

Response to the Draft Anglican Covenant
The Rt. Rev Barry L. Beisner, Diocese of Northern California
4 June 2007

(1) Do you think an Anglican Covenant is necessary and/or will help to strengthen the interdependent life of the Anglican Communion?

I don't feel that a Covenant is necessary, but I am aware that there are many who do, and I am fully prepared to commit to one, provided it does in fact "help to strengthen the interdependent life of the Anglican Communion." It is hard to answer this question in the abstract, however; the details of any such Covenant—and much more detail than this Draft provides—must first be considered.

(2) How closely does this view of communion accord with your understanding of the development and vocation of the Anglican Communion?

It is close enough, though I think we do well to remember that the Anglican Communion is an historical accident: the spread of Anglicanism globally and the emergence of the Anglican Communion as we know it was not the result of a comprehensive strategy or clear intention. To acknowledge this in no way contradicts the assertion that this Communion is a gift given to us through the grace of God; it simply recognizes the newness, unevenness, and elements of surprise present in our becoming who we are; it should also incline us to an abiding openness to change, flexibility, and a willingness to experiment. It may be that this Communion is still on its way to become something yet unimagined.

I appreciate this section's reference to mission.

(3) Is this a sufficient rationale for entering into a Covenant?

I believe it is, given its acknowledgment of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, of our common mission, our need for unity, and the recognition that this is intended as a help to a Communion still in the process of becoming, and needing to “grow up together.”

I would hope for a close examination of the choice of Scriptural citations here (and throughout this Draft). It does seem that these particular passages are not altogether consonant with the actual language of the Preamble. At the very least, it begs the question, “Why these, and not others?” Why omit John 15: 1-11, for instance? Implicit also is the question of how Scripture is being used.

(4) Do these six affirmations adequately describe The Episcopal Church’s understanding of “common catholicity, apostolicity, and confession of faith”?

Item #5 seems to give primacy to these particular documents, which does not seem to me to be warranted.

Additionally, I miss any mention of our Baptismal Covenant, which I am accustomed to viewing as essential to our self-understanding.

I also wonder: where is the classic Anglican formula of Scripture, Reason, and Tradition?

(5) The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer (of the Church of England) are not currently authoritative documents for the Episcopal Church. Do you think they should be?

No, I do not. They are to the Episcopal Church as they should be—important historical documents, worthy of study and important for our self-understanding as a Church and as

part of the Anglican Communion. But why now add additional sources of authority in the Episcopal Church, which it has never before needed?

(6) Is each of these commitments clear and understandable with respect to what is being asked of the member churches and are they consistent with statements made by the Episcopal Church in the General Convention? Why or why not?

Yes, except that Items #1 and #3 require further definition and clarification. We are left to wonder, Who defines these moral values? Who determines what constitutes “our best scholarship”? What is the place of the laity in this work of authoritative definition?

(7) Is the mission vision offered here helpful in advancing a common life of the Anglican Communion and does this need to be a part of the Draft Covenant?

Yes. This is the very best part of the Draft Covenant, and expresses some of the best reasons there are to have an Anglican Communion.

(8) Does this section adequately describe your understanding of the history and respective roles of the “Four Instruments of Communion”?

I would like to see more of an explanation of each of these entities, and how this (really very recently emerged) system actually works, making clear how each is constituted, how they inter-relate, to whom each is accountable, etc.

I do wonder, with regard to the expectation of the Primates’ Meeting working in “full collaboration,” how they can collectively function as an instrument of Communion when they individually refuse to receive Holy Communion with/from each other? And why

should a Primate who refuses to respect the authority of our Presiding Bishop and/or General Convention expect to have any authoritative role in the in life of this Church?

(9) Do you think there needs to be an executive or judicial body for resolving disagreements or disputes in the Anglican Communion? If so, do you think it should be the Primates Meeting as recommended by the Draft Covenant?

Not so much for resolving disputes as for negotiating how we stay together and go forward in mission in the presence of the many disputes which will inevitably arise. Again, I find myself wondering, What is the role of the laity in this ministry of governance?

(10) What does the phrase “a common mind about matters of essential concern...” mean to you?

I am not sure, in this context. Does this mean definitive formal statements on doctrine arrived at by some mutually agreed upon method, or something more like an abiding sense of shared values and priorities—arising out of a shared commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, and relationships of trust in Him—and a resulting common vision and mission.

(11) Can you affirm the “fundamental shape” of the Draft Covenant?

Yes, with attention given to matters discussed above.

(12) What do you think are the consequences of signing such a Covenant as proposed in the Draft?

I would expect that there would be an extended time of adjusting to new structures, lines of accountability, etc., but that over time the Communion might be stronger for it. I hope to see more of a discussion about the process for amending the Covenant over time, once we begin living it.

I hope that it will enhance what we value most about being Episcopalians.

I also hope that the ecumenical impact of this Covenant will be positive. (It would be good to hear from our partners what they think of it at the outset.)

(13) Having the Draft Covenant as a whole do you agree with the CDG's assertion that "nothing which is commended in the draft text of the Covenant can be said to be 'new'"?

I disagree. It seems to me that there is much that is new here, and will need careful consideration along the way.

(14) In general, what is your response to the Draft Covenant taken as a whole? What is not-helpful? What is missing? Additional comments?

I have long cherished the Anglican Communion and value the Episcopal Church's participation in it as an important way of helping to keep us from becoming captive to Western materialism/consumerism in general and American triumphalism in particular. When this relationship is at its best, it helps us to get and stay mission-focused, outreach-oriented, evangelistic, and less self-absorbed. It helps us to be more recognizable as Christ's Church, and to be more faithful in response to God's call.

Still, I am not convinced that a Covenant is truly necessary. I understand the desire to give us something stronger than the bonds of affection to hold us together—but if such affection is lacking, if mutual regard is problematic and trust in short supply, will the existence of a formal arrangement—including one with some coercive aspect (or, at the least, the power to censure and exclude) suffice to hold us together under pressure?

That said, I remain open to the idea of a Covenant, and am willing to give it the benefit of the doubt.

I am grateful to the Covenant Design Group for its good work.