

Christian practice in
church theology
religion essay



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forModule TH 8825 M. Th. Discuss the Anglican Covenant and whether it had potential for maintaining unity and diversity in the Anglican

CommunionPrepared by: Trevor Holmes (09263021 1 UX)Tutor: Revd. Patrick

CommerfordPage Count: 13Word Count: 2708The General Synod of the

Church of Ireland issued a press release in May 2011 stating, " Seeing that the Anglican Covenant is consonant with the doctrines and formularies of the Church of Ireland, the General Synod hereby subscribes the Covenant[1]." It

was further elucidated that in " Subscribing the Covenant", the Church of Ireland had put its collective name to and aligned with it. However, the

Covenant sits under the Preamble and Declaration of the Church and does not affect the sovereignty of the Church of Ireland or mean any change in

doctrine. The path travelled by the Anglican Communion on this journey to date has not been either easy or indeed particularly respectful to its unity or

diversity. Archbishop McAdoo viewed Anglicanism through three lenses,

faith, church and as an ecumenical vocation[2]. His words with regard to

ecumenism appear prophetic when viewed from today's internecine disputes within the Anglican Communion." Ecumenism is dialogue, not bargaining. It

most certainly does notpreclude argument and the frank confrontation of difference anddifficulties. The contrary is the case... [it]...includes listening

and learningas well as talking. It is a search for meaning and mutual

understanding.[3]" It was a failure to respect this as our Anglican tradition

which both created the circumstances in which a covenant was envisioned and the circumstances in which it should also fail. This essay will trace the

brief historic route leading to the proposed covenant and question whether it was ever set-up for success. Ignoring arguments for and against the notion

of covenant, a brief exploration of whether it was truly Anglican in character

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will be undertaken before questioning whether the Communion did not already have in earlier agreements a better basis at its disposal for the maintenance of unity and respect for diversity. The essay will close with a short personal conclusion. Following the English reformation a wide diversity of views existed, ranging from the very Catholic which perceived the papacy being replaced by the monarchy, to the decidedly protestant drawing their inspiration from Calvinism and being puritanical in vision, expecting biblical principles to dictate the state governance. Richard Hooker's call for a balance of authorities between Scripture, tradition and reason, outlined in the late sixteenth century, became the norm for Anglicanism. The 1662 prayer book aims to provide for a wide range of diverse viewpoints within a single church[4]. Rather than a specific theology, Hooker's approach in time became viewed as the Anglican method, a way of searching for the truth, rather than a specific set of particular doctrines. A point well captured by McAdoo when he wrote " Anglicanism is not committed to believing anything because it is Anglican but only because it is true[5]". Therefore, the communion has always accommodated different opinions and emphasises. The first Lambeth conference was convened in 1867 to discuss the contrarian views of Bishop Colenso including his belief in universalism[6]. In their "...strong preference for consultation in the search for truth over authoritarian pronouncements by a central legislative body,[7]" a principle was established, the conference was not viewed as a body with decision making powers on behalf of the communion at large. In preparation for the Lambeth conference in 1998 the leaders of the Church in the South met in Kuala Lumpur in February 1997 to " reflect on the place of Scripture in the life and mission of the Church in the 21st century[8]". They issued a

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statement on human sexuality which declared, " We are deeply concerned that the setting aside of biblical teaching in such actions as the ordination of practicing homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex unions calls into question the authority of the Holy Scriptures. This is totally unacceptable to us[9]" The Lambeth conference in 1998 set out to achieve a compromise in keeping with the original Lambeth conference principle but the debate became a deeply divisive and stormy affair[10]during which the infamous Resolution 1. 10 was passed which rejected " homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture[11]". Two years later the Church of the Province of Rwanda established a mission in the United States of America to establish alternative Episcopal oversight. These actions coupled with the election of a perceived liberal Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, were to set the foundations for a particularly difficult period of intra Anglican relationships. Three further events intensified the crisis dramatically. In Canada an Episcopal blessing was given to a same-sex union and a liturgical rite for similar blessings published. Then an English priest in a homosexual partnership was appointed suffragan bishop of Reading and subsequently forced to resign prior to consecration. In November 2003 an American priest in an openly homosexual relationship was appointed and duly consecrated bishop of New Hampshire, despite the public disapproval of the supposedly ' liberal' Archbishop of Canterbury[12]. The Primates' meeting laid the blame for disruptions within the communion with the Canadian and American churches and requested a report be prepared which ultimately became the Windsor Report issued in October 2004. It concurred with the Primates' meeting and made two key proposals for maintaining unity, a triple moratoria and a proposed Anglican covenant. During the following five years

