

PROVINCE OF HONG KONG SHENG KUNG HUI

PROPOSED ANGLICAN COVENANT

RESPONSE TO THE FIRST DRAFT

Following an extended period of consultation within the parishes of the three dioceses of HKSKH, together with the Missionary Area of Macau, a consultation meeting of the Provincial Clergy was held at which a range of views was aired and discussed. The following summary fairly represents the responses of the majority of our members.

1. THE DESIRABILITY OF AN ANGLICAN COVENANT

1.1 A decision to transfer *authority* from the autonomous Provincial Churches of the Anglican Communion, together with a dilution of the *authority* inherently vested in the historic role of the Archbishop of Canterbury as *spiritual leader (primus inter pares)*, to a credal document would be received by many members of HKSKH as incompatible with Anglican tradition. Beyond the mountainous obstacle of actually arriving at an agreed text lies a potential minefield of disputatious haggling over interpretations of the document whenever accusations of non-conforming and heretical provincial behaviour are laid before a Primates' Meeting.

1.2 In common with many other provinces of the Communion around the world, HKSKH treasures the traditional Anglican comprehensiveness and diversity that has enabled different theological and liturgical emphases – Anglo-catholic, Broad, Evangelical – to find expression under one extended canopy. The cohesiveness of pluralistic societies, such as the international community of Hong Kong, depends upon the fostering of a welcoming inclusiveness within churches, social clubs and all the varied organisations in which the majority come together with minority groups in an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance.

A covenant, if allowed to impose a prescribed, monochrome reflection of received truth, ecclesiastical correctness and *accepted* behaviour, would seriously undermine communal tolerance. The issue of the place of women as leaders in the Church presents an example of great significance in Hong Kong. In 1944 the late Revd Florence Li Tim-oi was the first woman to be ordained in the Anglican Communion. In Lambeth Palace that pastoral initiative in southern China context attracted vehement disapproval. Anglican women priests, numbers 2 and 3, were 'properly' ordained in Hong Kong in 1971. What was new and controversial was, within a generation, found to be desirable and legitimate by a large part of the Church around the world.

- 1.3 The core of unity must rest upon Jesus Christ our Lord. Whether a covenant would be capable, and the only way, of inducing an appropriate level of order and coherence within what is essentially a family of ‘adult’ churches needs further wide-ranging, exploratory discussion.
- 1.4 The emergence of the draft covenant, following the recommendation contained in the Windsor Report, is an indication of a widespread feeling that the unity of the Anglican Communion is breaking down. Obviously, if a group of primates are unable to partake of Holy Communion with one or more fellow primates then we need to question whether we have unity in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

2. THE PRACTICABILITY OF A COVENANT

- 2.1 The binding power of a future covenant is an unknown quantity when viewed against the current background of escalating polarisation and escalating incursions across provincial boundaries. The sense of autonomy when in harness with contextual and cultural considerations override respect for and understanding of the contexts and cultures of brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world and for the efforts of the Archbishop of Canterbury as he struggles – without even a fig-leaf of canonical authority – to preserve a modicum of unity in the midst of diversity.
- 2.2 A system of punishment, in whatever terms, would need to be established in tandem with a covenant in order to provide a deterrent to systematic violation. It has already been mooted that the judicial authority would be vested in the Primates’ Meeting, which would transform a consultative Anglican-style ‘talking shop’ into an authoritarian Vatican-style *curia*, which would not be welcome.
- 2.3 Within the first draft of the covenant there are potential theological issues that will be difficult to negotiate; for instance, many Hong Kong Anglicans would balk at endorsing an affirmation of the Thirty-nine Articles as set out in Section 2 (5) as one of the confessions of faith.

3. A FURTHER COMMENT OFFERED IN THE LIGHT OF OUR SPECIFIC HKSKH CONTEXT.

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is a constituent territory of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It follows that HKSKH is an – the only – Anglican province in the emerging super power wherein Christianity has suffered trials and tribulations following the Communist Revolution in the middle of the last century.

During the years between 1984 and 1990, Archbishop Emeritus Peter Kwong, then Bishop of Hong Kong and Macao, worked tirelessly as a member of the Basic Law Drafting Committee. He succeeded not only in greatly contributing to the preservation of Hong Kong's religious freedoms but also in forging close and enduring relationships with the senior officials of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (directly under the State Council of the PRC) and the leaders of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (the only registered post-denominational Protestant Church in China), including its Chairman for many years, Bishop Ding Guangxun – the last Anglican bishop in China.

The establishment of the HKSKH as the 38th Province of the Anglican Communion in 1998 further underscored the autonomy and independence of our Church as seen by the authorities in mainland China. In the past decade, the harmonious links have been further strengthened and in 2007, two young clerics from the Three-Self Movement Church have embarked on further studies at SKH Ming Hua Theological College in Hong Kong.

There is no doubt that the autonomous governance of our Church, together with the affectionate but non-interfering ties with the See of Canterbury and other churches of the Communion, sit easily with the familiar crystal-clear policies of the PRC government with respect to religious affairs.

HKSKH Anglicans are bound to approach any movement within the Anglican Communion towards the centralisation of power and governance with considerable reluctance and great caution.

We are pleased to offer this brief response to the draft covenant and hope that the frank and sincere comment contained herein will prove useful to the Drafting Group as it continues with its formidable task.

HONG KONG

22nd January 2008