

Why the Anglican Communion Covenant matters

Introduction

When asked to write a preparatory piece on the Anglican Communion Covenant for members of General Synod by the outgoing General Secretary, Jackie Pearse, I soon realised it would be an extraordinarily difficult task. To be sure; she had approached me on account of the exchange the editor of *Taonga* had set up in the recent Advent edition between Richard Randerson and myself (see pages 36-38). I trust this exchange has already contributed positively to raising people's awareness of some of the issues at stake. For all that, immense difficulties remain. What might some of these be?

First and foremost, to my mind, are the many ways different people have experienced the Christian Faith. For some have kept their heads down in their local church and beavered away in their ministries and have seen little need to really raise their heads above the local parish or diocesan scene. Others again, for different reasons, have encountered not only a Three Tikanga Church but also the manifold cosmopolitan splendour of a world-wide Church, and not just the one found in the Anglican Communion but also that ecumenical adventure witnessed, for example, in the World Council of Churches and its diverse gatherings and programmes around the globe. These may be two extremes, and most General Synod members will probably sit somewhere in between; but varying degrees of international and ecumenical exposure is my main point. This reflects the missionary Church of the 21st century; this is our essential context.

This context is both delightfully rich and yet also rather complex. And I venture to say *none* of us may get our heads around either its riches or its complexity. Indeed; so heady are both its riches and its complexities that one temptation is to retreat forthwith into our respective local scenes, deliberately keeping our heads down and out of the way! Unfortunately, while such a strategy might work for some and/or for a while, it does little justice to the circumstances those called to represent our dioceses and te Pihopatanga o Aotearoa and Polynesia at General Synod now face. And what are these circumstances?

In the first instance, some folk will turn directly to the election and consecration of Gene Robinson, who is a partnered gay man, as the Bishop of the Diocese of New Hampshire in the United States. Nor would they be entirely wrong to do so. Yet it is my contention, and many agree, that in fact this event is but *one symptom among many*. What it reveals - and what the many different *reactions* to this event also reveal - is once more the rich complexity of our contemporary world and the circumstances the present Anglican Communion simply finds itself in. Even as some of us might have contributed to these circumstances, creating new initiatives and pioneering new ways, others are mostly on the receiving end - and others again are left wondering what on earth is going on.

But such events and such phenomena as Bishop Robinson's consecration are furthermore *symptomatic of a deeper concern*. And it is this concern which triggers directly any conversation on such a thing as the Anglican Communion Covenant. For what is really at stake here is the issue of authority - *and beyond that*, the different forms of supposed legitimacy substantiating *differing understandings and practices of authority itself*.

Authority: levels and contexts

Authority never simply functions *ad hoc* or without an historical setting. Another preparatory paper for General Synod, that by Peter Carrell, begins by referring to both elements of our history and our present self-governing status. The two subtly interact, even now. Options have developed precisely

on account of our history. We are not a Congregationalist Church. Nor are we a centralised organization as is the Roman Catholic Church with its Magisterium. Where we have come from - our sources, and the very word “authority” incorporates the word “author” - determines to a large degree what is occurring in the present and what our options are for the future. This is the way any human traditions and the traditioning process function.

Yet there is an added element, it has to be said, when we view matters in this way. How exactly might we ‘read’ the history of the processes that have brought us thus far? For “authority” is also a living thing, a matter of “practical reason” even. Consider such a thing as the Treaty of Waitangi and its role in the complex processes currently brought before the Tribunal to settle claims for compensation by iwi. For not only are we, in the 21st century, ‘reading’ now an historical document written in 1840 when none of us were actually present; there is also the simple fact that the very ‘history’ gathered for the purposes of the claims has a distinct bias. No; this word “bias” is not a dirty word, necessarily. Rather, it just says *why* we are undergoing our historical research into such a situation: to make a claim because we have a particular grievance about something, and these are the substantiating reasons. For all that, a local historian, Giselle Byrnes, has published a most important book, *The Waitangi Tribunal and New Zealand History* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pointing out that such an approach has omitted vast tracts of otherwise significant history that has occurred in these Islands. And how might *this* history interact with the narrower ‘grievance history’ being written up over a few decades now via the Waitangi Tribunal process? How might the wider setting of the history of Aotearoa New Zealand be able to accommodate and integrate those specific features of quite legitimate yet limited ‘grievance history’ into this wider, more comprehensive history?

