

Who runs the Church?

In November the Church of England's General Synod will be asked to approve the Anglican Covenant. Many Synod members do not realise it, but it could be [the biggest change to the Church since the Reformation](#). We explain here why it would be a change for the worse.

What would the Anglican Covenant do?

It would enable objectors to forbid new developments

Each of the 38 Provinces in the Anglican Communion is being asked to sign it. By signing, it undertakes not to introduce any new development if another Anglican province anywhere in the world opposes it – unless granted prior permission from a new international body, the Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion.

It would redefine Anglicanism

The Covenant would become 'foundational for the life of the Anglican Communion'; signatories would agree that 'recognition of, and fidelity to, the text of this Covenant, enables mutual recognition and communion'. This means that non-signatories would no longer count as part of the Communion. Since 'mutual recognition and communion' have until now applied across all Anglican provinces, the effect is to withdraw recognition and communion from non-signatories.

Thus the Anglican Communion would cease to consist of the 38 provinces and instead consist of the new international structure, to which the provinces will only belong if they sign the Covenant.

Who wants an Anglican Covenant?

It was first proposed by the Windsor Report in 2004 to put pressure on the North American churches, after a diocese in the USA had elected an openly gay bishop and a diocese in Canada had approved a same-sex blessing service. Opponents had no legal way to expel the North Americans, so the Covenant is designed to achieve the same result by redefining the Anglican Communion to exclude them. However the Covenant does not mention those events; instead it imposes restrictions on any future church developments which another province opposes. This makes it much more significant.

If it's this important, why has it been kept so quiet?

For a few years it was being publicly promoted as a way to 'discipline' the North Americans and establish an authoritarian leadership of the Anglican Communion. In other parts of the world it is still being presented like this; but where opposition is likely, it is now being presented as a minor bureaucratic reform – to persuade the provinces to sign it. Once the signing is done we expect the gloves to come off again.

What will happen if the Church of England signs it?

It would subordinate itself to an international body

The Covenant text claims to affect only the relations provinces have with each other, so that they would be unaffected in their internal governance. However the intended effect, as often expressed in international discussions, would be to subordinate the Church to the judgements of the Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion. It would thereby make the Church of England subject to an outside power for the first time since Henry VIII. This would create serious conflict with its role as the established church.

It would become more dogmatic

Until now Anglicanism has prided itself on being 'catholic' in the original sense of expressing universal Christianity, not a sect with its own distinct doctrines. If the Covenant is approved, every time the Standing Committee upholds an objection it will thereby establish a new ruling, another doctrine Anglicans are expected to believe. Over time Anglicanism will become less inclusive and more dogmatic.

This would affect parishes too. As each new ruling becomes the Anglican position clergy who disagree, or simply prefer a more open-minded approach, will come under greater pressure to avoid telling their congregations what they really think for fear of reprisals.

It would become more inward-looking

At present when General Synod makes new proposals it consults interested parties like the dioceses and parishes, relevant specialists and the Government. The Covenant would subordinate this to international Anglicanism: the top priority would always be to 'to seek a shared mind with other Churches' at the expense of national and local context.

It would become more backward-looking

Instead of Classic Anglican theology'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.

It would increase interference from outside

At present General Synod openly debates proposals and votes on them. The Covenant would oblige it 'to act with diligence, care and caution in respect of any action which may provoke controversy, which by its intensity, substance or extent could threaten the unity of the Communion'. This would put pressure on churches to avoid changes which other Anglicans, anywhere in the world, might

dislike, and would encourage opponents to exaggerate the strength of their objections. We cannot know in advance which issues may generate objections from overseas hierarchies in the future. To sign the Covenant would in effect give them the right to lodge formal objections to any change we may wish to make in the future.

It would become more centralised and clerical

General Synod may not be perfect, but it does aim to be representative and allow a voice to laity. The Covenant would subordinate it to the new centralised authorities, the Standing Committee and the four Instruments of Communion. Power would be centralised and concentrated in smaller numbers, 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 to accentuate the problem and create a new obstacle to mission.

It would hinder ecumenical relations

Proponents of the Covenant hope it would ease ecumenical discussions at an international level. At a local level, however, initiatives would become subject to objections from Anglicans in other parts of the world who do not know the local situation.

What will happen if the Church does not sign it?

Because the Church of England is the mother church of the Communion, if England declines to sign it will probably not come into effect. This would be the best possible outcome.

If the Covenant goes ahead, provinces not signing will govern themselves in the same way as now, but signatories will no longer count them as part of the Anglican Communion. They will be excluded from representative institutions and counted as 'second track' or 'churches in association'.

What if we already had the Covenant?

Over the centuries there have been many changes. The Church no longer approves of slavery, but does permit divorce and contraception. We have introduced new orders of service, terms of ordinations and ordination oaths. In 1992 we permitted women priests. If the Covenant had already been in force other provinces could, and almost certainly would, have objected to these changes. It is one thing to disapprove of some of them, quite another to give other provinces the right to veto them.

If it had been in force in 1944 the ordination of the first Anglican woman would almost certainly have been forbidden, and from then onwards women priests would have been forbidden in every Anglican province. The Covenant is not now expected to rule out women bishops because some provinces already have them; but if it is in force before the Church of England's legislation and Code of Practice are agreed, other provinces will have an opportunity to lodge objections.

Is there a better way to resolve disagreements?

The Covenant offers a neo-Puritan method

Behind the campaign for an Anglican Covenant lies an attempt to re-establish a Puritan dogmatism. Reformation Puritans believed Christians should submit to the supreme authority of the Bible and therefore agree with each other on all matters of doctrine and ethics. Refusing to allow reason a role, their disagreements have often led each side to accuse the other of not being true Christians. This is why parts of Protestantism have a history of repeated schisms.

Their successors today support the Covenant because they see disagreements within the Church as a threat. When disagreements arise they aim to resolve them as quickly as possible, by means of a pronouncement from the leadership decreeing what all members are to believe and forbidding dissent. Some other Anglicans support them in the mistaken hope that this will avoid schism.

Classic Anglicanism offers a better method

Anglicans traditionally value the role of reason and thus expect to learn from other people. We have therefore been better at staying united because we have debated our disagreements 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 debated within the Church, in the interests of seeking truth, without invoking power games or threats of schism.

How you can help

Please encourage your General Synod representatives to vote against the Anglican Covenant. To find out more visit www.modernchurch.org.uk/anglican covenant/ and follow the links; contact: covenant@modernchurch.org.uk or 07762 373 674; or write to Covenant Debate, 9 Westward View, Liverpool L17 7EE.

