of our identity and the identity of Anglicanism.

Following its mandate in resolution GC 2006-A166, the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church developed a process to solicit ideas and comments regarding the draft covenant from members of the church. We received approximately 500 responses to a study guide, a copy of which is attached as Appendix 2. Responses came from all provinces of The Episcopal Church, from individuals (the majority of whom are lay people), parish study groups,

vestries, diocesan committees and councils, deputations to General Convention, bishops, and regional groupings of dioceses. Many of the responses were quite detailed. The Executive Council was profoundly moved by the interest shown by so many members of this Church and the care with which they made responses.

There are great differences of opinion about the draft Anglican Covenant in our church. Our intention in this document is to set these various opinions before the Covenant Design Group and the Communion generally in a fair and open manner so that the many concerns and perspectives in The Episcopal Church can be understood and considered.

This document is informed by these various responses and the Executive Council's deliberations on the Draft Anglican Covenant. It represents the considered opinion of the Executive Council on the draft covenant and our hopes for the continued work of the covenant development process. We sincerely appreciate the efforts of the Covenant Design Group and its commitment to the search for Christian unity as represented in the Draft Anglican Covenant. As the responsible agent of our synodical structure Executive Council offers this as an official response of The Episcopal Church.

Concerning the necessity for an Anglican Covenant

At the outset we asked ourselves and our church, "Do you think an Anglican covenant is necessary and/or will help to strengthen the interdependent life of the Anglican Communion?" Notwithstanding the resolution of General Convention (A166), many feel that a covenant is neither necessary nor helpful.

The principal contention within The Episcopal Church today is whether a process for resolution of disagreements about doctrine or practice at the inter-Anglican level is within our understanding of communion. We wonder if such a process would be healthy and productive for the life of the communion over the long-term. Related to these concerns is the sense that an Anglican covenant is a means by which a church perceived as recalcitrant, namely The Episcopal Church, can be brought into conformity with a particular set of norms in the Anglican Communion. Specifically, many are concerned that the immediate purpose of the covenant will be to halt or reverse developments in the thought and practice of The Episcopal Church in faithfulness to the Gospel as they understand it. Moreover, many are concerned that fundamental changes in our common life as Anglicans are being proposed in response to the problems of the moment and these changes may have unintended consequences in decades to come. They believe that decisions and changes made in a time of anxiety and fear may not best serve the cause of communion. Our study process has led us to the conclusion that The Episcopal Church, as with the Executive Council, is not of one mind as to the efficacy of this particular Draft Covenant in either form or content. Furthermore, some parts of the Covenant have received broad endorsement within The Episcopal Church, whereas other parts have engendered vigorous debate and opposition. Recognizing this diversity of opinion, we will now discuss each section of the Draft Anglican Covenant, seeking to be responsible to the variety of opinions within our church.

Concerning sections of the Draft Anglican Covenant

An Introduction to a Draft Text for an Anglican Covenant:

There is wide appreciation that the Introduction is a valuable statement of the theological basis for communion. We particularly appreciate the understanding expressed in the Introduction that communion is seen as a gift from God, grounded in the reality of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, and consistent with God's covenants with Israel. We understand communion as a plurality of churches coming together to serve God's mission in the world and as a witness to God's promises to the world, in spite of conflict and fragmentation. The Introduction both affirms the communality of our life together as Anglicans and our call to interdependence as Christians in many different contexts.

We recognize that the ills of colonialism and imperialism notwithstanding, God has brought diverse peoples together in our Anglican Communion. We believe that our work in defining the global nature of our communion, and our struggle to define its future shape, have much to offer the world and the Christian church in this time. So we join in the prayer with which the Introduction concludes that God redeem our struggles and weakness and renew our common life together for the purpose of witnessing to the new life and hope found in Jesus Christ.

We thus find the Introduction to be of great value and would ask the Covenant Drafting Group to move its ideas to a more prominent position. We hope that ideas contained in the Introduction could be included in the body of the covenant itself in the next draft.

