The Anglican Covenant

a CHURCH TIMES guide

The Covenant: gift or shackle?

A FALSE distinction is sometimes made between faith and religion. Faith is supposedly free, the preserve of the unbridled spirit; religion is a codified set of doctrines and rules. In reality, as St Paul thought he had explained to everyone's satisfaction nearly 2000 years ago, the two are always in each other's company, sweeping away ignorance to enable them to hear the Holy Spirit clearly. This, in turn, leads to right behaviour, based on love of neighbour.

The remarkable thing about the Anglican Communion up to the present is that this balance between freedoms and responsibilities has been tipped so decidedly towards the former. Whereas national Churches operate within a legal framework that regulates ministry, liturgy, property, and governance, the relationship between the different provinces internationally is held together by "bonds of affection" and little else. This has been a point of pride among many Anglicans when they compare it with the centralised power structures of other denominations. The argument runs, however, that this degree of affection lasts only while the Anglican provinces have little to do with each other and are allowed to go their own way without check. This is not how the modern world works, however. The Western liberal finds it hard to tolerate the unjust treatment of minorities in the South on the grounds of tradition. Southern conservatives feel compromised by Western liberalism, which is the vision of an Anglicanism whose diversity is limited not by centralised control but by consent — consent based on a serious common assessment of local needs. The group that had been working on a draft Covenant had made "far more progress than anyone expected, and was able to submit a draft for discussion to the Primates, which will now be circulated for further comment from provinces. This tries to outline what a 'wholly consultative' approach to deciding contentious matters might look like — with some of the inevitable consequences spelled out if this is not followed. This is not. I must stress, threatening penalties, but stating what will unavoidably flow from more assertions of unqualified autonomy."

Days later, he told the General synod that regulations of a theological dispute had taken the Anglican Church in the US to clarify its future process where consultation was fully built in. Whether it can all come together remains to be seen. "Whatever happened, he said, "there is no way in which the Anglican Communion can remain unchanged by what is happening at the moment." The Anglican Covenant needs spelling out, he observed, "not for the sake of some central mechanism of control, but so that these have left it flawed. The debate about it has certainly been unbalanced, concentrating mostly on Section Four, which tackles the question what should happen to a province that fails to comply with the Covenant requirement for constraint. Dr Williams spoke early on of two methods of handling diversity: council and covenant. Thanks to the various debates, we know plenty about what to do with a province or diocese that innovates without agreement, but too little about how to nurture that agreement. The paradox is that the portion of the Covenant which was most enthusiastic about the Covenant, the conservative South, has now virtually disowned it. Bishop Akae argued that on these pages that, watered down through successive drafts, the Covenant now offers no threat to recalcitrant provinces and is consequently no longer fit for its purpose. For others, the weakening of that element of threat is a recommendation, although it raises the question what, now, the Covenant is actually for. Ultimately, its effect on the Communion cannot be known in advance. To vote in favour, therefore, is to step into the dark. Such is the present state of the Communion, however, that to vote against it might well lead Anglicans into similar obscurity.

Through uncharted waters with Dr Williams at the helm

The Archbishop's guidance has been crucial, reports Pat Ashworth

IT IS almost five years since the Archbishop of Canterbury first set out his thinking on the Anglican Covenant. The 3000-word reflection that followed the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in the United States, in June 2006, was hailed as "momentous" for its frank recognition that the Anglican Communion faced a stark choice: sacrifice or separation.

A lengthy debate at the Convention had ended in a highly nuanced resolution about the consecration of more gay bishops. The politicisation of a theological dispute had taken the place of reasoned reflection in the Anglican Church, Dr Williams suggested. "It isn't a question of throwing people into outer darkness," he emphasised, "but of recognising that actions have consequences.

The "tact conventions" in the Communion needed spelling out, he observed, "not for the sake of some central mechanism of control, but so that we have ways of being sure we're still talking the same language.

Dr Williams suggested that the best way forward was an opt-in covenant between Churches, as suggested in the 2004 Windsor report. He acknowledged that some Churches might be unwilling to limit local freedom for the sake of wider witness, and, even at this early stage, the idea was floated of a tiered Communion of "consistent" Churches in covenant with the Anglican Covenant and other "Churches in association" — a relationship he likened to that between the Church of England and the Methodist Church.

Whatever happened, he said, "there is no way in which the Anglican Communion can remain unchanged by what is happening at the moment." HE MOVED rapidly to set things in motion in advance of the Primates' Meeting scheduled for February 2007. By September 2006, he had appointed the Archbishop of the West Indies, the Most Revd Drexel Gomez, to chair the Covenant Design Group (CDG), and, in a pastoral letter, acknowledged: "We are entering uncharted waters for the Communion, with a number of large issues about provincial identity and autonomy raised for all of us."

His observations on the possibility of a Covenant had "on the whole been received with sympathy", he reported. A stormy Primates' Meeting in Tanzania in February 2007 resulted in an ultimatum to the Episcopal Church in the US to clarify its position on same-sex blessings. Keeping the Communion together might look to some people "like prolonging the life of a dysfunctional or abusive marriage," Dr Williams said. But the outline of a covenant document suggested "ways in which we could commit ourselves to a future process where consultation was fully built in... Whether it can all come together remains to be seen." Days later, he told the General Synod: "It is folly to think that a decision to 'go our separate ways' in the Communion would leave us with a neat and morally satisfying break between two groups of provinces." The group that had been working on a draft Covenant had made "far more progress than anyone expected, and was able to submit a draft for discussion to the Primates, which will now be circulated for further comment from provinces. This tries to outline what a 'wholly consultative' approach to deciding contentious matters might look like — with some of the inevitable consequences spelled out if this is not followed. This is not. I must stress, threatening penalties, but stating what will unavoidably flow from more assertions of unqualified autonomy."

The "appropriate channels" in each province studied a draft text, a revised version of which was to be evaluated at the Lambeth Conference in July 2008. In his first presidential address to the Conference, the Archbishop weighed the arguments of the Communion as a loose federation against those wanting "more consistent control of diversity". He remained convinced that "the option to which we are being led is one whose key-words are of council and covenant. It is the vision of an Anglicanism whose diversity is limited not by centralised control but by consent — consent based on a serious common assessment of the implications of local change."

A covenant "should not be thought of as a means of excluding the difficult or rebellious but as an intensification — for those who so
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that would not be possible, and we’re not going to get there, so we don’t get there very quickly.”

The Anglican Consultative Council (ACC), the Communion’s decision-making body, met in Jamaica in May 2009. Archbishop Gomez warned at the start that the Communion was close to breaking up if it could not state simply and clearly what it had together.

The meeting had to vote whether to accept the Covenant and send it out to the provinces for consideration and adoption. The stumbling-block was Section 4, which deals with the enforcement of the terms of the Covenant. In what seemed to many to be a confused and controversial process, the ACC voted by the narrowest of majorities not to send it out until there had been further consultation on section 4.

Dr Williams acknowledged that there remained “an intensely felt and strained underpinning of our Communion”, but reported agreement on the substance and timescale of the Covenant. He said: “We have not in this meeting given evidence of any belief that we lack no future together.” The meeting had sanctioned an element of delay, but he urged: “The tests are out there. Please pray them through, and talk them through, starting now.”

We cannot start from the standpoint that there is no Covenant. The Covenant is not optional. The Covenant stands, to find its unity there.

