

Reflections on the Theological and Ecclesiological Implications of the Adoption or Non-Adoption of the Anglican Communion Covenant

October 28, 2012

General Synod Resolution A137: Anglican Communion Covenant

Be it resolved that this General Synod:

1. receive the final text of *The Covenant for the Anglican Communion*;
2. request that materials be prepared under the auspices of the Anglican Communion Working Group, for parishes and dioceses in order that study and consultation be undertaken on *The Covenant for the Anglican Communion*;
3. request that conversations, both within the Anglican Church of Canada and across the Communion, reflect the values of openness, transparency, generosity of spirit, and integrity, which have been requested repeatedly in the context of the discussion of controversial matters within the Communion;
4. request that the proposed Covenant be referred to the Faith, Worship and Ministry Committee and to the Governance Working Group in order to support these conversations by providing advice on the theological, ecclesiological, legal, and constitutional implications of a decision to adopt or not to adopt the Covenant;
5. direct the Council of General Synod, after this period of consultation and study, to bring a recommendation regarding adoption of *The Covenant for the Anglican Communion* to the General Synod of 2013.

Our task, to examine the “theological and ecclesiological implications of a decision to adopt or not to adopt the Covenant”, has not been a straightforward one. We have found it impossible to achieve a consensus on what those implications (in either direction) might be. This is not a matter of interpreting the document itself differently, but rather due to divergent perceptions of the context in which the text of the Covenant came to exist and is now being read.

Theological Vocabulary

Some of these divergent perceptions come to the fore in the theological concepts which appeared in our discussion of the Covenant text. These concepts provide a basic vocabulary with which to examine the document, but we also observed that the way we apply the concepts brought to light some of the divergence in our reaction to the Covenant. We identified some of these concepts as follows:

1. Trust and trustworthiness – qualities which are revealed in our experience of God and called forth from us by that same experience. Yet failures and betrayals of trust are also part of the human experience narrated in Scripture.

2. Communion – similarly, begins with God’s invitation to us and is reflected in our growth in relationship with each other. God’s grace in communion enables the formation of trust but is imperfectly received by human beings.
3. Authority – divine authority both supplies and transcends boundaries for human action and relationship. In Scripture, divine authority is portrayed as implying consequences for human failure to live out our commitments, but also as maintaining our covenant relationship with God even while those consequences are being lived out. By contrast, human authority is portrayed as having the capacity both to break down and to build up relationship and trust.
4. Conflict – The story of Scripture is a story of conflict. Conflict is a part of the human condition, and as a result, also part of the church’s condition. The accounts of God’s people reveal a range of human elements in the resolution of conflict, ranging from processes of communal discipline and wise judgement, through mutual forbearance, acceptance, and respect. In each of these the church also looks for a further divine element, in the shared experience of transforming grace.
5. Purity & inclusion – The trajectory of the story of salvation is one of increasing inclusiveness in the offer of divine grace, culminating in the Incarnation which happened in the midst of all human imperfection. In Jesus we meet the one who dismantled the boundaries of law and whose table fellowship welcomed everyone; and we also meet a robust rejection of any teaching or behaviour which strips grace of its power to produce holiness of life. The community of his followers proved to be defined, sometimes shockingly, by its distinctive holiness – and yet to remain committed to a universal embrace.
6. Communal and prophetic theology – Scripture shows the community of faith discerning together, and also being challenged by prophetic voices to be faithful to its true commitments.
7. Understanding of terms – divergent applications of the preceding concepts are bound to influence what we understand by a “controversial action” within the life of the church or the achievement of a “shared mind” on a particular issue.

Context for reading

There are more concrete divergences of interpretation of the context of the Covenant which also surfaced in our discussion and in our perceptions of what its implications would be. For example, some see the Covenant proposal more as a direct response to specific recent disagreements in the Anglican Communion, where others interpret it more in the context of longer-term evolution of structures within the Communion.

Our perception and experience of the Anglican Communion itself creates some divergence. We noted that some of us were more comfortable describing the Communion through the imagery of

“friendship in Christ” (with its implications of autonomy and freely offered interaction), where others were more comfortable drawing on the imagery of a covenanted relationship in marriage. We also observed that this type of divergence may be a source of conflict in the Communion, where there are mismatched expectations about the degree of trust and accountability implied in our relationships to one another as member churches.

A further source of divergence arises in the recognition that we interpret the text of the Covenant in our own cultural contexts. We recognize that the Canadian context is strongly influenced by individualism, shaping an understanding of freedom in relationship that rules out the imposition of constraints on one another. In addressing conflict within relationships, we tend to assume that the responsibility for resolution lies with the individual parties, and that reference to a third party signals a breakdown or failure of the relationship, rather than the potential for resolution within a larger communal framework. These assumptions may not hold for all contexts, including some within our own country, but they do have an impact on our reading of the Covenant.

Adopting the Covenant

As a result of these divergent ways of reading, different conclusions can be drawn regarding the consequences for our church of a decision to adopt the Covenant. The potential for positive consequences is associated with readings of the Covenant that see it as a natural evolution of the structuring of relationships within the Anglican Communion, designed to build mutual accountability, articulating a positive basis (in sections 1-3) for our commitment to one another, yet recognizing the inevitability of human fallibility within relationships even in the church, and offering a way for the Communion as a whole to resolve conflicts.