Section 1: The Preamble

There is wide agreement that setting forth the goals of the Covenant is useful. There is some confusion, however, as to whether the goals also represent a rationale — that is, if the goals also stand as the argument for adoption of the Covenant. In that regard, we find the Introduction provides a better rationale for communion than the Preamble. We would suggest that including the ideas contained in the Introduction in the Preamble would create a stronger document.

Some are concerned that the language "to grow as a Communion to the full stature of Christ" could, in this context, imply that Anglicanism is intended to grow into a singular global church rather than a communion of churches.

While the idea "growing in the full stature of Christ" is clearly scriptural and should be a core aspiration for all Christians, the use of that language here could be read as implying that the structures of the Anglican Communion are intended to grow into a hierarchical or curial organization. Perhaps the "full stature of Christ" might be balanced

by Paul's description of the church, as found in 1 Corinthians 12:12: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."

Section 2: "The Life We Share"

Section 2: "The Life We Share" articulates some of the common beliefs that we affirm as Anglicans. We agree that Anglicanism is part of one holy catholic and apostolic church, worshipping one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We further welcome the affirmation of the first three articles of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, namely: that the Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary for salvation, that the standard of faith is set forth in the creeds, and that two sacraments, Baptism and Eucharist, duly administered, are necessary for the church.

We note that the fourth item of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, the embrace of the historic episcopate locally adapted, has been moved to Section 5: "Our Unity and Common Life." We do not believe that this separating out of bishops from the discussion of our core beliefs and linking it to the discussion of the Instruments of Communion is helpful. We believe the idea of episcopacy should be introduced in this section, reflecting its importance to our Anglican identity, rather than in later the discussion of structure in Section 5.

We affirm as stated in the draft covenant that The Episcopal Church, as part of our common life, "participates in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God."

The Episcopal Church recognizes the Thirty-nine Articles as part of our Anglican legacy, and as such we list them as historical documents in our Book of Common Prayer. At the same time, most people in The Episcopal Church do not attach primary significance to the Thirty-nine Articles for our self-understanding as Anglicans. Signing them has never been a prerequisite for ordination in The Episcopal Church. Citing the Thirty-nine Articles in the Covenant elevates them to an importance that is not shared by most in this church. Similarly, while we acknowledge that the Prayer Book of The Episcopal Church has continuity with and is indebted to the early prayer books of the Church of England, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer has not had authority in our church since the ratification of the first American Book of Common Prayer in 1789.

Most in The Episcopal Church find the reference to the Thirty-nine Articles and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer in the Draft Covenant as elevating these formularies to the status of definitive statements of who we are as Anglicans today, and this is highly problematic in light of the limited role they have played in our history and practice as a church.

We wholeheartedly agree that our loyalty to the faith inherited consistent with other sister Anglican churches around the world is an important resource for bringing the grace and truth of Jesus Christ to this generation.

Section 3: "Our Commitment to Confession of the Faith"

Reactions to this section are highly mixed, leading us to ask if this section is particularly necessary to the Covenant.

Section 3: "Our Commitment to Confession of the Faith," as it stands, incorporates a wide range of commitments many of which are broadly accepted but some of which imply agreement to as yet undetermined Communion-wide understandings. There seems to be little in this section that cannot be understood as growing from the positive affirmations of our Anglican Christian identity developed in Section 2: "The Life We Share," or in Section 4: "The Life We Share With Others." If Section 3 is to be retained, many believe that it needs considerable reworking.

While the commitments contained in Section 3 are commendable, the language used for some of them is subject to various interpretations and misinterpretations. It seems to many of us unwise to place language of this sort within the Covenant without having a clear and agreed-upon definition of what these terms mean.

For example, what does the phrase "biblically derived moral values" mean and how are such values determined? In the American context, the phrase, "biblically-derived moral values," is fraught with baggage. On the individual level this phrase can convey a facile and judgmental approach to Christian moral ethics and decision-making not in keeping with the best of Anglicanism. Historically, some of the greatest national sins of conquest and subjugation have been defended by appeal to "biblically-derived moral values."