Everything else being equal, what we now face in the Anglican Communion is rather similar. A particular event has occurred (as mentioned) which has precipitated a wide set of reactions (also mentioned). But this particular occurrence is symptomatic of a wider, more complex situation. What is really at stake here? For it has happened in a cultural and historical and organisational setting way beyond a mere sacramental act in New Hampshire one November, in 2003. And how might we *adjudicate* not only the event of Robinson’s consecration (if we really think we have to, which is itself one response among many), but furthermore the *reasons* for the *varying reactions* we have witnessed around the Anglican Communion, and even in Aotearoa New Zealand itself? And then, lastly, what are we to do with *all the different responses* - and *especially those that are quite at odds* one with another? (See below for unravelling some of this.) It is the *scale* and *depth* of our differences that have been major contributors to our Communion’s present plight - to degrees simply not witnessed before.

The Windsor Report (TWR), released towards the end of 2004 by the Lambeth Commission on Communion, sought to address a limited number of such concerns. It did not, for example, actually debate the question of the theological legitimacy or otherwise of people in same-sex relationships let alone their being bishops. Rather, the Commission’s brief stood at one remove from this specific matter. Likewise now, the Anglican Communion Covenant, first suggested in an Appendix to *TWR*, stands at one remove from this particular, contentious issue. This point is very important. For the Anglican Communion Covenant does not limit in any way those topics or subjects of debate that may be brought to the table for discussion. Instead, it offers a way for *all* possibly contentious matters of *any* kind to be discussed and processed - a way that did not exist when Gene Robinson was consecrated.

Back in 2003 it was assumed the “bonds of affection” would determine more or less how contentious matters (those deemed to be not *adiaphora*, as outlined in *TWR*) should be handled. In fact, *TWR* devoted considerable space to outlining how the “bonds of affection” *had already worked in practice* with the issue of the ordination of women (§§ 12ff). Yet in Robinson’s case, these steps, as detailed

by *TWR*, had been short-circuited. And short-circuited to such an extent, it was felt, that trust among us had become so seriously eroded that many considered we could no longer simply rely on such “bonds of affection” to facilitate contentious decision-making from now on. What therefore might be capable of establishing a suitable means of “living ‘in communion with autonomy and accountability’” (quoting 3.1.2 of the Covenant, which itself quotes the Primates’ Letter from Alexandria, March [should it be February?] 2009)? Enter the Anglican Communion Covenant.

The Question of Recognition

The *Taonga* article I have already mentioned focuses at some length on the question of recognition, but it bears repetition, since it casts a helpful light on what “living in communion with autonomy and accountability” might mean. I approach it now from another angle.

There is much that is good about our church history in these Islands, much that is sheer gift of God as well as the fruit of our unique cultural cross-currents. The Lord of the Church has indeed woven a wonderful mat from our respective *taonga*, now formally institutionalized as our Constitution with its three *tikanga* or streams. Yet, the question has now become urgent in the 21st C: How might we take this history and weld it into a vision of Gospel mission that may better embrace *both* the global communities to whom we are sent and whom we are to serve, *and* our own Gospel heritage? For not just any missionary project is in view; multinational corporations too have their mission statements and strategies, often at the expense of the local populations. In times of change - and surely our times are constantly changing - inevitable questions circulate around what form of continuity with the past coupled with what forms of novelty may best serve the **Church’s own** form of mission. The safest way of guarding our Gospel heritage is paradoxically, yet typically, not to hold it too tightly to ourselves, but to allow once more an even richer inter-penetration and cross-fertilization of what *we* bring to the table of fellowship and what *others* have discovered of the inexhaustible riches of Christ.

Yet, there is a problem, it has to be admitted: How might one *recognise* what folk bring *as indeed pertaining to the Gospel*? Not all that claims to be of Christ is indeed fruit of Jesus’s love and truth. The history of the Church is littered with claims both good and true, and claims that turn out to be counterfeit and false. And the key word is “recognize”. I refer to the Archbishop of Canterbury in his Advent Pastoral Letter of 2007.