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various draft texts were developed and exchanged largely driven by those wishing deeper punitive measures in direct opposition to those trying to maintain provincial autonomy. In December 2009 the final draft of the Anglican Covenant was released for approval by the constituent provinces with no timeframe for adoption or manner in which it should be adopted. In the failure of the covenant to become the vehicle for respect of diversity, several factors ultimately impacted on this outcome and are worthy of note. The Windsor Report had envisaged a Covenant as being a longer term solution but the review group suggested a tight timeframe which enabled only one Lambeth Conference to review matters[13]. In extreme haste a group was commissioned to draft and inside five years, the lower end of the envisaged timescale, the covenant was circulated for final approval. The undue haste to be perceived as actually taking action to address matters rather than a focus of the triple moratoria, even in the breach, as a means to create time and space for discourse, debate and listening was consequently overlooked. This would suggest that the norms of classical Anglicanism were at best disregarded. In this rush to action the most obvious of questions never appears to have been addressed, what is wrong with the status quo? Was there a case for doing nothing? In legal circles the adage 'hard cases make bad law' is often invoked to suggest a more temperate approach or to question the timing of legislative intervention. The question in hindsight for the Anglican Communion is twofold, was this the most judicious timing in which to draft a response to an ongoing problem and if so what sort of approach would be most effective. A position well articulated by a Canadian Archdeacon at the time." Even if an Anglican covenant is desirable, there is a very real danger that the current climate of conflict and the sense of

urgency to resolve it would so shape the finished product that we would lose an opportunity to produce a visionary statement of hope for the Anglican Communion in favour of the development of processes with which to conduct our present and future conflicts. In other words, even if a covenant is a good idea, it may be an inopportune time to draft one.[14]" In addition, there would also appear to have been a serious misreading of the actual geopolitical situation, the presenting problem was the authority of scripture particularly with respect to human sexuality. A deeper scholarly investigation has since suggested that a much deeper power play within the Communion was underway with the Churches of the South no longer prepared to just accept the positions and teaching of either Canterbury or other Northern provinces and so they linked with disaffected and dissident global Episcopal colleagues to assert their case[15]. The Anglican Communion by its nature can often appear chaotic and difficult to interpret. However, in this case the Covenant was not set up for success due to poor problem assessment, a rush to action, an unwillingness to use established methodology, a lack of vision for what it could embrace and a failure to address whether the status quo may have offered reflection time or a different solution. At a colloquium in Dublin in 2011, the Bishop of Cashel & Ossory made an interesting observation in keeping with McAdoo's concept of a hierarchy of truths, when he stated " I hope that both in the articulation of the Covenant and in due course in its application if it is passed we remain true to the principle that there is a hierarchy of truths. Lambeth 1. 10 is not the Nicene Creed.[16]" This is an interesting insight and a good perspective from which to question whether the proposed covenant was truly Anglican in nature. Doe makes a strong case for the covenantal character of Anglicanism[17] which will not be

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further developed. However, accepting the premise of his argument, it is in the detail of implementation where questions arise. The principle of Lambeth resolutions not being binding on Provinces would seem to be challenged as Lambeth 1. 10 in the intervening years appears to have been "...elevated into something like a test of soundness or orthodoxy.[18]" A former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey questioned the existence of 'Anglicanism' and asserted that Anglicans do not have a "... system or a Confession that can be defined and commended side by side with those of others...[19]" This appears to be the route envisaged by many supporters of the Anglican covenant which creates two additional issues namely what is contained within that confessional statement and who decides whether a Provincial action is in keeping with the statement or not. Even at this level of query it begins to feel more akin to the Roman Catholic ecclesiology with definitive teaching protected and adjudicated upon by the Magisterium. An increasingly centralised authoritarian perspective has asserted itself within the Anglican Communion which has been further encouraged by the Anglican Covenant debate. The covenant would enable the Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion to decree official Anglican teaching on any novel controversy in the future. They would hold the power to declare any matter as having been settled and stifle any potential scope for future debate. That is not in keeping with our classical Anglican method. Within Anglicanism, resolution of a disagreement occurs through encouraging the varying opinions to be openly expressed and defended over time until agreement can be reached. Disputing parties can with respect challenge and learn from each other and continue dialoguing, even over an extensive period of time, up to a point of consensus. Anglicans expect to differ but we also expect to