Similarly, we might ask what understanding of human nature is operative in the phrase "the vision of humanity"? Clearly, Holy Scripture contains a very complex and, at times, paradoxical vision of humanity. Using a phrase like this in the context of the covenant seems to ignore these complexities and the difficulties that Christians have had through the centuries in understanding and applying this biblical vision of humanity to their lives and societies.

We would suggest that it is disputes over concepts like these that have led to some of the current challenges before the Anglican Communion. We doubt that using such terms in the body of the covenant without further definition would advance the interest of unity or a common understanding of what the terms mean and how they should be applied.

We affirm the statements in the draft covenant that welcoming members of all Anglican churches to the Eucharistic fellowship and participation in the sharing of Jesus' body and blood is a manifestation of God's gift of communion that we cherish as Anglicans. Similarly, The Episcopal Church strongly supports the injunction that "biblical texts [be] handled faithfully, respectfully, comprehensively and coherently." There is concern, however, that the emphasis on primacy of "the teaching and initiative of bishops and synods" can be read to diminish the role of the laity in discerning the truth in God's word. While it is true that Scripture must "illuminate, challenge and transform cultures, structures and ways of thinking," many in our church believe that the truth of Scripture, as the living word of God, can most fully be incarnated in the particularities of our own local experiences. The role and witness of all members, lay and ordained, of the Anglican Communion world-wide is critical to this making-real of the Gospel. As Max

Warren, once Secretary General of the Church Missionary Society, said, "It takes the whole world to know the Gospel."

The governing insight of the Covenant appears to be an emphasis on broadly-shared fundamentals of the faith interpreted through the on-going life of the Communion and its churches. For that reason, the extra-creedal confessional nature of Section 3 seems out of place and inconsistent with the larger document. Perhaps it might be helpful in the structure of the whole Covenant if, having begun with statements of who we are (Section 2: "The Life We Share"), the Covenant then moves directly to our service to God's mission (Section 4, "The Life We Share With Others"), and then to how we live into that mission through the structures of the Anglican Communion. In this regard, Section 4: "The Life We Share With Others" is widely seen as a useful statement of Anglican participation in the mission of God and provides a parallel to Section 2, placing our life as a fellowship of churches in the context of God's mission in the world. If Section 3 were deleted and Sections 2 and 4 were linked together and written in one voice, the hope of many for a fuller statement about our common life as Anglicans would be met.

Section 4: "The Life We Share With Others"

We recognize that much of this section was informed by the work of the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Mission and Evangelism in its report to the Anglican Consultative Council 13, known as "Communion and Mission." The Episcopal Church agrees with the commitment that, "answering God's call to share in his healing and reconciling mission for our blessed but broken and hurting world, and, with mutual accountability, to share our God-given spiritual and material resources in this task."

The Executive Council of The Episcopal Church, consistent with Anglican Consultative Council resolution ACCXIII no. 27 has studied and affirmed the Covenant for Communion in Mission. Many in The Episcopal Church would prefer to see a covenant based largely on the terms of the Covenant for Communion in Mission. This, they believe, would create an Anglican covenant based on relationship rather than structure and more appropriately focus on the missional nature of our interdependence. But, as discussed below, others believe that relationship without structures for determining the shared identity on which relationship is based is not sustainable.

We find the articulation of the five marks of mission at the end of Section 4 to be particularly important for defining our common identity as Anglicans in service to God's mission. Given the centrality of these five marks of mission to our understanding of Anglican faithfulness, we suggest that they be highlighted and moved to the beginning of this section.

Section 5: "Our Unity and Common Life"

The principal concern voiced by many about Section 5: "Our Unity and Common Life" is that it focuses our unity almost entirely on the office of bishop. As stated in the discussion of Section 2 above, we do see the historic episcopate locally adapted, as articulated in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, as a key component that informs and forms our Anglican identity. Most in The Episcopal Church affirm "the central role of bishops as custodians of faith, leaders in mission, and as visible sign of unity."