“The TED and its allies have put an end to our problems, but this way of thinking was a mistake. The question is whether we can only work where there is free assimilation.”

In the second presidential address, Dr Williams identified the central question to be answered: “How do Churches co-operate? Here is a way, says Gregory Cameron

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Born of outrage, this is just confusion
THE Anglican Covenant now forwarded to us is spoiled by its history. It was conceived in indignation, and determination to discipline has brought it to birth. In the summer of 2003, in the Episcopal Church in the United States, Canon Gene Robinson, a partner gay man, was ordained as Bishop of New Hampshire, while, in the Anglican Church of Canada, the diocese of New Westminster approved and used liturgical rites for the blessing of homosexual couples. Pan-Anglican Primates expressed outrage. The Archbishop of Canterbury responded by appointing the Lambeth Commission, whose remit was crisis-management and damage-control. The Windsor report proposed strengthening pan-Anglican polity by assigning new disciplinary and gate-keeping functions to the existing Instruments of Communion. National Churches would be required to submit any changes that might cause controversy in doctrine or praxis to pan-Anglican authorities, who would decide whether the Communion could tolerate a province’s giving them institutional expression. If the answer was no, the said province was not to proceed, on pain of excommunication.

Although the various draft covenants have assigned these new tasks to first one pan-Anglican body and then another, all agree that for a national Church to covenant means that it commits itself to shared discernment about whether innovations are compatible with Anglican “essentials”; to mandatory caution that denies innovations institutional expression, unless and until pan-Anglican bodies agree; and to “accommodating” the “requests” of pan-Anglican bodies on pain of “relational consequences”, including provisional or permanent exclusion from Anglican Communion decision-making processes.

The fact that the Instruments cannot have legislative or judicial authority over legally autonomous national Churches turns out to be a red herring. Each draft Covenant redefines membership in terms of “mutual accountability” and “interdependence”. Private associations are entitled to set their own house rules. SUCH centralised disciplinary procedures are enough, on paper, to raise liberal hackles. Supporters make matters worse when they declare that “only the whole Church knows the whole truth”: Christ was not the whole Church ultimately go wrong, but individual provinces can be mistaken (see Dr Williams’ CT Challenge and Hope, 2006, as well as the 1997 Virginia Report, 4.27 and 5.22, and the 2007 Kuala Lumpur Report II.51.29). But that is not all. Even if the Anglican Covenant could not be law, it is like a law, in that its meaning cannot be given in abstraction from context.

The Windsor report was written with an air of presumptive legitimacy and invited Primates to act on its recommendations for dealing with the Episcopal Church in the US and the diocese of New Westminster. This means that, for better or worse, proposed Anglican Covenant machinery has had a trial run.

The first phase was marked by primatial tyranny. The 2005 Primates’ Meeting in Northern Ireland embraced the Windsor report as the way forward, summoned the Episcopal Church and New Westminster to answer for their actions, and New Westminster to answer for its province. The Windsor report was written with an air of presumptive legitimacy and invited Primates to act on its recommendations for dealing with the Episcopal Church in the US and the diocese of New Westminster. This means that, for better or worse, proposed Anglican Covenant machinery has had a trial run.

The 2007 Primates’ Meeting in Tanzania was firmer still, requiring the Episcopal Church in the US to stop local bishops from authorising same-sex blessings and to be explicit that elections of non-cathedral homosexuals as bishops would not be punishable.

In Tanzania, the Primates moved to set up a pastoral council to look for untrammelled autonomy, apparently in the hope that Windsor-compliant congregations and dioceses in the US. The Primates also demanded that the Episcopal Church drop lawsuits to recover property occupied by would-be secessionists.

All of this was done without any legal authority, and with none of anyone’s covenanting to anything. Meanwhile, the Archbishop of Canterbury appointed various panels of reference to hear North American complaints, remained aloof from the Episcopal Church’s House of Bishops, and encouraged many to think that Windsor-compliant dioceses seceding from the Episcopal Church would be granted membership in the Anglican Communion.

What conclusion would any “liberal” draw from that? The Windsor report delivered a veto over institutional policy to foreign Primates, who should expect to be answerable to the province in question, invite the abuse of power. GAFCON and moderate Evangelicals are frank: this was precisely the sort of discipline they envisaged. But, in the second phase, Windsor machinery has not continued to deliver “the relational consequences” dreamed in mind.

The Anglican Covenant could not be law, it is like a law, in that its meaning cannot be given in abstraction from context.

Episcopal Church representatives to faith- and order groups were deported to observer status after the Episcopal Church “did it again” and consecrated a coupled lesbian as Suffragan Bishop of Los Angeles. But the Archbishop of Canterbury invited bishops from the Episcopal Church, except for Bishop Robinson, to the Lambeth Conference in 2008. The Episcopal Church’s Presiding Bishop has attended every Primates’ Meeting since her election in 2006. Moreover, the Windsor report sought to tighten pan-Anglican institutions, but the Archbishop of Canterbury turned both Lambeth 2008 and the 2011 Dublin Primates’ Meeting into fellowship groups, which were ill-suited for global governance.

If ACTIONS speak louder than the words they intend, the trial run of the Anglican Covenant leaves us confused about what it is trying to say. Why should we — sign a document when we cannot tell what it means?

The trial run does showcase is an Anglican Communion dominated by Primates. The first phase features primatial oligarchy, in which the Primates’ Meeting plays a leading part. The second phase spotlights primatial monarchy, in which the Archbishop of Canterbury uses his powers to manipulate outcomes (by turning Lambeth 2008 and the Dublin 2011 Primates’ Meeting into “share” groups, focused on restricted topics, thereby disallowing substantive debate.

PRIMATES’ MeETING into “share” groups, focused on restricted topics, thereby disallowing substantive debate.

Why would anyone who loves a liberal Church want to covenant for that?

The Revd Marilyn McCord Adams is the Distinguished Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and is a former Regius Professor of Divinity, in the University of Oxford.
The Covenant is permissive, not coercive, argues Norman Doe

THE Church has always had norms of conduct, designed to assist its mission and witness to Jesus Christ. Alongside the normative texts of scripture and liturgy, the Church also has its law-books. All three are fundamental to Christian disciplinary and ecclesial life, addressing issues of governance and ministry, doctrine and worship, sacrament and mission.

The body of legal norms — canon law, in the widest sense — serves to facilitate and order the communion and mission of the Church, which does so quietly, largely because its norms are internalised in the daily conduct of the faithful. They help to orientate their ministry through and beyond the institutional structures of the Church.

Certainly, we do not notice them when we are in agreement. Sometimes, however, canon law itself comes under the public spotlight — in the light of human sexuality and same-sex partnerships.

Antagonists accuse the Church of avoiding the issue, but other churches do not. They see to balance the communion of the faithful corporately, and the autonomy of the antagonists individually. But with disagreements at the global level of the Anglican Communion — between provinces — there is no canonical framework to balance communion and provincial autonomy.

The absence of such an agreed framework contributes to a significant degree, exacerbated current conflicts in the worldwide Anglican Communion, such as those over human sexuality and same-sex partnerships. Antagonists may demarcate the lines, other churches will not. They may clout their arguments in scripture, reason, and tradition.

Conservatives accuse liberals of betraying what the conservatives genuinely believe is the clear mandate of scripture. Liberals accuse conservatives of literalism, and fail to respond to what the liberals genuinely believe is the mandate of scripture. The problem is, of course, who the people in the modern world.

