

A Response to “An Anglican Covenant: the Saint Andrew’s Draft”

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“And [Simon Peter] said unto [Jesus], Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.” (Gospel Reading from the *Form of Ordaining or Consecration of an Archbishop or Bishop*, BCP 1662)

The above pledge from a thrice-failed disciple, and his restoration and his re-commissioning from the risen Lord, sets out a vision for an Anglican Covenant for today. God remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself: this is the confidence upon which we offer our pledges afresh amid our histories of perceived betrayals and broken vows. This biblical passage aptly comes from one of the three Gospel readings appointed for the Form of Ordaining or Consecration of an Archbishop or Bishop in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Such vision underpins the pledges the new bishop is to make – “I will so do/be, by the help of God” – as he takes up his episcopal responsibilities.

A draft that testifies to the good will across the Communion

Saint Andrew's Draft testifies to the good will from church leaders and theologians across the Communion. That such a comprehensive draft – with Commentary and Appendix – was agreed upon within the span of a few days of meeting in February 2008 speaks volume of the solidarity among leaders from different contexts and traditions. They came together to work for the Communion's common welfare at this time of deep crisis and uncertainty. Such mutual trust and good will should be applauded.

The draft is “tentative” – the Covenant Design Group underlines – in particular with regard to the “procedural appendix” that has (rightly) been the centre of animated discussion. The draft is meant “for discussion”, “offered for reflection in the Communion at large, and in particular by the Lambeth Conference” to be convened this summer.

In this spirit I offer the following observations to further the discussion.

A step forward from the Nassau draft?

The Design Group members had before them the feedback from the provinces. The solid feedback from the Church of England was significant, and has helped to strengthen the theological underpinnings of the Preamble and moderate the role of the Primates in the Nassau draft. At the same time, Saint Andrew's Text (SAT) does not merely tidy up ND's loose ends. It surprisingly made two important changes.

First, missing from the Introduction is any reference to the historical context that gives rise to the urgent need for this present Covenant.¹ Secondly, remarkably

¹ “While a definitive text which held all such elements in balance might take time to develop in the life of the Communion, there was also an *urgent need to re-establish trust* between the churches of the

vanished is also the guarded tone in the Covenant reception processes.² In their places, SAT offers the Communion a theology of covenant and an Appendix with a detailed Framework Procedures for the Resolution of Covenant Disagreement. The Design Groups also gives us clear time-line that a draft with "definitive proposals for adoption in the Communion" (I assume with framework procedures included!) will be finalised later this year after the Lambeth Conference".³

Let us ponder over these two changes. The SAT Introduction in eight paragraphs sets out the theological underpinnings for the Covenant. Paragraphs 1 to 3 begin with the Trinitarian and ecclesial foundations of the covenant. It helpfully refers to the baptismal covenant in Paragraph 2 to which I shall return: "Into this covenant of death to sin and of new life in Christ we are baptized, and empowered to share God's communion in Christ with all people, to the very ends of the earth and of creation."

From Paragraph 4 to 8 the Design Group gives the theological rationale for the present act of covenanting in the Anglican Communion. First, the drafters recognise the providential emergence of the Anglican Communion among the families of churches (para. 4). Then in the same breath, it goes on to say:

Recognizing the wonder, beauty and challenge of maintaining communion in this family of churches, and the need for mutual commitment and discipline as a witness to God's promise in a world and time of instability, conflict, and fragmentation, we covenant together as churches of this Anglican Communion to be faithful to God's promises through the historic faith we confess, the way we live together and the focus of our mission.

Well, all this can be said of any other church in all ages and all places. But why is it so urgent for the Communion now? The drafters do not make clear.

In the same way, the hesitations in ND over the time-line for adoption and reception processes are replaced with a rather (please forgive me if I am wrong here) buoyant mood marked with an elaborate procedure in conflict resolution. My hesitation here is not on whether Canterbury should be accorded any enhanced role and power. I am more concerned with the grounds upon which any person or instrument can understand, discern, and make practical judgments on matters of faith and order. In particular, on what grounds can X/Y/Z claim any action threaten the unity of the Communion (Appendix 2.1)? And on what basis can the Anglican Consultative Council pass a judgment that a "rejection of the request is compatible with the Covenant" (Appendix 8)? Good will on its own would not do. There must be some prior understanding in how to distinguish matters that are essential from what are of indifference.

Communion. . . . At the same time, there needed to be a commitment now to the fundamental shape of the covenant in *order to address the concerns of those who feared that the very credibility of the commitment of the Anglican Churches to one another and to the Gospel itself was in doubt.* (italics mine) "(ND, Preamble).

² "Bearing this in mind, the CDG recommends a *dual track* approach. The definitive text of any proposed Covenant which could command the long term confidence of the Communion would need extensive consultation and refining. (italics mine)" (ND, Preamble)

³ See the Statement from the Covenant Design Group on the Saint Andrew's draft.

What does the Anglican Church stand for?

This last observation touches the root problem behind the surface issues (important though they are) that the Communion faces today. The Communion as we experience it today (as a family of thirty-eight autonomous provinces spread across the world) is of recent origin – sixty years at most in its present form. The Anglican Communion is never meant to be. It came about in haphazard ways. This realisation should sober us up, and overwhelm us with an immense sense of gratitude and responsibility. The story of how the Church of England transformed from the sixteenth century to the present Anglican Communion can be told by abler historians. Two points are important. First, ecclesiastically, the Communion has moved from the days of an Anglo-American-centered church to a family of autonomous churches around the globe. The Communion has come a long way from the Lambeth 1948/1958 discussion on the status of Florence Li's ordination and on the Church of South India, through the 1963 Anglican Congress on "Mutual Responsibility and Independence" to 1984 ACC-6's "Bonds of Affection". Partnership between provinces have also come a long way since the Partners-in-Mission processes through the rise of the South-South Encounters to the present Global South Anglican movement.