While we are indeed an "episcopal" church, the relation of that episcopacy to the baptized, on the one hand, and the emphasis on an increasing role of primates, on the other, raise a variety of concerns. Locally, in The Episcopal Church, our presiding bishop enjoys few of the metropolitan powers often associated with the primates. In fact, The Episcopal Church has never had any form of archepiscopacy. The use of the term, "primate" for our presiding bishop is a recent development. We note as well that the use of the term "Primate" in the Anglican Communion is recent and is effectively a broadly inclusive word denoting the chief bishop and pastor of a participating Church in the Anglican Communion.

Because of The Episcopal Church's embrace of lay people in the governance of the church since 1789, the exercise of episcopate is always in relationship to the role and authority of the baptized. Further, most in the Episcopal Church believe that decisions taken by the church should always include lay people, deacons, priests and bishops as a structured part of the decision making process.

We believe the description of the role of the Instruments of Communion in this section needs further clarification and discussion. Prior statements of the Virginia Report and the Windsor Report articulate four "Instruments of Unity." The recent meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council has clarified these four instruments as including "one Focus of Unity" — the Archbishop of Canterbury — and three "Instruments of Communion" — Lambeth Conference, Anglican Consultative Council and Primates Meeting (ACC XIII, no. 2). Yet the Covenant designates all four instruments as "Instruments of Communion." Some believe that the designation of the four instruments as "Instruments of Communion" imbues the four instruments with more structural authority than previously understood.

Communion and unity are both gifts of God, not something that we create. "Communion" seems to be a more appropriate term for a group of churches. Moreover, the Anglican Consultative Council, the Anglican Communion's representative body, uses this term. For these reasons, we believe the word "communion" should be used throughout to describe the four instruments.

It is clear that the next four paragraphs of this section seek to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the four instruments. There is much agreement with the description of the role of both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lambeth Conference. There is, however, some concern about describing Lambeth Conference as "an instrument in guarding the faith and unity of the Communion." This language seems to go beyond the currently understood role of the Lambeth Conference and beyond the initial reason for its creation, which was for

conversation and mutual support. There is further concern about how that role for the Lambeth Conference can be fulfilled.

Some in The Episcopal Church have pointed out that placing the discussion of the Primates Meeting ahead of the Anglican Consultative Council does not represent the historical developments of the four instruments. Historically, the development of the Anglican Consultative Council preceded the creation of the Primates Meeting by almost a decade.

Similarly many are concerned that the description of the roles of the Primates Meeting and the Anglican Consultative Council imbues the primates with more authority over "doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters" than has previously been the case, while relegating the Anglican Consultative Council to the specific and limited role of "ecumenical and mission work." This description of the roles and the changing of the historical order appears to elevate the primates to a position of new authority in the Anglican Communion. As discussed below, some believe that a more healthy balance in decision-making in the communion would result from a parallel development of the role of the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates Meeting.

One of the principal defects in the Draft Covenant as perceived by many in The Episcopal Church is its failure to recognize effectively the voices of lay people, deacons and priests in the councils of the Anglican Communion. In fact, even for those who accept the idea of a covenant, many reject the proposal of the increased role of primates alone as presented in this section.

Section 6: "Unity of the Communion"

We see Section 6 as a further elucidation of what is set up in the previous section. We note a progression in the six commitments in this section from (i) a relational understanding of communion as consultative and communal (koinonia), to (ii) a more conciliar, consultative process of discerning "common mind," and finally (iii) to a synodical or council structure for decision-making in contentious circumstances.

Most Episcopalians do not want to see the development of a synodical decision-making body in the Anglican Communion. They would strongly prefer communion as based on relationships and shared participation in service to God's mission.

Nevertheless, some in The Episcopal Church believe that interdependence and mutual accountability require reasonably well-defined structures of consultation and resolution to function effectively. They believe that a communion of Christian churches is based on relationships of shared identity, and shared identity requires a means of defining that identity and what is and is not within its boundaries. Those in this group believe that the absence of structures for defining what can and cannot fall within our shared identity as Anglicans has contributed to the current discord in the Communion. They believe that instituting such structures is the only logical way to maintain the Communion. Further, they see much value, internally and ecumenically, in a global Anglican Communion that can speak with one voice on important issues of doctrine and practice. They believe that the Communion could pursue God's mission in the world more effectively if the Communion's identity were more clear, its structures were better defined and its decision-making processes more transparent and deliberate.

