

THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION COVENANT

DIOCESE OF MANCHESTER: NOTES FOR SYNOD MEMBERS

Introduction

Article 8 of the Constitution of the General Synod provides that certain kinds of legislation may not receive the final approval of the General Synod unless they have first been approved by the majority of diocesan synods.

Legislation to enable an Anglican Communion Covenant falls within the scope of Article 8.

For the purposes of Article 8, the General Synod needs to have from each diocese a clear decision. Each diocesan synod is, therefore, asked to consider a motion in the following terms:

‘That this Synod approve the draft Act of Synod adopting the Anglican Communion Covenant.’

The papers concerning this referral including the draft measure, background to how we got to this point and answers to a number of questions and several useful background documents are available on a number of websites listed below.

Deanery synods are asked to consider the matter, advised by the Bishop’s Advisory Group on Anglican Matters. Each deanery synod is asked to vote on the motion. The votes taken by deanery synods are not formally part of the reference process but will help to inform the final debate in the diocesan synod in March 2012.

A. Who or what is the Anglican Communion?

The Anglican Communion arose for three principal reasons:

1. the varying pattern of the Reformation in the British Isles led to the Church of Ireland and the Scottish Episcopal Church as independent of, but in full communion with, the Church of England
2. at the time of the American Revolution, episcopal structuring was provided for the United States independent of the British Crown
3. as Anglican church life followed the spread of British rule, dioceses, initially dependent on the British crown, were founded in a number of places.

Later, Anglican churches were founded across the globe as a result of the missionary movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Most of these were given autonomy as provinces in the course of that same period.

Today there are 34 provinces and about 78 million Anglican Christians across the world.

In the 19th century the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral emerged at a missionary conference in Chicago and the Lambeth Conference (the gathering of world-wide Anglican bishops) of 1888, as four elements essential to Anglican identity:

1. the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as "containing all things necessary to salvation" and as the ultimate rule and standard of faith
2. the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed as statements of the Christian faith
3. the two dominical sacraments - baptism and the Eucharist - ministered with the elements ordained by Christ and his words of institution
4. the historic episcopate, locally adapted.

For years the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, a common liturgical inheritance from the Book of Common Prayer, much common history, ties of friendship and loyalty, and no doubt a good deal that was (either consciously or unthinkingly) taken for granted, were enough to hold the Anglican Communion together.

B. Is this not still the case?

More recently it has become clear that this is no longer the case. It has become equally clear that if each province is autonomous in its decision making, and free to make decisions that are felt to affect other provinces, then new, additional models of relationship will be necessary.

There are two other obvious models of communion illustrated by other of our ecumenical partners.

1. jurisdictional : one central point, acknowledged as possessing the power and authority to settle disputed matters when necessary (e.g. as we understand it, the Roman Catholic Church)
2. confessional : one statement of faith, acknowledged as the final authority in disputed matters when necessary (e.g. as we understand it, the Lutheran churches).

The contested issues of the late 20th century brought the ties that held the Anglican Communion together to breaking point, and in some cases they broke. Consequently a process began searching for new ways of holding the Anglican Communion together and avoiding, or at least regulating, further impairment of full communion.

Hence the process of drafting an Anglican Covenant that will add an additional tie to those that hold the Anglican Communion together and which will regulate the use of provincial autonomy in decision-making and relationships between provinces. It is the current draft of that Covenant that is now before the synods of the Church of England.

C. What is the Covenant?

It is a common agreement that all churches of the Anglican Communion are asked to sign up to and formally agree together. 'It is for proclamation, the offering of God's love in service, and the maintaining of unity, so that we and all God's people can grow in holiness.

The preamble says:

We, as Churches of the Anglican Communion, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, solemnly covenant together in these following affirmations and commitments. As people of God, drawn from 'every nation, tribe, people and language' (Rev 7:9), we do this 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).

The Covenant has three sections with each Church affirming and committing itself to core principles:

Section 1 Our Inheritance of Faith.

The eight parts affirm the basis of faith and expresses the distinctive Anglican principles:

1. One holy catholic and apostolic Church worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit
2. Catholic and apostolic faith revealed in Holy Scripture and set forth in catholic creeds.....
3. Holy Scripture (Old and New Testaments) as containing all things necessary for salvation and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.
4. Apostles' Creed – baptismal symbol; and Nicene Creed – statement of Christian faith.
5. Two sacraments ordained by Christ himself – baptism and the Supper of the Lord, ministered with Christ's words of institution.
6. Historic episcopate, locally adapted to varying needs of the nations and people called of God in the unity of his Church.
7. Shared patterns of our common prayer and liturgy.
8. Participation in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God, which is shared with other Churches and traditions.

