

Response of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa to the Draft Anglican Covenant

Summary

The Anglican Church of Southern Africa is a very diverse Province with views that span close to the whole spectrum of those found within the Anglican Communion.

A wide consultation process has thus thrown up a range of perspectives, though for the most part there is agreement on the value of a Covenant and the need for appropriate mutual accountability, provided that it neither diminishes legitimate diversity and autonomy, nor constrains Anglicanism's traditional ability to address new circumstances as they arise. There is hope that a Covenant has the potential to provide a confident articulation of Anglican identity that can help us hold together as far as possible while working through differences, though acknowledging that there may need to be limits on the breadth of beliefs and practices among those who call themselves Anglican.

Of concern is that the process to develop a Covenant may be proceeding too quickly, and may be too far driven by current disagreements, which risk distorting our ability to develop a text that will achieve its stated objectives, and have a long 'shelf life.' Some have suggested a parallel commentary, which explains more fully the choices of the form of the draft and the language it employs. Some felt that though the centrality of Scripture is a fundamental Anglican tenet, this was not adequately expressed in the Draft; while for others the choices of verses for each section was unexplained, did not include key biblical references to covenant, appeared to be little more than arbitrary 'proof texts' and in all this begged the questions that the hermeneutical project will address.

The most widespread criticisms were of Section 6 of the Draft Covenant. There was close to universal disquiet at the extended role proposed for Primates, with the view that this undermines our commitment both to being 'episcopally led *and* synodically governed' and to proper collegiality between primates and their fellow bishops. Rather, there was strong affirmation that the Anglican Consultative Council should play a fuller, even decisive, role, many suggesting that this should be the body which acts in 'extreme circumstances' (section 6.6), though there should be a longer process before such point was reached. There was also concern that there was no mention of the role of Provinces' due synodical processes in the decision-making of the Communion, and little that related the Covenant to the daily life and mission of Anglicans.

The draft also raised a fundamental wider-ranging question, which is our understanding and expression of communion not only between Anglicans but in the *koinonia* of the wider Church of God. Has the work of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission been taken into account? Furthermore, given the focus of the draft on our internal life, there is a risk that we present our own self-understanding in a way that does not cohere with our relationships with others. Will, for example, the Roman Catholics 'recognise' us in the Covenant, in a way that we wish them to do so?

The draft provides no process for 'restoration and renewal.' There should be far stronger expectation of and encouragement for this, if we are to avoid the creation of new anomalies that resemble that between the Anglican Church in Southern Africa and the Church of England in South Africa. Another particular South African concern is whether

the Covenant would have any provision for others to become members of the Anglican Communion, or in 'full communion' with the Anglican Communion – a question that has been raised by the Ethiopian Episcopal Church.

Detail

By way of background, it is worth noting that Southern Africa is a hugely diverse Province in terms of race, language and culture, and similarly so in churchmanship. Almost every shade of Anglicanism is found here. We therefore have a particular experience of living with diversity (not least in opposing the artificial dehumanising divisions of apartheid and working for reconciliation across the whole human family) as well as having among us views on the presenting issue of human sexuality that span close to the entire spectrum of those found within the Communion.

It is within this context that, in September 2006, the Synod of Bishops concluded that they did not believe that differences on human sexuality were a church-dividing matter, saying:

*'We know from experience that unity is a divine given but requires constant effort to be realised; a journey that requires tolerance and grace so that no-one should be hurt and all should feel that they belong. Our own journey continues to remind us of the need for a generosity of spirit and the respect for diversity.
... As Bishops, we remain convinced that within the Anglican Communion what unites us far outweighs what divides us.
... We urge the Anglican Communion to choose to remain united in accordance with the will of the Triune God whom we seek to serve. ... We urge every part of the Anglican Communion to recognise, in one another, our common sanctification in Christ and to seek steps that, in time, will lead to reconciliation and the unity and peace that Christ wills for his Church.'*

Against this background, the Archbishop of Cape Town encouraged a wide consultation process on the Draft Covenant, and a sub-group of the Diocese of Cape Town's Theological Commission produced a study guide which was circulated to all Dioceses and used by several in their discussions. Six Dioceses submitted detailed responses (some developed in consultation with laity and clergy, some with only clergy), which are drawn on in what follows, along with some responses made by individuals.

