

To: Response to Draft Anglican Covenant
The Office of the General Convention
The Episcopal Church Center
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Comments on the Report of the Covenant Design Group

I submit these comments to the Office of the General Convention primarily on the basis of scholarship I have contributed over a period of thirty-five years on Victorian intellectual life, the history of the Church of England and religious thought in nineteenth-century England, and religious life at twentieth-century Oxford University.

Throughout these comments I use the term Anglican Churches understanding them to include the Church of England and churches whose liturgy and ecclesiology derive from the Church of England even though the term itself is not without problems.

The documents in the Report of the Covenant Design Group speak of “an authentic Anglicanism.” A great historian once described isms as “trouble breeding and usually thought obscuring” terms. That description would appear to apply to Anglicanism as much as to any other word ending in ism that seeks to describe wide varieties of opinion and experience under a single term. How is either “authentic” or “Anglicanism” to be defined or recognized in lived experience? The term “authentic” functions simply polemically to distinguish one mode of Anglicanism from other groups whose faith is implicitly implied to be “inauthentic.” “Authentic” has no substantial meaning in these documents. As applied to much of the history of the Church of England even the term Anglicanism is anachronistic being little used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Moreover in the past two centuries the term Anglican has as often as not served quarrelsome polemical purposes within the life of the English church and those derived from it rather than reflecting a substantial unity or essence. During the nineteenth century, for example, certain groups in the Church of England (usually Anglo-Catholics or high churchmen) used the term to distinguish themselves from evangelicals who they regarded as less than fully Anglican. (These same criticisms would apply had the document used the terms “orthodox Anglicanism,” which frequently appears in current press coverage of the Episcopal Church.)

Historically one of the great theological challenges for members and clergy of the Church of England and those churches that trace themselves to that church has been the absence of a single systematic Anglican theology. In this sense the English Church and those churches derivative of it differ from churches of the Lutheran and Reformed tradition. At best Anglican theologians can call upon a host of often sharply differing distinguished theological writers from the sixteenth century to the present. Consequently, even the idea of an “authentic Anglicanism” is virtually a non-starter if by the term is meant a systematic or genuinely coherent theology or even a systematic or coherent set of beliefs

on the part of either clergy or laity save those of the early creeds.

Both the Report of the Covenant Design Group, Introduction to the Draft Text of the Covenant, and the Draft Text for an Anglican Covenant are deeply flawed in concept, rhetoric, and content. At a time when the Anglican Communion, an entity never clearly defined in these documents, already stands in turmoil, these documents hold the promise not only of further immediate conflict between those churches of the communion who accept or reject the documents but also for future confusion and conflict for those churches of the communion who accept the documents. In the case of the latter, the acceptance of these documents, and most particularly the proposed Covenant, will commence an ongoing process of interminable cleansing of those churches and groups who will be adjudged to be unfaithful to the Covenant. The current troubles of the Anglican Communion will thus simply mark the beginning of a long time of troubles and consequent diminishment of Christian witness.

It is unclear how during a moment that the report of the Covenant Design Group describes as one which requires a restoration of trust the writing of a historically unprecedented covenant based on contentious (and often vague) readings of scripture, tradition, and Christian history would serve that purpose. The process itself, wholly novel, must by its very nature generate distrust. The Covenant Design Group report does not in any detail describe its own processes, nor does it offer to make the record of its discussions open to the independent churches of the Anglican Communion or to individual parishes. Moreover, the actual purpose of the proposed covenant is clearly not meant to be inclusive but rather to exclude churches on the basis of undefined majoritarian decisions arising from undefined procedures as explained in Section (5) 1 of "Each Church commits itself."

During a period of conflict and distrust a covenant cannot define a long-existing self-perception of Anglicanism but rather can only enunciate a new, unprecedented, previously unarticulated self-perception intended to be held in the future by portions of the communion at the expense of other portions. In this respect item (6) under "Each Church commits itself" is in reality the single operative clause in the proposed Covenant. It and the Covenant as a whole are designed to exclude churches whose views do not fall under the majoritarian rulings of the Anglican Communion, an entity which as already stated is itself not very clearly defined. It is unclear who would decide a church had relinquished itself from the force of the covenant, under what procedures, and under what conditions. Certainly in a church with episcopal ecclesiastical structures the violation of the boundaries of a diocese would presumably count for such a relinquishment. This document proposing a new Covenant remains remarkably quiet on longstanding and previously universally recognized principles of ecclesiology and diocesan authority.

