

'A Necessary Covenant'

The Archbishop of Cape Town's Letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury

The Archbishop of Cape Town, the Most Revd Dr Thabo Makgoba, has written to the Archbishop of Canterbury in response to his Advent Letter to the Primates of the Anglican Communion and Moderators of the United Churches. In his letter, Dr Makgoba reflects on the Anglican Covenant as 'necessary' for Anglicans 'in recalling us to ourselves'. He argues that the Covenant must be considered on the basis of its ability to help Anglicans recover their true vocation within God's One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. This includes growing more fully into the life of 'mutual responsibility and interdependence' which the 1963 Toronto Congress identified and from which the Communion has since drifted. Recalling how the Communion was able to stand in solidarity with Southern Africa in the past, he sees the Covenant as being an effective vehicle for more fully expressing Anglicanism's theological, pastoral and missional understandings and callings.

Therefore, he says, it is a mistake to focus too narrowly either on the disagreements around human sexuality, or on seeking legally or structurally based solutions to current Anglican difficulties. The identity of the Communion's member churches 'should not principally be conveyed through legal prisms, whether of some form of centralising authority, or of Provinces' constitutions and canon law which must be "safeguarded" from external "interference".' The Covenant also ensures that the Communion cannot 'rest content with the sort of "autonomous" ecclesial units that implicitly privilege juridical unilateralism over autonomy more rightly understood as the growing organic interdependence that must inevitably mark the living body of Christ' and so is necessary in taking the Communion beyond the context in which current difficulties could arise and be pursued so acrimoniously.

Though recognising the reality of human fallibility, the Communion should look to 'the salvific work of Jesus Christ' and put its trust in him, rather than appearing to seek structural or legal solutions to its difficulties. He sees the Covenant as a means for doing this, since it 'places God's vision for God's Church and God's world centre-stage; and then invites us to live into this as our ultimate and overriding context and calling.' The provisions of the Covenant – which neither create new structures nor interfere in Provinces' life – should be understood, he argues, in terms of 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:2). Covenanting together does not mean legal restrictions, but instead, says Dr Makgoba, 'constraining ourselves through the same sort of mutuality of love St Paul had in mind when he wrote "all things are lawful but not all things are beneficial – all things are lawful but not all things build up" (1 Cor 10:23). The Archbishop encourages those who are daunted by the challenge of living together in Christ by noting that 'St Paul is under no illusions as to how difficult it can be', in illustrating this by the mutual incomprehension of seeing and hearing within a human body. He also points to Southern Africa's experience of bridging vast differences in the past and today.

Finally, he encourages those Provinces of the Anglican Communion which have yet to do so, to adopt the Covenant. He says 'echoing St Paul, we affirm that we cannot say "We have no need of you" (1 Cor 12:21).' He concludes by urging 'all of you, as partners covenanting to go forward in newness of life together, are "indispensable" (v.22) to our own ability to grow in faithful obedience to what we believe is God's vocation for all Anglicans, and ultimately towards the fullness of his vision for his One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

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The full text of Archbishop Makgoba's letter follows below.

My dear brother in Christ

With love and prayers, I greet you this Epiphany-tide in the name of Christ, made manifest as Lord and Saviour of all.

Reading your Advent letter again, in the quieter period following Christmas, underlined the particular gift that the Communion has the potential to be, as together we share the message that Jesus Christ is truly 'the Light to all nations', in whatever troubles the world faces. This was vividly evident in the visit I made with you to Zimbabwe. The capacity to act together – across old divides of colonisers and colonised, and contemporary differences of rich and poor, north and south, through God's gift of unity to the Communion – gives considerable force to our joint proclamation of Christ as the Light of the World. We cannot put in jeopardy our ability to spread the Gospel in this way. In everything from standing in solidarity with Bishop Chad of Harare and his clergy and people, to contributing effectively to debate on reshaping international economic structures in ways that are more just, we need to do our utmost in ensuring God's word is effectively expressed in and to his world.

Support during the apartheid era to us in Southern Africa from across the Anglican world demonstrated how great a difference the Communion can make: from the pastoral care such encouragement brought, through to its impact in helping us speak truth to power. Our theological convictions that God had called us to a particular expression of common life within the body of Christ thus bore both pastoral and missional fruit during the struggle years. Enjoying an identity that has dimensions beyond the borders of our Province has continued to empower us to speak courageously and truthfully in all circumstances – for we believe that, as in the past, if any of us are adversely touched in any way, the whole Communion is touched.

Yet such mutuality cannot be taken for granted, and indeed, the way that our disagreements on human sexuality have played out suggests we had already begun to drift from that particular sense of belonging to God and to each other, within the wider body of Christ, which was so strong in Southern Africa's great time of need. It seems to me that the Covenant is entirely necessary, in recalling us to ourselves. Only in this way can we continue to grow in bearing this rich fruit that comes from living the life which is both God's gift and God's calling. This is how we have seen the Covenant, and so the Anglican Church of Southern Africa has taken the first step towards adopting it, with the concluding stage of ratification on the agenda for our next Provincial Synod in 2013).

