

Diocese of Rochester

The Anglican Communion Covenant

Resource Material for Synodical Discussion

Preface

In February 2012, the Diocesan Synod is being asked to vote on whether the Church of England should sign up to ('adopt') a Covenant to manage the relationships between churches and provinces across the world-wide Anglican Communion. All the other thirty-seven national churches are being asked the same question. Before February, deaneries across the diocese are being asked to express their views. This paper has been written to highlight the significance of the Anglican Communion for the Church of England and inform this decision-making. Section I introduces the Anglican Communion; Section II describes why the question of a Covenant has arisen for the Anglican Communion; Section III gives a brief outline of the proposed covenant; Section IV gives some reasons for voting for in favour and Section V gives reasons for voting against agreeing a Covenant for the Communion and Section VI explains the mechanics of the vote and what happens next. Links are provided to fuller material on the Church of England web site for those who would find that helpful. I am grateful to Dr. Martin Davie, the Ven. Clive Mansell and Revd. Dr. John Perumbalath for joining me in compiling this resource and for the stimulating discussions we had in the process.

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I The Anglican Communion

The Anglican Communion is all about relationships forged through a common commitment to Jesus Christ. For a number of years, this diocese has had a close link with Harare in Zimbabwe and Mpwapa and Kondo in Tanzania. Harare has been particularly in the news in recent times as Anglicans, having been barred from entering their churches (often built with their own hands) are forced to worship out in the open and clergy and their families expelled from their vicarages. Groups from parishes and schools have been visiting Tanzania, returning enthused, encouraged and challenged by Anglicans living and worshipping in very different circumstances from us. This diocese has been enriched by visitors from across the Anglican Communion. Parishes in the diocese have formed close links with Anglicans in many parts of the world and have both given and received generously. Anglicans facing political difficulties (eg Pakistan, Harare and Sudan) are strengthened by belonging to a Communion which supports and encourages them in their trials: we are blessed because we are able to give support and be inspired by their faith in the most dire circumstances. We are all enriched by being members of one family stretching from India to Alaska, from Australia to the USA, from Papua New Guinea to Africa. We are held together by a common faith and by 'bonds of affection.'

As Anglicans our identity is shaped by and dependent upon our belonging to this world-wide family of thirty-eight national churches. We are all threads in a large tapestry. Each area of the Communion breathes its own distinctive character into our shared faith. As in all families, so too in the Anglican Communion there are both agreements and disagreements. Disagreements are natural. Indeed, disagreements can become catalysts to growth. What is important is the way that disagreements and growth are handled and it is the mark of a Christian Community (and Communion) that managing disagreement leads, not to break-up, but to a deeper commitment to Christ and each other. The questions at the heart of the Covenant debate are about how we can most faithfully live the Good News in the world and in the church, deepen our commitment to Jesus Christ and remain together as a family.

II Background to the development of the Covenant

The Anglican Communion is a worldwide fellowship of churches that developed from the end of the sixteenth century onwards as a result of a combination of the creation of British colonies, emigration, and deliberate missionary activity. The churches of the Communion are autonomous in the sense of legally self-governing, and they have always resisted the idea of creating a central legislative and executive authority to which they would all be subject. However, this does not mean that the churches of the Communion have believed that they were free to do whatever they liked. Instead, in the words of the encyclical letter from the bishops of the Lambeth Conference of 1920, they have held that the churches of the Anglican Communion:

...are indeed independent, but independent with the Christian freedom which recognizes the restraints of truth and of love. They are not free to deny the truth. They are not free to ignore the fellowship.

In specific terms this has meant that Anglican churches have not seen themselves as free to act in ways which contradict the Christian faith as Anglicans have received it, or to act in ways that are contrary to decisions taken by the representative bodies of the Communion.

From the end of the 1990s serious divisions emerged in the Communion because The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada broke with the tradition of accepting the mind of the Communion by blessing same sex relationships and ordaining people in such relationships, things which they had specifically been asked not to do by the Communion as a whole. In view of what they saw as the inability of the existing structures of the Communion to respond effectively to these actions, a number of churches from the Global South then took matters into their own hands and also broke the traditions of the Communion by intervening in the United States and Canada in support of conservative Anglicans in those countries.