Within this section each church is asked to make a commitment to live out this shared faith, and is asked to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and to make a commitment to a common approach to its application. These include a way of:

1. teaching and action that is consonant with our shared faith and agreements
2. teaching and discipline that is rooted in Scripture and tradition
3. witnessing for revival and holiness
4. reading scripture
5. interpreting scripture
6. leadership
7. upholding communion
8. seeking the truth together.

Section 2. *The Life We share with others: Our Anglican Vocation.*

This section asks: What are we for? ..What is our particular commitment to the mission of God in the world?

It affirms that:

1. communion is for proclaiming and witnessing to God's reign.
2. God has been at work through our history shaping us for worldwide mission.
3. we confess our failure to live up to our calling
4. we cooperate with other Anglicans throughout the world engaging in mission, at all levels.
5. we cooperate with other Christians in this mission (committed to the ecumenical task).

The section then requires each church to commit itself:

1. to share our resources in order to evangelize, to heal and reconcile a broken world.
2. to engage in mission through the Five Marks of Mission (Proclaim the Good news, to teach, baptize and nurture new believers, to respond to human need in loving service, to seek to transform unjust structures in society, to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation.....)
3. to be humble and open to our own conversion
4. to renew our structures for mission
5. to root our mission in the worship of God.

Section 3. *Addresses the way we live together as a family of churches, and the people and structures that exist to strengthen our common life.*

It affirms that:

1. we are called by Christ to live together in peace.
2. as Anglicans we do not have a central authority; each church governs itself, but we belong to and are accountable to one another so we have some common 'Instruments of Communion' that help shape and sustain our common life.
3. we affirm the role of bishops and the threefold ordained ministry in leading and equipping the ministry of all God's people.
4. we acknowledge four Instruments of Communion that serve our life in communion: the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates' Meeting.

A commitment is then made:

1. to support the work of the Instruments and take their counsel seriously
2. to respect the autonomy of every other church while upholding mutual responsibility and interdependence.
3. to try to discern God's will through listening, prayer, study and debate
4. to seek a shared mind with the churches of the Communion
5. to take due care in acting on controversial matters.
6. to participate in mediation in situation of conflict.
7. to live in the highest level of communion possible.

D. How will the Covenant work?

At the heart of how the Anglican Covenant will work is an understanding that the Anglican Communion is itself more than a federation of churches. It does not simply have shared beliefs but also a shared life. The idea of the Covenant is to deepen the life of the Communion by providing a constant reminder of our shared life and mutual responsibilities while renewing our commitment to the mission of the Church in the world. At the same time it recognises that disputes, such as have arisen in recent years within the Communion, have been part of the life of the church from the earliest times.

When disputes arose in the early church, its members would meet together to discuss their disputes and, guided by the Holy Spirit, find a measure of peace and resolution as they journeyed together. The Anglican Communion Covenant seeks to provide an order to our Communion by describing how our disputes are to be dealt with, patiently, prayerfully and collectively, thereby deepening our shared life and mutual commitment. It does this at the prompting of Scripture and through faith in the guiding power of the Spirit.

It is hoped that all the provinces of the Anglican Communion will adopt the Covenant. However, it is possible that some will not. It is important to recognize that if a province does not adopt the Covenant, this does not mean that it is no longer a part of the Anglican Communion. Likewise, if a particular church community affirms the Covenant and it is not currently part of the Anglican Communion, its affirmation of the Covenant does not automatically make it part of the Anglican Communion.

There may be other Churches not currently in the Communion, or individual dioceses within existing provinces or local churches, which wish to affirm the Covenant, and which could be invited by the Instruments of Communion to adopt it formally. Currently, only those Churches which are members of the Anglican Communion (that is, those on the Schedule of Membership of the Anglican Consultative Council) are being invited to adopt the Covenant. The means by which Churches will adopt the Covenant will vary according to their respective procedures.