The challenge that constitutes the extremes, arguing that the Church has more compelling issues to address — AIDS, poverty, the state of the planet — than functional or constitutional issues about how the Anglican Communion is run.

But conflicts have consequences. They involve the mission of the Church, damage eccumenical relations, and result in claims of implied communion inaction, to which the Church responds. There is a temptation to the creation of laws in other churches offering facilities for those who abandon Anglicanism and seek to continue their traditions elsewhere.

It was this absence of an agreed global mechanism, and the consequences flowing from it, that led the Lambeth Commission, in its Windsor report of 2004, to suggest the adoption, by each Church of the Anglican Communion, of a covenant that spells out formally what it means to be Anglican.

To do this, the exercise of provincial autonomy involves working together with the wider family of the Communion; and involves working together with the body of legal norms that spells out formally what it means to be Anglican.

Church of England claims to be part of the one holy Catholic and apostolic Church: the very word “Catholic” means “universal”, or communional compact in the shape of a constitution and canons.

There are also obvious precedents. Baptism, marriage, and ordination are all covenantal in character: promises are voluntarily exchanged; commitments are solemnly undertaken; and the autonomy of the parties is limited by the duty to have regard for one another.

Eccumenical covenants are equally commonplace — voluntary instruments by which churches regulate their relationships of communion with other Churches. Above all, perhaps, the instruments of comparable international ecclesial communities provide inspiration for the Anglican Covenant.

The Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas, the international conference of Old Catholic Bishops in the Union of Utrecht, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the Baptist World Alliance all have covenantal constitutions that spell out the meaning of, and the obligations of, each member Church, enables the exercise of autonomy within a framework of the common good, and prescribe the manner in which mutual decisions are to be made.

ANGLICANS should be reassured that the Anglican Covenant is broadly consistent with the theological and legal understandings of covenant in scripture, eccumenical tradition, and the experiences of ecumenism and comparable global ecclesial communities. There is nothing extraordinary about the Anglican enterprise.

Although the project is driven by theology, ecclesiastical politics, and pragmatism, covenanting would evolve participation in a conventional ecclesial experience for which there are numerous enduring principles and precedents. An Anglican Covenant would appear novel, but spiritual, sacramental, and structural, covenanting is a well-trodden Christian path.

The Anglican Covenant does not represent the Communion as the primary manifestation of Anglicanism, one that protects the autonomy of each member Church (or freedom) of its member Churches (the “red-light” model).

The Covenant does not see the autonomous provincial Church as the primary manifestation of Anglicanism, under which the province has an unfettered freedom, without any restraint from the global family (the “green-light” model).

Rather, the Covenant sees partnership between the Communion (the family) and each autonomous Church as the primary manifestation of Anglicanism, one that protects the autonomy of each member Church (or freedom), subject to the competence of the Communion (through its instruments) to protect the whole field of highly contentious matters of common interest (the “amber-light” model).

This is the Anglican way.

Dr Norman Doe is a Professor of Law at Cardiff Law School. He was a member of the Lambeth Commission, served as a consultant in canon law to the Primates’ Meeting and the Lambeth Conference, and has written on Anglican Covenant: Theological and legal considerations for a global debate (Canterbury Press, 2008).

The universal Church requires a better way to discern the truth, says Simon Killwick

I REJOICE every Sunday to see the Anglican Communion at worship in my church, as many of the congregation come originally from other provinces of the Anglican Communion in the West Indies and Africa. The same would be true of many Anglican parishes in the big cities in this country: the Anglican Communion is over here, not out over there.

The international nature of the Church is an essential part of the biblical and Catholic faith. In the book of Revelation, the apostle John sees a wonderful vision of heaven, where people of all nations worship together before the throne of God (7:9-10). In the Nicene Creed, we say: “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” The unity of the Church is not an optional extra to Christianity; it is an article of faith.

The New Testament is clear that Christ came to unite all peoples and things in himself (Ephesians 1:9-10). The Church of England claims to be part of the one holy Catholic and apostolic Church; the very word “Catholic” means “universal”, or “according to the whole.” St Vincent of Lerins famously wrote in his Commentaries that “all possible care must be taken to define clearly the doctrine which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and in the strictest sense of the word, to define the name itself and the reason of the thing declared, comprehends all universality.”

We need each other, internationally, in order to discern the truth.

St Vincent’s Commentary has a remarkably contemporary feel about it. He says that we need the universal Church to help us interpret scripture, “because, owing to the depth of holy scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands it in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters.”

This is why we need his tests of Catholicity: discerning the truth.

Vincent discusses the idea of development in religious knowledge (1500 years of interpretation), and readily admits the possibility of progress, so long as it is real progress, and not altogether against the faith. “Regard must be had to the consentient voice of the Church upon that of antiquity, lest we either be torn from the integrity of unity and carried away to schism.”

WE CANNOT carry on as if the rest of the world doesn’t exist, because the discernment of Christian truth can take place only on a universal or international basis. The Church of England would be hugely diminished without the Anglican Communion. We would be so much less than the Church of the whole world.

The Anglican Covenant has been designed to help the whole Church to discern the truth, and to be prescriptive enough. Both conservatives and liberals have been criticised by some for being too prescriptive, and by others for not being prescriptive enough. Both conservatives and liberals misinterpret the point, which is that we should discern the truth together as a universal basis.

For the Covenant to work as it should, it needs the genuine participates of all Anglicans worldwide; it will also need to look beyond the Anglican, to a more ecumenical and universal approach.

HOW might we discern the truth on an international basis? When an

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Not red nor green: amber is the Anglican colour
A useful compendium, but lose the chocolate teapot

The Covenant leaves too many questions unanswered, thinks Alan Wilson

IN THE village where I began my ordained ministry lived two clans who had feuded off and on for 500 years. Local lore says that their young men were having a customary New Year punch-up down by the riverside, when their neighbours hit on the novelty, for the 1920s, of telephoning the police.

The brawl on the banks of the Thames was reaching positively Glascwegian proportions by the time the Keystone Cops from the city lurchted into view in their shiny new paddy-wagon. At this point, both tribes laid aside their ancient quarrel for 20 minutes, dealt with the police, hurled their paddy-wagon into the lock, and then got back down to business. A copper’s lot is not a happy one.

If the Anglican Covenant is supposed to patch up the Anglican Communion after the culture wars of sexuality which gave rise to the Windsor report, it has probably already failed. Those whose consent would be necessary for it to achieve that purpose have said openly that they just don’t buy it. The paddy-wagon is in the lock, and it won’t be taking anyone off to the cells tonight. The thought may alloy liberal fears as much as disappoint conservative aspirations.

This failure is probably a mercy, because seven years is a long time in politics — even church politics. The doctrinal dust settles on what some felt was sub-Christian bickering about sexuality, colonialism, and biblicalism, perhaps a real opportunity is opening up to work out what we really are and what we stand for.

None of the contentious issues of 2003 has gone away, but the energy has drained away from fighting over them. Certainly, in the pews around here, people would sooner stick their heads in a food mixer than see the Anglican dog return to this particular vomit. The Christian faith is about following Jesus Christ, and loving God and neighbour, not having punch-ups by the riverside to feed the self-importance of our most zealous parishioners.

When all is said and done, Anglican Churches are no more than delivery systems for the Kingdom — expressions of discipleship. We did not become Anglicans to build Anglican brands in order better to follow Jesus Christ. We are Anglicans to be Christians, not the other way around. Our ecclesiology, largely implicit, points to that fact by its very incompleteness.