The Lambeth Commission on Communion was established to try to find a way forward in the face of these divisions and in its Windsor Report of 2004 it recommended the creation of:

...common Anglican Covenant which would make explicit and forceful the loyalty and bonds of affection which govern the relationships between the churches of the Communion. The Covenant could deal with: the acknowledgement of common identity: the relationships of communion; the commitments of communion; the exercise of autonomy in communion; and the management of communion affairs (including disputes).

A Covenant Drafting Group was established in response to this recommendation and after an extensive process of consultation across the Communion which involved looking at three draft texts this group finally produced the current Anglican Communion Covenant which is now being considered by the churches of the Communion.

III The Contents of the Covenant

Following an Introduction, which describes how we are called into communion with God and one another and that the purpose of the Covenant is that ‘the bonds of affection which hold us together may be re-affirmed and intensified,’ the Covenant text consists of a Preamble and four subsequent sections. In each of these sections there are a series of affirmations which then lead into a series of commitments.

The **Preamble** declares that as churches of the Anglican Communion we covenant together in what follows in order:

...to proclaim more effectively in our different contexts the grace of God revealed in the gospel, to offer God’s love in responding to the needs of the world, to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and together with all God’s people to attain the full stature of Christ (Eph 4.3,13).

Section One: Our Inheritance of Faith contains eight affirmations based on the Church of England’s Declaration of Assent (Canon C15) and the Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888 which summarise the Christian faith as Anglicans have received it. It also contains eight commitments which express the ways in which covenanting churches will live out this common inheritance of faith in their own contexts and on the basis of ‘a pattern of Christian theological and moral reasoning that is rooted in and answerable to the teaching of Holy Scripture and the Catholic tradition’

Section Two: The Life We Share With Others: Our Anglican Vocation contains five affirmations which trace our communion to God's gift and providence, acknowledge our failings and need for constant repentance and define our Anglican vocation in relation to the mission of God 'a vocation and blessing in which each Church is joined with others in Christ in the work of establishing God's reign.' On the basis of these affirmations covenanting churches then commit themselves to mutually accountable mission and evangelism, to the Anglican Five Marks of Mission, to a renewal of structures for mission and to the ordering of mission to the 'joyful and reverent worship of God.'

Section Three: Our Unity and Common Life contains four affirmations which set out our sacramental incorporation into the body of Christ, our resolve to live in a communion of churches which combines 'autonomy and accountability,' our acceptance of the central role of bishops as teachers and guardians of the faith and the historic threefold order of ministry, and our belief in the importance of the Instruments of Communion. On the basis of these affirmations covenanting churches then make seven commitments to living in a way that sustains and deepens their common life, particularly in relation to matters of controversy or conflict, always having in mind that 'our bonds of affection and the love of Christ compel us always to uphold the highest degree of communion possible.'

Section Four: Our Covenanted life Together sets out a series of 'principles and procedures' which each covenanting church affirms and commits itself to implement. These principles and procedures cover the adoption of the Covenant, how the Covenant will be implemented and disputes between Covenanting churches handled, withdrawal from the Covenant and the amendment of the covenant text.

IV Why vote 'yes' to the motion on the Covenant?

The motion that you are being asked to vote for is 'That this Synod approve the draft Act of Synod adopting the Anglican Communion Covenant.' As paper GS 1809 shows, if the Act of Synod is agreed this will mean that the Church of England will adopt the Anglican Covenant in its present form, making the affirmations and commitments contained in the Covenant text. If you vote for the motion before Diocesan Synod you are voting for this to happen. The reasons for voting 'yes' are as follows:

(i) As the 2006 report *Towards an Anglican Covenant* explained, the existence of an Anglican Covenant will have relational, educational and institutional benefits. In relational terms the Covenant will be able to help the process of reconciliation which the Communion requires 'by focussing on that which unites us, reaffirming our commitment to one another, and thereby helping to heal and strengthen the bonds of affection that have been damaged in recent years.' In educational terms, the Covenant will provide an educational tool which will enable 'Anglicans worldwide to understand and deepen their commitment to the beliefs, history and practices they share in common and their development of these as they engage together in God's mission in the world.' In institutional terms the Covenant will provide what the Communion currently lacks, 'an agreed framework for common discernment, and the prevention or resolution of conflict.'