For those who read the Covenant in these ways, the key implication of adopting the covenant is the message it sends to partner churches who also adopt it. Adopting the Covenant issues an invitation to partner churches, and accepts their invitation, to share in a new kind of relationship characterized by an updated and mission-focused agreed definition of Anglican identity (in sections 1-3) and by a commitment to mutual accountability as spelled out in section 4.

While we take the text of the Covenant at its word that it does not represent submission to external jurisdiction or compromise the constitutional integrity of our province, we acknowledge that a fresh degree of mutual accountability would require us to re-examine our own faithfulness to the shared commitments of the Covenant and the way we live them out. We have already experienced similar processes as we have committed to greater mutual accountability with First Nations people within our church, and to full communion partners in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. It is not possible to say in advance what the consequences of such a commitment can mean, precisely because they are discovered mutually as both parties live into the new relationship.

A different reading of the Covenant will come to very different conclusions regarding the implications of adopting it. Where the Covenant is read as a means for member churches to impose constraints on each other, to substitute quasi-legal processes instead of working out issues over time within a relationship of trust, or to implement forms of accountability which are incompatible with the real nature of our communion relationship, the implications are negative.

For those who read the Covenant in these ways, the key implication of adopting it is that we would become subject to a potential process of exclusion from relationships with other churches and within the Instruments of the Anglican Communion. We have already experienced similar processes in the impairment of communion relationships with other provinces, and in the request not to exercise our membership in the Anglican Consultative Council meeting of 2005. To formalize such possibilities would necessarily affect the atmosphere in which all relations with partner churches would be conducted.

Not Adopting the Covenant

The implications of a decision not to adopt the Covenant again depend on the context within which one interprets it. For those who see the Covenant as a means to enter into the offer of a new relationship with other Anglican churches, non-adoption amounts to the refusal of that offer. While it would not exclude us from the institutions which currently express the life of the Communion, including the Instruments as well as the many other forms of practical partnership in mission, it would exclude us from future developments predicated on the mutual affirmation and accountability set out in the text of the Covenant. As before, the exact nature of these future developments is unforeseeable, as they will emerge from the living out of those new relationships.

For those who read the Covenant as subjecting the relationships between churches to a new form of control, non-adoption means that the potentially constraining effects of the Covenant do not become active for our church. (The Covenant is only operative for those churches who choose to adopt it.) Nothing in the Covenant prevents us from continuing our relationships within the Anglican Communion in the form they currently exist, so long as our partners in those relationships are willing to do the same.

It is significant that there is a high degree of consensus in our church regarding the value of sections 1-3 as an accurate and contemporary description of the reality of Anglican faith and witness in our time. If the Covenant in its complete form is not adopted by our church, these sections could be recognized in a way which indicates our church's desire to identify with that description, and thus to share at least to that extent with churches which adopt the Covenant.

The Fate of the Covenant

The previous considerations about the implications of adopting, or not adopting, the Covenant, are based on the assumption that in the future the Covenant becomes operative for a number of Anglican provinces and becomes a new organizing principle for their shared life and mission. If that were to be the case, the main implications for the Anglican Church of Canada concern whether we do or not wish to be part of the new configuration.

However, there are reasons to believe that assumption may not be well founded. Already in the course of its reception, the Covenant text has had mixed reactions. The resignation of Archbishop Rowan Williams, often perceived as a champion of the Covenant, may have a further impact. Those who see the Covenant as a reaction to recent conflicts in the Communion may sense that the growing distance in time from those conflicts has lessened the urgency for a

particular tool to deal with them. The lack of consensus about the meaning and significance of the document may persuade others that the Communion needs a different way forward.

By the time we come to our own General Synod in 2013 some of these questions may have become clearer. It is possible that the question of our adopting the Covenant will be, or will appear likely to be, moot. This too has its implications. As a partner church in the Communion we will want to be sensitive both to the offer of trust implied by those provinces who have already endorsed the document, as well as to the different kind of trust invited by those who have declined to accept it. We will want to be a participant in the process of examining alternative ways forward for the Communion in these circumstances.

The potential use of sections 1-3, to articulate some of the principles of contemporary Anglicanism, may be one of those ways. More concretely, our church is already committed to Communion initiatives which strengthen our friendship and engagement with other Anglicans in mission, such as the Continuing Indaba, Canadian-African Bishops Dialogue, and other patterns of local partnership. The question of the fate of the covenant cannot overshadow how important these relationships are to us and to our partners, especially to those who most need the sense of support from a global communion. Nor can it obscure the need for us to develop new initiatives which encourage greater awareness and involvement by our own members, in opening up their lives to Anglicans elsewhere who share with us in worship, discipleship and mission.

Resolution of the Faith, Worship and Ministry Committee, October 28, 2012

Moved by: Iain Luke

Seconded by: Linda Nicholls

That this Faith, Worship and Ministry Committee requests that the Council of General Synod receive its Report on the *Theological and Ecclesiological Implications of the Adoption or Non Adoption of the Anglican Communion Covenant*, and encourages the Council of General Synod to circulate appropriate preparatory materials to General Synod members in order that they be sufficiently informed well in advance of General Synod 2013 and prepared well for discussions and decisions on these matters.

Carried.