THE first three sections of the Covenant clearly express a reformed Catholic view, based on Archbishop Fisher’s principle: “We have no option but to be Catholic creeds, and those creeds we possess the Catholic doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of truth, (John 16.13).”

The procedural fourth section is a chicanery body and can’t you, what you will, but do not expect it to hold boiling water. I would detach it from the useful stuff as quietly and as tactfully as possible. Lawyers say that this cannot be done, but I seriously question whether a civilization capable of conquering space can really be that incapable.

The useful compendium in sections 1-3 could seriously help dioceses and deaneries to explore what being Christian means for them. It could unlock some fascinating questions that are all too seldom addressed.

What does it mean to be a Christian today? How far is an Anglican a member of a global society, and to what extent simply a Christian living out faith in a particular local culture? What kind of local inculcation for mission requires central regulation, and what kind do Churches have to trust other Churches to handle for themselves? Just what does it mean to be Anglican? Does it involve membership of a global denomination? The New Testament knows of local churches — small “c” — as part of the whole mystical body of Christ, the first-fruits of the whole human race redeemed: Church with a capital C. What room is there, in that scheme of things, for denominations, self-contained mini-Churches developed over the past 300 years, defining themselves over and against each other about particular dogmas?

Perhaps we are supposed to organise our life around denominations. Different as they are, they all use much the same grandiloquent biblical sound-bites to capture their unique selling points. How much authority should we invest in creating and defending the corporate brand?

THESE questions may lead to others. Homosexuality, the main bone of contention in 2003, was not even defined in a modern sense until the last century. There is nothing in any historic creed about it, and next to nothing in the Bible — possibly three or four verses, at a pinch. So how do we deal faithfully with new issues beyond the scope of our base formulations?

What part should bishops, synods, rules, and lawyers play in the Church? When people in the family fall out, do we tinker with the system, or address the problem itself? If we could not use effectively the instruments that we had, what chance is there that we will use new ones better?

What do we mean by church unity? How can legal engineering create unity, and how can it impede it? Is it about producing a single visible organisation in some ideal sense, or does it transcend particular organisations?

Is the Church, ultimately, a smooth-running spiritual society, or humanity as a whole, fully redeemed in Christ? If the latter is God’s purpose, the people you chuck out now come back in the end anyway; so you might as well learn how to live with them.

These are big questions. I hope that, as the Covenant goes for discussion, lay people’s answers will be as carefully received as those of lawyers and ecclesiastical technocrats have been so far in this process. And if the ordinary people of God, the plebs sancta Dei, who came through the gay wars with their credibility far more intact than that of their bishops, should be allowed to judge our elders and betters will be listening.

‘When families fall out, do we tinker with the system, or address the problem itself?’

Canon Simon Kilwick is Rector of Christ Church, Moss Side, Manchester, and a member of the General Synod.

Dr Alan Wilson is the Bishop of Buckingham.
AFRICAN Christian understanding of a covenant agrees with the church’s traditional understanding of covenant as a strong commitment to a relationship between two or more parties on agreed terms. Covenant presupposes that both parties accept the terms, are in communion, and are committed to respecting and being bound by the terms, as well as subject to the consequences of obeying or violating it.

In traditional African society, covenant is irrevocable, and cannot be trivialised without dire repercussions — more so when oaths have been sworn in the name of God. The fear of God underscores respect for divine laws and prohibitions. As such, virtually every African society, there exist sets of moral laws taboos (abomina), which are strictly adhered to.

These values existed before the coming of Christianity: they were only reinforced by it. Indeed, African morality is similar to the biblical portrait of Jewish and early Church moral values. This attitude was transformed into a condition of faith and ethics by Africans converts to Christianity. They therefore manifest biblical precepts in accordance with the word of God in their faith, worship, and morals.

Whereas African culture comes into conflict with Christian tenets, culture has a profound role in the reception and authority of scripture. The African spirituality does not dwell on philosophical abstractions, but it also seeks to deter the corruption of spiritual realities such as belief in God, judgement, heaven, and the afterlife. Therefore Africans interpret deviant behaviours, such as homosexuality, as abominable actions that corrupt the Church, dilute the Christian faith, and jitter the biblical foundations of the “faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints” (Jude 1:3).

With the possible exception of Yehweh’s suzerainty covenant with Israel, the Church has voluntarily entered into by two parties. It is never forced by one party upon another on the basis of divine faith and a consummating factor and a uniting mechanism to project the unity of a party with a uniting mechanism to project the unity of a party.

The idea of an Anglican Covenant was suggested by the Global South to check the drift of some members of the Communion, especially in the Episcopal Church in the United States and the Anglican Church of Canada, as well as some other parts of Europe, such as Germany and the UK, in the wake of a revisionist agenda manifested radically by the recognition of same-sex relationships by the Church, especially the consecration of two same-sex practitioners as bishops in the Episcopal Church in the US.

Unfortunately, the original idea of a covenant is to bring back to normal members who have embraced the Communion in a false or apostate fabric was adopted by the Anglican establishment, which fashioned a covenant in its motive, content, and thrust deviates from the original objective of healing and unifying the Communion.

To African Anglicans, the present Covenant is crafted to persuade orthodox Anglicans to commit to fellowship with revisionist groups who have committed abominations, but who unrepentantly defy various moral principles, on their own.

The Church of Nigeria is aware of its weaknesses as a body of Christ, and of the conditions of Nigerian society, with all its weaknesses and imperfections. Nevertheless, we do not use this to redefine the ideals expected of society. We believe in the transformative power of the gospel to engender a new society among us.

The following reasons underscore African Anglicans’ sense of caution against the Anglican Covenant in its present form:

1. During the drafting of the Covenant, not all parties were involved in the original formulations. Most African parties have expressed their reservations for their comments after the structure and direction had been formed. The offending Episcopal Church in the US remained defiant and recalcitrant, despite a series of appeals and resolutions. This attitude of the Episcopal Church towards the entire Communion and fellowshipping parties, that is not one of partnership, where all are committed to respecting and being bound by the terms, as well as subject to the consequences of obeying or violating it.

2. The Anglican provinces made a constructive critique of the draft Covenant, their contributions were hardly recognised or reflected in subsequent revisions, leading to the emergent Cambridge version, which is seemingly the final form.

3. Whereas a covenant is ideally entered into by two communicating and fellowshipping parties, that is not the case in the present Anglican Covenant. There is a conspicuous absence of cohesion in the Communion, which is a necessary foundation for a covenant.

At the moment, we cannot say that we have one Anglican Church. This does not refer to the geographical regions of Anglicanism: for, even in diversity, we had hitherto maintained a remarkable measure of unity. That is now lost. We now behave like people in the era of the Judges of ancient Israel, when “there was no king in Israel and every man did as he pleased.”

4. The present Covenant distracts the orthodox Anglican voices from the main issues currently in contention in the Communion. It seeks surreptitiously to engender perpetual talk and argument, and to undermine the unity of the Communion.

5. The parameters of biblical interpretation in the Anglican Church are diversified. Unfaithfulness to God and dishonesty in biblical interpretation gave rise to the present problems. In this approach, the authority of the Bible is weakened against evil cultural and behavioural practices. Pressure by secular forces, political factors, governments, parliaments, lawyers, the entertainment world, and the educational system, may lead some churches to believe that human culture appears to have overwhelmed the Church and compromised her prophetic voice.

