The Anglican Covenant

By Paul Avis

Originally published in *Ecclesiology* 7.3 (2011) and reproduced with the permission of the author and of the publisher (BRILL).

The Anglican Communion is under stress because of disagreements about Christian morals and about what kind of mutual obligation is involved in membership of the Communion. The Windsor Report (2004)[i] tackled the problems raised by the consecration of a bishop in a same-gender partnership in The Episcopal Church in the USA, the liturgical blessing of same-gender partnerships in a diocese of the Anglican Church of Canada, and the cross-jurisdiction interventions by Anglican churches from the Global South in response to this situation.

The single most significant proposal made by The Windsor Report (2004) was for a Covenant between the churches of the Anglican Communion. It proposed that they would covenant together to commit themselves to exercise restraint in contentious areas, to consult carefully about potential developments and to strengthen processes of mutual accountability. The Covenant has since gone through various drafts and the final ‘Ridley’ draft is now being considered by the member churches of the Anglican Communion. The Covenant proposal has generated considerable nervousness among some: it is seen as moving the Anglican Communion into unknown territory and compromising the hard-won autonomy of the member churches. On the other hand, some representatives of the Global South of the Anglican Communion have already written it off as lacking teeth and unable to remedy the situation. These two responses seem to cancel each other out. So how should we assess this proposal?

First, the Covenant is the only realistic option on the table. As others have said, it is the only game in town. The future of the
Anglican Communion is in jeopardy at the present time and specific measures are needed. The Anglican Covenant, centering on mutual commitment, is intended to secure the future of the Communion as one body. The Covenant is the only credible proposal that I am aware of to help hold this family of churches together. The alternative to the Covenant is to allow the present sharp tensions to be worked out in the formal separation of some Churches of the Communion from others — and that means schism and the fracture and possible break up of the Anglican Communion.

Second, the Covenant is an embodiment of mutual commitment. The Covenant is not perfect and it is not completely clear to me how the ‘Consequences’ aspect of it will be worked out, if it comes to that. But I don’t think that that is the most important thing about the Covenant. The key, for me, is that by subscribing to the Covenant, Anglican Churches will signal in a serious way their intention to remain together. They will signal this to themselves, to all the other Anglican Churches throughout the world, and to other Christian world communions, who are watching anxiously and do not want to see the Anglican Communion fail as a world-wide fellowship of Churches. Such a failure would indicate a serious weakening of Christianity and its witness on the world stage. It would also bring grief and heartbreak to millions of Anglican Christians around the world.

Third, we need to consider the challenge that the Covenant is ‘un-Anglican’. Behind that accusation lies a concern that the Covenant asks too much of member Churches and fatally compromises the autonomy of the member churches? I don’t share that concern. ‘Autonomy’ cannot be the first thing that we have to say about ourselves as Anglican Churches. The attributes of the Church of Christ that we affirm in the Creed must surely come much higher up: unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. The very first thing that we want to say about our own church, whatever that church may be, is that it belongs to the one, holy, catholic and
apostolic Church of Jesus Christ. But if we belong, with others, to something much bigger than ourselves, then we belong together and not in autonomous isolation. So interdependence must be a key denominator of Anglican ecclesiology and polity. The Covenant seeks to flesh out in practical terms what interdependence might mean. Nevertheless, the Covenant can only be adopted by the free constitutional action of each member church of the Communion and any future consequences of the Covenant would need to be processed by each church in a similar way. Self-government is not threatened by the Covenant.

Fourth, the Covenant is orientated to the common good of the Communion. From mediaeval times, through the Reformation and right up to the present day, churches have used the language of the common good and applied it not only to the wider society, but to the Church as an institution. As Churches that exist in a relationship of interdependence, it seems not too much to ask of us that we consider the common good of the Christian Church as a whole and of the Anglican Communion as a part of that whole. This takes us to the heart of what is meant by catholicity. The word ‘catholic’ is from the Greek *kat’ holon*, ‘according to the whole’. To be catholic means to be deeply conscious of being part of a wider whole and to act accordingly. The virtues of forbearance, patience, restraint, willingness to consult and to accept a degree of accountability to others come into play here. As St Paul says, ‘Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ’ (*Galatians* 6.2).

Fifth, it is significant that the Covenant does not propose any additional doctrinal tests for the Anglican Communion. It contains doctrinal matter, but this is presented descriptively. The Covenant simply describes the existing doctrinal stance of Anglicanism in a broad and uncontroversial way. Nor does the Covenant advocate any particular ethical tests, with regard to Christian morals. It functions crucially in the realm of behaviour: how we should act towards one another when we are in a
relationship of ecclesial communion. It is concerned with the virtues that belong to relationality. I think it is difficult to argue against the Covenant on this score, unless one thinks that the virtues of mutual forbearance and mutual responsibility are inappropriate for Christian churches.

Finally, we need to ask, ‘Does it matter?’ Is the Anglican Communion important enough to be worth saving? Is the Communion worth fighting for? My answer to that question is an unequivocal, ‘Yes’, and there is a profound theological reason for saying that. Communion (koinonia) is not something that is man-made. It is not a human construction and is not at our disposal to accept or reject. Communion — whether between individual Christians in the Body of Christ, or between particular churches within the universal Church — is something given in the realm of grace. It is intimately connected to the sacraments. In baptism we are brought into communion sacramentally with the Triune God and with one another; in the Eucharist — Holy Communion — we are continuously sustained and strengthened in that communion. Communion is God’s greatest gift to us in this life and it will be perfected and fulfilled in the next. Any expression of communion is to be treated with great respect and care. It is an imperative of Christian love to seek communion with our fellow Christians. We are called to seek, maintain and extend communion. To do that we are inspired by the Holy Spirit, who is often conceived as the bond of communion between the Father and the Son. Ultimately, then, the future of the Anglican Communion is not a merely political matter, but an essentially spiritual issue. I believe that Anglicans — and our ecumenical partners and friends — should look at the Covenant in that light.

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[ii] See P. Avis, Beyond the Reformation? Authority, Primacy and
Unity in the Conciliar Tradition (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

The Rev. Dr. Paul Avis is a theological consultant to the Anglican Communion Office and canon theologian of Exeter Cathedral. He is the editor of the journal Ecclesiology and the author of several books on Anglicanism, including The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology (T&T Clark, 2008).

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