(ii) Contrary to what has been suggested by those opposed to the Covenant, the text does not embody the views of conservatives within the Communion in a partisan way and it does not mark a departure from traditional Anglican belief and practice. The Covenant Design Group which produced the text was a representative body made up of Anglicans from a wide range

of churches and with a wide range of theological perspectives. In addition, a study of the development of the Anglican Communion since the first Lambeth Conference of 1867 shows that what is proposed in the Covenant reflects precisely the way that the theology and practice of the Communion as a whole has developed during this time as reflected in the resolutions of the Lambeth Conferences, the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates meetings and reports on Anglican ecclesiology such as the *Virginia Report* of 1998. It is the unilateral innovations and actions that have taken place in recent years that have been a departure from traditional Anglicanism.

(iii) Section Four of the Covenant, which has been the focus of much of the opposition to it, is a necessary part of the Covenant because there have to be provisions for churches to enter and withdraw from the covenant, for the text to be amended if necessary and for disputes between covenanting churches to be addressed. This section does not envisage a new centralised authority dictating to the churches of the Communion. A covenanting church will retain exactly the same degree of legal autonomy as it has at present. It will simply take into account the obligations of Covenant membership and the recommendations of its Covenant partners when deciding what actions it should take.

In the end the issue is simple. If you accept the vision of Anglicanism given to you in the Covenant as consonant with Scripture and the Anglican tradition, then you should vote yes to the Act of Synod.

V Why Vote ‘no’ to the motion on the Covenant?

(i) Many national churches are not able to commit themselves to this covenant. The Primates of the Southern Cone, West Africa, Rwanda, Tanzania, Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya rejected this Covenant last year. Some of them are reconsidering their position and the situation remains fluid. They consider that this Covenant is not strong enough to deal with circumstances where some provinces act contrary to Anglican beliefs. Five other churches - North India, South India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Hong Kong are unable to adopt the Covenant for “legal and constitutional reasons.” The Episcopal Church in the Philippines considered the Covenant and rejected it as an “un-Anglican” attempt to “lord it over” the Communion’s national provinces. How can a Covenant that is already unacceptable to many Churches unite the Communion?

(ii) The Covenant itself is likely to institutionalise divisions. The *Briefing Paper* quotes the Archbishop of Canterbury, “we could arrive at a situation where there were ‘constituent’ Churches in the Anglican Communion and other ‘churches in association,’ which were bound by historic and perhaps personal links, fed from many of the same sources but not bound in a single and unrestricted sacramental communion and not sharing the same constitutional structure.” This will obviously create a two-tier Communion. The advent of the Covenant will force the issue of who's in the club and who's out.

(iii) This Covenant is un-Anglican in its understanding of the Communion. a) Anglican churches are autonomous. There is no magisterium or overarching jurisdiction beyond the individual province. Many of these churches believe that their established polity does not allow for intervention from outside. For them, a global centralisation of authority is un-Anglican. b) Anglican Communion is ‘credal’ (like Roman Catholic and Orthodox

Communion they consider the ancient creeds as the foundation for belief, without any additional statement of faith to bind the whole Communion together), not ‘confessional’ (like Presbyterians who have Westminster Confession as the foundation for faith, in addition to the creeds). The Covenant might change the fundamental credal nature of the Anglican Communion.

(iv) A number of churches fear that they will have to change their constitutions and canons in order to adopt the covenant even though the Covenant claims that it does not alter “any provision of the Constitutions and Canons of any church of the Communion.” The Standing Commission on Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church observes, “Adoption of the current draft Anglican Covenant has the potential to change the constitutional and canonical framework of The Episcopal Church, particularly with respect to the autonomy of our Church, and the constitutional authority of our General Convention, bishops and dioceses.” Canada has expressed “a concern about whether adopting the Covenant might have consequences in civil law”.

