

The Church in Wales

A Response to Section 4 of the Ridley Draft of the Anglican Communion Covenant

Introduction

The Church in Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to Section 4 of the Ridley Draft of the Anglican Communion Covenant.

We understand the Covenant to be first and foremost a document of unity and hope. It identifies the nature of our shared pilgrimage in Jesus Christ by pointing to what might be called ‘identifying marks of the Church’: the Scriptures, the inheritance of faith, the sacraments, the apostolic ministry, and catholic unity. At a most general level, the Doctrinal Commission is concerned that Section 4 of the Ridley Draft places into the hands of the Communion the formal means for dividing the Communion rather than a theological method for nurturing the unity of the Church.

Earlier drafts of what is now Section 4 have included lengthy descriptions of ecclesiastical legal procedure should there be a question over whether any Province has broken the Covenant. Concerns were expressed over the juridical and punitive tone of these earlier drafts, and, despite significant change and development, we remain concerned that Section 4 of the Ridley Draft is not wholly free of such a tone, and sounds at odds with the properly theological style and method of Sections 1 to 3. The Covenant appears to be understood in some quarters as a tool for the reordering of the Church which will be used to effect a rapid severance between Provinces whose contexts and understanding of Christian discipleship are, for now, too different to lie within a single ecclesial body. We hope that this is not the case, and that the Covenant will remain an instrument intended to unite Anglicans around a common and flexible understanding. We are concerned lest the current draft of Section 4 of the Ridley Draft could lead to chaotic, painful and *protracted* disputes with little, if any, sense of *how* such disputes are to be resolved.

This leads us to recommend, in Section B below, a reorientation of Section 4 of the Ridley Draft towards a theology of reconciliation. We are aware that the Covenant Design Group (CDG) and the Anglican Consultative Council have laboured for a very long time amidst wildly conflicting demands to produce the current draft for the Church’s consideration, and that any proposal for a wholesale re-writing of any portion of the Covenant will be greeted with – to say the least – a sigh. We are not necessarily suggesting that the CDG start all over again. We are also very aware that any portion of the Covenant must be succinct, very focussed and clear in its meaning and implications. However, we perceive real dangers in the current draft of Section 4, and believe that an opportunity remains here to provide the Church with a more positive and theological account of how we might work harder towards the unity of the Anglican Communion.

A: Authority and Procedure

Section 4 of the Ridley Draft addresses the question of authority in the interpretation and maintenance of Covenant. As the commentary makes clear, there has been unhappiness at placing authority exclusively in the hands of the Primates’ Meeting or the Anglican Consultative Council, so the current draft proposes that authority for the maintenance of the Covenant be vested in *both*, in the form of the Joint Standing Committee. It would be beneficial if the theological rationale

and practical implications for allocating this task to the JSC were further clarified. Requiring that the instruments of communion interpret the Covenant and administer sanctions is perhaps to demand of these bodies a role and function for which they were not originally intended and for which they may not be equipped. Should further consideration be given to the resources which the JSC will require in order to fulfil its role in relation to the Covenant? For example, might it be furnished with theological guidance from IASCUFO?

Despite authority being vested in the JSC for the interpretation of the Covenant, there is an overriding desire to maintain the autonomy of the Provinces and avoid any sense of central, curial power. However, the JSC may only *recommend* a certain course of action to the other instruments and to Provinces should the Covenant been deemed to have been broken. According to 4.2.5, 'It shall be for each Church and each Instrument to determine its own response to such recommendations.' Potentially, this could lead to chaos within the Church as Provinces reach wildly different conclusions following a recommendation from the JSC. It is not clear how this will lead to resolution of a conflict.

Earlier drafts of the Covenant which have evolved into Section 4 of the Ridley Draft have sought to achieve the impossible: to marry unassailable provincial autonomy with universal juridical authority. It seems that Section 4 of the current draft has responded to concerns about centralising authority by maintaining, in very strong terms, the autonomy of the Provinces. This is reinforced when we read in the commentary that, 'Section Four of the RCD is therefore constructed on the fundamental principle of the constitutional autonomy of each Church.' We should like to invite further reflection on the *nature* of the Provinces' autonomy. Of course, there is a vital *theological* sense in which the Provinces are *not* autonomous; the Church is one body under Christ its head, and this is why disputes across the Communion are so painful and seem to exhaust our resources. Provincial autonomy may concern governance, procedure and context. However, the current draft of the Covenant has overstated the case and needs to focus on our *theological* responsibilities to each other as a properly catholic and apostolic body. This needs to be married to a properly *theological* account of the Covenant's authority and the demands of discipline.

