

“Eyeball-to-Eyeball Communion”

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“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.