We find it difficult to discern when the Church is speaking, and when society is speaking through the Church.

6. The Anglican Church in Nigeria is not able to subscribe to, or sign up to, the Anglican Covenant because it disagrees with the trends above. We hold scripture as God’s word, written and inspired by the Holy Spirit, as the best biblical scholarship, and under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

To African Anglicans, the present Covenant is crafted to persuade orthodox Anglicans to commit to the imperial onslaught of Western Christian civilisation. Despite treaties and covenants, colonial governments continued to assert their capricious will over the Maori tribes. The history of this country is marked by Maori attempts for justice and unity, and cohesion cannot easily enter into the fabric of the Communion.

Unfortunately, the original idea of a covenant will remain impracticable.

The Rt Revd John Akao is Bishop of Sabongidda-Ora, and chairman of the Theological Resource Group.

Cohesion must come before covenant, says John Akao

It cannot stop the unravelling

The Revd John Akao is Bishop of Sabongidda-Ora, and chairman of the Theological Resource Group.

We’re too independent for this

Under a covenant, minorities suffer, Glynn Cardy says

IN 2012, the General Synod/Te Hinota Whanui of the Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia will vote on the entirety of the proposed Anglican Covenant. Although predicting the outcome of any vote is fraught, I suspect that it will not pass, and the reasons for this will have little to do with the authorising of formal liturgical blessings for same-sex couples, or the ordination to the episcopate of those in same-sex relationships, or cross-provincial interventions.

New Zealand is a little Church in a little country with a little budget. It has always been that way. We have had to survive by generating new ideas, trying them out, and taking risks. Context, mission, and innovation are closely entwined.

Those innovative ideas include giving the guya voting rights in its synods (1957); a Maori bishop to minister to Maori within the diocese of a Pakeha/European bishop (1928); the baptised receiving the word of God in their faith, language, as was the Prayer Book. Yet, with the arrival of the settlers from Britain, another Anglican arrived. Quirky power shifted into the hands of the immigrants, and Maori were marginalised in their own land and Church.

Slowly, over the decades, we have sought to redress this. The 1992 constitution was a large milestone. Status as an equal partner, with the authority largely to govern one’s own affairs, has now been achieved for Maori Anglicans after 178 years.

This proposed Anglican Covenant is not one of partnership, where all Provinces have to either agree or abstain: it is one where the majority rule. Our history teaches us that under such a covenant, minorities suffer, and that suffering is the detriment of the whole Church and its whole mission.

Lastly, it will be difficult to win support for the Anglican Covenant in New Zealand, because it is trying to impose a form of centralism upon a Church that is increasingly pluralistic. A Christ-centred world is not one where everyone thinks similarly or agrees, but one where we celebrate that they do not. To impose sanctions on those who differ is to close our ears to what we may need to hear.

Our history has taught us that innovation is always highly culturally conditioned. The majority, whether liberal or conservative, are not always right. Our history and culture are not always wrong. Indeed, even our enemies reflect something of the One who saved us.

There are also the practicalities of being a little Church in a little country. At the end of the day, we have to learn to live with each other. We can argue with, and try to convince, others, but we cannot force agreement, and we cannot banish disagreement.

Unity is not achieved through a submission to a demand, or by coming to respect the variety of ways in which Anglicans live out their faith. The majority and minority are not always wrong. Indeed, even our enemies reflect something of the One who saved us.

The Ven. Glynn Cardy is Vicar of St Matthew-in-the-City, Auckland, New Zealand.
The annotated Covenant

We present the full text of the Anglican Covenant, with marginal notes compiled after consulting a range of opinion among a small group of informed contributors.

Introduction to the Covenant Text

"This life is revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father, and was revealed to us — we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have communion with us; and truly our communion is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. These things we write so that our joy may be complete." (1 John 1.2-4)

1. God has called us into communion in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1.9). This communion has been "revealed to us" by the Son as being the very divine life of God the Trinity. What is the life revealed to us? St John makes it clear that the communion of life in the Church participates in the communion which is the divine life itself, the life of the Trinity. This life is not a reality remote from us, but one that has been "seen and testified to" by the apostles (John 20.30) and "lived out" in the Church we share in the divine life" (1). This life of the One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, shapes and displays itself through the very existence and ordering of the Churches. We humbly recognise that this calling and gift of communion entails responsibilities for our common life before God as we seek, through grace, to be faithful in our service of God's purposes for the world. Joined in one universal Church, which is Christ's Body, spread throughout the earth, we serve his gospel even as we are enabled to be made one in him as the dividing walls of human sin and estrangement (Ephesians 2.12-22).

2. Our divine calling into communion is established in God's purposes for the whole of creation (Ephesians 1.10, 3.9f). It is extended to all humankind, so that, in our sharing of God's life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God might restore in us the divine image. Through time, according to the Scriptures, God has furthered this calling through covenants made with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David. The prophet Jeremiah looked "foreword to a new covenant not written on tablets of stone but upon the heart (Jeremiah 31, 31-34)." In God's Son, Christ Jesus, a new covenant is given us, established in his "blood . . . poured out for the many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26.28), securing through his resurrection from the dead (Ephesians 1.19-23), and sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts (Romans 5.5). Jesus thus initiates this covenant of death to sin and of new life in Christ which we are baptised, and empowered to share God's communion in Christ with all people, to the ends of the earth and of creation.

3. We humbly recognise that this calling and gift of communion entails responsibilities for our common life before God as we seek, through grace, to be faithful in our service of God's purposes for the world. Joined in one universal Church, which is Christ's Body, spread throughout the earth, we serve his gospel even as we are enabled to be made one in him as the dividing walls of human sin and estrangement (Ephesians 2.12-22). The forms of this life in the Church, caught up in the mystery of divine communion, reveal to the hostile and divisive power of the world the "majesty, splendour, wonder, beauty and challenge of maintaining communion in this family of Churches, and the need for mutual commitment and discipline in witness to God's promise in a world and time of instability, conflict, and fragmentation. Therefore, we covenant together as Churches of this Anglican Communion to be faithful to God's promises through the historic faith we confess, our common worship, our participation in God's mission, and the way we live together."

4. "Therefore", in the final sentence, works only if the principle of the Covenant is already agreed.

"We covenant together" is not happy English (neither is "growing our Communion" in the final sentence, works only if the principle of the Covenant is already agreed).

Our common inheritance and distinctive witness are indeed important, but so is coming to terms with the theological aspects, historical and contemporary witness of what we now share.

5. In no case is the word "canon" used in the Declaration of the new Anglican Covenant. There is no "quintessence" of Anglican life, so there is no "canon" to which the Church may be "bound". The purpose of the new Covenant text is to provide a logical and clear statement of Anglican belief, not to express "a canon of Anglican Doctrine."

"What does "coherent" mean?" Internally consistent? Comprehensible? Monolithic? It is an elastic word that is used in the following sense: "A text or tradition is coherent in the sense of being consistent, logically connected, and reasonable."

6. "Yes, mission is the priority — but just as its expression has changed over time, so it will be expressed differently in the diversity of global culture."

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If no change to the character of Anglicanism, why has there been such an effort to redefine the church's "coherence"? "Bonds of affection" are replaced by covenanted bonds. This is a significant change.

At the heart of this whole process is what our distinctive Anglican Way says about holding together unity and diversity: although it is entirely thoughtful, upholding historical factors such as establishment and Empire, it has resulted in something that, unlike other families of Churches, is neither monolithic nor merely associational.

mission is carried out in shared responsibility and stewardship of resources, and in interdependence among ourselves and with the wider Church.

