

Speech opposing the motion to approve the Anglican Communion Covenant  
delivered by Peter Owen to Liverpool Diocesan Synod on 17 March 2012

I care very much about the Anglican Communion. I have worshipped in six provinces of the communion outside England. Along with colleagues from four provinces I help publish Anglicans Online each week as an offering to the Communion. On our website we say that “the issues that unite us are so much stronger and larger than the issues that might sometimes divide us.”

That is why I am saddened when disagreements over one particular issue have, after almost a decade of commissions, reports and drafting groups, led us here today to discuss a document that, if adopted, could fundamentally change the nature of our Communion.

Those of you here today have a wide range of views, and although it may sometimes be difficult we stick together and try to resolve our differences. Even when we disagree we accept that a range of views is acceptable. This inclusivity is at the heart of Anglicanism, unlike the way it is in many other branches of Christianity. We don't have a detailed statement of faith, or some central authority to enforce discipline.

The Covenant, on the other hand, seeks uniformity. New ideas are to be treated as an aberration to be stamped out. From the start it has been a power struggle by those who want uniformity against those who want to be inclusive.

Although the wording of section 4 has been toned down from earlier drafts, the Covenant still threatens “relational consequences” for those found to be out of line. Although it is not clear quite what these might be, we have already seen provinces asked to absent themselves from the Anglican Consultative Council, individuals dropped from official bodies, and a bishop not invited to the Lambeth Conference. The Covenant explicitly refers to suspension from an Instrument of Communion, as though a Church is being declared to be insufficiently Anglican. And this discipline will be enforced by a central authority – the joint Standing Committee of the primates and the ACC.

Several primates have indicated that they consider these latest provisions to be too weak – and managed to say this in a press release issued just too late to influence the November 2010 debate at General Synod to send the Covenant to the dioceses.

I was a member of General Synod when it debated the Windsor Report in February 2005. I remember two things. First, the then chair of the house of laity said that “there is too much law in the Windsor report, too much reliance on law as a solution to our problems”. And he was a professor of international law. Second, the motion before Synod tied support for the Windsor process (ie the idea of a covenant) to support for the Archbishop of Canterbury. But we should be judging the Covenant on its merits (or lack of merits) – not voting for it because we want to support the Archbishop.

Not much has been said about the first three sections of the Covenant which try to define what it is to be an Anglican. But do we all accept all of it? Some of you may have read the paper written “from an evangelical perspective” that was placed on the diocesan website, where the writer argues that these sections are mistaken. We may not agree with everything he writes, but we must ask the question, “do we want to be tied down by a statement of our common faith that is more detailed than the historic formularies?”

Like the Archbishop of Canterbury I want to keep the Anglican Communion together. But I think that the way to do this is to meet with each other. Bishop James has earlier spoken about the importance of partnerships like the ones that this diocese has with Akure and Virginia. The covenant, I believe, will make such relationships more difficult.

To sum up, this proposed covenant, any covenant with “relational consequences”, will change the nature of the Communion in an undesirable way. I therefore ask you to vote against the motion before this Synod today.

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