

APPENDIX B

Resolution regarding the Anglican Covenant – some explanatory thoughts from the working group set up by the Standing Committee to consider the issue, approved by the Standing Committee on 8 March 2011.

For many years the ‘glue’ which held together the autonomous and mostly national churches of the Anglican Communion was, over and above the bonds of affection which derive from a common history and a shared approach to worship and theology, four acknowledged Instruments of Communion. These have been, in the order in which they have emerged over time, the archbishop of Canterbury as ‘primus inter pares’ among the bishops, the Lambeth Conference of Bishops, the Anglican Consultative Council on which each province is represented and which includes lay people and priests as well as bishops, and – more recently – the Primates’ meeting. Of late, however, some have been questioning the adequacy of these arrangements in the rapidly changing circumstances of to-day.

Undoubtedly there have been contentious events within Anglicanism which have raised questions about the extent to which individual provinces in their own cultural settings may act unilaterally in great matters when their actions impinge on their relationships with others, and hence deserve reflection and evaluation in a wider context. Autonomy of its nature is textured in any communion by mutual commitment and to some extent discipline. No province can be deprived of its freedom of action, but all provinces have to agree upon a means of recognising and addressing the relational consequences of their actions. In addition, other global churches and communions with which the Anglican Communion is in ecumenical dialogue may well value being able to consult an articulated series of theological principles by which we consider ourselves to be held together.

The Anglican Covenant, the fruit of considerable international deliberation and rewriting over a number of years (a complex task concerning which we in Ireland must acknowledge the particular role played by Archbishop John Neill) is a noble attempt to walk a tight rope. On the one hand it makes absolutely clear that each province must be governed by its own independent canonical procedures and that there is no hidden agenda to centralise Anglicanism. On the other hand it demonstrates that in a Communion, as in any family, the actions of one member have consequences for others and that – following due process – individual provinces *may* have to acknowledge, at least for a time, that actions which they have decided to take could lead to a situation in which their full participation in the instruments that bind Anglicanism together may become compromised.

The motion before the General Synod is clear in its intention. By presenting it at all we are acknowledging the value of having a covenant and our view that the present text is the most satisfactory likely to be produced in these times. The House of Bishops have made clear their view that the covenant is consonant with the formularies and the doctrines of this church. We are not seeking to make the covenant itself part of our formularies, which would extend its range in a manner that could be problematical.

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Rather, should the synod pass this motion, the Church of Ireland would be saying that in the context of its own clear and unchanged self-understanding, the covenant provides a means, not of altering the character of the Church of Ireland, but of regulating our external relationships with other churches in a manner which we freely acknowledge to have value and from which we indeed have the capacity to withdraw should external circumstances change. The covenant does not lock us into an arrangement that undermines our autonomy, but passing the motion before the synod does display our willingness to display generosity and faithfulness and our acknowledgement that in making major or innovative decisions no Anglican province can simply walk alone. It will be the role of the General Synod in the future to assess the extent to which the covenant has borne fruit in terms of the purposes for which it was gestated.

It should be noted that the Preamble and Declaration of 1870, written when the then United Church of England and Ireland was being sundered by action of the legislature, committed the Church of Ireland in the future to retain communion particularly with the sister Church of England. We therefore have already in our own formularies a commitment to an external relationship and of course such a commitment has practical consequences if the relationship is to be sustained and cherished. It is interesting to note how for 140 years now the relationship of communion with the Church of England has been utterly unquestioned here and has been, some might say, one of the shoots which led Anglicanism from being a largely English experience to being a truly global and multi-cultural one. And, interestingly enough, in the evolution of events since, there was no widespread challenging of the Irish decision of 1990 to allow for the ordination of women to the episcopate, notwithstanding our commitment to maintain communion with another church where such a decision has not yet been finally made. This historical precedent might suggest, to those who fear the effects of the covenant could be the over-constraining of individual provinces from doing what they believe to be right, that where there is mutual attentiveness and respect, differing decisions on a major matter do not always inevitably lead to impaired communion.

We are asked to subscribe the covenant as it has been set before us. Such a document is not the equivalent of Holy Scripture and it is almost bound over the years to need improvement and indeed amendment. A procedure for such amendment has been articulated within the covenant. We would anticipate that in the context of that procedure the possibility of an amendment being imposed on a church such as our own without consent would be very low indeed. Were such an unlikely eventuality to occur, we could of course exercise our option to review our relationship with the covenant.

People around the world will contend, from various perspectives, that the covenant is from their point of view problematical. Some will say it is too little and too late in terms of maintaining the unity of the communion. Others will say its inner agenda is the disciplining of particular provinces and that its capacity to survive the test of time, after present controversies have passed, is at best limited. As a church which has always championed balance and lived with a considerable measure of diversity, perhaps the Church of Ireland would wish to give the covenant process a fair chance, to demonstrate real commitment to it, to avoid elevating it into a formulary of our own but to acknowledge the virtue of how it strives to bring home to people what are often the huge

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relational consequences of their actions? At a moment like this the famous words of the revisers of our own post-Disestablishment Prayer Book in 1878 seem always to inspire – *Let (us).., on the one side and on the other, consider that... judgements of perfection are very various and that what is imperfect, with peace, is often better than what is otherwise more excellent, without it.* The resolution offered to the synod concerning the covenant is presented very much in that spirit, conscious too that the attitude of the Church of Ireland to the covenant, given our long history and capacity to live with significant diversity on many levels, will send out an important signal to the rest of the Anglican family