Ironically, this clause (6) will cause as much difficulty to churches that adhere to this novel Covenant as those who do not. The clause will become the vehicle of ongoing evictions and self-purification of the Anglican Churches of the Covenant. The clause thus in and of itself undermines the assertion that the Covenant is to be a vehicle of community. One issue after another will arise in which the majority will exclude other Anglican Churches from the new, presumably "authentic Anglican" ecclesiastical entity that will arise as a result of the adoption of the Covenant.

No doubt much of the rhetoric of the three documents is well intentioned, but there is a florid quality

to much of the prose, which will to many, possibly most readers, appear incomprehensible. For example in the introduction to the Draft Text, one sentence reads (in part), “Recognizing the wonder, beauty and challenge of maintaining communion. . .” What is the meaning of such wording? What is its use? Throughout the documents there is what can only be regarded as an indeterminateness of prose that seems either silly or confusing. To be sure, the documents are ecclesiastical documents but the rhetoric is overly “churchy,” which is to say comprehensible to only a small group of people within any of the churches at present associated with the Anglican Communion. Certainly most laity will find the language off-putting, difficult to share with anyone outside their particular church or parish, and even more difficult to explain. One could argue (though this response is not the place) that much of the present turmoil among churches in the Anglican Communion has arisen from use of such language for the sake of possible politeness, but with the result of confusion and anger.

At other points the documents display conceptual confusion and a deeply flawed understanding (if not outright ignorance) of the history of the Christian Church over the century and of those churches whose life and witness originates in or derives from the Church of England. For example, the introduction states, “Our faith embodies a coherent testimony to what we have received from God’s Word and the Church’s long-standing witness; . . .” It is unclear what is meant by “a coherent testimony.” Does this mean a systematic theology or a body of recognized theology? For better or for worse neither has ever really existed in the Church of England and those churches derivative from it. Furthermore, Anglican churches, as well as other Christian churches, in point of fact are now and ever have been quite selective in their reading of God’s Word, which in this context presumably means the Bible, rather than the incarnate Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. Does the term “Church” in this sentence mean the historic churches associated with the Christian faith or does it mean the several churches of the Anglican Communion? What is meant by “the Church’s long-standing witness”? Indeed as the most elementary history of Christian doctrine demonstrates, there have across the centuries indeed across the decades of any given century been changes in the character, content, and direction of that witness.

The Report states “What is to be offered in the Covenant is not the invention of a new way of being Anglican, but a fresh restatement and assertion of the faith which we as Anglicans have received, and a commitment to inter-dependent life such as always in theory at least been given recognition.” Certainly this statement is incorrect if not self-consciously disingenuous. To assert the Covenant is not new does not make such the case. First, there is no precedent for being an Anglican under a Covenant. Second, virtually every radical movement of change in Christian doctrine or ecclesiology has presented itself as a restoration or return to allegedly authentic sources. Such was true not only of radical Christian groups in the Middle Ages and the Reformation era but also of evangelical Anglicans in the eighteenth century and Anglo-Catholic Anglicans in the nineteenth each of which held the other in contempt. Third, it is quite unclear when “a commitment to inter-dependent life” came to have recognition. It has not been “always in theory.” At the first Lambeth Council numerous English bishops refrained from attending, and the Dean of Westminster refused those who did attend permission to gather in Westminster Abbey because the gathering represented only various groups in the Anglican Churches and by no means intended to embrace all.

There is a very troubling absence of discussion in these documents as to who would be expected to subscribe to the Covenant. Would it apply to churches collectively? Would individual parishes be

expected to subscribe? Would individual members of parishes be expected to subscribe? Would the Covenant become a part of the liturgy of worship, as is the Nicene Creed? Would persons baptized in churches subscribing to the Covenant be expected to subscribe later in life or would the Covenant be regarded as part of the baptismal vows? Would individual clergy be expected to subscribe to the Covenant at the time of ordination? Would clergy who had subscribed at the time of ordination be permitted to re-interpret the meaning of their original subscription? Would they be expected to re-subscribe at certain points in their subsequent ministry to assure their ongoing adherence to “authentic Anglicanism”? Would clergy ordained at present who do not on grounds of conscience subscribe to one or more parts of the Covenant be deprived of their parishes or of their clerical standing?

