

ANGLICAN COVENANT

A Paper from the Faith and Order Board

1. Introduction

In June 2010 the General Synod passed the following motion:-

“That this Synod, recognising the publication of the Anglican Covenant and the need to address the Covenant in a manner which is careful and prayerful, request the Faith and Order Board to advise General Synod 2011 on what process or processes might be appropriate to be followed by this Synod to enable due consideration of the final version of the Covenant by the Scottish Episcopal Church.”

Since General Synod, the Faith and Order Board has given consideration to the issue. It benefited from work done on its behalf by a small sub-group, from the results of discussion within the College of Bishops and also from legal advice tendered on the issue. This paper represents the conclusions of the Board’s most recent deliberations at its meeting in March 2011.

2. Contextual Issues

The Board noted a number of possible courses of action in relation to the Covenant, including the possibility of deferring consideration of the Covenant for a period of years thereby enabling the Scottish Episcopal Church to weigh and assess the approaches taken in other provinces and to draw on the wider wisdom of the Communion. The inclination of the Board was neither to defer consideration of the Covenant nor to rush too quickly to considering the question of adoption. However, it seemed to the Board that it would be appropriate at this time to offer a clear process and timescale.

To set out a process in order to enable the Church to come to a decision to adopt (or not) the Covenant seemed to have a number of advantages. Firstly, it enables the Scottish Episcopal Church to take responsibility in relation to a matter which may have significant implications for the future of Anglicanism. It can be argued strongly that we owe it to ourselves and future generations of Scottish Episcopalians, and also to the Anglican Communion as a whole, to express our voice on this issue. To defer risks “missing the boat” such that the Scottish Episcopal Church would end up in effect adopting a reactive rather than proactive position on the matter. Secondly, to defer debate denies the opportunity to those within the Church who wish either to advocate adoption of the Covenant or to argue against its adoption.

Accordingly, the Board was of the view that it would be appropriate to bring to General Synod 2011 a process which would enable due consideration to be given to the Covenant and, ultimately, a decision on adoption.

3. Legal Process

Advice received by the Board concluded that the appropriate body within the Scottish Episcopal Church to consider adoption of Covenant is the General Synod and that, ultimately, the process for adoption is by canonical legislation. Such a process, therefore, would involve

the usual two readings at successive General Synods. Voting would be in houses, the first reading requiring a simple majority in each house but the second reading, as with any canonical change, requiring a two-thirds majority in each house.

Despite the fact that a canonical process would ultimately be necessary, the Board considered that there would be an advantage in creating within the General Synod and within dioceses an opportunity for discussion without those present having immediately to vote on the issue. It would be possible, for example, for the Synod to debate the question of adoption “in principle” without immediately commencing the canonical process. It is, of course, possible that the outcomes of a vote “in principle” and any subsequent canonical process might be different. A vote “in principle” would be considered by the Synod as one house and would require only a simple majority. As noted above, the process for the adoption of Canons is different. Theoretically, therefore, Synod could vote in favour of a motion to adopt the Covenant “in principle” but thereafter decline to enact a new Canon. The possibility of different outcomes is simply a result of our synodical procedures.

4. A Suggested Process

The Faith and Order Board commends the following to the General Synod as a process for consideration of the Covenant. It is not the only possible process but is recommended as encompassing a number of elements which combine wide discussion as well as the ability to arrive at a clear decision one way or the other. The proposal is as follows:-

A. General Synod 2011

An “indaba” process would be undertaken during General Synod 2011. Indaba groups were a feature of the Lambeth Conference 2008 and were a means of enabling all voices to be heard. Accordingly, the Synod membership would be divided into small groups for a period of approximately 1½ hours each working with an identified facilitator. The groups would be invited to explore a number of questions and would be provided with supporting resources. The comments from each group would be noted so that a record could be kept of the indaba discussions. A short procedural motion will be presented early on in the Synod meeting inviting Synod to agree to this overall process.

B. Diocesan Synods between General Synod 2011 and 2012

The indaba process would be capable of replication within Diocesan Synods (or broader Diocesan gatherings). Assuming adoption of the process set out in this paper, General Synod members will themselves have had the benefit of the indaba discussion at General Synod 2011. The purpose of extending the process into the dioceses would be to enable those General Synod representatives to hear local voices so that they have a good appreciation of those opinions when the matter comes for discussion to General Synod 2012.

C. General Synod 2012

The Synod would be invited to debate the substance of the Covenant culminating in a motion approving adoption of the Covenant “in principle”. This would not represent the final decision of the Church on the matter but rather would be a means of the

Synod expressing at least a preliminary view on the merits of adoption or otherwise. Were such an approval “in principle” to be given, a further motion could be proposed to Synod inviting it to instruct the Faith and Order Board to prepare the necessary canonical material. If the “in principle” motion fell, it would seem that there would be no point in continuing with any further process.

D. General Synod 2013

Subject to the passing of the “in principle” motion in 2012, canonical material would be presented to General Synod 2013 for a first reading and would be debated in the usual fashion.

E. Diocesan Synods between General Synod 2013 and 2014

Subject to the passing of canonical material at first reading, Diocesan Synods would consider it as part of the normal canonical process.

F. General Synod 2014

Subject to the passing of canonical material at first reading in 2013, a second reading of the material would take place at General Synod 2014. As usual, General Synod would have the opinions expressed by Diocesan Synods available to it.

The Faith and Order Board commends the process set out above to the General Synod for its consideration and adoption.

The Rt Rev Dr Gregor Duncan
Faith and Order Board
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