

The Radio 4 Anglican Covenant Debate

On November 7, 2010, Edward Stourton interviewed the Revd. Dr. Lesley Fellows and the Rt. Rev. Gregory Cameron on the BBC Radio 4 program "Sunday." The topic of the discussion was the Anglican Covenant now before churches of the Anglican Communion. The Revd. Dr. Fellows serves as moderator of the international No Anglican Covenant Coalition and is the group's convenor for the Church of England. Bishop Cameron, who is Bishop of St. Asaph in Wales, was secretary of the Covenant Design Group charged with drawing up the Anglican Covenant. What follows is a summary of the discussion.

After Edward Stourton introduced the topic and the guests, Bishop Gregory Cameron explained that the Covenant was intended to be a summary of Anglican faith drawn up to unite Anglicans.

Stourton asked, "But, to be clear, it is about controlling what different bits of the church believe really, isn't it, particularly in the light of the fact that it comes from the row over the ordination of a gay Bishop in the United States?"

Cameron replied, "Well, it depends what you mean by the word 'control.'" He insisted that the Covenant is not about giving one body control over the Communion.

To this, the Revd. Dr. Lesley Fellows replied that she didn't think the Covenant was Anglican at all, explaining that the Anglican way is to worship together and allow differences of opinion while seeking the Spirit together. She expressed scepticism that the Covenant could work and called it a "document of schism." Fellows justified the claim by Inclusive Church and Modern Church in a recent advertisement in *Church Times* that the Covenant represents revolutionary change by pointing out that discernment by synod is to be replaced by decisions of "a group of 15 people."

Cameron dismissed the remark about 15 people, insisting that churches will continue making their own decisions and that the Communion cannot be governed from the centre. "But," he said, "when one church acts in a way which can cause offence or division to other churches, then the Communion has to be able to have a way to express what it feels is going on."

The moderator asked if the ongoing conflict wasn't really about the ordination of a gay bishop. Cameron answered that Gene Robinson's selection created distrust and anxiety that must be dispelled. Fellows, however, answered that the issue is really whether all Anglicans have to believe the same thing.

Stourton challenged Cameron on his having characterized his opponents as "an ecclesiastical BNP [the far-right jingoistic British National Party]." Cameron said that he had been shocked by the *Church Times* advertisement that raised the spectre of foreign control of the Church of England, which seemed like right-wing rhetoric.

Fellows insisted that worries about external control were not exaggerated. The concern for differences, she explained, has led to a desire for centralised control. The relational consequences that the Covenant allows to be imposed on a church to enforce discipline, she explained, "sounds to me punitive."

Stourton suggested that the heated debate over the Covenant looked bad to outsiders. Fellows replied that debate is good. When pressed, she offered that she and the bishop have more in common than not, and that they simply disagree on how to proceed.

Cameron agreed that the debate has been heated and complained that people were not arguing on the basis of the Covenant text but were instead misrepresenting it. The *Church Times* advert, he said was trying to "sell a scare story." When Stourton suggested that the debate might get even more heated in the General Synod, Cameron begged off, saying that his Church in Wales didn't have the same divisions as the Church of England.

When asked her opinion, Fellows replied that many have felt powerless, but that she has received many messages supporting a real debate on the Covenant. "It looks like it's going to be a lively debate," she said.

— *The No Anglican Covenant Coalition, 13 November 2010*