

A COVENANT FOR THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION

A proposal for use as a discussion starter by Bishop George Bruce
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One of the elements of the Lambeth Commission on Communion, more commonly known as the Windsor Report, which provoked some controversy was both the discussion surrounding the idea of a Covenant as well as the Appendix containing a draft Covenant for the Anglican Communion. While much else in the report may have been generally acceptable to many of the report's readers, the notion of Covenant seemed to raise many hackles. From my perspective most of the distress seemed to be focused on the example of what a Covenant might look like which was contained in the Appendix. Sadly, most of those objecting did not bother to read the disclaimer that this was a possible way forward and that the printed text was merely offered as an example of what a Covenant might look like. To the best of my knowledge even its author was not totally happy with the text or even that it was included. Chalk one up to the power of the printed word! Nevertheless, the draft Covenant, if not the idea drew fire on many fronts as being too rigid; too much a throw back to the colonial era and so on. Ignored in the debate was the potential value at this time in the life of the Communion of some kind of document that could serve to draw the disparate churches of the Communion closer to God and to each other particularly in times of tension and difficulty.

It makes sense to me, that the starting point in any discussion must be a clear understanding of the terminology that is being used. Too many of the phrases so glibly thrown around in the current debates threatening the Communion mean very different things to different people. No wonder that we find it so difficult to engage in reasoned discourse. Such clarity of understanding must begin with what precisely do we mean by the term "Covenant". Of the various definitions of the word *covenant* to be found in the Oxford English Dictionary I believe two are apposite. First, a solemn agreement and second, an agreement held to be the basis of a relationship of commitment with God. Both definitions are derived from the Old French meaning *agreeing* which in turn is derived from the Latin *convenire* to come together. Perhaps a conflation of both of these definitions into "a solemn agreement held to be the basis of a relationship of commitment by the members of the Anglican Communion with God" is an appropriate direction in which we should all be moving.

In discussion with others, it seems to me that the major difficulty with the style of Covenant being proposed in the Windsor Report is that it in fact has a constitutional or legislative tone rather than a relational one. While I fully appreciate the concerns expressed by canon lawyers throughout the Communion, I, like many, question the need for a legally binding document. On reflection, my personal preference would be for something akin to the structure to be found in the Baptismal Covenant contained in the Book of Alternative Services which consists of two distinct parts. In that covenant we first make a clear and corporate affirmation of what we hold to be true with respect to our imperfect understanding of the nature of God. In the baptismal context this is an affirmation of the statements to be found in the Apostles Creed. Secondly, we indicate the manner in which, as a community of believers, we will seek to live out that affirmation.

I suggest that a similar template could equally be applied to the relationship which ought to exist between the various churches and Provinces of the Anglican Communion. What is

there that we can all affirm in common as members of the Anglican Church world wide (Affirmation of The Lambeth Quadrilateral and perhaps the so called “Instruments of Communion” would be an excellent start) and how do we as a Communion propose to live out those affirmations through the grace of God and to the best of our ability?

Having said this it would be necessary to amplify somewhat each of the points of the Quadrilateral to ensure common understanding of their meaning. As I noted earlier, one of the major difficulties in current debates is the manner in which the various parties engaged in the discourse manipulate language to their own advantage. A clear and accepted understanding of the meaning of the various terms being used would be an immense step forward. For example some of the highly charged debate about the interpretation of scripture could benefit immensely from the discussion of that subject in the Windsor report itself. Clear affirmation of the role and function of the “Instruments of Communion” would hopefully ensure a high degree of commitment to the future of the Communion. For example, I believe that any Covenant, which does not acknowledge the unifying role of the Archbishop of Canterbury, would be self-defeating.

While it may be possible without too much dissension to agree upon what we can affirm, it will more difficult to delineate what as provinces we can agree to do to demonstrate vividly our intention to live out these affirmations in our individual churches. Assuming that this is possible and I believe fervently that with a spirit of generosity it should be achievable it still begs the question of what, as a Communion, we can agree to do in the event of serious disagreements. Can we come to an understanding of which issues are Communion issues and which may be left to individual provinces to work out?

Thus, a further key aspect of any Covenant would have to include some discussion of a mechanism for dealing with areas of Communion life where there is significant divergence. To have in existence such a mechanism in advance would provide an ordered way to move forward through the minefields that the many diverse approaches to issues throw in our path. While this need not necessarily be couched in binding canonical terminology the very fact of its existence and that it had been agreed to by all Provinces would provide it with a moral authority that, perhaps, would be more binding on us all than any legislation we might contemplate.

Offered as a possible starting point for a way forward.