8. Our prayer is that God will redeem our struggles and weaknesses, renew and enrich our common life and use the Anglican Communion to witness effectively in all the world, working with all people of good will, to the new life and hope found in Christ Jesus.

The Anglican Communion Covenant

Preamble

We, as Churches of the Anglican Communion, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, solemnly covenant together in these following affirmations and commitments. As people of God, drawn from “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9), we do this in order to proclaim more effectively in our different contexts the grace of God revealed in the Gospel, to offer God’s love in responding to the needs of the world, to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and together with all God’s people to attain the full stature of Christ (Ephesians 4:13).

Section One

Our Inheritance of Faith

1.1 Each Church affirms:

(1.1.1) its communion in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

(1.1.2) the catholic and apostolic faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation. (The historic formularies of the Church of England) [3], forged in the context of the European Reformation and acknowledged and appropriated in various ways in the Anglican Communion, bear authentic witness to the faith, (1.1.3) the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as containing all things necessary for salvation and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith [4].

(1.1.4) the Apostles’ Creed, as the baptismal symbol, and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith [5].

(1.1.5) the two sacraments ordained by Christ himself — Baptism and the Supper of the Lord — ministered with the unifying use of Christ’s words of institution, and the Communion, ordained by him [6].

(1.1.6) the historic episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of his Church [7].

(1.1.7) the shared patterns of our common prayer and liturgy which form, sustain and nourish our worship of God and our faith and life together.

(1.1.8) its participation in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God, and that this mission is shared with other Churches and traditions beyond this Covenant.

1.2 In living out this inheritance of faith together in varying contexts, each Church, reliant on the Holy Spirit, commits itself:

(1.2.1) to teach and act in continuity and consonance with Scripture and the catholic and apostolic faith, order, and tradition, as received by the Churches of the Anglican Communion, mindful of the common councils of the Communion and our ecumenical agreements.

(1.2.2) to uphold and proclaim a pattern of Christian theological and moral reasoning and discipline that is rooted in and answerable to the teaching of Holy Scripture and the catholic tradition.

(1.2.3) to witness, in this reasoning, to the renewal of humanity and the whole created order through the death and resurrection of Christ, and to reflect the holiness that in consequence God gives to, and requires from, his people.

(1.2.4) to hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Scriptures in our different contexts, informed by the attentive and communal reading of and costly witness to — the Scriptures by all the faithful, by the teaching of bishops and synods, and by the results of rigorous study by lay and ordained scholars.

(1.2.5) to ensure that biblical texts are received, read and interpreted faithfully, respect fully, and authentically, and with the expectation that Scripture continues to illuminate and transform the Church and its members, and through them, individuals, cultures and societies.

(1.2.6) to encourage and be open to prophetic and faithful leadership in ministry and mission so as to enable God’s people to respond in courageous witness to the power of the gospel in the world.

The Covenant recognises that there is a wide variety of contexts in global Anglicanism. That context will often set the agenda for the Gospel, and interrogate the tradition in new and wondrous ways.

Section Two

The Path to Covenant

We believe that the establishment of the Anglican Covenant is a deliberate and courageous step towards the greater faithfulness and unity of the Church. This Covenant is intended to: (1) to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and together with all God’s people to attain the full stature of Christ; (2) to provide a clear statement of the Christian faith and practice; (3) to give a clear statement of the nature of the Church’s unity; (4) to provide a means of making connections between Churches, provinces, and provinces of provinces; (5) to provide a process for responding to the needs of the Church in light of the breadth of its unity; (6) to be a signpost of what the Church values; and (7) to be an instrument for a new and different sort of unity.

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The Covenant recognises that there is a wide variety of contexts in global Anglicanism. That context will often set the agenda for the Gospel, and interrogate the tradition in new and wondrous ways.
2.1.4 The Anglican Communion is centred on the revelation of God in Christ; not on Canterbury, but there has been a historical process that created Anglicanism and the Communion. The Communion still needs to understand its mission foundations and history in order to understand its vocation as a Communion of Churches in mission.

Section Two:
The Life We Share with Others: Our Anglican Vocation

2.1 Each Church affirms:

2.1.1 communion as a gift of God given so that God’s people from east and west, north and south, may together declare their allegiance to the Lord and be both a sign of God’s reign in the Holy Spirit and the first fruits in the world of God’s redemption in Christ.

2.1.2 in gratitude for God’s gracious provision extended to us through the ages: our origins in the Church of the apostles; the ancient common traditions; the rich history of the Church in Britain and Ireland reshapedit by the Reformation, and our growth into a global communion through the expanding missionary work of the Church; our ongoing reformation by the Holy Spirit through the gift and sacrificial witness of Anglicans from around the world; and our summations into a more fully developed communion life.

2.1.3 in humility our call to constant repentance: for our failures in exercising patience and charity and in recognising Christ in one another; our misuse of God’s gracious gifts; our failure to heed God’s call to serve; and our exploitation one of another.

2.1.4 the imperative of God’s mission into which the Communion is called, a vocation and blessing in which each Church is joined with others in Christ in the work of establishing God’s reign. As the Communion continues to develop into a worldwide family of interdependent churches, we embrace challenges and opportunities for mission at local, regional, and international levels. In this, we cherish our mission heritage as offering Anglicans distinctive opportunities for mission collaboration.

2.1.5 that our common mission is a mission shared with other Churches and traditions beyond this Covenant. We embrace opportunities for the discovery of the life of the whole globe, and for reconciliation and shared mission with the Church throughout the world. We affirm the ecumenical vocation of Anglicanism to the full visible unity of the Church in accordance with Christ’s prayer that “all may be one.” It is with all the saints in every place and time that we will comprehend the fuller dimensions of Christ’s redemptive and immeasurable love.

2.2 In recognition of these affirmations, each Church, reliant on the Holy Spirit, commits itself:

2.2.1 to answer God’s call to undertake evangelisation and to share in the healing and reconciling mission “for our blessed but broken, hurting world” (8), and, with mutual accountability, to share our God-given spiritual and material resources in this task.

2.2.2 to undertake in this mission, which is the mission of God in Christ (9):

2.2.2.a “to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God” and to bring all to repentance and faith;

2.2.2.b “to teach, baptise and nurture new believers”, making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28.19) through the quickening power of the Holy Spirit (10) and drawing them into the one Body of Christ whose faith, calling and hope are one in the Lord (Ephesians 4.4-6);

2.2.2.c “to respond to human need by loving service”, disclosing God’s reign through humble ministry to those most needy (Mark 10.42-45; Matthew 18.4; 25.31-45);

2.2.2.d “to seek to transform unjust structures of society” as the Church stands vigilantly with Christ proclaiming both judgement and salvation to the nations of the world (11), and manifesting through our actions on behalf of God’s righteousness the Spirit’s transfiguring power (12);

2.2.2.e “to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth” as essential aspects of our mission in communion (13);

2.2.3 to engage in this mission with humility and an openness to our own ongoing conversion in the face of our unfaithfulness and failings in witness,

2.2.4 to revive and renew structures for mission which will awaken and challenge the whole people of God to work, pray and give for the spread of the gospel.

