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Some Thoughts on the Anglican Covenant

On the 21st April 2012 the Synod of the Diocese of Christchurch debated a motion seeking support for the Anglican Communion Covenant. After much debate the vote passed in the house of laity but was lost in the house of clergy. Thus Christchurch became the fourth Pakeha diocese out of seven to reject the Covenant as it currently stands. With Tikanga Maori having also rejected the Covenant it is now difficult to see it gaining assent in the forthcoming General Synod in July.

All this has come about because of a division within the communion precipitated by the consecrating in 2003 of a bishop in The Episcopal Church (TEC) in the United States who was in a partnered homosexual relationship. Not surprisingly many in the communion objected to such a unilateral, not to mention controversial, move as being in direct contravention of Lambeth 1.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference which affirmed, among other things, that the church rejects homosexual practices as being incompatible with scripture. Much has been said and done since that time that has both benefited and harmed Communion ties, the so called 'bonds of affection' that hold the Communion together. With things rapidly falling apart the Archbishop of Canterbury commissioned a report on the whole issue to help plot a way forward. This Commission produced what was called the Windsor Report and out of that report the idea of a Communion wide covenant was promoted. And so today many dioceses and provinces are voting on whether to accept this proposed Covenant or not.

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One might wonder why all this fuss about a covenant in the first place? Why do we even need one? Have we not the scriptures, the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion and the Book of Common Prayer, not to mention the so called instruments of unity, to guide us and help sort out our differences? Well, yes we do have those things, but they don't appear to be working how they ought to. This is mainly because the

church is divided at a most profound level, one group doesn't believe the scriptures, the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion, or the Book of Common Prayer have any real relevance for us today, especially when it comes to moral and ethical issues, while another group doesn't believe that an institutional response like a Communion wide covenant is going to solve anything!

What has been interesting is the way that evangelicals have voted on this issue, while some are pro the covenant there are others who are against it, though it has to be said those evangelicals who are against it, are against it for very different reasons than those of a more liberal persuasion. Those who are for it would say that we have to keep the dialogue over the issues that divide the Communion going, while those who are against it say that the time for talking is over, and action has to be taken to deal with the issues. But precisely what action should be taken, and by whom? The Anglican Covenant was supposed to have provided a mechanism for such action to take place but it is now doubtful that enough of the Communion's 38 provinces will adopt it for it to be effective, especially since the Covenant didn't even get the required amount of assent for it to be put to the General Synod of the Church of England, and what's the point of a covenant that doesn't include the C of E?

To complicate things, moves are afoot in other parts of the Communion that may have a profound effect on the Communion as a whole. Back in 2008 twelve hundred Anglican bishops, clergy and lay leaders, including ten from New Zealand, gathered in Jerusalem for the inaugural Global Anglican Future Conference, or Gafcon as it is known. Out of this meeting came two things: the first was a declaration of the faith of the Church along orthodox, biblical lines — the Jerusalem Declaration; and second was the setting up of an organisation to foster links

between like minded Anglicans from around the Communion — the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans (FCA), which encompasses all Anglicans of an orthodox persuasion, whether evangelical, charismatic, anglo catholic, or reformed. It has to be said that this meeting of global Anglican leaders represented more than two thirds of Communion members so cannot afford to be written off as inconsequential.

This has since been followed up by a meeting of two hundred of the same leaders in London, England, in late April of this year, including two bishops and three clergy from our own province, to plan for a second Gafcon conference to be held in May of 2013. In his opening address to the conference Archbishop Eliud Wabukala of Kenya said of the Communion's present problems that 'the heart of the crisis we face is not institutional, but spiritual', and indeed it is, for if the problem were merely an institutional one then the Covenant may have had a real chance of success. As it is it seems that it has been fatally wounded, if it is not dead in the water already.

So... clear lines have been drawn. On the one hand we have TEC and their supporters with a progressive liberal agenda, and on the other we have Gafcon/FCA and their call for a return to biblical orthodoxy. Would the Covenant have had any real chance of bringing them together? Maybe, but we'll never know for sure. What we can know for sure is that the actions of a very small province of the Anglican Communion has forever altered the face of global Anglicanism. They may have their supporters in the Western church, but there are also many who are wary of their intentions, and more still who are utterly opposed to what TEC has done.

If the answer then is not an institutional one then what can we do about it at a local level in our part of the world? The first thing we must do is always act in obedience to what the Lord requires of us, in humble submission to his Word and his Holy Spirit. Our life together as Christians is not a matter of following our dreams and feelings as those are merely subjective. What we must do is be true to Jesus Christ and remember that we do not live for ourselves but for his glory. If the scriptures teach us anything

they teach us that God is faithful to those who keep his commandments and decrees, and those who are not he leaves to their own desires, leaving them to reap the inevitable consequences their actions have sown.

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The second thing we can do is to keep on preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to those around us, and to continue to teach the scriptures to the faithful so that we do not lose our way as some have done already. Continuing to meet together for fellowship and teaching is vital too, not just in our local communities but in wider networks such as offered by the Latimer Fellowship and, in Auckland, Anglican Mainstream and through the Affirm network. Support for mission and evangelism agencies, as they seek to maintain a biblical witness both nationally and internationally, has also to be a vital part of our continuing witness to the world of the validity of Christ's death and resurrection.

Despite the possible failure of the Anglican Covenant, Anglicanism is not dead but it is going through some troubled times, but by God's grace it will prosper again, provided we remain faithful to our calling to be true to his Word and not succumb to the temptations and pressures of the world around us. It may well be that the Gafcon movement and the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans holds the key to keeping the Communion together, providing Communion partners with a mechanism to ensure collegial ongoing mission in the knowledge that we have a shared faith and orthodoxy along with the rest of the Christian world.