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have our views respected and to respect the viewpoint of others. An additional problem is created in the increased powers envisaged for the Standing Committee in Section 4. By what benchmark should they judge, in the language of the Covenant, a "controversial action"? While the standards of the faith are set out in Section 1 they are nothing more than the traditional marks of Anglicanism. What punishments can they invoke? The answer is nothing clearer than undefined "relational consequences". Herein lay a recipe for disaster, a vague, unclear process with arbitrary standards and whose justice is eminently questionable. It would appear reasonable to suggest that the character of the covenant as constructed and defined was inherently non-Anglican. While much criticism focused on Section 4 and specifically Section 4.2, the proposed mechanism for settling disputes. A fundamental flaw in the whole edifice appears to have been overlooked in Section 3 which ostensibly outlines how we are meant to live together as communion[20]. The precept of working together in 'koinonia' is indisputable, however the premise of Section 3 presupposes that conflict is the normative mark of relations among the constituent churches of the Anglican Communion and that ineffectual processes of discernment are in place. An additional more concerning motif, endorsed by Avis[21], is that constituent churches will tend to act in an inappropriate and irresponsible manner. That would tend to support the thesis that this whole engagement has more to do with power within the communion rather than where authority and truth lie. The Church of England acted bravely and worthily in deciding to send the draft covenant to its diocesan synods. It has resulted in the proposed draft being defeated but the process was open, transparent and enabled the full range of voices to be heard and it was intrinsically

Anglican. The words of Bishop Jones of Liverpool in placing the draft before his synod were powerful, prophetic and more critically focused on mission."... church history tell us that the mission of God brings with it adventure and risks and takes us to new places that we never dreamed of. Right from the outset when the Jewish disciples of Jesus engaged with a Gentile world they found themselves challenged, conflicted and more importantly changed by those encounters. The Church must be free to go into all the world and to engage with new cultures enabling us all to learn Christ. As we do we will find that we too are changed by this engagement with the world. Such change lies at the heart of repentance as we continually re-think, re-assess what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ in a new context.[22]" He wonderfully captures the necessary dynamism of mission which the draft covenant was likely to endanger. While Section 2 did invoke the missional character of the church aligned to the agreed five marks of mission[23]. Its overbearing assumption is a unitary, monolithic elucidation of Church mission in their diverse contexts. Rereading the words of Bishop Jones, it is ironic to reflect that the original Kuala Lumpur statement was a reflection on twenty first century mission. In preparation for the meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council in 2005, the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Mission and Evangelism developed a Covenant for Communion in Mission which built substantially on the Five Marks of Mission[24]. This was recommended to the Anglican Communion by ACC. It has a simple nine point structure which is intended to enable an envisaging of covenant where the five marks are seen as dynamic thus providing each of the provinces of the Anglican Communion with a framework for " developing or revising its own understanding of mission which is faithful to Scripture[25]". In the introduction to their strategic plan <https://assignbuster.com/christian-practice-in-church-theology-religion-essay/>

the Canadian primate captured the power of such an approach when he wrote, " These marks speak to our true vocation as evangelists, storytellers, caregivers, advocates for peace and justice, and good stewards of God's creation.[26]" Surely here lies a more powerful, hopeful vision for any Covenant between the members of the Anglican Communion one in which both its diversity and unity can be respected. A Communion which is willing to visualise and actualise the dynamism of mission so beautifully reflected in the words of Bishop Jones. In conclusion, should the Communion decide to continue with the search for a meaningful covenant then perhaps it could focus on the mission of the Church and some of the existing work in that regard[27]. That decision of the Church of England to request each of its dioceses to decide on the covenant should now be viewed as a potentially viable way forward. Whereby, dioceses at their respective synods should make decisions on any future " controversial actions" and be enabled perhaps to also agree the nature and severity of " relational consequences", should they still be deemed expedient. This may help address both the perceived power-play and the needs of a global church. Perhaps a period of grace for reflection is needed at this juncture, whereby the communion at large could reflect on those most famous, politically incorrect, nonetheless oft quoted words from the Preface of the post-disestablishment Irish Prayer Book "...consider that men's judgements of perfection are very various, and that what is imperfect, with peace, is often better than what is otherwise more excellent, without it[28]."