The Communion is a voluntary association of provinces and dioceses; and so its unity depends *not* on a canon law that can be *enforced*, but on the ability of each part of the family to **recognise** that other local churches *have received the same* faith from the apostles and are faithfully *holding* to it, in loyalty to the One Lord incarnate, who speaks in Scripture and bestows his grace in the sacraments. To put it in slightly different terms, local churches **acknowledge** the same ‘constitutive elements’ in one another. This means in turn that each local church *receives from* others and **recognises in others** the *same* good news and the *same* structure of ministry, and seeks to engage *in mutual service* for the sake of our *common* mission. (emphases added)

Eighteen times in all Rowan Williams uses words of recognition and recognisability, etc. They run through his Pastoral Letter like a mantra. And well they might. For since the Gospel, and the Church to which it gives rise, is all sheer divine gift and not from ourselves, “a human construct” (Windsor Continuation Group), so essentially are we placed on the receiving end; and our due response is one of grateful *acknowledgement*, of *recognising* the situation for what it is: “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Cor 9), which prompts our “Yes and Amen!” (2 Cor 1), an expression so beloved of *The Gift of Authority* from ARCIC of a decade ago.

The Covenant is essentially a tool for such recognition. It authorizes us to say of each other, church to church: Yes, you too have the specific marks of Jesus Christ upon you and your life and upon your ministry and mission. We are enabled to acknowledge we share certain basic “constitutive elements” in common as Anglicans. Sections 1 - 3 of the Covenant detail what are in effect the criteria enabling us to recognise these characteristic things among us. Section 4 then authorises us what to do about it; it details the consequences of this kind of recognition and acknowledgement. And note well: there is quite simply no Covenant without such a consequential Section 4. Sections 1 - 3 are only so much nice theological abstract theory (“a sounding gong or clashing cymbal”), as it were, on their own, without some carefully specified mechanism for handling any contentious matters that might arise as we go about our interdependent vocation and mission together. Put bluntly, without such formalised processes, we’d simply be back where we started in 2003.

A western problem

Earlier I wrote: “how might we *adjudicate* ... the event of Robinson’s consecration (if we really think we have to, which is itself one response among many) ...” The clause in brackets was no idle aside; it is meant to sow a line of thought, one which must now be allowed to come to the fore.

There has grown over many years in most western societies a quite specific attitude to the increasingly cosmopolitan and multicultural diversity that is our contemporary world. Yet this attitude has not arisen by chance; it derives from Europe’s own experience of internecine religious warfare, especially of the 17th century. To cut a long complex story short, two notable motifs have emerged: tolerance; and the division between the public world of facts and the private world of values (including the religious). These two features we now quite simply assume ‘to be the case’. But when one adds a third, even more basic assumption - or “plausibility structure”, as they are technically called, what Paul Ricoeur terms the “available believable” - that of *pluralism*, which is more an ideology than a description of the plurality of things, “tolerance” takes on another characteristic altogether.

While no-one wants to be accused of being discriminatory when it comes to a person’s access to certain goods and services within present-day western society, “discrimination” is not a univocal notion; it has more than one meaning. As a result, our responses are *not* going to be the same in all cases - that is, “discrimination” does not have only one, negative, connotation. This is especially true when we consider the very foundations of rationality are based on a *positive* form of discrimination, one that would affirm the truth and eschew the false. In technical terms, Aristotle, millennia ago, would speak of “the excluded middle”, so that if a statement X were true, then its opposite, Non-X, would then be false - and there is simply no third, middle term or option available. For all that however, we today live in a social world that would want to keep virtually all its options open. Each ‘perspective’ is *deemed* to be as ‘valid’ as the other; each ‘tribe’ or social grouping has its own ‘acceptable’ or ‘plausible’ ethos and world-view. We may not ‘discriminate’ between or among them. Such is “the social construction of reality” that an ideological pluralism *deems* we must be ‘tolerant’ of *all* ‘views’. ***But this is to jettison both rationality and logic - even if we do have to further deny the so-called divide between facts and values in the process.***

Non westerners - and I have lived a good third of my life in Africa - see this elephant in the western room for what it is: a naked emperor! Curiously many a westerner simply blinks when it is pointed out that nothing could be more illogical than the ideology of pluralism. This is not surprising though: it is initially often this way whenever anyone points out something about one’s own native culture, the ‘medium’ in which one ‘naturally swims’. Yet how on earth may one firmly hold with conviction to the view that *everything is relative, given a supposed pluralism* - when simultaneously

everything IS deemed to be relative - including therefore *this very view itself*?! For to claim something - anything at all - 'to actually be the case' requires its status to be more than merely *relative, one 'view' among many!*

