

The Anglican covenant is the only way forward

Its detractors say it will stifle diversity, but unless the church votes for the covenant, deeper divisions will be unavoidable



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The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, right, with Sitembele Mzamane, Bishop of Mthatha, South Africa, during the Lambeth conference in 2008, at which the Anglican covenant was discussed.

Photograph: Shaun Curry/AFP/Getty Images

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" is a celebrated line in [WB Yeats's](#) 1920 poem *The Second Coming*. How that relates to the Church of England and the tensions in the wider Anglican communion, 90 years later, we shall witness next week. On Wednesday 24 November, General Synod will be debating the [Anglican covenant](#).

This covenant of unity seeks to [hold the Anglican communion together organically](#) in the face of increasing fragmentation. The choice in this debate is to opt into [intensifying our world-wide relationships](#) in affection and commitment or to allow splits to develop further and irrevocably. Do we consider each other and decide we belong together, or do we do our own thing and hang apart?

The covenant has been portrayed, and betrayed, by its [detractors](#) as a dangerous, monolithic innovation of regulatory control, which will stifle freedom and diversity. But forced assimilation is not on the table, and it is false witness to dress it up as such. [Gregory Cameron](#) (secretary to the group who produced the covenant) and [Andrew Goddard](#) (Anglican ethicist) have demonstrated that its detractors have seriously misconstrued the text and its intention.

The model of the covenant is drawn from family ties and kinship and bounded by mutually agreed norms of behaviour which benefit everyone. It is not a document of doctrinal specifications, like the conservative [Jerusalem Declaration](#), drawn up mostly by those who boycotted the Lambeth conference. Nor is it a contract, as feared by its [liberal critics](#). It is truly a covenant.

In his [address to the Lambeth conference 2008](#), the Chief Rabbi, [Jonathan Sacks](#), was pithily penetrative and perceptive in drawing out contrasts: "A contract is a transaction. A covenant is a relationship. Or to put it slightly differently: a contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an 'us'. That is why contracts benefit, but covenants transform."

The four sections of the covenant cover the themes of belief, mission, church and

relational consequences. They provide for a delicate balance of communion with autonomy and accountability. It seems to me that the "unbounded" is soon the "empty" and we do not want the life of the body to drip out, dissipate and disappear.

Perhaps a step back to the late 1960s and early 1970s will provide some perspective on this debate. Some liberal and catholic Anglicans in the Church of England were questioning the need for clergy to assent to the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion and some evangelical Anglicans wished to retain this subscription. The resulting new text in 1975, the Declaration of Assent, provided an elegant middle way forward.

The covenant mentions this in its first section, and one way of viewing the covenant is as the internationalising of this key text of breadth, unity and concord. It is made by deacons, priests and bishops when they are ordained and on each occasion when they take up a new appointment.

An extended preface precedes the brief declaration, which then states: "I, AB, do so affirm, and accordingly declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the holy scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness; and in public prayer and administration of the sacraments, I will only use the form of service which are authorised or allowed by canon."

The "historic formularies" refer to the Thirty-nine Articles, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal. Colin Podmore, a scholarly central administrative secretary of the Church of England, in chapter four of his book Aspects of Anglican Identity sets out in detail the emergence of the text of the Declaration of Assent and its preface. Although Ian Ramsey, the Bishop of Durham, chaired the doctrine commission and John Austin Baker came up with the shape and first draft of the long preface and short declaration, Podmore notes: "The dignified, poetic and theologically sensitive final text of the preface was not the work of academic theologians, however, but of two back bench synod members – combining a parish priest's theological vision with a solicitor's skill at drafting."

Lay people and priests, as well as bishops, are crucial in crises and in the vote on the covenant. The progress of the covenant does indeed move at a glacial pace, but the debate next week forms a focal point in the stretching of our Anglican imagination. The communion does not need conservative or liberal incitements to isolation but encouragement to interdependence. Where there is a will, there is a middle way.