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### THE ANGLICAN COVENANT

By David Phillips

The only significant item of business at the November Group of Sessions of the General Synod was a debate on the proposed Anglican Covenant. The Covenant is intended to represent an agreement between Churches within the Anglican Communion. Provincial churches which adopt the Covenant will, in theory, be full members of the Communion whilst those that do not will either not be part of the Communion or will be a sort of second tier of the Communion. In addition it will be possible for Provincial churches, which drift in some way from the agreement, to be investigated and potentially demoted.

At first sight this looks like a good idea. Everyone knows that in the background are the actions of the US and Canadian Churches which have torn apart the communion by promoting and endorsing sexual immorality. Certainly some response was needed to this, but the Covenant process tried to avoid being focused on one issue. But is the Covenant either desirable or sufficient as a means of restoring the damage done to the Anglican Communion?

Prior to the debate a campaign was launched by liberals within the Church of England, and wider, under the slogan “No Anglican Covenant”. They placed an advert in the Church press, issued a news release and set up the now obligatory website ([noanglicancovenant.org](http://noanglicancovenant.org)). The objections raised by this group were well aired in the General Synod debate. Various objections were articulated:

Most liberals opposing the Covenant agree with the theological stance of the US and Canadian Provinces. Some call their actions “prophetic” and they do not want to do anything which might make it more difficult for the rest of the Communion to travel the same path to ungodliness (my words, not theirs!).

Many are also conscious of other contentious issues where they think “progress” might have been frustrated if the Covenant had been in place. The most obvious example is the ordination of women as priests. For those of us who are against the ordination of women this is a positive argument for the Covenant. But this is a hard one for many who favour the Covenant but can see the logic of the position.

Others are against the idea of discipline in the Church. The disciplinary aspect of the Covenant has been watered down but not so much that it has gone altogether. This is a hypocritical argument and I do not believe that there are many who hold it with integrity. As was pointed out in the debate in the US and Canada the provincial leadership has been more than willing to use legal processes to secure property and evict from communion those who have stood against the majority. Moreover, some have been pushing hard for action against the provinces who stepped in to help the Anglicans in North America who had taken a stand against error. What liberals don’t want is discipline on matters of faith and doctrine, they are very happy to see discipline to maintain the structures and institutions.

A final concern is the camel’s nose argument. They fear, and maybe they are right, that even if the present form of the Covenant is not too bad (in their eyes) once it is in place the conservatives in the Communion are going to want to beef it up.

This last argument loses some weight however, because many conservatives are also against the

Covenant.

When the Covenant was first debated by General Synod in July 2007 I wrote an article against it in Cross†Way. One of our Council members, Tim Cox, put an amendment to the Synod which would have replaced the Covenant with something better. Sadly Tim did not get the support of others. It is encouraging to discover therefore that finally others have woken up to the fact that the Covenant is a waste of time. On the same day that General Synod was debating the Covenant in London the Primates of the Global Anglican Futures Conference issued a statement from Oxford.

One thing the Primates stated was that they would not be attending the forthcoming Primates meeting in January. They have seen how previous Primates meetings have been manipulated, particularly by Archbishop Rowan Williams. What is the point of going to another meeting where their views will be sidelined, the process will be stacked against them and any decisions the Primates actually make will then be completely ignored?

Also in their statement they said:

*For the sake of Christ and of His Gospel we can no longer maintain the illusion of normalcy and so we join with other Primates from the Global South in declaring that we will not be present at the next Primates' meeting to be held in Ireland. And while we acknowledge that the efforts to heal our brokenness through the introduction of an Anglican Covenant were well intentioned we have come to the conclusion the current text is fatally flawed and so support for this initiative is no longer appropriate.*

They do not state what the flaws in the Covenant are and if they have issued an explanation I have missed it. However, in 2007 we highlighted in Cross†Way the flaws in an earlier draft of the Covenant and it seems that the final version is, if anything, worse.

First, we criticised the Covenant for being inadequate in its definition of Anglicanism. We criticised in particular the weakness of the statement about the 39 Articles. This statement is taken from the Church of England Declaration of Assent which has failed to prevent people who do not stand by historic Anglican doctrine from occupying posts in the Church. But the final version of the Covenant seeks to weaken this even further when it states:

*The historic formularies of the Church of England, forged in the context of the European Reformation and acknowledged and appropriated in various ways in the Anglican Communion, bear authentic witness to this faith.*

This attempts to contextualise the Articles and give credence to those Provinces which have abandoned the Articles as part of their doctrinal basis.

Moreover, the final version of the Covenant goes on to describe the *Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith*. It is the word 'sufficient' that is the stumbling block in this statement, because it implies that everything else is unnecessary. Thus it would appear that the Reformation and the issues addressed in our 39 Articles are all secondary, they have become items of historical interest but where they go beyond Nicea they are unnecessary. The Anglican doctrine of justification (Article 11) and the sacraments (Articles 25-31) are unimportant.

The second major area of concern with the Covenant is the assignment of authority to some body or bodies within the Communion to exercise a disciplinary function. Here we share with the liberals a justifiable concern. Put in bogey-man terms, we do not want an Anglican Papacy or Inquisition. Although the Church of England has had clear disciplinary structures, part of the break with Rome involved the rejection of a universal structure within the Church. In this respect we are much more

akin to the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches. The Covenant envisages that some international Anglican body will have the power not only to decide the rules for the Anglican club but to determine whether people should be thrown out. Faced with the problems caused by liberalism in North America this is a very tempting scenario, but we must be fearful of where it might lead.

The Covenant will now be discussed in Dioceses before returning to the General Synod in 2012. If it is approved within the Communion then it will be some time after that that it becomes effective. If, the Covenant is already being dismissed by the GAFCON Primates, and presumably in time by their provinces, what future does it have? Without the Covenant what hope is there?

In 2007 we proposed an alternative course which was the substance of the motion put by Tim Cox and rejected by the Synod. The main part of the motion was as follows:

*urge all the Provinces of the Anglican Communion to declare themselves in community only with those Provinces, dioceses and congregations that:*

- (i) assert whole-heartedly that the Scriptures are the Word of God;*
- (ii) uphold the historic Anglican formularies (the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, 1662 Book of Common Prayer and Ordinal); and*
- (iii) on the current presenting cause of division, uphold the Biblical teaching that sexual intercourse belongs solely within the lifelong commitment of a man and woman in marriage.*

It is along the same lines as the 2009 Jerusalem Declaration and I hope it is similar to the line the GAFCON Primates will now take. It relies on seeing the Communion as a fellowship of like-minded Provincial churches rather than an international structure. It will work only if those churches agree to a common inheritance of faith and also agree, in humility, not to turn aside lightly from that inheritance. I fear it is this last point which is problematic because some in Anglicanism now have little respect for this inheritance and tend to erroneously equate their own novel ideas with the leading of the Holy Spirit.

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