



The Episcopal Diocese of Vermont

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Response to the Anglican Communion Covenant, Final Draft

The proposed Anglican Communion Covenant [hereafter, Covenant] attempts to respond to the question posed to the authors of the 2004 Windsor Report, “What is the nature of communion and how do we live more deeply into communion?”

We believe the Covenant offers some helpful affirmations about the nature of communion and our vocation as a fellowship of independent churches. In the end, however, it appears to us to be taking a path that will lead not to deeper communion but rather to further division among our diverse fellowship. We believe The Episcopal Church should not adopt the Covenant as it has been presented to us.

Ours is a world that seems on one hand to be increasingly fragmenting into homogeneous groups and on another to be finding vitality in networked rather than hierarchical relationships. The traditions of Anglican theology and ecclesiology offer in this context the gift of a capacity to live in lively tension among diverse points of view and styles of worship and governance. The Anglican Communion has been historically a network that has resisted fragmentation. Now is not the time to abandon this charism, nor is it the time to let an urge toward uniformity overwhelm the challenges of finding unity in communion.

We believe the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral is quite adequate as a guide for Anglican and Christian unity. Interdependence cannot be coerced by rules or confessions of doctrine. The Anglican gift is to show how true interdependence among diverse churches emerges as a response to shared goals and sacramental relationships. Our vocation as a communion is best expressed in our shared mission as the Body of Christ in a hurting world and in coming together to share Christ’s body and blood in sacramental fellowship.

The Executive Council’s Study Guide poses several questions for reflection. With regard to the first two, we do not believe the Covenant strengthens the corporate life of either The Episcopal Church or the Anglican Communion. The Introduction and Sections 1-3 do offer some helpful statements about the life of the Anglican Communion (question 3).

Question 4 is the most provocative in the sense that we find a disturbing conflation of the notion of unity with a desire for uniformity, a very unfortunate push toward the vision of an Anglican “Church” as opposed to the tradition of an Anglican Communion of independent churches, and the vesting of authority in a very small group, mostly bishops, in contrast to a more generous understanding of the ministry of all the baptized.

The Covenant would, because of its emphasis on contractual and confessional language, require significant changes in our Constitution and Canons (question 5). It requires assent to the 39 Articles (now printed as historical documents in the BCP) and the 1662 BCP of the Church of England. Neither is acceptable nor consistent with the historical development of The Episcopal Church.

Praying the prayer of Christ, learning the mind of Christ and doing the deeds of Christ through ministries of
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We are grateful for the Covenant's statements about respecting the "constitutional autonomy of all the Churches of the Anglican Communion," but we find the document to be overly focused on managing change rather than respecting the creative tension between the impulses of those stretching in new directions and the values of those holding to their own understanding of tradition.

While none of us can claim with certainty a knowledge of the workings of the Holy Spirit, we are concerned that the Covenant as proposed offers a means for a small body of the Anglican Communion to stifle the work of the Holy Spirit among us. While we may in our diverse churches be drawn in different directions at different times by the Holy Spirit, our call is to remain in fellowship, respecting our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Section 4 (question 7) remains the most contentious part of the Covenant. Rather than exhibit language of covenant that is open-ended, it veers toward contractual and punitive language that we believe will lead to conflict about who is in and who is out and lead to exercises of power that have little to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, we see few, if any, positive consequences to signing on to this Covenant. In terms of negative consequences, we believe the Anglican Communion will have lost its most creative and compelling gift to the world of the 21st Century, a world hungering for ways to live together in difference. It may become a "Church," but it will have lost the genius of its tradition.

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Endorsed on behalf of the Diocese of Vermont by:

The General Convention Deputies (2012)
The Rt. Rev. Thomas C. Ely, Bishop
The Standing Committee
The Diocesan Council