

# What will the Anglican Covenant do to the Church?

As a General Synod member you will soon be asked to cast your vote on the **Anglican Covenant**. This leaflet explains why you should vote against it.

The Covenant is designed on the presupposition that the proper way for Anglicans to resolve disagreements is for a small committee to decree *the* Anglican position and for the rest of us to believe what we are told. It would produce tighter restrictions on General Synod's powers to introduce changes – whether on women priests, or new liturgies, or moral judgements like contraception and the remarriage of divorcees.

You may find this so un-Anglican as to be incredible. The Covenant's proponents know it will be unpopular in England, so until the vote is taken they will present it as a small bureaucratic matter. In other parts of the world church leaders are much more open about the intention to decree Anglican doctrine and forbid dissent.

## The background

An Anglican Covenant was first proposed by the Windsor Report in 2004 after one diocese in the USA had elected an openly gay bishop and another in Canada had approved a same-sex blessing service. Opponents could not legally expel the North Americans, so the Covenant in effect redefines the Anglican Communion with a view to excluding them. The final draft was agreed at the end of 2009 and it is now up to the 38 Provinces of the Anglican Communion whether to sign it.

From the Windsor Report onwards the clear intention has been to establish a new regime with power to decree Anglican doctrine. However the provinces are self-governing and cannot be forced to sign it. The text therefore stresses that each province will still be self-governing and the Covenant will only affect its relations with other provinces. However its very purpose is a regime sufficiently centralised and authoritarian to forbid certain actions. The small print therefore makes it possible.

## What would the Covenant do?

Signatories undertake not to introduce any new development if another Anglican province opposes it, unless granted prior permission from the Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion. This is a body of 15 people, legally the trustees of the Anglican Communion.

The Covenant describes itself as 'foundational for the life of the Anglican Communion' and states that 'recognition of, and fidelity to, the text of this Covenant, enables mutual recognition and communion' – which until now has applied anyway across all the provinces. In other words, recognition and communion would be *withdrawn* from non-signatories.

Thus the Anglican Communion would be redefined as the new international structure, to which the provinces – even Canterbury and York! – will only belong if they sign up. For the first time since Henry VIII the Church of England would be subordinated to an outside international authority. This would create serious conflict with its role as the established church. The text denies that there is any subordination as provinces may leave at any time; but if they do, they will no longer be part of the Anglican Communion. In effect each province is being told: either you sign up and allow other provinces to intervene in your internal affairs, or you will no longer count as part of the Anglican Communion.

## How would it change the Church of England?

By signing the Covenant the Church would commit itself 'to act with diligence, care and caution in respect of *any action* (our italics) which may provoke controversy'; and, if any province objects, the Standing Committee will have power to decree *the* Anglican teaching on it. This would affect the Church of England in many ways.

It would become *more dogmatic* as each new ruling lays down a new official Anglican teaching. The effect would be felt not only nationally but also in parishes, as open-minded clergy came under increasing pressure to toe the line.

It would become *more timid* as new proposals could be blocked by objections – possibly from just one archbishop the other side of the world. Thus decision-makers would feel obliged to conform to international Anglicanism instead of responding appropriately to local situations.

It would become *more backward-looking*. Instead of Classic Anglicanism's balance of scripture, reason and tradition, which allows for new developments, the Covenant reduces Anglicanism's authorities to 'the Scriptures, the common standards of faith, and the canon laws of our churches', thus making it harder to justify changes. If it had been in force in 1944 when the first woman priest was ordained, it would almost certainly have prevented Anglicanism ever having women priests.

It would become *more centralised and clerical*. Though the text denies it, in effect General Synod would be subordinated to the new centralised authorities, mostly bishops and archbishops. The voice of the laity would be significantly reduced.

It would *hinder mission*. Many younger people are put off by the Church's apparent reluctance to change and backward-looking stance on many issues. Whether or not they are right, to turn this stance into an essential feature of Anglicanism is bound to alienate many and create a new obstacle to mission.

It would *hinder ecumenism*. Proponents of the Covenant hope it will help international discussions; but local initiatives would be subject to objections from far distant Anglicans who do not know the local situation.

It would be *expensive*. Substantial additional funds be needed to administer it and these have not yet been identified. As its main purpose is to create the means to expel The Episcopal Church (USA) and the Anglican Church of Canada from the Anglican Communion, this will probably mean losing their generous contributions.

## **The theological context**

Behind this debate lies a longstanding theological disagreement. Reformation Puritans believed Christians should submit to the supreme authority of the Bible, that every question has a single biblical answer, and that therefore there should be no disagreement between Christians. Their successors today therefore welcome a central hierarchy with power to decree *the* Anglican teaching on each issue. Anglicans with different theologies sometimes support them in the mistaken hope that this will avoid schism.

Classic Anglican theology, rooted in Richard Hooker and his successors, values reason and thus expects Christians to learn from others. We have therefore been better at staying united because we accept disagreements as normal and debate them openly within the Church, without threatening schism, until such time as consensus is reached.

The way to keep united is to insist, as the Church of England has normally done, that differences of opinion may be freely and openly discussed within the Church, in the interests of seeking truth, without invoking power politics or threats of schism.

## **Want to know more?**

Visit <http://www.modernchurch.org.uk/anglicancovenant/> and follow the links.

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