Despite such illogicality, much of western culture tries nonetheless to hold together positions which are simply irreconcilable, being totally at odds. Such a stance has naturally enough found its way into some churches of the Anglican Communion, where what was once seen as a mark or note of the church, catholicity (depicting the whole scope of Christ's redemption), has been replaced by pluralism's ideological counterfeit, 'inclusivity'. True; one of the virtues of an historical Anglican ethos was a degree of comprehensiveness. Yet even historically there were seen to be boundaries: just so, the tradition laid down by the Caroline Divines of the 17th C and expressed by Thomas Ken - "I die in the Holy, Catholic and Apostolick Faith, professed by the whole Church before disunion of East and West. More particularly I dye in the *Communion of the Church of England* as it stands distinguished from all Papall and Puritan Innovations ...". Anglicanism's *via media* is here viewed as precisely that between Rome on the one hand and a hard-core Geneva on the other. For by the end of Hooker's generation previously, the Church of England had been set upon a course that embraced an integration of key traits from *both* the Catholic *and* the Reformed. This tradition the Anglican Communion Covenant now seeks to uphold, even as it also seeks to engage with cosmopolitan cultures via a robust view of Christian global mission (see below).

Back to authority

The Japanese like their whale meat. They therefore hunt whales, supposedly for 'scientific research' yet really for acknowledged "cultural reasons", even as many a westerner deplores their callous disregard or Maori their desecration. Certain traditional cultures 'incise' a part of female anatomy, while westerners (and others) deplore such 'mutilation'. And so on ... In other words, to adjudicate among the sundry traits of a culture and/or further between cultures as a whole raises the inevitable question of authority. By what authority might we seek to affirm the one and/or deny the other? What in other words are our means of discrimination, the criteria by virtue of which we may recognise the truly human and correspondingly the inauthentic and inhuman?

Previously I pointed out there was a relationship between "authority" and "authorship" or source. Within a Christian ethos and world-view we refer to this connection via the notion of revelation, indicating that God is the source, God is the authority therefore. In addition, *TWR* made it very clear that when we Christians speak of authority and justly locate that authority supremely in the Holy Scriptures, what we are saying is properly "the authority of the triune God, *exercised through scripture*" (emphasis original). [See *TWR* §§ 53-56 for "The authority of scripture" and §§ 57-62 for "Scripture and interpretation".]

In this light, we need to read even more carefully the opening Section One of the Anglican Communion Covenant, noting especially how authority resides in Holy Scripture, "as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith" (1.1.3), even as tradition and reason have their due part to play in "Christian theological and moral reasoning and discipline" (1.2.2). And with these two direct references to the text, we finally come to a brief examination of the Covenant itself.

The Anglican Communion Covenant: the text

[The best web site link for details of the process and the draft texts leading up to the present, finalised text of the Covenant, to be considered by the Churches of the Anglican Communion, may be found at: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/index.cfm>]

Readers might be rightly asking themselves, Why has it taken so long to get to an examination of the

text itself? To repeat where we began: “First and foremost, to my mind, are the many ways different people have experienced the Christian Faith.” We all have, as it were, a set of spectacles perched on the end of our noses. The prescription of the lenses of the spectacles (or glasses) are derived from our own experience-and-understanding of the Christian Faith hitherto. For it is through such lenses that we ‘read’ Jesus, who he is and what he has done and what he can and will do. Our own experience-and-understanding ‘filters’ our expectations of the Spirit of Jesus, in the first place. “The vernacular logic of the Gospel” (Lamin Sanneh) always seeks to incarnate God into our own respective cultures. And an element of the genius of the spirit of Anglicanism is to take all of this seriously, since the Church of England has transplanted itself to the four cardinal points of the globe. Consequently, our ‘readings’ of the text of the Covenant will be initially via our respective ‘native’ experiences-and-understandings. *Yet* - and this proviso is crucial - as St Paul also clearly appreciates at the turning point of his own exposition of the Gospel, at Romans 12:1-2, our “minds need renewing lest they be conformed to ‘this world’”, which “transformation” is achieved from the unique perspective of the Gospel of “the mercies of God” in Christ Jesus. In which light, all the foregoing is meant as a very small exercise in assisting the transformation of our hearts and minds to better ‘read’ the text of the Covenant that is now before us.