2.2.5 to order its mission in the joyful and reverent worship of God, thankful that in our eucharistic communion “Christ is the source and groundwork (the “A” canons)

2.1.6 The wider ecumenical scene, there is an interesting difference between the documents which could be about trying to keep certain people in by pushing others out, is something that both conservatives and liberals need to learn.

2.1.7 It is indeed true that the canons of the Church of England put a high premium on communion. The canon “Of schisms” comes among those setting out the groundwork (the “A” canons)

2.2.2 The dispute-settling process proposed by the Covenant does not set the world an example of “transforming unjust structures”, since it fails to meet the standards of natural justice in its own procedures.

2.1.8 to pursue a common pilgrimage with the whole Body of Christ continually to discern the fulness of truth into which the Spirit leads us, that peoples from all nations may be set free to receive new and abundant life in the Lord Jesus Christ.
goal of the unity of the Church and of the renewal of human community” [14].

Section Three
Our Unity and Common Life

3.1 Each Church affirms:

3.1.1 that by our participation in Baptism and Eucharist, we are incorporated into the one body of the Church of Jesus Christ, and called by Christ to pursue all things that make for peace and build up our common life.

3.1.2 its resolve to live in a Communion of Churches. Each Church, with its bishops in synod, orders and regulates its own affairs and its local responsibility for mission through its own system of government and law and is therefore described as living in communion with autonomy and accountability” [15]. Trusting in the Holy Spirit, who calls and enables us to dwell in a shared life of common worship and prayer for one another, in mutual affection, commitment and service, we seek to affirm our common life through those Instruments of Communion by which our Churches are enabled to be confirmed together to the mind of Christ. Churches of the Anglican Communion are bound together “not by a central legislative and executive authority, but by mutual loyalty sustained through the common counsel of the bishops in conference” [16] and of the other instruments of Communion.

3.1.3 the central role of bishops as guardians and teachers of faith, as leaders in mission, and as a visible sign of unity, representing the universal Church to the local, and the local Church to the universal, and the local Churches to one another. This ministry is exercised personally, collegially and within and for the eucharistic community. We receive and maintain the historic threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, ordained for service in the Church of God, as they call all the baptised into the mission of Christ.

3.1.4 the importance of instruments in the Anglican Communion to assist in the discernment, articulation and exercise of our shared faith and common life and mission. The life of communion includes an ongoing engagement with the diverse expressions of apostolic authority, from synods and episcopal councils to local witness, in a way which continually interprets and articulates the common faith of the Church’s members (consensus fidelium). In addition to the many and varied links which sustain our life together, we acknowledge four particular Instruments at the level of the Anglican Communion which express this co-operative service in the life of communion:

I. We accord the Archbishop of Canterbury, as the bishop of the See of Canterbury with which Anglicans have historically been in communion, a primacy of honour and respect among the college of bishops in the Anglican Communion as first among equals (primus inter pares). As a focus and means of unity, the Archbishop gathers and works with the Lambeth Conference and Primates’ Meeting, and presides in the Anglican Consultative Council.

II. The Lambeth Conference expresses episcopal collegiality worldwide, and brings together the bishops for common worship, counsel, consultation and encouragement in their ministry of guarding the faith and unity of the Communion and equipping the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4.12) and mission.

III. The Anglican Consultative Council is comprised of lay, clerical and episcopal representatives from our Churches [17]. It facilitates the co-operative work of the Churches of the Anglican Communion, co-ordinates aspects of international Anglican ecumenical and mission work, calls the Churches into mutual responsibility and interdependence, and advises on developing provincial structures [18].

IV. The Primates’ Meeting is convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury for mutual support, prayer and counsel. The authority that Primates bring to the meeting arises from their own positions as the senior bishops of their Provinces, and the fact that they are in conversation with their own Houses of Bishops and located within their own synodal structures [19]. In the Primates’ Meeting, the Primates and Moderators are called to work as representatives of their Provinces in collaboration with one another in mission and in doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters that have Communion-wide implications.

It is the responsibility of each Instrument to consult with, respond to, and support each other Instrument of the Communion [20]. Each Instrument may initiate and convene a process of discernment and a direction for the Communion and its Churches.

3.2 Acknowledging our interdependent life, each Church, reliant on the Holy Spirit, commits itself:

3.2.1 to have regard for the common good of the Communion in the exercise of its autonomy, to support the work of the Instruments of Communion with the spiritual and material resources available to it, and to receive their work with a readiness to undertake reflection upon their counsels, and to endeavour to accommodate their recommendations.

Footnote 18 has a syntax error. Either the “if” ought not to be there, or “are” should read “as.” Further evidence of haste in preparation: Not to mention inconsistency of numbering subsections
3.2.2 To respect the constitutional autonomy of all of the Churches of the Anglican Communion upholding our mutual responsibility and interdependence in the Body of Christ [21], and the responsibility of each to the Communion as a whole [22].

3.2.3 To spend time with openness and patience in matters of theological debate and reflection, to listen, pray and study with one another in order to discern the will of God. Such prayer, study and debate is an essential feature of the life of the Church as it seeks to be led by the Spirit into all truth and to proclaim the gospel truth in each generation. Some issues, which are perceived as controversial or new when they arise, may well evoke a deeper understanding of the implications of God’s revelation in us; others may prove to be distractions or even obstacles to the faith. All such matters therefore need to be tested by shared discernment in the life of the Church.

3.2.4 To seek a shared mind with other Churches, through the Communion’s councils, about matters of common concern, in a way consistent with the Scriptures, the common standards of faith, and the canon laws of our churches. Each Church will undertake wide consultation with the other Churches of the Anglican Communion and with the Instruments and Commissions of the Communion. 

3.2.5 To act with diligence, care and caution in respect of any action which may provoke controversy, which by its intensity, substance or extent could threaten the unity of the Communion and the effectiveness or credibility of its mission.

3.2.6 In situations of conflict, to participate in mediated conversations, which involve face to face meetings, agreed parameters and a willingness to see such processes through.

3.2.7 To have in mind that our bonds of affection and the love of Christ compel us always to uphold the highest degree of communion possible.

Section Four
Our Covenanted Life Together

Each Church affirms the following principles and procedures, and, reliant on the Holy Spirit, commits itself to their implementation: 4.1 Adoption of the Covenant

4.1.1 Each Church adopting this Covenant affirms that it enters into the Covenant as a commitment to relationship in submission to God. Each Church freely offers this commitment to other Churches, that we may live more fully into the ecclesial communion and interdependence which is foundational to the Churches of the Anglican Communion. The Anglican Communion is a fellowship, a fellowship in the one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, of national or regional Churches, in which each recognises in the others the bonds of a common loyalty to Christ expressed through a common faith and order, a shared inheritance in worship, life and mission, and a readiness to live in an interdependent life.

4.1.2 In adopting the Covenant for itself, each Church recognises in the preceding sections a statement of faith, mission and interdependence of life and is consistent with its own life and with the doctrine and practice of the Christian faith as it has received them. It recognises these elements as foundational for the life of the Anglican Communion and therefore for the relationships among the covenanting Churches.

4.1.3 Such mutual commitment does not represent submission to any external ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Nothing in this Covenant of itself shall be deemed to alter any provision of the Constitution and Canons of any Church of the Communion, or to limit its autonomy of governance. The Covenant does not grant to any one Church or any agency of the Communion control or direction over any Church of the Anglican Communion.

4.1.4 Every Church of the Anglican Communion, as recognised in accordance with the Constitution of the Anglican Consultative Council, is invited to enter into this Covenant according to its own constitutional procedures.

