

A Short Introduction to the Anglican Covenant

Churches of the Anglican Communion are being asked to adopt the so-called Anglican Covenant (or Anglican Communion Covenant). To date, few churches have done so, but no church has actually rejected the controversial pact. What is the Covenant? How did it come to be? And will it strengthen the Anglican Communion or destroy it?

The Covenant is a proposed agreement—some would say a contract—among Communion churches. It is a nine-page document developed over a period of more than three years by an international committee, with feedback from various Anglican bodies and churches. It consists of a brief Preamble, four substantive Sections, and a concluding Declaration. An Introduction is prefixed to the Covenant that is declared not to be a part of it but that nonetheless is required to be printed with it. A church does not have to adopt the Covenant to remain in the Anglican Communion, but failure to do so will consign it to a “second tier,” whose size and influence has yet to be determined.

Development of the Covenant resulted primarily from the growing discomfort of conservative Evangelicals in the Communion with “innovations” in Anglican churches—acceptance of divorce; ordination of women, gays, and lesbians; non-literal interpretation of Scripture; and, especially, the blessing of same-sex unions and the consecration of partnered gay bishops. Leading the disaffected were dissidents in The Episcopal Church in the U.S., who found allies in African and Asian churches, particularly in those countries where the founding influence was that of English Evangelicals. The dissidents settled on rejection of homosexual activity as their defining issue and, at the 1998 Lambeth Conference, passed Resolution I.10, which declared “homosexual practice … incompatible with Scripture.” Contrary to 130 years of Lambeth Conference tradition, Resolution I.10 has been touted as “the teaching of the Communion.”

In October 2003, the radical conservatives got their chance to strike back against liberalizing tendencies in Anglicanism when Rowan Williams, less than a year into his tenure as Archbishop of Canterbury, called an emergency meeting of the Communion’s primates (i.e., chief bishops) in the wake of The Episcopal Church’s decision to consecrate a partnered gay bishop and the approval of a liturgy for blessing same-sex unions by the Diocese of New Westminster in the Anglican Church of Canada. The primates expressed alarm at the recent developments and called for the Archbishop of Canterbury to establish a commission to deliver, within a year, a report that would address the maintenance of communion among Anglican churches.

In October 2004, the Windsor Report addressed that issue. Though never officially adopted by any Anglican body, the report has repeatedly been characterized as offering “the only way forward.” It recommended “the adoption by the churches of the Communion of a common Anglican Covenant which would make explicit and forceful the loyalty and bonds of affection which govern the relationships between the churches of the Communion.” Williams appointed a Covenant Design Group nearly two years later and put a prominent dissident primate in charge of it. By December 2009, the 38 churches of the Communion were being asked to adopt the “final text” of a Covenant.

Whereas the Anglican Communion traditionally has been a fellowship of autonomous churches bound neither by formal agreements nor confessional statements, the Covenant attempts to define the limits of Anglican belief and to establish a disciplinary mechanism to enforce compliance with an Anglican consensus developed through “shared discernment.” Sections 1 and 2 of the Covenant articulate basic Anglican beliefs and goals. Section 3 institutionalizes Communion bodies as “Instruments of Communion” responsible for maintaining order in the Communion, and it commits Communion churches to avoiding unilateral acts that might offend other churches. Section 4 provides a mechanism, albeit a vaguely defined one with no checks and balances, for enforcing that Anglican consensus. It does not speak of punishing wayward churches, but of subjecting them to unspecified “relational consequences.” Yet, disingenuously, the Covenant claims to preserve churches’ autonomy while committing them to “interdependence.”

The strongest advocate for adoption of the Anglican Covenant has been the Archbishop of Canterbury. Ironically, the most conservative Evangelicals have, at least informally, rejected the Covenant as being too weak to impose their form of “biblical Anglicanism” on the Communion. They have advocated an alternative confession of faith, the Jerusalem Declaration, and have formed an organization, the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans, that has the potential to become an alternative to the Anglican Communion.

We believe the Anglican Covenant cannot achieve its goal of assuring Anglican unity. If it is adopted by a majority of Communion churches, it will likely institutionalize and intensify the conflict that has beset the Anglican Communion in recent years. The radical conservatives seem insistent on having their own way, however, and it is unclear that there is any way to keep all 38 churches in the same communion with or without the Covenant. In such circumstances, it seems foolish to adopt an agreement guaranteed to destroy the generous diversity and willingness to be led by the Holy Spirit that have characterized Anglicanism simply to achieve the illusion of unity. Rather than imposing an artificial unity where no consensus exists, Anglicans should acknowledge sincere differences of opinion, allowing them to be expressed and debated within the Communion free from threats of schism or exclusion.