The Archbishop also commented publicly on the Covenant in his address to the Diocesan Convention of the Diocese of California in October, while on sabbatical prior to retirement (see Appendix).

The detailed comments that follow begin with general points that refer to the Draft Covenant as a whole, and then continue with particular points raised by the sections of the Draft.

General Remarks

There is widespread agreement that the Anglican Communion would be helped by some clear enunciation of the basis of our common life in a way that allows us to go forward holding faithfully to our Christian calling. There is support for the concept of a Covenant *insofar* as it is able to achieve this – though a few have expressed concern at whether this

is actually achievable in practice. The current draft is found to be inadequate in a variety of areas, most notably section 6.

Points relating to the general nature of a Covenant include the following:

- Even the title of ‘Covenant’ was questioned, given that this seemed to be ‘a human attempt at managing unity’, rather than reflecting the nature of God’s covenants with humanity.
- A Covenant must demonstrate that we are serious about tackling the differences we face, and with honesty.
- The Covenant, and the process by which it is developed, must inspire confidence in Anglicans at every level
- It must both build unity and allow appropriate diversity (though there would not be total agreement on what constitutes ‘appropriate’ in this and following points!)
- It must preserve an appropriate autonomy for Provinces, balanced against a right level of mutual accountability and commitment
- It must allow for open airing of new issues as they arise, even if only in one or two Provinces. Others must not put a brake on, and close down, the addressing of pertinent questions. All of us must be encouraged to be aware of our cultural contexts – none is neutral, none is necessarily better or worse than any other. It is how we enunciate the gospel and live it out within them that matters.
- Thus, while upholding moral values, it must ensure the flexibility for continuing growth and development of Anglican Tradition
- To be too prescriptive would both ‘box in’ the Holy Spirit, and undermine the laity in living out their calling in the diversity of their contexts.
- The Covenant must provide processes that allow and encourage us to continue talking for as long as possible while we explore differences, without the perceived need for participants to separate themselves when disagreements first arise.
- It must respect the due Canonical and Synodical processes of Provinces and Dioceses

Wide-ranging concerns were raised about the timing and pace of the Covenant process:

- We should not feel under pressure to conclude a text hastily – we are in danger of moving too fast.
- We should not allow ourselves to be driven by the particular presenting issue, as there was far too much risk of us each addressing the draft on the basis of whether it would deliver the outcome we would prefer for the current difficulties. (Some here drew parallels with whether such a covenant would have allowed for the ordination of women to priesthood and/or episcopate – developments which all but one welcomed and feared might not have been possible with the current draft, the exception citing the opposite with feeling!)
- It also seems we are operating out of a need for ‘damage control’ rather than from the perspective of building up our common life, fuelled by a vision of a flourishing future.
- ‘We are in danger of straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel.’
- There is also too much of a feeling that this is about ‘power’ – not least, between north and south, colonial and post-colonial. We should not operate on this basis.
- Indeed, it is questionable whether now is a good time to pursue the idea of a Covenant, given the atmosphere of distrust, mutual accusation, and fundamental disagreement, with pressures from certain quarters for conformity and opposing diversity.

- The Covenant ought to be developed only *after* the outcomes of the Canon Law and Hermeneutics projects are finalised, taking their conclusions into account.
- More work needs to be done on ‘diversity and unity’ and we should ‘not fear where an inclusive Church would take us.’ We should be guided by the Lord’s attitude to the stranger, the marginalised and the outsider.

One Diocese reflected in depth on the parallels between the Anglican Communion and recent South African history. They said

Both the Virginia Report and the Windsor Report have recognised the need for a basis of common life and have begun in helpful ways, to address that need. However any ‘top down’ or partisan basis on which a covenant may be drawn in haste will prove counter-productive; an enforced basis of unity will self-exclude those who cannot own it, and an enforced and exclusionary document containing any group’s shibboleths will be ignored, We have learned in South Africa that for any process to be ‘owned’, it needs to be processed by the people it affects, often slowly and over time. It requires effort and expense; witness the process by which we arrived at the ordination of women.