4.1.5 The Instruments of Communion may invite other Churches to adopt the Covenant using the same procedures as set out by the Anglican Consultative Council for the amendment of its schedule of membership. Adoption of this Covenant does not confer any right of recognition by, or membership of, the Instruments of Communion, which shall be determined by those Instruments themselves.

4.1.6 This Covenant becomes active for a Church when that Church adopts the Covenant through the procedures of its own Constitution and Canons.

4.2 The Maintenance of the Covenant and Dispute Resolution

4.2.1 The Covenant operates to express the common commitments and mutual accountability which hold each Church in the relationship of communion one with another. Recognition of, and fidelity to, this Covenant, enable mutual recognition and communion. Participation in the Covenant implies a recognition by each Church of those elements which must be maintained in its own life and for which it is accountable to the Churches with which it is in Communion in order to sustain the relationship expressed in this Covenant.

4.2.2 The Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion, responsible to the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates’ Meeting, shall monitor the functioning of the Covenant in the life of the

4.2.3 It is at this point that the document approaches the “elephant in the room”: the actions of the Episcopal Church in the United States towards gay and lesbian people. In theory the issue could also be discrimination against women, or the persecution of gay people in other parts of the Communion, but the defining aspect here is things considered to be “controversial or new” (3.3.3). We might remember that the abolition of slavery used to come into this category.

3.2.5 This seems well put, in light of biblical and theological teaching down the ages on the sin of scandal.

3.2.7 A reference to 2 Corinthians 5:14.

4.1 It is clear how Provinces may adopt the Covenant, but not the continuing status within the Communion of those Churches that decline to do so.

4.1.1 “Interdependence” is that act actually able to live with “autonomy”.

4.1.2 Surely a significant phrase — “consistent with”, not in accordance with, or in line with.

4.1.5 Why would any Church currently outside the Anglican Communion wish to adopt the Covenant, except as part of actually applying to join the Communion? In which case, what is the point of this paragraph?

4.2.1 What is the work here of the word “enable”? It seems odd, given that recognition and communion exist without the Covenant.

4.4.3 As to those currently outside the Communion, the provision in 4.1.5, raises all kinds of questions. As a some supposed, this could mean inviting the new alternative Anglican church in North America (ACNA) to adopt the Covenant, what status — notwithstanding what it says here about other membership implications — would follow for that Church in contrast with others which have refused such adoption?

4.4.2 Here is where the Covenant itself becomes “new and controversial for the first time. For there are to be new requirements that, if not met, will result in a decision by a central body, the Standing Committee (4.2.2), on “relational consequences” (4.2.7). For some, no body such as this should have such power in our kind of Communion; while for others, such a synodal body would usurp the role of the Primates.

3.2.7 The moral and spiritual force of the Covenant comes here, with regard to the bonds of affection and upholding the highest degree of communion possible; but it is not clear whether this applies only to those accused of being “controversial or new”, or some might say to those who want to employ what is now in Section 4.

4.3 There is a long way to go in terms of working out how we relate truth and love, and express that in terms of structures, and doctrinal and ethical discipline. Section 4 does not now bear the weight of the expectations it did, and this does need to be recognised by those who want more and those for whom this is all too much.

4.4.1 “Freely” — this is fanciful, given the envisaged sense of “sign up to this or else” which will follow such a “procedure”, and given that those who choose to dissociate themselves from the Covenant will “trigger the provisions set out in section 4.2”.

What will this achieve? Churches in different cultures are bound to go in different ways as the process of indigenisation proceeds. The basic need is to accept processes of discernment. There is a need to trust and accept what other Churches are doing.

4.4.3 This denies what it is seeking to do for it proposes submission to a higher authority. We need a much deeper understanding of a dispersed authority: not a centralised one, but one that is based on mutual acceptance.

This is here to make sure no one can argue that the Covenant is about centralisation.
4.2.3 When questions arise relating to the meaning of the Covenant, or about the compatibility of an action by a covenanting Church with the Covenant, it is the duty of each covenanting Church to seek to live out the commitments of section 3.2. Such questions may be raised by a Church itself, another covenanting Church or the Instruments of Communion.

4.2.4 Where a shared mind has not been reached, the matter shall be referred to the Standing Committee. The Standing Committee shall make every effort to facilitate agreement, and may take advice from such bodies as it deems appropriate to determine a view on the nature of the matter at question and those relational consequences which may result. Where appropriate, the Standing Committee shall refer the question to both the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates’ Meeting for advice.

4.2.5 The Standing Committee may request a Church to defer a controversial action. If a Church declines to defer such action, the Standing Committee may exercise a Judicial Council of Communion relational consequences which may specify a provisional limitation of participation in, or suspension from, that Instrument until the completion of the process set out below.

4.2.6 On the basis of advice received from the Anglican Consultative Council and the Primates’ Meeting, the Standing Committee may make a declaration that an action or decision is or would be “incompatible with the Covenant”.

4.2.7 On the basis of the advice received, the Standing Committee shall make recommendations as to relational consequences which flow from an action incompatible with the Covenant. These recommendations may be addressed to the Churches of the Anglican Communion or to the Instruments of the Communion and add the extent to which the decision of any covenanting Church impairs or limits the communion between that Church and the other Churches of the Communion, and the practical consequences of such impairment or limitation. Each Church or each Instrument shall determine whether or not to accept such recommendations.

4.2.8 Participation in the decision-making of the Standing Committee or of the Instruments of Communion in respect to section 4.2 shall be limited to those members of the Instruments of Communion who are representatives of those Churches who have adopted the Covenant, or who are still in the process of adoption.

4.2.9 Each Church undertakes to put into place such mechanisms, agencies or institutions, consistent with its own Constitution and Canons, as can undertake to oversee the maintenance of the affirmations and commitments of the Covenant in the life of that Church, and to relate to the Instruments of Communion on matters pertinent to the Covenant.

4.3 Withdrawing from the Covenant

4.3.1 Any covenanting Church may decide to withdraw from the Covenant. Although such withdrawal does not imply an automatic withdrawal from the Instruments of Communion or a repudiation of its Anglican character, it may raise a question relating to the meaning of the Covenant, and of compatibility with the principles incorporated within it, and trigger the provisions set out in section 4.2 above.

4.4 The Covenant Text and its amendment

4.4.1 The Covenant consists of the text set out in this document in the Preamble, Sections One to Four and the Declaration. The Introduction to the Covenant text, which shall always be annexed to the Covenant text, is not part of the Covenant, but shall be accorded authority in understanding the purpose of the Covenant.

4.4.2 Any covenanting Church or Instrument of Communion may submit a proposal to amend the Instruments to the Instruments of Communion through the Standing Committee. The Standing Committee shall send the proposal to the Anglican Consultative Council, the Primates’ Meeting, the covenanting Churches and any other body as it may consider appropriate for advice. The Standing Committee shall make a recommendation on the proposal in the light of advice offered, and submit the proposal with any revisions to the covenanting Churches. The amendment is operative when ratified by three-quarters of such Churches. The Standing Committee shall adopt a procedure for promulgation of the amendment.

Our Declaration

With joy and with firm resolve, we declare our Churches to be partakers in this Anglican Communion Covenant, offering ourselves for fruitful service and binding ourselves more closely in the truth and love of Christ, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory for ever, Amen.

“Now may the God of Peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Hebrews 13.20, 21)

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