Conscious of this, I offer these reflections on the Covenant, and its potential – if we are prepared to work wholeheartedly within its framework, trusting God and one another – to help us grow more fully into our calling as faithful Anglicans, faithful Christians, faithful members of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. This is the proper context for our discerning of truth, our pursuit of unity, and our understanding of (and, indeed, our disagreeing over) how they relate. It concerns me greatly, therefore, that, from what I read on line and elsewhere, and from the responses I received to the article I wrote for The Living Church last year, too much of the debate around the Covenant seems to have lost sight of this as our true context. There appears to be a too narrowly blinkered focus on questions not primarily directed towards growing as faithful and obedient members together of the body of Christ, of which he is the one true head, with all that this entails.

Arguments that the Covenant is ‘not fit for purpose’ (for example through ‘going too far’ or ‘not going far enough’) are too often predicated upon an inadequate model of ‘being church’ and what it means to live as members of the body of Christ. Implicit, it seems to me, is a diminished view of God’s grace, God’s redemptive power and purposes, and God’s vision and calling upon his people and his Church, and so of Anglicanism’s place within these. Our sense of who we are, and called to become, should not principally be conveyed through legal prisms, whether of some form of centralising authority, or of Provinces’ constitutions and canon law which must be ‘safeguarded’ from external ‘interference’. Nor should we primarily look to structural or legal solutions to our undeniable difficulties or for regulating our relationships.

Scripture reminds us that solving our problems ultimately rests not on our efforts but on the salvific work of Jesus Christ. He is the one who can make the Church faithful and obedient, holy and loving. For he ‘loved the Church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish’ (Eph 5:25-7). Do we truly believe and trust in this promise of God for ourselves? Do we truly believe and trust in this promise of God at work in the lives of other Anglicans? Of course we must work with the reality of human failings, but surely we should debate and behave and order our lives on the basis of the overriding sure and certain hope of God’s redemption in Christ.

Seeing the Covenant merely as a product of disagreements over human sexuality, or in terms of whether or not it provides particular solutions to these disagreements, is therefore to miss the fundamental point. As I noted earlier, it seems that, especially in the acrimonious and bitter ways we have often handled our differences, disunity over sexuality was symptomatic of a deeper malaise within our common life. I suspect this reflects a failure to take seriously the commitments to ‘Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in the Body of Christ’ made at the 1963 Toronto Congress. We said then ‘our unity in Christ, expressed in our full communion, is the most profound bond among us, in all our political and racial and cultural diversity’ and in consequence, ‘our need is ... to understand how God has led us, through the sometimes painful history of our time, to see the gifts of freedom and communion in their great terms, and to live up to them.’ The Congress warned ‘if we are not responsible stewards of what Christ has given us, we will lose even what we have.’ But it appears we have not been responsible, taking one another for granted, being content to drift apart, allowing ourselves to be preoccupied with our own concerns, so that when differences arose we had lost our ability to connect and work through them in love together.

Therefore, to ask if the Covenant is ‘fit for purpose’ should be to ask whether it helps us address the foundational question of growing together in faithful obedience within the body of Christ. And it seems to me that, above all else, the Covenant does indeed do this, in the way it places God’s vision for God’s Church and God’s world centre-stage; and then invites us to live into this as our ultimate and overriding context and calling. It does not create new structures or authorities, nor alters constitutions; and scope for individual action remains considerable (as your letter underlines). But nor will it allow us to rest content with the sort of ‘autonomous’ ecclesial units that implicitly privilege juridical unilateralism over autonomy more rightly understood as the growing organic interdependence that must inevitably mark the living body of Christ. As ‘Covenant’, it propels us towards understanding and expressing its legal provisions in terms of ‘the law of the Spirit* of life in Christ Jesus’ (Rom 8:2); constraining ourselves through the same sort of mutuality of love St Paul had in mind when

he wrote ‘all things are lawful but not all things are beneficial – all things are lawful but not all things build up’ (1 Cor 10:23). It thus invites us – invites God’s Spirit – to breathe new and redemptive life into the Communion’s existing frameworks.

Where we are apprehensive about our ability to ‘lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Eph 4:1-2), then it is reassuring to note that St Paul is under no illusions as to how difficult it can be to relate to those who are different within Christ’s body. Members who are otherwise completely mutually incomprehensible (as seeing is to the ear, hearing to the eye – 1 Cor 12:17) can nonetheless hold together, if they can recognise that Christ lives in the other. This is something we learnt in the past in Southern Africa, and continue to experience across vast ethnic, cultural, political and socio-economic differences. More than this, we have found that, even in painful difference, we are better able to discern God’s truth together than apart. All this is why we hold together in ongoing debate across the whole spectrum of views on human sexuality – we do not agree, and our differences are sharp and painful, but we will not turn our backs on brothers and sisters in Christ and instead will keep wrestling together. This is why we are proceeding towards adopting the Covenant.

