

RESPONSE to the Anglican Covenant Design Group

December 2006

I am grateful for the invitation to respond to some of the current thinking on the Windsor Report proposal for an Anglican Covenant, and in particular the papers from the Joint Standing Committee and the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission. I write in a personal capacity, but I believe in tune with the Response to the Windsor Report made by the Trustees of USPG in January 2005.

The IATDC Study of Communion said in October 2006 *“A covenant, which rehearses the theological tradition from which Anglicanism has developed, and establishes clear commitments for the way it can maintain its cohesiveness, seems the most likely way to secure its communion for the foreseeable future”*. The problem is not so much the general content of such a Covenant - where the actual process of formulating and agreeing it could itself be a relationship-building exercise - but rather the nature of the ‘clear commitments’ which it might contain, the authority which will be afforded them, what processes may be set up to police them, how these will be used, and how they might be abused.

It is therefore important to begin with some honesty about whose agenda is running this exercise. Is it, as some are open enough to admit, primarily to bring into line rogue elements in ECUSA and Canada? Such a Covenant would fail to honour the kind of understandings the Communion has reached on other issues, such as the Ordination of Women. It would fail to recognise the compromises already reached on issues like Polygamy and Divorce, which have been accepted even in those parts of the Communion who have been most forceful in rejecting a similar attitude to Scriptural authority on other issues. It would also not best serve us if, as some predict, the next divisive issue will be Lay Presidency. So it is essential not to set up a Covenant which will increase division now and store up more problems for the future. In the words of one of my Trustees, “Any covenant worthy of the name should provide a framework in which difficult issues can be worked through, rather than providing slogans to shout at each other. If a Covenant encourages a deeper sense of theological seriousness, all well and good”.

One general agreement since the Windsor Report has been opposition to any increase in centralised authority within the Anglican Communion, and that needs to be applied not just to the office of Archbishop of Canterbury and the other Instruments but also to attempts to enforce further doctrinal compliance over and above what is already agreed, such as the Lambeth Quadrilateral. This leads me to three major points.

Firstly, there is much more holding the Communion together than its formal Instruments of Unity. Mission Agencies like USPG sustain a whole range of relationships and mutual sharing of resources - and our experience is that the kind of issues which apparently are a source of division within the Instruments do not have the same profile within the partnerships we share. The IADTC

Communion Study is therefore right when it says “ *‘thick’ ecclesiology, concrete experience of the reconciling and healing work of God in Christ, should take priority over ‘thin’, abstract and idealised descriptions of the church. Communion ‘from below’, is real communion – arguably the most vital aspect of koinonia with God and neighbour.*”

Secondly, within the more formal structures, there is the fundamental issue of the appropriate claim to “autonomy”. Part IV of the Windsor Report acknowledges the proper autonomy of each church, but calls upon each church to exercise this with a right concern for each other and for the common good. Whilst it has been unfortunate that some in ECUSA have defended their recent actions on the basis of a more political than theological claim to such autonomy, the Windsor call for churches to “*place the interests and needs of the community of member churches before its own*” needs to be addressed to the whole Communion and not just North America. In the debate since Windsor there has been much reference to not exercising autonomy in a way that would be unacceptable to other parts of the Communion, but nothing directly about respecting other parts of the Communion in their exercise of autonomy or about the seriousness of breaking communion. This also applies, of course, to the increasing intervention of some Provinces into the rightful business of others.

Thirdly, there is the related issue of the limits of diversity. Again, the Windsor Report rightly celebrated Anglican diversity as “*a desirable dimension of the catholicity of the church, a feature of the historic development of Anglicanism, and inherent to the particularity of each member church*”. In particular, the Report’s emphasis on reason and interpretation is to be seen as a welcome rejection of the kind of Scriptural Fundamentalism which threatens such diversity in current debates. It was, for example, disturbing to see the language of Scriptural “inerrancy” in the statement from the Kigali meeting earlier this year: this has never been the currency of Anglicanism.

On the question of the limits of diversity, Paragraph 30 of the Joint Standing Committee report is right to draw a parallel with the Ordination of Women. Here is an issue that touches on the very nature of ordained ministry, both within our own Communion and in relation to other Communion, and which is considered by some to be of the same moral order as discrimination on the basis of race. Yet, thanks to the Virginia Report and other initiatives, opposing views are held together within Anglican diversity, and Article 12 of the Windsor Report Covenant is able to neatly side- step it as a minor matter for each Church’s own rules.

The implication of all this for establishing the limits of diversity is surely that when a serious difference emerges it rests on both sides to argue their case with the tools which Anglican theologising provides. Any Covenant must set out that shared responsibility, and not simply become a tool for one side to berate the other.

So, if we are to have a Covenant, the two crucial issues remain these. Firstly, it must embody Anglicanism at its theological best and not its political worst. The IATDC Communion Study seems to me to go a long way in setting down what that entails, not least in the right valuing and but also proper use of Scripture. This would also suggest that these same values need to characterise the process by which the content of any Covenant is agreed, with good time given to study, consultation and prayer, rather than a rush to find a quick and easy solution.

Secondly, it must not be the means whereby one part of the Communion, geographically or theologically, is enabled to dominate another. I have written elsewhere about how the exercise of power has disfigured recent debates in the Communion. There is the inheritance of colonial power, and still a tendency in the Church of England either to retain control or lose interest. There is the emergence of new power blocks in the so-called South, not always accountable, and often liable to repeat the mistakes of an older Christendom. Most of all there is the new imperial power of America, sometimes in the arrogance of the Liberals, but most of all in the dollar-rich intervention of the neo-conservatives all around the world.

A Covenant, should we have one, must not exacerbate that power struggle, either by content which equipped one side to bully the other, or by means of implementation which would demand compliance or require expulsion.

Scripture should teach us that a Covenant is a framework for relationships not an instrument of control. It should be based on grace, not law. It should celebrate what we have in common and maximise our ability to live with our differences. It should recognise the diversity of what we bring and the places where we are set. It should build on our shared inheritance and be open to where the Holy Spirit may lead us in the future. It should provide food for the journey not weapons for a fight. In his introduction to the Windsor Report Archbishop Eames wanted the proposals to be “part of a pilgrimage towards healing and reconciliation”. If the proposal for an Anglican Covenant is taken forward, that must be the test.

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