

Anglican Covenant

Today we begin our consideration of the Anglican Covenant. Next year, we shall decide whether or not we shall adopt it. This year, we explore it together through Indaba method. Canon Michael Fuller will briefly set out for you something of the content of the Covenant. My task is to set it in context – to explain why it is before us and why we need to consider it carefully.

We are a Communion of independent provinces – diverse in social, cultural and historical settings. But each of the Provinces – the Scottish Episcopal Church is no exception – is both enriched and challenged by its internal diversity. I believe that respect for our internal diversity should lead us to give this issue measured and careful consideration – the use of Indaba is one method of achieving this.

I do not think that it is unreasonable that we should have a Covenant which sets out what it means to be part of the Anglican Communion. In former times, we spoke of bonds of affection which held us together. But times have changed. As a missional world faith, Anglicanism has been extraordinarily successful. So we now hold within our life a rich diversity of peoples and cultures. Against that background of growth, one can argue that bonds of affection can no longer be enough.

But of course it isn't just about response to growth. The Anglican Covenant arises from the Windsor Report which in turn was a response to the dissension which arose in the Communion following the consecration of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire. The Covenant therefore addresses the issues of Communion life not just in general but against the specific background of issues in human sexuality.

In the porch of Holy Trinity, Pitlochry, as in many of our churches, are two pictures. Alongside the baptism at Stonehaven Gaol is the consecration by the Scottish Bishops in 1784 of Samuel Seabury as the first bishop of the Episcopal Church in America. That was a foundational moment in the life of the Anglican Communion and we were at the heart of it. Our Anglican credentials are not in doubt. Nor is our commitment. The Communion matters deeply to us – as it does to all small churches. We are deeply involved in Communion life – our bishops at the Lambeth Conference, John Stuart representing us at the Anglican Consultative Council, my own membership of the Anglican Communion Standing Committee. At more informal levels, there are all the diocesan companionship links, the work of the Provincial Overseas Committee and much more.

The intention of the Anglican Covenant is that it should lead us into deeper communion. Communion in that sense is a relationship of shared faith in Christ, shared belonging, trust and mutual respect. The prize is a global church held together by the richest of aspiration and the most minimal of structure. But we are human – the question is whether we need some structure and some boundaries to help us to live up to that aspiration. Isn't that what the institution of marriage is about? But there is another side to the same argument. It is that mutual respect which has to be organized and institutionalized is a contradiction in terms. The risk is that the Covenant may push further away the very thing which it is trying to engender and safeguard. It is for us to make the judgement as to which it is.

As I develop my contacts and travel increasingly in the Anglican Communion, I am astonished at how Anglican it is – in culture, worship and polity. There are all sorts of cross-currents – numerical strength on the one hand, wealth and power on the other are powerful factors. So is the legacy of colonialism. Yet what each Province says and does matters – what we do in this Synod this year and next matters.

What matters is whether we in this church - the heirs to those who consecrated Seabury – feel that the Anglican Covenant is a reasonable and proper step to safeguard and enrich the life of an ever more diverse Communion – or whether we feel that it makes less likely the very quality of Communion life which we seek.

I want to thank those who have prepared our Indaba discussion. It has become the 'method of choice' in the Anglican Communion for conversation across difference. I pray that God will bless our deliberations.