

Covenant Council Report

Proposer: The Revd Canon Dr Maurice Elliott

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Archbishop,

Members of Synod can find the report of the Covenant Council from pp.299-300, and I think the first thing that should be emphasised is that the brevity of the report belies the genuine substance of what the Covenant Council has been seeking to realise over the past year.

Having been signed into the DNA of both of our traditions by Archbishop Robin Eames and the Revd Winston Graham in September 2002, the Covenant itself is now almost **21 years old**. Its various clauses continue to celebrate a shared understanding in many aspects of faith, worship, heritage, ministry and governance; and, back then, the text of the Covenant itself mapped out as many as ten different areas in which the two Churches were keen to explore further common life and mission. Amongst others, these included prayer for each other, mutual welcome of sacramental ministry, shared resources, joint programmes in training, participation in governance and fuller sharing of ministries. Over the years much work, sometimes visible but often unseen, has been invested into trying to put substance on to this framework, and one prospective task now identified by the Council is that it may be timely to re-work the original document, not by altering the heads of agreement, but with a **common declaration** of newly identified priorities for ongoing convergence. We would hope to have this drafted in time for consideration at next year's General Synod.

More recently, and as underscored in yesterday's consideration of Bill No.6, the General Synod and the Methodist Conference adopted legislation in 2014 to provide for full interchangeability of ordained ministry. Bill No.6 represents the culmination of highly significant work undertaken by the Council over the past number of years, as ways were sought to address the need for much more in the way of **occasional interchangeability**. The intention of the Bill is that it should become much more straightforward to allow for reciprocal holiday cover, shared missional activity or other one-off local occasions, and we are grateful to the bishops for hearing the need to make such provision. If the Bill is passed, the essential matter beyond that will be that across both Churches means are found to give tangible expression to what will have become permissible (to coin a metaphor from an earlier Synod, 'stocking the shelves' in addition to having an impressive 'window display'), and in support of this objective, the

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Council anticipates the need for training sessions to be facilitated in order to explain the custom of how things are typically done in either tradition.

Those of us who have the privilege of being involved in inter-church dialogue are constantly reminded of the current emphasis on what is described as ‘receptive ecumenism’. In other words, what really matters in ecumenical conversations is not a lingering insistence that those who are different need to become like us, but rather how we can all begin to learn from the riches of other Christian traditions. And this focus on reception continues to be a source of joyful discovery for members of the Covenant Council. One of the fascinating pieces of work this year involved consideration of how the various strands of **episcopate** – personal, collegial and communal – are enacted in each tradition, and the Council was pleased to receive papers from both the Bishop of Limerick and, further to his address to General Synod in Belfast last year, the former President and Episcopal Minister, the Revd Sahr Yambasu.

Looking ahead, future aspects of the Council’s work will involve deeper exploration of **liturgical rites**, the need for **updated regulations** under charities legislation for Local Covenant Partnerships (it is hoped that these can go to the Standing Committee with a view to bringing another Bill next year), and revision of the booklet, *Guidelines for the Journey*, first published in 2008. In an overall sense, one of the principles which urgently needs to become more firmly established is that, by virtue of the Covenant, the relationship between our two Churches begins to move beyond simple ecumenism. The Council is determined to see the Covenant go forward with renewed vitality. We would respectfully suggest that, twenty-one years in, it ought to be becoming second-nature for us to think ‘covenant’ at every opportunity, and that we should be much more intentional about finding ways of substantiating the shared approach which we have come to enjoy.

Finally, lest this be overlooked, to work more closely with others after the pattern of what the Covenant has come to represent is a gift which we would also long to see develop in relation to other ecumenical partners. I am reminded of the lovely story of a little boy who went into school and announced to his teacher that their cat at home had had kittens and that they were all Church of Ireland. The teacher replied by saying how wonderful that was and that, when

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next they would have the Church of Ireland minister at assembly, he would be able to tell her this very good news. A few weeks later the minister duly arrived for assembly and the teacher brought the little boy in front of her with these words, ‘Now tell the Reverend Ruth about your good news at home.’ The little boy looked at her and swiftly announced, ‘Our cat at home had kittens and they are all Presbyterian.’ ‘But I thought you told me they were all Church of Ireland?’ the teacher interrupted. ‘Yes, I did’, the boy replied, ‘they were Church of Ireland, but their eyes are opened now!’ It may sound like a facile illustration, but it generously conceived, and it can perhaps serve to make a crucial point. The Covenant itself emerged from the earlier tripartite conversations involving the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and, at an international level, dialogue between Anglicans and Reformed Churches has been formally re-invigorated. There is no doubt that both the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church could have much to learn from the heritage, the vigour and the witness of our Presbyterian brothers and sisters – ways, if you like, in which our eyes might indeed be further opened to all the beauty of God’s kingdom. We would take this opportunity, therefore, to remind the Presbyterian Church in Ireland of its entitlement to an **observer position** on the Covenant Council, and we would very much welcome the reinstatement of that post.

We express our thanks to the co-chairs, the Revd Dr Heather Morris and Bishop Michael Burrows, for all that they do to enable the constructive working of the Covenant Council, and to those who serve its administrative needs, especially the Revd Dr Janet Unsworth and Dr Nicole Gallagher. Archbishop, I have pleasure in proposing that the report of the Covenant Council be taken into consideration.