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## **WATCH comment on the proposed Covenant for the Anglican Communion**

At their residential meeting in March 2007 the National Committee of WATCH considered the Draft Text of the Anglican Covenant and presents to the Covenant Design Group and the Anglican Communion Office the following comments as a contribution to the ongoing discussion.

### **1. Necessity for a Covenant**

We regret that the drafting of a Covenant is now considered to be a necessity in the Anglican Communion. We cannot agree with the view expressed by the Covenant Design Group that the concept of a Covenant is to be welcomed as a moment of opportunity within the life of the Communion. We would greatly prefer that there were no Covenant as we consider that the concept is alien to Anglican identity, based as it is on the idea that there can be a single infallible source of truth. The most common form of this view expects certainties to be found in the Bible and then made binding on the Communion as a whole

We regret that issues concerning gay and lesbian people have not been dealt with in the same manner as was the desire of the Diocese of Hong Kong to ordain women priests in 1971. When Bishop Baker of Hong Kong informed the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) meeting in Limuru that his Diocesan Synod had voted that he should ordain two woman priests and asked whether, if he did so, he and his Diocese would remain in Communion, the ACC agreed by a majority vote that they would. The ACC was thus able to allow the ordination of women to happen in Hong Kong and subsequently other Provinces, where Synods agreed to this development, while preserving the right of other Provinces not to ordain women. We are sad that the same open-ness to change has not been shown in the matter of considering the ordination of gay and lesbian people or their civil partnerships.

We regret that a mood now prevails in the Communion that no Province can be allowed to develop except at the pace and in accord with the most conservative of Provinces. This seems to be contrary to the spirit of Anglicanism as a Communion

with its understanding of Provincial autonomy rather than the structure of a hierarchical authoritarian Church. We are doubtful whether the ordination of women would have proceeded as it did if the current mood of the Communion and the new suggested way of operating had been dominant in 1971.

A biblical Covenant always has two sides and two ‘partners’. This draft Covenant is very one sided and makes no provision for differing views or for progress.

We are concerned at the effect which this Covenant may have on our Ecumenical Partners, particularly the Porvoo Churches, the Meissen Churches and the Methodist Church of Great Britain which is currently engaged in its own Covenant discussions with the Church of England

## **2. Process**

Much time, effort and money has already been, and will continue to be, spent on refining the Covenant: the whole process will be a mystery to ordinary Anglicans. We are sceptical of the viability of such a process which aims to produce a response from each Province in time to prepare a revised text before the Lambeth Conference in the summer of 2008.

## **3. The text of the Covenant**

Although we would **prefer** that there were no Covenant we believe that it is imperative for us to comment on the draft text because, if there is to be a Covenant, we would want it to be framed in such a way that traditional Anglican inclusiveness is preserved and open and honest debate is encouraged rather than suppressed by a decision imposed by a hierarchy. We do not want a situation in which it becomes impossible for the Communion to move forward or one in which we have a similar dynamic of control from the top as that exercised in the Roman Catholic Church

### **Section 3: Our Commitment to Confession of the Faith**

#### Para (1)

We query the phrase ‘biblically derived moral values’ because although we recognize the Bible as communicating true morality and justice, that phrase has become associated with a particular Christian sub-culture that seems to leave no place for the valid and proper development of ideas, biblical hermeneutics or new pastoral situations. In view of the history of change and development within the Church of England, and within the Communion as a whole, the phrase is now seriously compromised. At one time, for example, the Lambeth Conference declared itself to be opposed to contraception as contrary to Scripture whereas a later Lambeth Conference reversed that decision after further biblical study and with the advance of scientific understanding. In a similar way the Church of England and other Provinces of the Communion wrestled with biblical texts and eventually came to the conclusion that the re-marriage of divorced persons in church was appropriate in certain circumstances.

Para (3)

We are not happy with the claim that it is necessary to ‘ensure that biblical texts are handled faithfully, respectfully, comprehensively and coherently, primarily through the teaching of bishops and synods.’ Ordinary Christians living their lives in our complicated society today have a vital role to play. The continuing interpretation of the Scriptures is the task of the whole community of the Church.