Such a process is hard to envisage, given that the differences among us are geographical and cultural, and bridging these would require persons from distant places to engage quite deeply with each other. An unhurried Lambeth is a start but needs to be supplemented, maybe through the network of partner and link dioceses across the Communion. It would be wise to recognise that such a process will take 20 years; Lambeth should accept that and bind itself to a midway review in 2018 with a view to finality after 2028.

They also raised the question of whether a ‘Truth and Reconciliation’ process might be pursued, which, inter alia, would revisit the roots of Anglican history, noting that

It has been suggested that the English saw so much bloodshed around religious issues during their Civil War, that they founded an inclusive church on the basis that any amount of divergence is tolerable as long as open dispute is avoided; in any event, the Church of England, even while disputatious, continuously failed to address constructively the theological and church-cultural issues within itself over the past 200 years, but rather exported its divisions through a colonial turf-war which merely planted its divisions more widely. Only when the world shrank to today’s village proportions did it realise how divided it was, and how fundamentally dishonest had been much of the ‘mission and outreach’ of global Anglicanism. Therefore we may be unable to make much progress until we have a ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’ at the roots of the Communion (notably in England) to address the sources of our misunderstandings and the mismatched pieces of our church life.

Another diocese made similar comments, commending reconciliation processes between individuals, particularly at the (archi)episcopal level.

Some felt that the draft was too long (often saying it was too full of theological and legal jargon that had little meaning for the majority of Anglicans and so would not enhance their life of faith), and that a more general conceptualisation would be better. Others, however, wanted a longer draft that went far more into specifics. On both sides there was disappointment that the Design Group had not provided a commentary explaining its decisions on form and structure, and choice of language.

One Diocese felt that the position and authority of Scripture ought to be made more explicit, in the Preamble, and more generally throughout the Covenant.

However, there was also widespread unhappiness (from across the spectrum of churchmanship) at the scriptural references that introduce each section: no justification was given for the use of scripture in this way, nor for those texts cited; some were lengthy passages, others only a few verses, and no reference was made to their biblical contexts, which would be the basis for understanding their import; key texts on the nature of covenant were omitted; and there were fears of 'proof-texting' and that choices were made to underline particular, not necessarily universally shared, perspectives.

The further point was made that interpretation of scripture was one of the underlying questions at stake in current disagreements, and to list texts in this way thus begged more questions than were answered.

It was also noted that while scripture is the supreme guide in our faith, we are nonetheless '*not required to believe anything that cannot be proved thereby*' (39 Articles) and thus 'there is space for some much-needed agnosticism' at times, not least in relation to pastoral care, and in not tying down Anglican identity too narrowly: 'we need a process which makes space for the views of all our people and does not command them how to vote.'

There was also widespread concern that a connection should better be made between any Covenant and the 'grass roots' life of the Church. A Covenant should be comprehensible to every church member, and should express Anglican identity in ways that strengthen and encourage Christian life and mission at parish level also.

The question was raised of whether there should be some provision internal to the Covenant to allow for its future amendment. There was a danger that it would be 'set in stone' and so soon become outdated, risking irrelevance

Specific Comments

1. *Preamble*

One Diocese suggest the final clause should read '*and to seek to grow together towards the full stature of Christ.*'

2. *The Life We Share*

There was concern that this section in particular should be informed by the outcome of the canon law project. Do all Provinces cite the 39 Articles, for example, and might oaths of canonical obedience be useful to quote?

There was also surprise that no reference was made here or elsewhere to 'scripture, tradition and reason', which have historically been seen as foundational within Anglican self-understanding.

3. *Our Commitment to the Confession of Faith*

Several Dioceses expressed concern that the wording of this section was too open to a variety of interpretations.

In (1) it was felt that 'biblically derived moral values' was a weak phrase, since biblical warrant is claimed for all manner of, sometimes contradictory, moral positions: 'almost any position could be derived from the Bible by those holding that position.' (See reference above to hermeneutics project.) A proposed alternative was '*a biblically inspired vision of humanity.*'

The reference that scripture 'must continue to illuminate, challenge and transform cultures ...' in (3) was welcomed;

Also in (3) it was suggested that 'comprehensively' be replaced by '*contextually*'.