This checkered transformation does not merely testify to a power-shift from north to south. The Communion is also re-orienting itself to an unprecedented missiological context. Hitherto, the Church of England – as the established church safeguarded by the successive Acts of Uniformity – undertook its mission in the context of "one king, one society, and one church". The Anglican Communion, however, is a family of churches that confesses her Lord before all kings and all societies, in a world that is increasingly hostile to the Christian faith and community. How the Communion as a tangible family of churches scattered worldwide can remain together (and not break up into like-minded fraternities) and work coherently for Christ's mission is nothing short of divine grace. This is the charism of, and challenge before, the Communion today.

And yet, the Communion for the past sixty years have not given due attention to this. The devolution of power from the British and American churches to the local Anglicans has absorbed most of the energy of the Communion. There was not a concurrent concern for catechetical responsibilities. The Communion has not given enough attention to how the faith is transmitted, how worship is conducted, and what is taught from the pulpit. The Global South Anglican Theological Formation and Education Task Force has raised such concerns in its recently released Interim Report Anglican Catechism in Outline.

The present crisis reveals such neglect. At present the Communion exposes itself to increasing onslaughts of doctrinal and ecclesiastical controversies. And this would not end even with the Covenant in place. More importantly, the Communion is not structurally equipped to face the missiological challenges of the wider world. A church that remains childish in its faith-understanding cannot stand up to the challenges today, and for sure cannot engender a new successor generation of mature Anglicans. To be sure, Section One ("Our Inheritance of Faith") of SAT may point to the formal doctrinal positions of the churches. But there is a huge jump between 1.1 (on the affirmation) and 1.2 (in living out this inheritance in varying contexts). The drafters pass over any consideration on any concrete embodiment of the faith. So churches everywhere (at provincial, diocesan, parish and congregational levels) are

left without guidance in how the affirmations should be interpreted and worked out in practice.

The affirmation that we have a “shared pattern of common prayer and liturgy form” (1.1.5) must be expressed in concrete forms, i.e., in the traditions of Prayer Books, catechisms, and standards for Christian initiation and ministerial formation. The word “common” used in the Book of Common Prayer refers to a common and “godly” order that was enforced by the Acts of Uniformity. The word “common” referred to above in the SAT draft perhaps means “neither individual nor private”. Between these two meanings lie two different social contexts and ecclesial visions! SAT may perhaps be strengthened by a clear resolve from churches to adopt an agreed framework in prayer book revisions (with clear rubrics on matters of faith and order) and in catechisms used across the Communion. After all, what provoked the present crises are intimately connected with our understanding of faith and morals *expressed through public rites* (whether in blessing of marriage and the consecration of bishops).

As it stands at present, provinces and dioceses may take different approaches to prayer book revisions, ministerial formation, and processes of Christian initiation. Anglicans who live as tiny minorities in socio-politically isolated places are especially at risk. We may fast approaching the day when we do *not* find in our churches “shared patterns of common prayer and liturgy form to sustain and nourish our worship of God and our faith and life together” (SAT 1.1.5).

In short, my concern here is not simply on whether the Covenant provides enough safeguards against fratricidal wars in the future. It is even more serious: does the Anglican Communion has an intentional structure that allows congregations to become theological mature and equipped? In what practical ways the Communion is fostering a culture that promotes theological learning and Biblical literacy among the faithful?

A practical way forward?

It is clear then that SAT – the act of covenanting – is intelligible only within a wider ecclesial reality, communities of faith that submissive to a godly order. SAT cannot stand on its own. Neither should it focus its attention towards solving the present crisis. It should seize the opportunity the present crisis offers to work out a proactive structure towards the maturing of the Anglican Communion.

Helpfully, the discussions at Lambeth will be strengthened by reflections from the Theological Education in the Anglican Communion as well. Discussions on the Anglican Way and on theological education in the Communion breathe concrete meaning to the Anglican Covenant. Perhaps it would also be helpful if some attention is given to the formulating of a catechetical framework, as proposed by the Global South Anglican Primates.

Put in another way, Lambeth perhaps should focus its discussion on the essentials in faith and order, that is, St Andrew's Text itself. I am unclear whether the proposed Appendix on Framework Procedures should be tabled at all for discussion in the foreseeable future. If the bishops at Lambeth are able to agree to a framework of faith, and come to a common mind in giving this concrete embodiment at the parish levels

(i.e. in having agreed standards in catechisms, prayer book, and theological education), dioceses across the Communion will draw from it direct spiritual benefit and be strengthened. We all would have come a long way.

To conclude, I refer to the baptismal vows mentioned earlier. Between theological statements and ecclesiastical polities stands the covenant: the gracious and creative “yes” of God and the responsive “Amen, be it done to me according to your will” of human hearts. Our baptismal and ordination vows are connected with this divine drama of God’s “yes” and our “amen”. Those decisions and vows anchor our lives to pursue our discipleship in concrete ways: to live as Anglicans and to live as Christians are the two sides of the same act of discipleship. The Anglican Covenant needs to find its secure moorings from these anchors. In this spirit, bishops are called to take up the Cross, in Canterbury’s words, to come to Lambeth. The decision to come to Lambeth cannot be degraded to a political gesture of whether one is pro- or anti-Archbishop Rowan Williams. He is a frail human, just as we all are, yet under the grace and election of God.

The Anglican Covenant would become more intelligible if it connects itself (especially in the Preamble and the Declaration) to the moments of baptism and ordination that are imbued with personal meaning. Such would save it from a perhaps impersonal and bureaucratic reading of the Appendix.

Come, Creator Spirit, come, our souls inspire . . .

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