

The Anglican Covenant

A briefing note prepared for Deanery Synods by Simon Sarmientos, Lay Chair Diocesan Synod

What is a Covenant?

In the Bible, 'covenant' refers to a solemn agreement or promise, which binds two parties together, e.g. see Genesis 9.8-13, or Exodus 19.1-6. A more modern example is *A Covenant between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England* signed in 2003.

What is the Anglican Covenant?

The Covenant is a proposed agreement among all Anglican Communion churches. It is a nine-page document developed over a period of more than three years by an international committee, with feedback from various Anglican bodies. It consists of a brief Preamble, four substantive Sections, and a concluding Declaration. (There is also an Introduction, which is declared not to be part of it!)

This document is intended to help hold the Anglican Communion together during a time of great debate and even division over sexuality (and other) questions. The text of the Covenant is available at

http://www.aco.org/commission/covenant/docs/The_Anglican_Covenant.pdf

Why are we having a debate in the Diocesan Synod now?

The Joint Standing Committee of the Primates and of the Anglican Consultative Council asked the Church of England and all other Anglican churches for responses in time to report to the next meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, scheduled for Auckland, New Zealand in November 2012, "on the progress made in the processes of response to, and adoption of, the Covenant."

The General Synod debated this in November 2010 and February 2011, and 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.

The process is the same as that used for the legislation on Women in the Episcopate. The draft text of the proposed Act of Synod is available at <http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1290760/gs%201809.pdf>

St Albans Diocesan Synod will debate this on **Saturday 17 March**. General Synod will then decide whether to adopt the Covenant, probably in July 2012. The Bishop's Council decided to refer

it also to Deaneries. No vote is required in deaneries, but comments are invited by the Bishop's Council.

What is the Anglican Communion?

It is the family of 44 Anglican (and some ecumenical) churches around the world, of which the Church of England is one. (Wales, Scotland and Ireland are three others.) These churches and provinces share:

- A common history based largely (but not exclusively) on British colonial expansion
- A theological identity deriving from the English Reformation and the Elizabethan Settlement
- A liturgical identity originating with the Book of Common Prayer.

These churches are already structurally linked by four "Instruments of Unity":

- The Archbishop of Canterbury
- The Lambeth Conference of bishops (since 1867)
All bishops from around the world, meets once every ten years, at Canterbury
- The Anglican Consultative Council (since 1971)
Has about 75 members, bishops, clergy, and laity, elected for up to 6 years, meets about every three years
- The Primates' Meeting (since 1979)
The archbishop or similar from each church, meets every two years

And there is a Joint Standing Committee combining representatives from both the ACC and the PM, which meets every year.

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?

- Increasing diversity over liturgy and the role of women in ministry in the 1970s and 1980s gave rise to the *Virginia Report* (1996).
- 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.
- The "gay bishops" controversies,

culminating in Canon Gene Robinson's election as Bishop of New Hampshire (USA) in 2003, gave rise to the *Windsor Report* (2004).

The *Windsor Report* recommended the idea in order to provide a brief statement of what should hold the Churches of the Communion together. It recommended a "Covenant" because it is about relationships as Churches united in Christ rather than about legal or confessional formalities. The Primates unanimously adopted the idea in 2005, and asked for a text to be drawn up.

How was the text developed?

The Archbishop of Canterbury appointed a Design Group which met between 2006 and 2009. They decided that nothing new should be expressed in the Covenant – instead, agreed statements (such as the Lambeth Quadrilateral, the four fundamental points of Anglicanism agreed in 1888) and existing institutions should be the basis of the text. They deliberately avoided a long list of beliefs or new structures, but placed the emphasis on the resources that allow all Anglicans to understand their faith. Three versions of the text were developed in turn, and each one was sent out to all the Churches of the Communion for consultation, with much feedback and revision. The final text was adopted by the Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion at their meeting in December 2009, and sent out to the Churches for consideration.

What is in the Anglican Covenant?

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

Why is the covenant controversial?

Three fears have been expressed in particular:

- That the Covenant defines Anglican faith too tightly.
- That the Covenant centralises power in the Communion.
- That the Covenant is designed to punish liberal Churches in the Communion,

especially on questions of sexuality.

What other criticisms have been made:

- 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.

Background Reading

For detailed analysis of the issues and arguments, I recommend the *Church Times* Guide 18 March 2011

<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=109403> for subscribers, or email me at ss@justus.anglican.org for a PDF copy of this.

Also if you really want more:

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>