In (4) the question was raised about what we mean by, and how we test 'prophetic' leadership/

The following rewording was proposed for (5): '*pursue a common ... Communion as we journey together towards discerning the truth that peoples from all nations may be truly free in celebrating the new and abundant life, in our Lord Jesus Christ, expressed through love, mutual respect, and openness to honour one another, despite our differences.*'

4. The Life We Share With Others

It was suggested that the first sentence be amended to read: 'We affirm that the Communion is a gift from God: and that *God's people from all over the world are called to declare God's glory* and be a sign of God's Kingdom.'

5. Our Unity and Common Life

While the Instruments of Communion were generally confirmed, concern was raised as to whether the Archbishop of Canterbury was likely always to be a British citizen, which distorted the office, as did also the requirement to swear allegiance to the British Crown, and the particular relationship with Parliament and other aspects of establishment.

One Diocese wondered whether there should be an additional Archbishop, not from the Church of England, having a special and unique relationship with Anglicans outside the Church of England.

It was stressed that though the Archbishop of Canterbury should be the 'first among equals' he should not become an Anglican "Pope".

6. Unity of the Communion

This section gave rise to the greatest number of comments. There was near universal agreement that the draft gave too great a role to the Primates, whom some felt already enjoyed too much power.

Rather, there was strong affirmation that the ACC should be the body that has a decisive role in addressing disputes, should this be necessary (with the hope that this would be rather more the 'last resort' than in the draft which seemed to move too precipitately to this point). One diocese suggested that the ACC function by houses, with each house being required to attain a 2/3 majority on the action to be taken in matters of serious dispute.

One diocese qualified this by noting that not all ACC representatives are necessarily chosen through due synodical processes and hoped the balance of decision-making could be sited within Provinces and Dioceses, taking account of the councils of parishes, unless ACC membership could be shown to be fully in touch with the grass roots.

There was a strong explicit commitment to upholding our ethos as episcopally led *and* synodically governed.

There was also concern that privileging the Primates undermines our understanding of conciliarity among bishops. Our being 'episcopally led' should focus more on the Lambeth Conference – though it was noted that there was huge disparity among Provinces about the number of parishes and individuals falling under each bishop's oversight.

One suggestion was that the paragraphs be reordered: 3), 4), 1), 2), 5), 6).

It was suggested that the Instruments of Unity be listed in (1) after the reference to them.

It was suggested the word 'prayerfully' be added to (2)

Conscious of our own long and divided relationship with the Church of England in South Africa, there concern that the draft contained no procedure for what might happen *after* the actions of (6). There should be much clearer provision for, and expectation of, going forward in some sort of relationship, even if impaired, and seeking future reconciliation. Several dioceses voiced concern that similar situations to ACSA/CESA should not be allowed to arise.

The question was raised as to who are the 'we' of (6).

7. Our Declaration

This wording was generally acceptable. There was concern that the declaration should indeed be made with joy, and not with any feeling of compulsion.

+David Beetge
Vicar General of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa.

21st December 2007.

Appendix

Extract from the address given by Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane to the Diocesan Convention of the Diocese of California, on 19 October 2007

"... We must honour our inheritance as both episcopally led and synodically governed. Clergy and laity, the whole people of God, must be included in wide debate, alongside the deliberations of the Primates, and the discussions of Bishops at Lambeth. We are not a church constituted in its bishops alone – and certainly not in its Primates alone.

I have deep reservations about the prominence given to the Primates, rather than the Anglican Consultative Council, in the draft Anglican Covenant. Indeed, I remain to be

convinced that a relationship founded on grace and the unity in Christ that is his gift, can be regulated in this way at all.

Furthermore, the present draft seems to be crafted as a mechanism for exclusion. This is wholly contrary to the very nature of God our Father, whose desire is always to seek reconciliation; and the very nature of Jesus Christ, who came not to condemn but to save; and the very nature of the Holy Spirit, the manifestation of whom is given to each of us for the common good, the life in common which Christians are called to share."