Finally, this is why we hold in our prayers those Provinces, including the Church of England, who are still considering the Covenant. The Communion, and all it has the potential to be and become, under God, matters. Echoing St Paul, we affirm that we cannot say ‘We have no need of you’ (1 Cor 12:21). Rather, all of you, as partners covenanting to go forward in newness of life together, are ‘indispensable’ (v.22) to our own ability to grow in faithful obedience to what we believe is God’s vocation for all Anglicans, and ultimately towards the fullness of his vision for his One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Yours in the service of Christ

+Thabo Cape Town

To: His Grace, the Archbishop of Canterbury; cc: Primates of the Anglican Communion, Moderators of the United Churches

Note: ‘Eyeball-to-Eyeball Communion’, The Living Church, 17 June 2011, is available at <http://www.livingchurch.org/news/news-updates/2011/6/17/eyeball-to-eyeball-communion>, and carried below.

Eyeball-to-Eyeball Communion

“God has called us into communion in Jesus Christ,” says the opening phrase of the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant, quoting from St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (1:9), which later has much to say about what it means for us all to be members of the body of Christ, with Jesus as our head.

These images of one body, composed of many different “members,” are very powerful in the experience of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. It is probably true that we are the most diverse Anglican province. South Africa is hugely mixed — culturally, racially, linguistically and economically — and the province encompasses Angola, Lesotho,

Mozambique, Namibia, and Swaziland, as well as the Islands of St. Helena and Tristan da Cunha. Johannesburg has some of the richest suburbs anywhere on the planet, while Angola, Lesotho, Mozambique and Swaziland occupy four of the five lowest slots for life expectancy. Our prayer book appears in 13 languages, but these are just a fraction of the languages in our parishes and pews. And practically every imaginable expression of Anglicanism — high and low, so-called conservative and liberal, European and African — is found among us. We are a microcosm of the worldwide Communion.

Yet if you were to attend our Provincial Synod, you would find a remarkable sense of unity among us. We enjoy this oneness through the gift and grace of God. We are more than conscious of how countercultural and even miraculous this is, given the history we have been through. Not very long ago, South Africa was an apartheid state, oppressing the majority of its citizens and brutalizing its neighbors. Anglican chaplains served with its armed forces, even as they assaulted, occupied, or otherwise tyrannized Anglican parishioners and their communities.

Yet somehow we held together. Often we argued eyeball to eyeball, and in doing so, rather than turning our backs on one another, despite our differences, we were able to see Christ in one another. Even if I disagree on every theological and political and social and economic question, if I nonetheless recognize in the eyes of others — in the window into their soul — that they are my brothers or sisters in Christ, then I know that we belong together, within the same body that is his Church. We may be as mutually incomprehensible as hearing is to the eye, or smell to the ear, as St. Paul puts it, but we can still recognize that we have no choice: we are one in Christ. And without each other, the body is broken and our longing for healing, wholeness, and growth is wounded and shattered.

Now, you might well ask, what has all this to do with the Covenant? It seems to me that this is a way of expressing, on a global scale, what we have discovered within Southern Africa, about how Christians can, and must, live with almost unimaginable diversity. The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1886 and 1888 was right to point to local adaptation of the administration of the episcopate — and, with this, our expressions of Anglican life — in accordance with varying local needs. But my great concern is that the momentum this set in motion has not been matched with a similar determination to hold together through an increasing differentiation. Over the decades, we have grown too far apart — further apart than is holy, than is right, than is healthy for us or good for the mission of God's Church to the world with all its desperate needs for his good news and healing touch.

Perhaps the Covenant is not perfect — no human invention ever will be. But it is more than good enough. It has the potential to work well, if we are committed to making it do so. Conversely, no matter how good our texts or resolutions or shared statements, we also have the capacity to derail them all if we put our minds to it. What is at stake is this: are we prepared to live in mutuality, across our differences? Or do we demand the right to do our own thing, on our own terms, even though this fails to reflect the body-of-Christ communion life to which God calls us; and even though, in the longer term, this will damage our own ability to flourish?

Each part of the body fundamentally needs those parts which are wholly different, if we are to be whole. As St. Paul intimates, the eye may be frustrated with the hand; perhaps it cannot hit the target the eye sees clearly. But with practice eye and hand can learn to coordinate and achieve what neither could alone. To Covenant together is to affirm our commitment to strive for the body of Christ to be whole and healthy in this way. I support it. Won't you join me?

<http://www.livingchurch.org/news/news-updates/2011/6/17/eyeball-to-eyeball-communion>, posted on 17 June 2011.