It must be noted that in these documents which repeatedly make reference to various kinds of deference to biblical authority, there exists a remarkably naive approach to the Bible. Throughout the present documents references to certain passages of scripture are cited in parenthesis as if self-explanatory and as necessarily subject to the same interpretation by all readers. The history of the Anglican Churches individually and collectively as well as of the Christian churches across the centuries stands as a contradiction to such assumptions. Furthermore, histories of the development of Christian doctrine, collections of historic creeds of Christian churches, histories of biblical interpretation and commentary since the patristic age indicate that the reading and interpretation of Scripture has been an ongoing project often understood by Anglican and other commentators as a mode of progressive revelation. Item 5 of the section “The Life We Share” indicates both ignorance and profound indifference to the history of the Church of England. This section seeks to give authoritative, almost creedal, standing to The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Both documents arose from the midst of deadly interchristian conflict. Both were designed to exclude people from the English Church and from institutions such as the English Universities dominated by the English Church. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer was part of a larger English restoration brought about by an English Army and further was part of a broader set of legislation that led to the split of English Christendom not only between Roman Catholics and Protestants but also between the Church of England and English Non-conformity. For over a hundred and fifty years both English Protestant Nonconformists and English Roman Catholics labored under civil disabilities related to the Restoration settlement and its aftermath. Moreover, the adoption of the 1662 Prayer book was followed by centuries of debate over the meaning of its liturgy and sacraments. Perhaps most relevant is the destructive nineteenth-century debate over the meaning of baptismal regeneration.

It is remarkable that the drafters of the proposed covenant would appeal to the Thirty-Nine Articles adopted in 1562 as a fundamental element of the Elizabethan religious settlement. It is the most commonplace of truisms about the history of the Church of England that the Thirty-Nine Articles, themselves the product of a political negotiation between bishops and Queen Elizabeth I, sowed discord and confusion. So great was that discord that by 1865 Parliament without significant opposition within the Church of England changed the grounds of subscription. By that point no one knew whether bishops and ordinands meant the same thing when one subscribed to the articles and the other accepted that subscription. Others in the 1860s believed they could not in good conscience subscribe to parts of the Articles that they understood to be scientifically or historically invalid. Historically subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles applied to clergy and to students and faculty

at Oxford and Cambridge. Subscription by parishioners was not required or assumed. It is unclear in the present document who would actually be expected to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles and in what manner. It is also unclear who would determine how the meaning of the Thirty-Nine Articles is to be ascertained. That issue, of course, sharply divided the Victorian Church of England as well as the English Church during other eras.

There are, however, even further difficulties posed by the appeal to the Thirty-Nine Articles. Do those proposing the Covenant actually wish to affirm Article 35 “Of the Homilies” and thus to urge the reading of the Second Book of Homilies in the churches? Do the proposers of the Covenant wish to affirm capital punishment as affirmed in Article 37? Do the proposers wish to embrace the general hostility to Roman Catholicism that exists in both the Articles and the Book of Homilies?

In the next section of the Draft Covenant there appears the term “our loyalty to this inheritance of faith” pointing to those documents in the previous section which were first and foremost political statements. It is significant that more emphasis is placed on these political statements than any of the historic creeds of the church, which are conspicuous by the little emphasis they receive in this document.

The Draft Covenant Section 4 speaks of the “life of the whole gospel.” It does not define the meaning of “whole gospel,” but in later sections it is clear that whatever the “whole gospel” may mean in the Covenant, it does not embrace all opinions or modes of faithfulness to the gospel. The documents say nothing about how the whole gospel is to be discerned, recognized, or experienced. Historically the meaning of “the whole gospel” has been sharply, destructively debated in the English Church with different meanings coming to the fore in different eras and among different groups, such as evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics, in the same era. There is little reason to believe a single conclusion or definition will emerge in the present day.