Even as the Anglican Communion struggles to (re)establish its unity amidst our present crises, the **Introduction** to the Covenant text resolutely portrays an ecumenical vision, where the one universal Church derives its very life from communion in the life of the Trinity. Such divine life is already communion among the persons of the Triune God. In which light, how might the Church be other than a reflection of this communion among the “various families of churches” (note the lower case ‘c’) - and this despite our “divisions caused by sin”? For “the promises of God in Christ”, which undergird our catholic mission, in the providence of God seek their fulfilment in “faith, hope and love” through the Church unto the ends of the earth and for the sake of the entire world. In such a vision, “fragmentation” is the opposite of what the Covenant itself seeks: “that the bonds of affection which hold us together may be re-affirmed and intensified. We do this in order to reflect, in our relations with one another, God’s own faithfulness and promises towards us in Christ (2 Cor 1.20-22).” (paragraph 5)

This rich theological Introduction sets both the Anglican Communion and its constituent churches (which are further described in paragraphs 4-7) in a place where it and they might still be a kind of offering to the wider Church, a form of extended family life that bears witness to the communion of the missionary God for the renewal of the world through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which mission the entire Church shares. The Introduction therefore is very clear that the Covenant, which on the one hand seeks to “re-affirm and intensify” relationships among the churches of the *Anglican* “family”, has also on the other hand a deliberate *ecumenical* focus. I too deliberately picked up on this in my initial *Taonga* article (centre column, first full paragraph). It is not just the future of the Anglican Church which is at stake here; the Universal Church that is the Body of Christ itself is directly implicated.

Thereafter, the overall structure of the text of the Covenant has, to my mind, an elegant simplicity: the **three sections** are arranged the same, with firstly a set of “affirmations” and then their complementary “commitments”. The flow from one section to another is similarly straight forward: “Our Inheritance of Faith”; “The Life We Share with Others: Our Anglican Vocation”; and “Our Unity and Common Life”. **Section Four** - “Our Covenant Life Together” - then in conclusion both “affirms and commits to” certain “principles and procedures” being “implemented”. All four sections therefore cohere, integrating both theology and praxis.

Biblical references and citations of Anglican documents abound, yet do not, again to my mind, intrude. Rather, what we have is a clear indication that the text is rooted in the Anglican Tradition,

one that has always sought to steer its Way through the vicissitudes of history by means of a “practical reason” formed by Scripture in the context of the common worship and witness of the Church.

While all members of General Synod will no doubt have their own ‘take’ from their own reading of the text, I conclude now with a few observations of my own, section by section.

1. Springing directly from the Introduction is 1.1.1: surely a glorious affirmation, if ever there was one, with which to begin! Thereafter, the changes from the St Andrews Draft to the Ridley-Cambridge Draft highlight especially the Lambeth Quadrilateral as the commonly agreed chief characteristic of Anglican identity. We should note too how the text weaves together, “reliant on the Holy Spirit” (1.2), what is, to some people’s minds, another feature of Anglican life, Scripture, tradition and reason. All in all, our distinctive Anglican inheritance of faith forms and enlivens our common worship and witness so “that peoples from all nations may be set free to receive new and abundant life in the Lord Jesus Christ” (1.2.8).

2. Since, following *TWR* (§ 46), “communion” is both “God’s gift as well as God’s command”, it is only natural that “our Anglican vocation” should arise from such a foundation: Section Two follows from Section One. At the heart of such a vocation is *the mission of the Church* which Anglicans share “with others in Christ”. To my mind, the sub-sections of 2.1 are among the briefest yet richest if most dense descriptions of this mission I have met. Naturally too, the sub-sections of 2.2 spell out such a missionary vocation in terms of the Five Marks now generally tabled among the Anglican Churches of our world-wide Communion. One is tempted to say that just such a world-wide Body as ours is capable of both declaring and demonstrating such a comprehensive vision and praxis. Just so, may we learn to steward this specific Anglican charism well into the 21st century! For it is also well to note again the changes from the St Andrews Draft to the Ridley-Cambridge Draft, with the addition of the new sub-sections 2.2.3, 2.2.4 & 2.2.5.