We regret that in the terms of the Covenant there is no mention of the importance of tradition, reason and experience in interpreting the Scriptures. The text says that ‘scriptural revelation must continue to illuminate, challenge and transform cultures, structures and ways of thinking.’ There seems no recognition of the truth that the reverse also applies.

#### **Section 4: The Life We Share with Others: Our Anglican Vocation**

Final Para point 4

This calls upon the Anglican Communion to ‘seek to transform unjust structures of society’. It fails to recognize that the Church itself has unjust structures especially where women, gay people and other marginalized groups are concerned.

#### **Section 6: Unity of the Communion**

Para (2)

We welcome the commitment ‘to spend time with openness and patience in matters of theological debate and discernment to listen and to study with one another in order to comprehend the will of God. Such study and debate is an essential feature of the life of the Church as it seeks to be led by the Spirit into all truth and to proclaim the Gospel afresh in each generation.’

We would hope that this element in the Covenant could be strengthened and accompanied by an acknowledgement that there cannot always be unanimity in all Provinces on all matters as different Provinces do their study and reflection in different cultural and pastoral situations. We would welcome an inclusion in the Covenant recognizing that Provinces should be free to act in different ways and yet be contained within the Communion. We do not think that this possibility is sufficiently recognized in paras (5) and (6), which seem to envisage unanimity on all issues within the Communion, a condition which has never been a characteristic of classical Anglicanism. Our tradition has always been dynamic and there has always been a process of change within the Church of England and the Communion which has taken place at different times and in different places about different issues.

The basis of the Church of England, and through it the rest of the Anglican Communion, has been the Bible and the tradition of the Church as interpreted in the 39 Articles and the Book of Common Prayer. Its life is, in fact, **based in worship**. In his preface to the Prayer Book of 1552 Crammer himself recognized that although the ancient prayers of the Church had been formed out of good ideas, the time had now

come when they needed to be changed. The preface to the 1662 Prayer Book further recognizes that “in the reigns of several Princes of blessed memory since the Reformation, the Church upon just and weighty considerations her thereunto moving, hath yielded to make such alterations in some particulars as in their respective times were thought convenient:”

**While respecting the historical basis of the Book of Common Prayer**, the Church of England has revised its liturgy on a number of occasions during its history and especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Freedom has been given to the Provinces of the Anglican Communion to develop and change their own liturgies in keeping with their own society, culture and language while maintaining a recognized historic liturgical norm. They have done this in a variety of different and creative ways.

**With respect to biblical interpretation**, the whole story of the abolition of the slave trade and then the abolition of slavery itself was based on a re-interpretation of the Scriptures as then understood. Those determined to abolish the slave trade - and this included a group of leading evangelicals - were obliged to think carefully about biblical texts and show why they had come to different conclusions than those reached, for example, by St Paul in some of his epistles. Basically they came to realise that Genesis texts about all people being made in God’s image were more important than St Paul’s instructions to slaves to obey their masters.

**The same struggle with and re-interpretation of some biblical texts** has been and continues to be an important part of discussions about the role of women, the ordination of women to the priesthood and, currently in the Church of England, about the consecration of women to the historic episcopate.

Movement on all these matters has differed considerably in the various Provinces of the Anglican Communion and yet Communion has been maintained. The process has moved forward in a pragmatic but open way.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The **key omission** in this draft Covenant is that it fails to indicate a process by which Provinces may be allowed to move forward at different times and in different ways about different issues. It is not sufficient to discuss matters openly and insist on unanimity. There must be a mechanism by which honest differences are recognized and those Provinces which wish to make changes that others may not desire, can yet have the freedom to do so if it is judged that change is appropriate to their mission. Anglicanism has always been prepared to allow people to hold different views. The advent of women priests and bishops has led to a situation where different practices are accepted. This pattern needs to be extended to allow new changes to take place while those who hold different views are still held within the fellowship of the Communion.

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on behalf of the National Committee of WATCH (Women and the Church)

