

The Covenant: an Introduction by archbishop Drexel Gomez

The idea of Covenant

The idea for the Covenant was born in the Lambeth Commission on Communion. The Commission, which had members from the whole range of the life of the Communion, recognised that trust across the Communion was dangerously damaged, and that Provinces were already at the point of broken or impaired Communion as a result of highly controverted actions in the North American Provinces.

The Commission felt that there was an urgent need for a description of the common ground in the Anglican Communion that would explore the basis upon which one Church in the Communion would express strong reservations or objections to what was happening in other churches.

It was felt that it was important for the Communion to determine how one particular Church maintains its catholicity - its interconnectedness with the universal Church of Christ across the world and through the millennia.

The Commission felt that there was an urgent need for the Communion to address two further important issues.

If the Communion is a fellowship of Anglican Churches, what does it mean to be Anglican? And, if we are bound together by the "bonds of affection" - what actually are those bonds?

These are very big issues; and they have only got bigger with the passing of time since the publication of the Windsor Report in October 2004.

The Commission's response was to suggest that it ought to be possible to write a short statement of what it was to be Anglican, what it is that holds us together and how one Anglican Church relates to another across the Communion. This could be a document which not only pointed us back to our common foundations, but which could also be an educational document, and one which witnessed to our distinctive charism among our ecumenical partners.

There were problems and dangers, of course: there was, and remains, very little appetite for an Anglican Confession or Statement of Belief; there is certainly no appetite at all for centralisation in the life of the Communion.

For three years, I have had the privilege of working as the Chair of the Covenant Design Group. Appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2006 at the request of the JSC, I have had the privilege of working with a dedicated team - once again from right across the Communion, once again from a broad range of opinion.

And once again we have managed to produce a document in which we have all been able to find agreement. Every member of the CDG is able to say of the present Covenant draft: we recognise the Anglicanism we hold dear in this document. That is not to say that there haven't been big discussions, and even compromise, and that members of the Group would have

reservations about some wording or some ideas, but it is to say that the broad diversity of the CDG has been able to come up with a document which we all believe represents a way forward as an adequate description of our common faith and the bonds which hold us together. It also provides a much needed mechanism in Anglicanism for dispute resolution.

In three years, the CDG produced four documents: three drafts for the Anglican Communion Covenant and one extended commentary reflecting on the discussion on the Covenant held in the Lambeth Conference last Summer. As a group we have listened to the feedback we have received very carefully - and I think the amount of revision undertaken in each draft bears testimony to the fact that what has been reflected back to us has been taken very seriously indeed.

The structure of the Covenant text

The draft before ACC at this meeting is the fruit of our labour. It adopts a structure which was discerned at our first meeting in Nassau in 2007. The idea of the structure of the text is to have three major sections - on the Anglican inheritance of faith, on Anglican vocation and mission, and on Anglican interdependence.

In each section, there are a series of statements intended to set out what Anglicans *already* believe on these matters, using language already accepted in the Communion - the Lambeth Quadrilateral in Section One for example; the five marks of mission in Section Two. These affirmations of what we have received in Anglicanism are followed in each case by a statement of what the Anglican Churches need to commit themselves to if these affirmations are to be sustained and flourish in the life of the Communion.

We say first what we as Anglicans want to be like, and then what we need to do as Churches in order to be like that.

The surprising thing about Sections One and Two is that the drafts seem to have been largely successful. Yes, each draft has developed further, and takes on board comment offered to us, but there has been surprisingly little argument about their content. At the Lambeth Conference, bishops were invited in their indaba groups to highlight the parts of the text which they agreed with in green, the parts about which there were worries in red. Sections One and Two came back from the bishops with acres of green highlighting, virtually nothing in red.

So, when you look at the Ridley Cambridge Draft, I think there is every reason why you at this meeting of the ACC should be able to agree with the bishops at the Lambeth Conference that the description of our Anglican inheritance and our Anglican mission is largely straightforward and uncontroversial.

Section Three

Where it has got harder is in the question of how Anglican Churches relate to one another. None of the Provinces wants to be ruled from abroad - each wants to be as free as possible to organise its own mission and life.

But equally, we can only be a Communion - be in communion with one another - if we are able to see in one another faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ, and a common Gospel, a common mission, and if we want to live as a family together.

Being in Communion is more than being in a club. It assumes that we belong together by God's calling, by God's gift of grace, and in His Body as the Christ. This implies that we can recognise in one another the authentic Christian Gospel, and that we are bound together through God's calling and empowering. It means in practice being ready to be mutually accountable, and ready to learn from one another about the way ahead.

The members of the CDG were impressed with the comments from the Windsor Continuation Group in paragraphs 2 and 55 of their final report.

