

A Response by the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations (IASCER) to ‘An Anglican Covenant: a Draft for Discussion’, December 2007

The Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations (IASCER) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the work of the Covenant Design Group, *An Anglican Covenant: A Draft for Discussion*. As a body charged with co-ordinating the ecumenical work of the Anglican Communion, we see three perspectives on the covenant process that derive from our mandate and experience:

- (1) the possible implications of an Anglican covenant in view of the perceptions of our ecumenical partners,
- (2) the contribution which the language of our ecumenical agreements can make to the development of a covenant, and
- (3) the experience of our ecumenical partners in their own self-definition and governance as churches.

(1) Implications of an Anglican covenant in view of the perceptions of our ecumenical partners

Credibility

IASCER suggests that ecumenical consultation in the covenant process would greatly enhance our own Anglican self-understanding. We believe that all of our ecumenical partners would welcome the development of an Anglican covenant that articulates who we are: our identity, faith and ecclesiology. Some partners have either said or implied that they no longer know who Anglicans are, and so are encouraging us in the covenant process. IASCER suggests that an Anglican covenant could lend greater coherence and credibility both to our life as a communion and to our ecumenical engagement.

How covenant language might be heard

IASCER suggests that the term ‘covenant’ may resonate differently among our ecumenical partners. There is a ‘covenanting’ tradition among Reformed churches and people from this family may conclude that Anglicans are engaged in a similar process. Churches which define themselves by ‘confessional’ statements may conclude erroneously that an Anglican covenant will function in a similar way. There has been extensive writing on the subject of ‘covenant’ in connection with the Vatican II use of the term ‘people of God’. These and other church families are likely to read an Anglican covenant through their own history and experience. This would suggest that the text should be very explicit in what it means by the language and concept of ‘covenant’.

Episcopacy, synodality and the role of the Primates’ Meeting

IASCER observes that the prominence given to the role of the Primates’ Meeting in the draft covenant has raised questions about the role of the Primates in relation both to episcopal governance and to the synodical role of clergy and laity in decision-making. IASCER notes that the Anglican Lutheran International Commission, for example, has

expressed concern about the emphasis given to the role of bishops in the proposed draft covenant, specifically that it ‘appears to greatly increase the authority of the Primates without any corresponding enhancement of the role of the laity in the decision-making processes of the Anglican Communion.’ ALIC observes that ‘it is not clear why this responsibility should be accorded to the Primates, rather than to the ACC, or some other body incorporating lay, ordained, and non-primatial episcopal representation’. (Response to the Draft Covenant, adopted by resolution of the Anglican Lutheran International Commission, White Point Nova Scotia, May, 2007). However, IASCER notes that any proposals of the Primates’ Meeting relating to the covenant would still need to be received by the duly constituted synodical structures of the Provinces.

(2) Contributions from our Ecumenical Agreements

Shape and language

The concept and language of ‘covenant’ have proved fruitful in an ecumenical context because they have provided a way of articulating a new quality of relationship between churches. When formally adopted, a covenant gives shape and stability to the relationship and provides an impetus for it to develop and deepen.

We discern two poles in ecumenical covenants: (1) the recognition and affirmation of ecclesial reality of each other’s churches based on a common confession of the apostolic faith and an apostolic ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral oversight, and (2) commitment to act together on the basis of this mutual recognition towards a common life and mission. Ecumenical covenants identify the existing common ground for the relationship and also make a commitment to work together to overcome remaining or new obstacles that prevent an even deeper life together.

Covenants are made between churches that have significant differences between them; it is not necessary for churches to agree with each other on all matters, but it is vital that they make a commitment to consider those differences together within their covenant relationship.

IASCER believes that the covenant design process in the Anglican Communion would benefit from following the shape of ecumenical covenants in making affirmations about the life of the churches and in making mutual commitment to work together both in mission and to resolve differences.

Biblical language

Pp. 6-35 of *In the Spirit of the Covenant*, a report of the Joint Implementation Commission of the Anglican – Methodist Covenant (Church of England and the Methodist Church of Great Britain) offer a biblical spirituality of a covenant relationship (Peterborough, England: Methodist Publishing House, 2005; <http://www.anglican-methodist.org.uk/JICreport.>)

Expressions of our self-understanding and identity

The articulation of our ecumenical agreements and covenants play an important role in our self-understanding and identity. In recent years, Anglicans have been part of many ecumenical agreed texts, both multilateral and bilateral. Some of these have been endorsed by Provinces and/or by the Lambeth Conference, and some of them, although not formally received, have nevertheless been influential in the development of Anglican thinking about ecclesiology. IASCER believes it important for the Covenant Design Group to ensure that its work is consonant with these ecumenical agreements.