We are not of a common mind regarding the authority granted by Section 6 to the various Instruments of Communion, and in particular the Lambeth Conference and the Primates Meetings. Many if not most of our members have serious reservations about what we perceive as a drift towards a world-wide synod of primates with directive power over member churches.

As to other items contained in Section 6, most in The Episcopal Church easily affirm commitments 1 and 2 of that section: it is indeed important "to have regard to the common good of the Communion in the exercise of its autonomy," to give financially to support the work of the Anglican Communion and to desire "to spend time with openness and patience in matters of theological debate and discernment." While many in The Episcopal Church believe that it is important to have a common mind about "matters of essential concern," there is anxiety as to who defines these matters. Similarly, as to the third item in this section, there is a healthy appreciation of the status of the Instruments of Communion, but it is unclear to many as to what is meant by their "moral authority which commands our respect." Most importantly, however, there is serious disagreement with the presentation of the Primates Meeting as having the power to adjudicate "matters of serious dispute among the churches of the Anglican Communion." Many of those who would support the need for such adjudication would argue that a more representative and elected body such as the Joint Standing Committee of the Anglican Consultative Council and Primates Meeting should be the body authorized to oversee the decision-making process.

Finally, to many, the provision contained in item six for loss of full status in the Communion appears to be punitive and offer little opportunity for reconciliation.

Ultimately, the fundamental question remains: Is there a need for a juridical/conciliar body in the Anglican Communion to deal with "issues" and is such a body consistent with our understanding of what it means to be an Anglican? With all due respect to our sisters and brothers across the Anglican Communion, a great many in The Episcopal Church do not see the need for such a body at present.

Section 7: "Our Declaration"

We see no issues with the ideas and language contained in this section.

Concerning the consequences of signing a Covenant as proposed in the Draft:

The Executive Council asked interested parties to respond to additional general questions concerning the Draft Covenant. Reflecting on responses received and growing from our own deliberations we offer these observations.

The Episcopal Church is committed to a process that would result in a covenant that we could sign. As indicated above, there is much work that can be done to make the current draft more true to the aspirations of The Episcopal Church and its understanding of the diversity and life and work of Anglican Communion.

At its best, an Anglican covenant can move the churches of the Anglican Communion to renew the sense of mutual responsibility and interdependence in the Body of Christ that has motivated life in the Communion in the past and lead us to higher levels of service to God's mission. A covenant can provide a context for engaging one another in new ways. It can make explicit the discipline of consultation, consensus and forbearance that has typified the Communion at its finest.

At its worse, many fear that an Anglican covenant might become the beginnings of a constitutional structure that would remake the plurality of churches of the world-wide Anglican Communion into a singular global church whose provinces are bound to as yet undisclosed limitations on autonomous action.

We are prepared to consider a covenant that says who we are, what we wish to be for the world, and how we will model mutual responsibility and interdependence in the body of Christ. We believe we must be open to God's doing a new thing among us; therefore, we remain open to explore such new possibilities in our common life while honoring established understandings.

Closing Remarks

The Executive Council believes that the Draft Anglican Covenant signals the beginning of a process for considering the future shape of our communion. Its ends are the hope for a communion whose member churches work and struggle in trust, with a full sense of mutual responsibility and interdependence in the Body of Christ. While some of our members consider the draft adequate as it stands, the majority believe that we must work in the hope that the final form of this document will provide a better means of engaging one another respectfully and with mutual regard, as we seek to agree on essential matters of faith and order while celebrating our differences.

We stand at a remarkable crossroads in the development of the Anglican Communion. We believe that the Anglican Communion, in its unity and diversity, is gifted to serve God's reign in unique ways. We hope that our shared faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, will draw us more deeply into relationships of shared service to God's mission in all its fullness with our sisters and brothers in Christ in the Anglican Communion. We trust that these relationships, undergirded by our shared sacramental life, will bring us new life and draw us more deeply together.

We commit The Episcopal Church to the effort to perfect this draft so that the resulting Covenant can be a beacon of hope for our common future.