2. The Anglican Communion is a family of autonomous Churches. It finds its identity in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. The Churches of the Communion, which are self-governing, share something of a common history, and have traditionally set their faces against centralised government in favour of regional autonomy¹. The Anglican tradition was fashioned in the turmoil of reformation in Western Europe in the sixteenth century. Its historic formularies acknowledge the circumstances in which it emerged as a distinctive church polity. The non-negotiable elements in any understanding of Anglicanism - the scriptures, the creeds, the gospel sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, and the historic episcopate - are to be found in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral²; and the Instruments of Communion - the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates Meeting - provide an evolving framework within which discussion and discernment might take place. It remains to be seen if the circumstances in which the Communion finds itself today - externally and internally - might require over the years a shift of emphasis *from* "autonomy with communion" *to* "communion with autonomy and accountability".

55. The principle of autonomy-in-communion described in the *Windsor Report* makes clear that the principle of subsidiarity has always to be borne in mind. If the concern is with communion in a diocese, only diocesan authority is involved; if communion at a provincial level then only provincial decision. But if the matter concerns recognising one another as sharing one communion of faith and life, then some joint organs of discernment and decision, which are recognised by all, are required. It is this necessity which led the WCG to articulate the move to "communion with autonomy and accountability" as being a better articulation of the ecclesiology which is necessary to sustain Communion.

So the task for the CDG was to write something which preserved the autonomy of the Churches, but which provided for a strong glue that held us together. It had to reflect the fact that as Anglicans we do not believe in one authority structure, but in dispersed authority - the whole people of God bearing witness to the Truth found in Jesus Christ, and each church rooting its witness in its own mission context.

¹ Cf the statements of the 1930 Lambeth Conference

² Originally fashioned as a basis for the reunion of Churches, the Quadrilateral has tended to become a statement of the irreducible minimum elements of the Anglican tradition.

Our first draft from Nassau was not received with a great deal of enthusiasm. Given that it was not our job to invent something new, we tried to describe what seemed to be the patterns already at work in the Communion.

However, people felt that it was very legal in its approach, and that by giving the Primates a key role in Communion-wide discernment, that it gave this body of 38 senior prelates far too much say in the direction of the Communion, including a say over what each Church did.

We heard that criticism.

In the second - St Andrew's Draft - we gave far more prominence to the ACC (which was also criticised) and instead of cluttering the Covenant with detailed rules for dispute settlement, we added an Appendix which tried to set out rules of arbitration and the resolution of disputes in a way which lived up to the laws of natural justice - ensuring that both sides were heard, for example, that there was a clear process and a right of appeal and so on.

This was also roundly criticised in Provincial responses and at the Lambeth Conference.

In the Ridley Cambridge Draft, you will see that the appendix has gone.

Instead, in Section Three we have tried to articulate the principles of how exactly our Churches relate, which is definitely not by way of a central authority, but as a family of equal Churches.

We are enabled to speak to each other - to witness, encourage and challenge - through the Instruments of Communion. That is exactly what their title means - not organs of government but of consultation.

But we have to be able to sustain our relationships for the sake of the Gospel. We have to be able to be mutually accountable, and responsible. As the 1920 Lambeth Conference said:

“The Churches represented in [the Communion] are indeed independent, but independent with the Christian freedom which recognises the restraints of truth and love. They are not free to deny the truth. They are not free to ignore the fellowship.”

If we are not able to commit ourselves to this sort of being a Communion, the break up of its life is staring us in the face. Either we are a family, which means that each member of the family has care for and respect for the other members of the family, or we will have to learn to go our separate ways. The question is: do we wish to remain a Communion?

I'm afraid to say that I think that is fundamentally the choice before ACC in these two weeks. What is decided here is likely to make or break the Communion.

The current draft

Section Three therefore sets out what holds us together in Communion - our Baptism and celebration of the Eucharist, our shared ministry, and the four Instruments of Communion. We state that we are committed to relationship.

And we've tried to explore what this may mean in practice - how to join, what joining means, how to deal with tensions and so on, in a new Section Four.

The principle that the CDG adopted in Cambridge was this:

The Communion guides
Each Church decides.

In other words, the Instruments of Communion are the place where we can confer and come up with common resolutions, but the power to decide has to remain firmly with each Church. Each Instrument can make proposals or recommendations, and indeed is free to make decisions about its own life, but if any decisions need to be taken which affect the Churches themselves, the new draft firmly states that each church decides for itself. In particular, to settle any questions over this, the RCD says quite clearly that nothing in the Covenant can or should change the Constitution and Canons of any Province. The members of the Covenant Design Group believed that section 4 is important for 6 reasons.

1. It gives explicit reassurance that the Covenant is not intended to interfere with the Constitutions and Canons of the Provinces. In this regard, we have paid due respect to the importance of Anglican polity in any Anglican Covenant.
2. It gives clarity over the processes of joining and leaving the Covenant.
3. It provides a method of dispute resolution. This is not coercive but advisory. Without any such provision, there are no processes by which dispute resolution can take place, and mutual responsibility and accountability is weakened. In addition, a failure to address dispute resolution would negate the Covenant process entirely.
4. It opens out the Covenant, making it open-ended and open to others joining. At the discussion of the Covenant proposal at the Lambeth Conference the desirability of making the Covenant an open-ended process received very favourable consideration by several of the bishops.
5. It provides for the amendment and development of the Covenant.
6. The provision of Section 4 represents a fulfilment of a promise made by the CDG in the Lambeth Commentary to the St Andrew's Draft. It provides the answers to some very important issues that arose in the discussion of the St Andrew's text.