3. At the core of our present Anglican dilemmas lies the tension between a due independence and a right and just interdependence, “living ‘in communion with autonomy and accountability’” (3.1.2 again). For what does it mean for national churches who have grown from the fruit of Anglican mission across the globe to now find themselves in another phase of their history? (See especially *TWR* § 66) Past phases have produced in the Providence of God such institutions and Instruments as local and regional churches who have sought some form of intercommunion through the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates’ Meetings (see 3.1.4). Yet even here in Section 3 the overall ecumenical vision of the universal Church is not forgotten! (See 3.1.1 & 3.1.3) And this, even as the text spells out what it means for Anglicans to be neither Congregationalist nor Roman Catholic as already suggested above in “Authority: levels and contexts”.

Given our particular ecclesiology then, this section of the Covenant immediately presupposes certain key understandings and practices: the necessary relationship between episcopacy and common life; and the logical connections between authority and freedom. *Yet*, given *other* certain “plausibility structures” in some quarters, notably the polity of “liberal democracy” and Western individualism, such traditional ecclesiological structures sit rather awkwardly among a global communion of churches. This is especially true when we try to parse the word “autonomy”. For while we may be clear it primarily means historically a form of self-government vis-à-vis other ecclesial units, it is also understood in the secular West now as a human absolute. Nor should we fail to see that this takes two forms: while the individual is viewed to be ‘absolutely autonomous’, so too has the state become increasingly “sacralized” (John Yoder) and so “absolutist” (William Cavanaugh) in its claims. Once more therefore, Anglicans need to heed seriously the words of St Paul in Rom 12:1-2 about “the world not squeezing [us] into its own mould” (JB Phillips translation) when we seek to

understand and practise “living ‘in communion with autonomy and accountability’” *in the Church* - and especially the desired *communion* that is the Ecumenical Church as well as the “family” of Anglican churches.

For the goal finally is clearly stipulated: “to seek a shared mind” as “we seek to affirm our common life”, in that we might “have in mind that our bonds of affection and the love of Christ compel us always to uphold the highest degree of communion possible” (3.2.4, 3.1.2 & 3.2.7). Just so, may the Church of the triune God itself display nothing less than that essential mind “which was in Christ Jesus, who ...”, ***Phil 2:6-11***. In this way and only in this way is the Glory of God’s rule established among the peoples of the world whom God loves so much - or at least, so declares the Fourth Gospel of John!

4. It was this Section Four which caused the most difficulties for some at the ACC Meeting in early May 2009 in Jamaica. For all that, the Covenant Working Group/Party, appointed by the end of that month, brought in a verdict at the end of last year of “the guiding principle ... of minimal revision”, even as they “cleared [up a few] definitions” and “changed the tone in language” here and there (see their Commentary, all of which is highly recommended).

Four things re this Section stand out for me. The first is the way the locus of authority has shifted between the various drafts. Nassau proposed the Primates as the ‘clearing house’ and determining body in the first place: see 6.5. Next, the St Andrew’s Draft Appendix put up the idea of the ACC as having this role: see Paragraph 8. Finally, the revised RCD opts for “the Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion” (4.2), since this very group is derived from both the Primates and the ACC. Given this history, and previous reactions to both the Nassau and St Andrew’s Appendix, it seems a good enough compromise regarding a most important issue.

The second point is to highlight 4.4. No human document or institution is ever going to be perfect - this side of the Parousia! Provision for amendment is more than wise. For all that, such has been the fall-out from key events of the past few years there is truly a degree of *urgency* now to seek some form of resolution to our Communion conflicts. The Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, wryly described the Anglican Communion last July as “the slow-moving train crash of international Anglicanism”. For it is simply the case that both forces and people continue to “tear the fabric of the Communion at its deepest level”. *Procrastination is simply not an option* - even as we do not have nor ever will have the ideal solution to preserving the *koinonia* of the Anglican Church as the due fruit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ - apart from Jesus Himself!

