

## Diocesan Synod Covenant Debate – 18<sup>th</sup> February 2012

Synod Members I am asking you to vote against this motion in favour of the Covenant for 3 reasons:

- I. The Covenant makes fundamental changes to our Anglican Legacy which we should resist. It was born out of a very particular dispute, the terms of which are already changing and however uncomfortable the storm of disagreement we shouldn't abandon our Anglican way of doing things.
- II. We're not going to achieve a consensus about this Covenant so it's a disproportionate and dangerous route. Already Birmingham, Gloucester, Truro, Wakefield and St Edmundsbury & Ipswich have voted against whilst 5 other dioceses have voted for.

Similarly in our global family, although processes aren't complete it's almost certain that we will be entirely divided. New Zealand, Philippines, Scotland, Canada have indicated that they will almost certainly vote 'no'. Most conservative provinces have lost faith in it: e.g. Sydney, Newcastle, conservative dioceses in Australia which have voted 'no'.

- III. We cannot predict its effect and all the evidence of last 7 years is that it will further divide us rather than unite.

Let me tell you a personal story:

In the 1980's General Synod asked me to serve on Council of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. Two evangelical colleges Wycliffe and Ridley insist on Governors signing a doctrinal statement of faith. I said I wouldn't, explaining that I say the creed every day and worship in Anglican tradition. It's our worship not signed confessions which shape our doctrine. Eventually they accepted I was sufficiently orthodox (they had after all trained me!) and I served very happily.

I was resisting a form of confessionalism - a tribal testing of who we find a true and acceptable Christian. Whereas I follow Archbishop Fisher: "We have no doctrine of our own we only possess the Catholic doctrine of the catholic church enshrined in the Catholic creeds, and those creeds we hold without addition or diminution"

Our call is to be the Established church – through our parish system – and that puts us in a different relationship with how we, or whether we, wish to test people's faith.

Few of us will disagree with the first three sections of the Covenant but baptism and regular Anglican worship should still be enough. So, here's why I hope you will vote against the motion.

### 1. **The Covenant will change the nature of our Anglican legacy:**

We all understand that what we're debating was born out of conflict. It was conceived in the indignation around gay bishops naming their sexuality and a determination to discipline churches who permitted such to happen. The focus has been on what to do with provinces or dioceses who innovate without agreement rather than applying our energy to nurturing trust, tolerance and discover roots of our disagreements.

The Covenant wishes to push us in two directions which are acceptable to other churches but are not part of Anglican polity and style:

- a) to make our ecclesiastical authority more centralised and less Provincial, more unilateral and less relational. e.g. even in drafting, those working on the Covenant have run into difficulty identifying which pan-Anglican body would exercise the judgment of whether 'innovations' are compatible with Christian essentials. 2007-2009 produced three different solutions:

Nassau Draft – Primates  
St Andrews – Anglican Consultative Council  
Ridley, Cambridge – Joint Standing Committee

We are an episcopally led and synodically governed church but this Covenant seeks to add an authority beyond that formula.

- b) we're being pushed towards confessionalism.  
The Covenant represents a desire to get individuals or dioceses or provinces to sign up to a particular understanding or brand of the faith which gives those of us in the Church of England difficulty with our earthed establishment in the parish system.

## 2. **We are not going to achieve a consensus about whether the covenant is a good thing.**

Admittedly this is a pragmatic argument but it is nevertheless crucial. Look at where we are:

- The Dean and Suffragan Bishop on different sides of the debate
- Bishops in this diocese will vote different ways
- Church of England will similarly be split 50:50
- No consensus in the Anglican Communion whether the Covenant will make things worse.

There are important issues in this debate. I'm glad we've discussed them. The drafting process has structured the start of a good debate about what it means to be an Anglican today.

How might a global denomination move ahead from its history and hugely varied cultural roots and create a common bond based around trust and mutual understanding?  
How do we deal faithfully with issues beyond the scope of our formularies and about which we still have partial knowledge.

But we shouldn't let the lawyers and ecclesiastical technocrats drive us to an institutional solution at this point.

We don't want to find ourselves in July at General Synod looking disloyal to the Archbishop of Canterbury and so far better that the dioceses vote 'no' which simply means that the question doesn't get put. Our voting 'no' will rescue the Archbishop from being marooned.

**3. I ask you to vote against this motion because we simply cannot predict its effect.**

In a sense we've given the Covenant a trial run in the way the Primates and ACC have dealt with The Episcopal Church and the Church of Canada.

Various they've enforced their withdrawal from decision-making bodies, proposed an external pastoral council within their provinces to care for conscientious objectors, demanded that they drop lawsuits, and suggested panels of reference to deal with dissent.

All of these initiatives have in one way or another failed, often making matters worse and have left all of us confused.

The people not confused are the New Zealand Anglican Church which has lived with cultural differences and minority interests for all its history. They're very clear that all the innovations they have introduced – giving laity voting rights (1857), create Maori jurisdiction (1928), ordaining women priests (1976), and then bishops (1987) – all would've been opposed by the majority of other Provinces at the time they were proposed.

They will be voting against because they fear the Covenant would allow churches in the conservative coalition to prevent their church proceeding in the future in the direction they believe the Spirit was leading.

Let me finish.

This is about how we disagree. Nothing will substitute for trust and relationship. Those who disagree with us make us feel very uncomfortable but they are a gift.

Nothing in the Covenant tells me that this is about living with that discomfort and learning from one another.

Last week there was a service at Westminster Abbey to mark 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Act of Uniformity. Under that Act those of a Presbyterian inclination were forced out of their livings and our church. We have lived with that institutional 'Great Ejection' for 350 years. Let us heed the words of the Puritan Richard Baxter, that great friend of George Herbert:

'Ministers must smart when the church is wounded, and be so far from being leaders in division, that they should take it as a principal part of their work to prevent and heal them....'

Members of Synod, I urge you to see that this Covenant will not prevent or heal our divisions; it may even harden our divisions and make our wounds smart more.