I don't intend to go spend a lot of time on the detail here - you have been given the RCD text - but please also read the accompanying report, because that explains much of what we did at our last meeting in Cambridge and why we made the proposals we have.

But I would like to address one or two further questions that may be in your minds:

1. Do we need to have a Covenant?

This has been a recurrent question in many people's minds. We have the Lambeth Quadrilateral and the bonds of affection, it has been said - isn't this enough? In some ways, I wish it was. But if it was enough, we wouldn't be where we are today.

One thing I have to say to you in all seriousness, the Communion is close to the point of breaking up.

If we can't state clearly and simply what holds us together, and speak clearly at this meeting, then I fear that there will be clear breaks in the Communion in the period following this meeting. Many of our Churches are asking to know where they stand - what can be relied on as central to the Anglican Communion; and how can disputes be settled without the wrangle and confusion that we have seen for the last seven years or more.

The Covenant tries to provide a picture of what holds us together as a relational document - it describes what holds us together, and what we must do to keep that fellowship alive. It stresses the bonds of affection, and avoids talking in juridical categories like "discipline", "adjudication" and "autonomy". There are elements of such things - as there are at every other level of the Church's life of course - but we have tried to keep them to a minimum.

It is because we are Christians, sharing in the same Covenant at Baptism that we are in a sense already living in committed relationship with each other. What the Covenant tries to do is to express clearly and simply in response to the times what that relationship is, and to state explicitly that we are committed to it.

The CDG was encouraged by the following comments from the recently concluded Primates' Meeting in Alexandria.

"We believe the securing of the Covenant to be a vital element in strengthening the life of the Communion. We welcome the Covenant Design Group's intention to produce a Covenant text which has a relational basis and tone. It is about invitation and reconciliation in order to lead to the deepening of our *koinonia* in Christ, and which entails both freedom and robust accountability. We look forward to the development of a Covenant text to be presented at ACC-14 which will commend itself to our Provinces because it speaks of the mutuality that should characterise the life of Christians and of Churches; of a relationship which exercises the self-limitation and gracious restraint born of true affection, and which should be marked by a spirit of humility and integrity." (Para 16)

2. What happens next?

The RCD represents a third text of the Covenant. Consultation started even before the CDG with a JSC document called, "Towards an Anglican Covenant". There have been two very big rounds of consultation with the Provinces, and with our ecumenical partners. There have been extensive discussions in the Instruments of Communion - at Primates' Meetings, at JSC, at the Lambeth Conference. The CDG has made and remade the draft from scratch on three occasions. There is an extensive commentary which takes on board all the comments of all the bishops who gathered at Lambeth. Such a level of consultation for any Anglican Communion document is unprecedented, but there has been real listening and learning.

The CDG thinks it has done the best job it can to write something which does set out briefly what holds Anglicans together, and which provides a mechanism by which we can each renew our commitment to the other Churches of the Communion and which does this in a way which does not change or compromise our own Provinces' Constitutions and Canons, but which does allow for a robust scheme of dispute settlement.

We offer it to you at ACC, and ask you to send it out to the Churches for consideration and adoption.

You could say, "No." but I have to be honest: at the moment, we have the chance to get something out to the Provinces that every Province will take seriously.

Of all the Provinces, only two or three have said that they don't think the Covenant is the right next step, and I have to say that even then I think if we can address some misunderstandings, then they could be persuaded to look at it.

But the chance that the Covenant offers to give something to the Communion as a description of what Anglicans care about, in which we can agree a basis for future discussion, and which puts something in place that could really hold us together won't last for much longer. The General Convention of TEC meets again this Summer; the Gafcon Primates' Council has been asked to recognise the Anglican Church of North America. A number of primates have spoken to me about how their synods are beginning to become impatient with the Communion's life if the Communion can't say something clear at this stage of its life.

I believe that the CDG has done the work it was asked to do, and done it well; the 660 bishops gathered in Lambeth have delivered their verdict, and were positive in what they said. Those provinces which have responded have largely said that they recognise the importance of the task. Where criticism has been offered, we have sought to address it.

There is not unanimity across the Communion, and I don't want to pretend that there is. But there is a real opportunity, and my hope for the Covenant is that it gives us a basis on which to go forward. I ask that ACC won't let this opportunity pass. I conclude with the sentiments expressed in the final paragraph of the CDG's commentary on the Ridley Cambridge Draft. "The CDG are pleased to be able to commend their work to the Communion. We have laboured to produce the best possible draft which we can commend together to serve the needs of the Communion at this juncture of its life. We offer this work in the hope that it will strengthen the interdependent life of the Churches of the Communion, freeing them for more effective mission and witness to the gift of Christ in the gospel."

I have the honour and the pleasure to commend the work of the CDG to you. Thank you very much.