E. What will happen if the Covenant is broken?

Section four of the Covenant describes what happens if a church is deemed to have broken the Covenant. The responsibility for monitoring the functioning of the Covenant belongs to the Standing Committee *on behalf of* the Instruments of Communion. When a question arises concerning faithfulness to the Covenant, Section four immediately calls the Churches of the Communion to the form of life described in section 3.2:

1. to have regard for our common life;
2. to spend time with openness and patience in matters of theological debate and reflection;
3. to listen, pray and study with one another in order to discern the will of God;
4. to seek a shared mind with other Churches, through the Communion's councils, about matters of common concern;
5. to act with diligence, care and caution in respect of any action which may provoke controversy;
6. in situations of conflict, to participate in mediated conversations, which involve face to face meetings, agreed parameters and a willingness to see such processes through.

If agreement concerning a particular dispute is not reached, the matter is referred to the Standing Committee which may request a Church to defer a controversial action. If that request is ignored, the Standing Committee may *recommend* to any Instrument of Communion (for example, the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Primates' Meeting) the relational consequences of that action.

The Covenant doesn't set out, as the Archbishop of Canterbury has said, "a procedure for punishments and sanctions. It does try and sort out how we will discern the nature of our disagreement, how important is it? How divisive does it have to be? Is it a Communion breaking issue that's in question – or is it something we can learn to live with?"

F. Is the Anglican Covenant a Good Idea?

.....some people say “YES”

There have been a number of questions about the desirability of such a Covenant, for example:

Will the Covenant prevent the Church from moving forward?

and

Is the Covenant a means of establishing centralised control within the Communion?

In answer to the first question nothing in the Covenant describes how the life of a particular Anglican Church should proceed. Each local Church must be free to develop its life and mission within its particular context. However, the Covenant reminds us that it must do so while being mindful of other Anglican Christians around the world. The process of discerning the prompting of the Spirit and the future of the church is therefore not only a local or regional matter; the Covenant reminds us that such discernment belongs to the whole church, local and global.

In relation to the second question, it must be stressed that the Covenant continually emphasises the autonomy of the provinces of the Communion. This helps to ensure that local and regional churches will not be swamped by any central power.

Here are some examples of the way in which the Covenant expresses the importance of local and regional churches.

- Each church, with its bishops in synod, orders and regulates its own affairs and its local responsibility for mission through its own system of government and law and is therefore described as living “in communion, with autonomy and accountability”.
- Churches of the Anglican Communion are bound together “not by a central legislative and executive authority, but by mutual loyalty sustained through the common counsel of the bishops in conference” and of the other instruments of Communion. (3.1.2)
- In addition, nothing in the Covenant of itself shall be deemed to alter any provision of the Constitution and Canons of any church

..... some people say “NO”

In the Church of England ‘Modern Church’ and ‘Inclusive Church’ have joined forces to form a pressure group ‘No Anglican Covenant’. They propose the following reasons to oppose the adoption of the Covenant:

1. *The Church of England would surrender its right to decide for itself how best to serve, and witness to Christ among, the people of England*

It would be expected to limit itself to what was acceptable in all countries and cultures so as not to risk ‘controversy, which by its intensity, substance or extent could threaten the unity of the Communion and the effectiveness or credibility of its mission’

2. *Power would be over-centralised*

The 15-person Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion could recommend excluding the Church of England or other churches from the Communion’s main bodies if they disapprove of decisions of Parochial Church Councils and Synods

3. *Helpful developments could be blocked*

Our Church’s ability to respond to new situations or fresh insights, including Biblical scholarship, would be damaged. We might be required to exclude ideas and people we want to include, and become less open to the Holy Spirit

Changes such as remarriage in church after divorce, and women’s ordination, might never have happened with this Covenant in place. The Archbishop of Canterbury has rightly called for deeper theological engagement on same-sex unions – but what results from this could be blocked by overseas leaders who refuse to take part in such listening and dialogue

4. *The Church would become more hierarchical*

Laypeople and parish clergy would have less influence, with more power for bishops and primates.

In England, laity constitute one of the Houses of General Synod. The Covenant’s administrators would be mainly bishops and archbishops. The four Instruments of Communion are the Archbishop of Canterbury, Primates’ Meetings, Lambeth Conferences and the Anglican Consultative Council. Only the ACC has any lay members on it.

of the Communion, or to limit its autonomy of governance.