B: A Conciliar Theology of Reconciliation

We should like to offer a positive recommendation to the Covenant Design Group. While it may be necessary to clarify the consequences of breaking the Covenant, the Covenant *itself* may not be the appropriate place to identify such legal and procedural matters. We should like to propose that, rather than focussing on 'The Maintenance of the Covenant and *Dispute Resolution*' (4.2, italics added), Section 4 focus on a theology of reconciliation and hope which is in greater continuity with the method and tone of Sections 1-3. Section 4 might continue this method and tone in delineating a theology of reconciliation which makes use of New Testament accounts of how the early Church negotiated myriad disputes and conflicts. We should like to commend to the CDG the recent report *Communion, Conflict and Hope: The Kuala Lumpur Report of the third Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission* (web site: http://www.aco.org/ministry/theological/iatdc/docs/communion_conflict_&_hope.pdf) While the whole document constitutes a strong theology of reconciliation and hope, we note that paragraphs 96-106 are particularly valuable. Insofar as one body or 'council' of the Church (in this case, the CDG) might refer to the deliberations and authority of another (the IATDC), it renders Anglican theological deliberation more genuinely conciliar.

The report *Communion, Conflict and Hope* points to some fundamental texts concerning dispute and reconciliation, notably Acts 15.1-35 and 2 Corinthians 1.23-2.11 (although many other examples are cited and discussed from the Old and New Testaments). Through theological reflection, certain principles and virtues can be identified for movement towards reconciliation and the nurturing of the Church's unity. This requires considerable theological spade-work. To take just two examples, the nature of reconciliation needs to be clarified, as well as a proper understanding of the New Testament's very rich notion of *paraklesis*. This term is usually translated 'admonition', which leads to a sense amongst some that *disciplinary* authority is a fundamental characteristic of Christian relations and Episcopal oversight. However, as *Communion, Conflict and Hope* makes clear (para. 103), *paraklesis* can also be rendered 'comfort', 'encouragement', 'exhortation' and 'direction'. How might such an enhanced theological understanding of *paraklesis* as first and foremost the work of the Spirit and then, in the full breadth of its meaning, a characteristic of Christian relations, inform the way in which we deal with a dispute such as an apparent break in the Covenant?

Of course, Section 4 of the Covenant is not the place for a full-blown theology of reconciliation. A laconic theological statement which directs the Church's life is required. Nevertheless, the Doctrinal Commission believes that *Communion, Conflict and Hope* can inform a revised Section 4 towards a more positive and genuinely theological account of how the Church might respond to our call to be reconciled to one another. For example, the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 clearly implies the importance of face-to-face meetings between disputants. Prior to any Anglican Province announcing its action in response to an apparent break in the Covenant, should there first be a face-to-face meeting between disputants, overseen by the Archbishop of Canterbury? In a culture of very rapid but largely media-driven and impersonal communication, such encounters may prove surprisingly fruitful. The power of the face-to-face meetings in Indaba groups at the recent Lambeth Conference testifies to the rich potential for such encounters. Such meetings are clearly implied in other sections of the Covenant (3.3); would it be expedient to underline this in Section 4? This is an instance where greater continuity of style across the different sections of the Covenant would aid understanding and interpretation. It would further strengthen the sense that there is a strong and coherent vision of what our corporate Anglican life would look like.

C: Context

Finally, we offer a brief reflection which might contribute to the commentary on a revised draft of Section 4.

It is frequently observed that the culture of rapid global communication is detrimental to Church unity. However, analysis of *why* this is so is sometime a little thin. It is certainly true that news of communities' actions and reports of views within the Church are transmitted without deep consideration and in a fashion that accentuates conflict and readily gives the impression that we are lurching from one crisis moment to another. Such 'violent' interaction between cultures can be very damaging. It has been frequently observed that there is a very stark contrast between our current 'faceless' and rapid means of interaction and the protracted discussions of the Church's early Councils, many of which lasted years, if not centuries.

We should like to point out that free communication and easily available travel gives rise to unrealistic expectations of *uniformity* and sets up a series of false cultural norms. A false cultural norm of pseudo-uniformity is created when, in reality, the different norms of one place do not impinge upon the daily life of another. The 'flattening' of human culture – the sense that there is

a certain 'default' setting – is characteristic of modernity. By contrast, Anglicanism has long celebrated diversity, but not for diversity's sake. Rather, the varied expression of Anglicanism is born of the conviction that the Gospel, because of its richness which exceeds all particularity, can be mediated in many ways.

For many, the disputes which face the Anglican Communion – same-sex relations, lay presidency at the Eucharist, the ordination of women to the priesthood or the Episcopate – are not matters of human culture but of divine authority in the ordering of the Church. Nevertheless, the Church is unavoidably culturally situated and the Gospel culturally mediated. We would welcome a brief reflection on the way in which our context drives our reception and interpretation of the Covenant, and our expectations for the Covenant's future.

This response is made by the Bench of Bishops following consultation with the Church in Wales Doctrinal Commission.