Exercise of authority

The *Virginia Report* and the *Windsor Report* both recommend strengthening the Instruments of Communion as a means of sustaining the bonds of communion between the Anglican provinces. Three of these instruments of communion, however, are exclusively episcopal structures. This raises the question of how episcopal authority ought to be exercised in the church. As Anglicans we have been guided in this area by the notion of “dispersed authority” (Lambeth Conference 1948) rather than a notion of centralized authority. In the language of our ecumenical agreements, this means that episcopal authority needs to be exercised in personal, collegial, and communal ways (BEM 26-27). In Anglican ecclesiology the principles of both episcopal and primatial authority are accepted. The question, therefore, is how a right balance is to be achieved between the personal, collegial, and communal dimensions in the exercise of these ministries.

Both ARCIC and the *Cyprus Agreed Statement* of the Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue stress the inseparable relationship between primacy and conciliarity.

“Primacy fulfils its purpose by helping the churches to listen to one another, to grow in love and unity, and to strive together towards the fullness of Christian life and witness; it respects and promotes Christian freedom and spontaneity; it does not seek uniformity where diversity is legitimate Although primacy and conciliarity are complementary elements of episcopate it has often happened that one has been emphasized at the expense of the other, even to the point of serious imbalance The *koinonia* of the churches requires that a proper balance be preserved between the two with the responsible participation of the whole people of God.” (ARCIC *Final Report*, 21-22).

The recent *Cyprus Agreed Statement* grounds primacy firmly in the local churches (dioceses). Primate represent their local churches and are accountable to them. Primacy and conciliarity are inseparable:

“The theological argument for primacy begins with local and moves on to regional and global leadership This ensures a proper balance between primacy and conciliarity Anglicans and Orthodox agree that bishops do not form an apostolic college apart from and above the local churches. Bishops are an integral part of their respective churches. Such an understanding precludes any form of centralised universal episcopal jurisdiction

standing apart from the local churches. [Furthermore] if conciliarity is one important complement of primacy, reception is another. Decisions of councils and primates need to be referred back to the local churches for their acceptance . . . Such decisions must be received by the community in order to become authoritative. This fact reinforces the truth that bishops, including primates, are not independent of their local churches.” (*The Church of the Triune God: The Cyprus Agreed Statement of the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue* 2006. V. 21-23).

IASCER finds Section VIII (pp. 91-96) of *The Church of the Triune God* a useful contribution to the discussion of how a covenant might provide a way to discern and define together what matters might be regarded as communion-breaking, and what matters might not be so regarded.

The work of ARCIC on authority, and particularly the responses of the Provinces to *The Gift of Authority*, could be useful background for the Covenant Design Group

(3) Experience of Ecumenical Partners in their own Self-Definition and Governance

Common Principles of Canon Law

IASCER notes that our ecumenical partners, who also face the need to work and hold together as families of churches, have different means of doing so; in some of them canon law plays a major role and in some a confessional document shapes their identity. The Anglican Communion Legal Advisers Network has almost completed a project of articulating a significant body of ecclesiological principles that are already held in common by the churches of the Anglican Communion and IASCER believes that the covenant proposal needs to be undergirded by the work of this project. IASCER is, therefore, of the view that this material, which simply describes and collates the ecclesiological principles that the churches of the Communion already share, should be made public as a matter of urgency, so that the Communion-wide discussion of the Covenant can take it into account.

Conclusions

1. IASCER believes that an Anglican Covenant could lend greater coherence and credibility both to our life as a communion and to our ecumenical engagement.
2. IASCER urges the Covenant Design Group to use as a resource the agreed statements between Anglicans and their ecumenical partners.
3. IASCER urges that the Covenant Design Group invite ecumenical partners, especially those with whom churches of the Anglican Communion are in dialogue or in relationships of communion, to engage in the covenant process as soon as possible. This would most likely take the form of them being asked to comment on the next draft text when it is published. The Covenant Design Group may want to consider developing specific questions that would encourage other churches to address the issues identified in this paper.
4. IASCER believes that the covenant proposal needs to be undergirded by the work on ecclesiological principles project of the Anglican Communion Legal Advisers Network.