The section “In seeking to be faithful. . .” represents a novel assertion of clericalism that is not unprecedented in Anglican history but rarely associated with any period of successful witness. Much in this section remains very vague and confusing such as the term “biblically derived moral values.” It is a matter of historical record that the text of the Old Testament contains numerous stories, characters, rituals, and examples of actions then regarded as heroic and godly that would hardly be seen as a source of good moral values. Yet they have been used as such.

It is unclear what is meant by “synods” as sources of biblical interpretation. Here again clerical majoritarianism comes to the fore in the document. With all due respect to the episcopate, there is no reason to believe that bishops as bishops are better qualified to interpret scripture than other clergy or informed laity. One can only wonder how many of the bishops across the churches of the Anglican Communion are actually fluent in the relevant ancient languages. The draft also speaks of ensuring “that biblical texts are handled faithfully, respectfully, comprehensively and coherently.” Accusations that these qualities were lacking marked all of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century assaults on the emergence of modern biblical scholarship in the English Church from *Essay and Reviews* (1860) to *Lux Mundi* (1890) to *Foundations* (1912) as well as to the writings of bishops such as John A. T. Robinson, David Jenkins, and John Shelby Spong. Furthermore “our best scholarship” is again a meaningless phrase that will in point of fact come simply to mean the scholarship of those

with whom a majority of the bishops or other synodical authorities agree. There is a long history in the Church of England itself of the persecution legal and otherwise of new improved scholarship. One need only look at the assault on biblical criticism in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as the effort to slow the acceptance of new scientific knowledge.

In the Draft Covenant Section 3 (4) the term “prophetic and faithful leadership and ministry” appear. Prophetic ministries from the time of the Hebrew Prophets through the ministry of John Wesley and John Henry Newman in the Church of England have traditionally encountered difficulty and have challenged established ecclesiastical and theological authority. It is just such authority that the Draft Covenant would seek to impose and would therefore by its very nature and enforcement smother prophetic ministry. Indeed there are those in the world of the Anglican Churches who believe the efforts to establish the Covenant is itself an effort to halt prophetic changes at work today the churches. The Covenant would similarly stifle efforts approved in Section 2 (1) to “proclaim afresh” the faith. The term “afresh “ suggests a mode of proclamation that might change over time and circumstances reflecting changes in theology as well as historical and scientific knowledge and understanding. There exist very distinct differences in ecclesiology within the various churches or provinces that have hitherto modestly cooperated in the Anglican Communion. It must be recognized that the present documents are far more clerical and episcopal than many of the churches in the communion and certainly than many of the laity. Indeed the absence and even contempt for consulting the laity resonates throughout these documents.

This clericalism as the clericalism of the historical documents to which deference is asked reflects an age in which the laity of the Anglican Churches were overwhelmingly illiterate. Clericalism is incompatible with widespread education, critical thinking, and free flow of information. The clericalism of these documents if somehow affirmed will lead to much conflict within the individual churches and individual parishes. Traditionally one has assumed that members of parishes in the Church of England and its derivative churches were thinking people. These documents would appear to be apprehensive of freedom of thought, criticism, and exploration of Christian history, theology, and witness.

One final point should be noted. The entire effort to produce a Covenant will in all likelihood over the course of time lead to a profound skepticism regarding the Christian faith and the validity of the Anglican Churches as exemplars of the Christian faith. Young people in the churches will come to doubt whether theirs is part of the true Christian Church or part of an “authentic” Anglican tradition. Assuming the emphasis on the Thirty-Nine Articles, the 1662 Prayerbook, and a particular narrow reading of the Bible are taken seriously and enforced, laity of the Anglican Churches will come to see their church as at odds with modern science, modern historical knowledge, and modern ethics. Such a situation breeding personal religious doubt and skepticism has persistently been the case over the past two centuries in the English and other churches when alleged orthodoxy has been championed over progressing knowledge, knowledge which numerous late Victorian theologians in the Church of England regarded as manifestations of the Holy Spirit. The churches of the Anglican Communion do not dwell outside history and historical development. If they seek to place themselves outside these forces, they will become the victims and relics of history as the realization of Christian faith and discipleship and the expansion of Christian communion move forward.