These remarks lead naturally to my third point: Who can sign? Section 4.1 details the procedures for “adopting the Covenant”, including those parties envisaged as signatories. Superficially, it might seem the Archbishop of Canterbury’s own ecclesiology is at odds with the decisions initially shown here. For in his letter to the Diocese of Fort Worth in October 2007 he stated “the organ of union with the wider Church is the Bishop and the Diocese rather than the Provincial structure as such”. This seemed to intimate that national or regional - Provincial - structures were more an accident of history than a necessary theological means of identity. Actually, I personally reckon Rowan Williams is correct ecclesologically on this point, since the rise of the nation-state is but a recent human convention, driven greatly furthermore by the metropolitan powers of 19th century Europe (one need only think of the carving up of the continent of Africa ...). In the light of the history of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, this convention and similar nationalistic traits are but a snip in time! For all that, Anglican pragmatism within the spread of the English speaking peoples has led to national churches having a real identity, one it seems which will last for a while longer. Yet again, we should not underestimate the implicit impetus within section 4.1.5. Nor should we underestimate the significance of individual dioceses around the Communion who in the fulness of time “endorse”

the Covenant.

The last point rounds matters off. It has been said the Anglican Communion Covenant, and especially its Section Four, will cause division. This is not strictly true. We are already divided - irrespective of any notion of a Covenant. Indeed, what has precipitated the very idea of the Covenant is, to repeat, “the *scale* and *depth* of our differences” across the Communion and “to degrees simply not witnessed before”. Now; we may ignore these divisions. Or we may pretend they do not exist. Or again, we may manage them as best we can, recognising them - yes; that word again - for what they have become. This is what the Covenant seeks to do - even should a “two tier” or “two track” scheme eventuate (to use the language of the Archbishop of Canterbury again). At least with the last scenario there is a measure of transparency about our Anglican identity/identities. Yet I would wish to go further, and repeat here the last paragraph of my *Taonga* article. For “the Anglican Communion Covenant has become the necessary tool for establishing an authoritative identity among Anglicans. It grants us the means to continue as a global Church, as a catholic community [and communion!] of churches. Without it, we shall simply fragment into groups of associated bodies, held together [albeit now seriously federated] by allegiances derived from things *less than* and *even other than* the Gospel of Jesus Christ himself.”

Conclusion

Whether one agrees with the idea of the Covenant or not, whether one endorses this particular text of the Covenant or not, whether one sides with Bishop Gene Robinson or not - whatever ‘side’ one happens to be on, one thing seems clear: the Anglican Communion of Churches has reached a cross-roads in its history, and we cannot go back to where we were (or perceive ourselves to have been). The question then becomes, in the simple words of Desmond Tutu: do we still wish “to meet together”? More formally and expressed with what I would see as a necessary theological density, do we see our Anglican vocation as one that indeed calls us to live in communion, a communion moreover that reflects the very Triune God of the Gospel, whose “being *is* communion” (John Zizioulas)? To my mind, there is now no escaping this question - that is, if we Anglicans truly seek to be disciples of Jesus in the 21st century and members of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We may prevaricate. We may seek to play bureaucratic games. We may seek genuinely to delay matters. Yet the question will continue to haunt us, to seek us out and demand a decision of us.

And so, the choice is before us. To sign or not to sign. That is the question. [With apologies to Hamlet, prince of Denmark ...] May we answer boldly by adopting the Covenant forthwith.

I have not used footnotes in this piece to reference sources, so as to not distract from the flow of the discussion. Readers who might like to pursue some matters further should seek the following especially:

Stephen Sykes, ed., *Authority in the Anglican Communion: Essays presented to Bishop John Howe* (Anglican Book Centre, 1987).

Gillian Evans, *Authority in the Church: a challenge for Anglicans* (Canterbury Press, 1990).

John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (T&T Clark, 2001), ch.6, “The Self-Organizing Power of the Gospel of Christ: Episcopacy and Community Formation”.

Ephraim Radner & Philip Turner, *The Fate of Communion: The Agony of Anglicanism and the Future of a Global Church* (Eerdmans, 2006).

Bryden Black, “Whose Language? Which Grammar? ‘Inclusivity’ and ‘Diversity’, versus the Crafted

Christian Concepts of Catholicity and Created Differentiation” in Brian Edgar & Gordon Preece, eds, *Whose Homosexuality? Which Authority? Homosexual practice, marriage, ordination and the church* (ATF Press, 2006), pp.151-167.

Oliver O’Donovan, *A Conversation Waiting to Begin: The Churches and the Gay Controversy* (SCM Press, 2009); plus “The Reading Church: Scriptural Authority in Practice”, a lecture given at St Mary Islington, 27 April 2009, at the launch of this book, which may be accessed at:

<http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=422>

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