(v) There are procedural concerns emerging out of Section Four. The multiple roles of the Standing Committee create uncertainty about the authority and jurisdiction granted to it under each role and cumulatively. There are no criteria for actions which are deemed to be ‘controversial’, which is what initiates the procedure under Section Four. The Canadian church points out that the Covenant does not contain the normal procedural fairness that is fundamental in their jurisprudence. Lack of definitional clarity in Section Four will leave space for further arguments and disagreements about interpretation and application of some provisions. Also, this Section is written as if there is one offending Covenant member at a time. But experience suggests that any significant conflict will cut across the whole Communion and international division will be echoed by division within Provinces. The proposed Covenant mechanisms do not address multi-directional conflicts.

Therefore, if you agree that this Covenant, in spite of its best intentions, would destroy the generous diversity of the Communion as it is today and create or institutionalize divisions rather than unite the Communion then you should vote no to the Act of Synod.

VI Next Steps: The Synodical Process and the Way Ahead

The General Synod in November 2010 considered a motion ‘*That the draft Act of Synod adopting the Anglican Communion Covenant be considered*’. This was carried after a Division by Houses by 39-0 in the House of Bishops, 145-32 in the House of Clergy and 147-25 in the House of Laity.

The Draft Act of Synod is an expression of the will and decision of the Synod, not a piece of primary legislation as such. However, the subject-matter of this draft Act of Synod does require it to be considered beyond the General Synod alone.

“A scheme for ... a permanent and substantial change of relationship between the Church of England and another Christian body, being a body a substantial number of whose members reside in Great Britain” may not receive the final approval of the General Synod unless it has first been approved by the majority of the dioceses at meetings of their Diocesan Synods. It is on the basis that the Covenant has a potential impact on the relationship between the Church of England and the Church in Wales and the Scottish Episcopal Church that this matter needs to be considered by Diocesan Synods and the draft Act of Synod may not receive the final

approval of the General Synod unless it has first been approved by the majority of the dioceses at meetings of their Diocesan Synods.

Diocesan Synods will wish to consider both the issues of principle that lie behind what is proposed and the way in which those principles are given effect in the specific provisions of the Anglican Communion Covenant. The issue for each diocese is whether it is willing to give its approval to the draft Act of Synod in the form in which it has been referred to it by the General Synod.

The General Synod needs, therefore, to have from each diocese a clear decision, taken on whether the Diocesan Synod approves the draft Act of Synod. Each Diocesan Synod has to consider a motion in the following terms: *‘That this Synod approve the draft Act of Synod adopting the Anglican Communion Covenant.’* - It has to be voted upon – for or against – in that form, *without amendment, and as a single motion.*

It is open to a Diocesan Synod, to consider further motions (proposed by members of the Diocesan Synod in accordance with its standing orders) relating to the draft Act of Synod. Any such motions must be debated and voted on separately from the main motion.

Deanery Synods are being consulted on the Covenant. However, any votes taken by deanery synods are not formally part of the reference process, but they do inform the Diocesan Synod of the views in the Deanery Synods. Deanery Synods are also free to debate and vote on further (“following”) motions separately from the main motion.

What happens next? If a majority of dioceses approve the draft Act of Synod, it will return to the General Synod for consideration in accordance with the requirements of Article 7 of the Constitution of the General Synod. Subject to the outcome of the Article 7 procedure, the Synod would then be invited finally to approve the draft Act of Synod. As an Act of Synod, it will not be laid before Parliament.

There is no fixed timetable for the consideration and adoption of the Covenant. Churches of the Anglican Communion have been asked to report to the next meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, scheduled for November 2012, “on the progress made in the processes of response to, and adoption of, the Covenant.”

Extra Material to be found on the Church of England Web Site (www.churchofengland.org)

GS 1809 – Draft Act of Synod adopting the Anglican Communion Covenant
<http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1150766/g1809.pdf>

GS Misc 971 – Reference to the Draft Act of Synod to the Diocesan Synods
<http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1161076/gsmisc971.pdf>

GS Misc 966 – Faith and Order Commission briefing paper on the Anglican Communion Covenant. This includes the text of the Covenant.

<http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1161753/gsmisc966.pdf>