

ANGLICAN COMMUNION COVENANT

Perran Gay – General Synod

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Mr Chairman, speaking against things is not something I enjoy doing very much. I like to celebrate all that is positive and good, and I usually encourage other people to do the same. And I love the Anglican Communion – I love its diversity; I love the way in which its member churches can share their particular insights with one another; I love, in particular, the way in which it has helped the churches of the West listen to and learn from the largely black churches of Africa where Christianity is growing at such an amazing rate. I am a great fan of the Anglican Communion as I have known it – a family that came into being in a rather chaotic and unplanned way, and largely because of former colonial conquests, but grew and developed into a fellowship of churches sharing a common ancestry, and with a common way of doing theology, as they each interpreted the universal truths of the Christian faith in their own particular context.

And that is what is under threat today. In an attempt to hold differing views together, and to try to prevent members from leaving the family table in a huff, we are in danger of replacing those precious things we share — a common history, a universal respect for the position and role of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and a shared way of doing contextual theology — we are to replace these with a much more authoritarian structure that will have the power to exclude members from the family table if they refuse to go with the majority view on contentious points of doctrine, and not let them return until they change their mind. Don't get misled by Sections 1 to 3 of the Covenant: although there are some big questions to be asked about some of the sweeping statements made in those sections, we don't have time to deal with them now, and to be fair, it would be very difficult to disagree with a lot of what is in Sections 1-3, particularly the wonderful material about Mission.

But when we turn the page to Section 4 we find ourselves in a very different world — a world where the 'bonds of affection' are to be made 'forceful' (can you really force someone to love you?), a world where churches who refuse to tow the line are subject to 'relational consequences' which may mean suspension or expulsion from the institutions of the Communion. This is far from the Biblical idea of a Covenant — an agreement undertaken in joy and in an atmosphere of trust such as in baptism or in marriage. This proposed so-called covenant is advanced in an atmosphere of anger, fear and distrust, and with the threat of dire consequences if it is not adopted. Worse than that, Section 4 makes it all too easy for any church to 'ask questions' about the actions of another, which may then be subjected to these unspecified 'relational consequences'. There is no sure measure of what behaviour is likely to be acceptable, no checks provided against unreasonable complaints, and no guarantee that 'consequences' (Covenant speak for punishments) meted out will be commensurate with the alleged offence.

Another major effect of the Covenant would be to stop churches from moving forward in prophetic ways as guided by the Spirit within their own context. Instead, in the cause of Communion unity, we will have to wait for almost everyone to agree before we can push forwards. At present, because of the current untidy arrangements, we have churches who have

had women bishops for many years, others in the process of debating that issue, and others who will continue absolutely to oppose this development for many years to come. If the arrangements of the proposed Covenant had been in place, I wonder whether we would yet have moved towards having women bishops at all. The Covenant would inevitably be a force for conservatism and preserving the status quo, whereas the Anglican Communion works at its best when conservative and liberal are in proper dialogue around one table.

Dreadful though all of this is, it might almost be worth putting up with it if there were any real indication that the covenant would work. But of course it won't: although it is offered as a mechanism to achieve unity, its immediate effect is to create divisions. Churches that cannot or will not accept the Covenant automatically become second-class members of the Communion. The Orwellian implications of Section 4 will likely further distinguish between full and 'less-than-full' members of the Communion, making it harder to have the kind of discussions that family members ought to have together. And as we know, the more conservative Anglican churches who most want this kind of arrangement in place, who subscribe to a notion of a clear Anglican doctrinal identity that has never existed, have already started to boycott Anglican Communion affairs in any case, staying away from the Lambeth Conference, setting up a rival bishops' meeting and working towards an alternative global fellowship. Even if adopted, the Covenant is set to fail.

There are a couple of constitutional issues too that I should briefly mention. The first concerns the process we are using within the Church of England to consider the proposed Covenant. Adoption is to be not by Measure, subject to full synodical and parliamentary scrutiny, but by Act of Synod, giving the Covenant binding moral rather than legal authority. Because it is an Act of Synod rather than a Measure, it requires only a simple majority at General Synod, rather than the two-thirds requirement in each house that the most significant business requires. An important matter such as the Ordination of Women as Bishops is subject to that full process. The Covenant, with even more far-reaching implications for how we agree our doctrine, may just go through almost on the nod. This cannot be right.

The other constitutional issue concerns our very nature as a national church. The Thirty-Nine Articles are very clear about the power of the Church of England to determine its own doctrine, and the relationship between Synod and Parliament safeguards that. Is it proper, I wonder, under the British Constitution for the Church of England to be bound by the doctrinal decisions of an international body? I note in Section 1 of the Covenant that we commit ourselves to 'teach the catholic faith, order and tradition, as received **by the Churches of the Anglican Communion**' I signed up to teaching the Christian faith 'as the Church of England has received it' and I think the change of emphasis is just a little worrying.

Time prevents me from saying much about how unrepresentative the instruments of communion are of the whole people of God. We are rightly episcopally led, but I can see little sign of the voices of clergy and lay people operating here in a church that claims to be synodically governed. Of the four instruments, only one contains any provision for clergy or lay people at all, and on the worryingly powerful Standing Committee there are currently four lay people and just two priests, outnumbered by the eight episcopal members. And I also worry about the ecumenical dimension of the proposed covenant, and how in strengthening the power of the Anglican Communion we could be tying our hands in our dealings with Methodists in Britain, as well as our partners in Europe under the Meissen Declaration and the Porvoo Agreement. Our companion Swedish diocese of Strängnäs matters to me at least

as much as San Francisco or the Seychelles (although I'd rather go on holiday to those places!)

I want to end as I began by returning to the fundamental point of what it is that I most admire about the Anglican Communion and how that very thing is being threatened by the Covenant that purports to be holding it together. I believe in universal Christian truth, in the inspiration and guidance of Scripture as the primary norm for doctrine, in the unique work of God in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But what that means for me in terms of spirituality, and ethics, and political engagement, and most of what it is to be a Christian, has to be worked out in the context where I live. If I lived in West Africa my views on same-sex relationships, for example, (for we do need to name the elephant in the room) would likely be very different than they are for me as a member of the Church of England. If I lived in San Francisco, they would be different again. All are authentic ways of being an Anglican Christian, all need to be heard at the family table. If people want to walk away from the table, they need to be free to do so. But the proposed covenant would exclude them when they want to belong, when they want to speak and listen and contribute to the family discussion. It is this distinctive gift of the Anglican churches to the wider Christian family that is most threatened by this covenant, and if you really care about the Anglican Communion, I urge you to reject the covenant proposals. You will not be alone: even in these early days of the reception process, the Bishops in the Philippines have rejected it: in Australia, Evangelical Sydney and Liberal Catholic Newcastle next door to it have both rejected it; in New Zealand, two Maori dioceses, together with Auckland, Waiapu and Dunedin have rejected it; to say nothing of its reception in the United States where the Executive Council have urged the next General Convention to reject it too. I urge the Diocese of Truro to follow suit and vote clearly and overwhelmingly against the motion.