

INTRODUCTION TO THE ANGLICAN COVENANT DEBATE

Background Reading

These notes are inevitably brief and can only serve as a thumbnail sketch. For more detailed analysis of the issues and arguments, I suggest you look at:

Anglican Consultative Council Webpage (which contains a YouTube interview with the Archbishop of Canterbury)
<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/index.cfm>

Church Times Guide 18 March 2011 (which articulates strong arguments for and against the Covenant)
<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=109403>

Faith and Order Commission Report, GS Misc 966 (which sets out detailed history and commentary)
<http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1161753/gsmisc966.pdf>

Transcript of General Synod debate on 27 November 2010
<http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1121614/transcriptanglican covenant.pdf>

General synod Reference GS Misc 971 (the formal reference to dioceses)
<http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1161076/gsmisc971.pdf>

Why are we having this debate in the Diocesan Synod?

- 1.1 The General Synod has referred the following motion to Diocesan Synods, for decision by April 2012:

That this Synod approve the draft Act of Synod adopting the Anglican Communion Covenant.

- 1.2 In the light of responses from all of the dioceses, GS will then decide whether to adopt the Covenant. Its decision will probably be made at its July 2012 session in York.
- 1.3 The discussion on 18 June is merely introductory, and is *not* the debate on the General Synod motion – that will come next March.

What is the Anglican Communion?

- 2.1 It is the family of 43 Anglican (and some ecumenical) churches and provinces around the world, of which the Church of England is (only) one.
- 2.2 These churches and provinces share:
- A common history based largely (but not exclusively) on British colonial expansion in its different phases over 400 years
 - A theological identity which is both Catholic and Reformed
 - A liturgical identity originating with the *Book of Common Prayer*
- 2.3 These churches are structurally linked by four “Instruments of Unity”:
- The Archbishop of Canterbury
 - The ten-yearly Lambeth Conference of bishops
 - The Anglican Consultative Council
 - The Primates’ Meeting
- 2.4 In addition to these formal links, There is a high level of “intercommunion”, through mutual recognition, interchangeability of orders, personal, parish and diocesan links between Anglican churches across the world, and historic links established through specific agencies such as CMS and USPG.

What prompted the drafting of the Covenant?

- 3.1 Increasing diversity over liturgy and the role of women in ministry in the 1970s and 1980s gave rise to the *Virginia Report* (1996).
- 3.2 Crises in Rwanda and the Sudan in the 1990s gave rise to questions about the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury to intervene in other churches and provinces.
- 3.3 The “gay bishops” controversies, culminating in Canon Gene Robinson’s appointment as Bishop of New Hampshire (USA) in 2003, gave rise to the *Windsor Report* (2004).
- 3.4 The Windsor Continuation Group took extensive soundings and provided several drafts for consultation before putting an agreed document to the ACC in May and December 2009. This is the document which began to be circulated for adoption in 2010.

What is in the Anglican Covenant?

- 4.1 *Section 1:* Articulates the Anglican emphasis on Scripture, the Catholic Creeds and historic formularies.
- 4.2 *Section 2:* Expresses the churches’ commitment to its missional vocation, with particular reference to the *Five Marks of Mission* (adopted by the bishops at the Lambeth Conference 1998)
- 4.3 *Section 3:* Expresses the churches’ commitment to sustaining interdependence and common life as part of its Anglican identity and witness
- 4.4 *Section 4:* Develops the practical implications of this commitment, and provides dispute resolution procedures.

What difference will it make, if the Covenant is adopted?

- 5.1 At one level, it will make no difference at all:
 - The Covenant cannot affect the history and heritage of Anglican churches and provinces
 - It does not impinge on the traditional autonomy of the churches.
- 5.2 However, it may help the churches:
 - To articulate and explain the Anglican traditions and faith they have inherited
 - Express their solidarity with each other, when any is the subject of misunderstanding or persecution
 - To reinforce interdependence, mutual responsibility, and awareness of each others’ differing cultures
- 5.3 Having said that:
 - Almost inevitably, it has raised suspicion about the central structures such as the Standing Committee of the Anglican Consultative Council
 - Some (the more “conservative” groups) do not consider it goes far enough in imposing doctrinal and ethical discipline
 - Others (the more “liberal” groups) consider its disciplinary effects are too extensive.
- 5.4 So, is it better to risk signing up, or to risk not signing up?

**Canon John Rees
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