- The Covenant does not grant to any one church or any agency of the Communion control or direction over any church of the Anglican Communion. (4.1.3)

However, although the Covenant does not in any way suggest the creation of a centralised authoritarian structure, it does affirm the importance of our interdependence and mutual responsibility. A common life means that each Church of the Communion should be mindful that its life and decisions impact positively and negatively on the lives of other churches. Therefore, the Covenant commits us 'to have regard for the common good of the Communion in the exercise of autonomy' while 'upholding our mutual responsibility and interdependence.' (3.2.2)

Some people are nervous about the Covenant. They are concerned that it makes new and considerable demands on the Instruments of Communion. Much may depend on how the Covenant is received and used. Others suggest that the Covenant will make tensions and divisions within the Communion even more visible.

At present the Anglican Communion has no way of identifying which disputes might potentially lead to the fracture of our Christian body, and which are less damaging or divisive. If we are to enhance the unity of the Communion and work towards the healing of the Church, we need a way of identifying which are the really serious problems. We also need a description of how we are going to set about dealing with those problems. The Covenant tries to do just that.

5. Valuable aspects of traditional Anglicanism would be lost

The balance of scripture, tradition and reason would be devalued

6. Anglican unity would be damaged

Signatories would have to agree that 'recognition of, and fidelity to, the text of this Covenant, enables mutual recognition and communion'. Other provinces would no longer be treated as full Communion members

Membership of the Body of Christ in Baptism, and the Eucharist, would count for less

Friendship across provinces, joint study, worship and prayer should be nurtured, rather than the Covenant, with its disciplinary processes and threats of 'relational consequences'

7. Ecumenical relations would be hindered

Supporters of the Covenant argue that it would assist ecumenism, and some partners would indeed prefer a more centralised set-up while others would not. Moreover local ecumenical relationships could be blocked by Anglicans in other parts of the world

8. Charity is lacking, and those accused of breaching the Covenant might face procedures which fall short of ordinary legal – let alone Biblical – standards of justice

Earlier drafts of the Covenant contained punitive language. The final text speaks only of 'relational consequences'. The question is whether those consequences are in effect punishments.

When a church refuses to accept a recommendation the sanctions available to the Standing Committee are exclusion from some or all of the Communion's international structures.

From the perspective of those being excluded it is indeed a punishment. They are being excluded for the crime of disagreeing with an opinion which the dominant powers have exalted to the status of official teaching.

9. Covenant processes for dealing with disagreements could use up valuable resources which could be better used in mission and ministry

10. Local disagreements could easily be internationalised, and harder to resolve

G. Background Papers

The background paper from the Church of England Faith and Order Commission begins with the following:

The idea of an Anglican Covenant was first proposed in *The Windsor Report* of 2004, which was written in response to tensions within the Anglican Communion which came to a head following the election of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire. The Covenant is intended to help the Anglican Communion address the challenges of living out the principle of autonomy-in-communion, by committing its member Churches to mutual accountability, consultation and the achievement of consensus. It is intended as a means by which the Anglican Communion can discern its calling to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

In the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury in his 2009 reflections 'Communion, Covenant and our Anglican Future':

The Covenant proposals of recent years have been a serious attempt to do justice to that aspect of Anglican history that has resisted mere federation. They seek structures that will express the need for mutual recognisability, mutual consultation and some shared processes of decision-making. They are emphatically not about centralisation but about mutual responsibility.

1. The Archbishop of Canterbury's Presidential Address at General Synod Nov 2010 is well worth reading.

<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/3056>

2. Note from the Business Committee of General Synod which gives the wording of the resolution to be voted on by Diocesan Synods (GS Misc 971)

<http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1161076/gsmisc971.pdf>

3 Text of the draft Act of Synod adopting the Anglican Communion Covenant (GS 1809)

<http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1150766/gs1809.pdf>

4 Background Paper from the Faith and Order Commission, which includes the text of the Anglican Communion Covenant and some frequently asked questions(GS Misc 966)

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

5. A briefing paper for the Church in Wales

http://www.churchinwales.org.uk/resources/acc/docs/gb_paper.pdf

Other very helpful short papers are:

Paul Avis (General Secretary of Council for Christian Unity in the C of E)

<http://www.livingchurch.org/news/news-updates/2011/4/1/catholicity-outweighs-autonomy>

and Geoffrey Rowell, Bishop of Gibraltar in Europe

<http://www.livingchurch.org/news/news-updates/2011/4/8/belonging-together>