

Ecclesial Reconciliation and the Anglican Covenant Agreement

Between April of 1994 and November of 1995, ten Churches signed what is known as, The Porvoo Common Statement with the Porvoo Agreement (<http://www.porvoochurches.org/intro.htm>). The commendation and signing of the Agreement was the end result of discussions between official representatives of four Anglican Churches and eight Nordic and Baltic Churches that took place from 1989-1992. The Churches involved included the Churches of England and Ireland, the Church in Wales and the Episcopal Church of Scotland, together with the Churches of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, and the Evangelical-Lutheran Churches of Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia and Lithuania. According to the Common Statement, "acceptance of agreement by the signatory churches means that for the first time the Anglican Churches in Britain and Ireland have now moved into visible communion with other national Churches in Europe." The purpose of the Common Statement was to "draw the Churches involved into a new and closer relationship for the sake of greater unity and more effective mission."

The potential for witness to ecclesial reconciliation is at first glance, significant. All of the Churches involved share in substantial agreement in doctrine and faith. They also share in a common understanding of ministry and sacraments and thus these elements of church life are in fact, interchangeable. The latter of these certainly points to the possibility of a greater degree of communion than for instance, do other ecumenical statements such as those of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. But a question still remains as to the sufficiency of an ecumenical agreement such as that of Porvoo in achieving its purposes of "greater unity and more effective mission." This question has most recently been brought to bear by the Church of England's response to the Church of Sweden's decision to authorize rites for blessing same-sex unions (both Churches are members of the Anglican Communion, included on the Anglican Consultative Council [ACC] schedule). I quote at length the response of The Council for Christian Unity and the Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England:

[The Church of England Archbishops' Council joint response by The Council for Christian Unity and The Faith and Order Advisory Group (hereafter referred to as the CoE AC) felt that the proposal [Porvoo], relating as it does to the wider cultural, political and social situation, raises important ecclesiological questions about the relationship of Church and society and the essential freedom that the Church possesses to order its life according to the Gospel. From a Church of England perspective it is vital for the Church to maintain a critical distance from the state and to resist what the state is doing if this is at odds with Scripture and the Catholic tradition. We recognize of course that it is easier to state this principle than to be clear how in any given situation particular churches make decisions in communion with the Church down the ages and across the world after prayer, under the guidance of the Spirit and on the basis of the study of Scripture.

This is one of the reasons why we had hoped that the Porvoo agreement would enable participating churches to assist each other in living the Catholic spirit as they face the pressures of changing social values in their own societies ... *we fear that the present developments [authorizing rites for the blessing of same-sex unions] may indicate a real weakness in the Porvoo agreement as it did not involve binding mutual consultation and joint decision-making.* (HYPERLINK "<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/ccu/europe/notices/replytoabsweeden.pdf>" <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/ccu/europe/notices/replytoabsweeden.pdf>)

Herein lies the true crux of the issue with respect to ecumenism and ecclesial reconciliation in general, illuminated here by this particular exchange of events: without structures in place with the authority for ordering the common practices of member Churches, the thin veneer of unity achieved merely masks a more fundamental autonomy. If history is any indicator (as I would most certainly argue it is!), then the result of autonomous decision making (such as that displayed by the Church of Sweden) is – as Samuel Hugh Moffett concludes in examining why the Eastern Church (Asia) “came so perilously close to utter failure [as one might suggest of mainline Churches in Western Europe and North America at present]” – indicative of Churches that have compromised their evangelistic and missionary priorities to preserve themselves out of fear for individual survival. The inward-looking nationalist Church succumbs to syncretism, is absorbed into the surrounding culture, and is left with nothing to proclaim that is not simply an affirmation of its surrounding culture. Such a Church has no mission and thus has no use (see: Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia Volume I: Beginnings to 1500*, Orbis Books, 2008, particularly concluding pages 503-9).

This particular exchange reiterates and confirms in quite pointed fashion, a reality of the Anglican Communion at present. We have no structural means of sustaining our current relationships when there is disagreement, as there always is, let alone engaging in efforts of reconciliation with the wider Christian Church (including Churches of the Porvoo Agreement and any like arrangements) as two Churches are making the social transition of coming together as one. In this light, any relationships we might wish to establish with Churches not on the ACC schedule will, as demonstrated by two Churches on the ACC schedule (!), at the least be impaired, but more likely simply disintegrate instead.

Although the exchange cited here between the Church of Sweden and the Church of England is most unfortunate, it does raise the issue of our potential, as a whole Church, for moving forward in the wider context of our ecumenical relationships. This is indeed most pertinent to a given document before us as members of the Anglican Communion and for the purposes of this paper, as those who might seek membership in its communion of Churches: The Anglican Covenant Agreement; and in particular, section 4 of this document. Below I will provide a quick summary of the first three sections of the Covenant Agreement that illuminate the means by which such a document responds both to the claims of closer fellowship, transformation, unity and mission articulated in the Porvoo documents and to the concerns expressed by the Church of England in response to the actions of the Church of Sweden’s decision to authorize rites for same-sex blessings that by implication, affect our ecumenical relationships. I will then suggest how Section 4 of the Covenant Agreement could have provided a means for a more fruitful and faithful response to Christ’s call to unity and mission (John 17:17-23).

The Covenant Agreement opens with the following passage from Scripture which is then filled out in paragraphs 1-8 of the introduction:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life. This life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:2-4)

This passage echoes John 16:7-13. It indicates is that the Covenant Agreement is first and foremost articulating a reality, a metaphysic of order already given in God's own self: the communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This order into which Churches of the Communion are being called is therefore a 'transformative' reality as the body of Christ, the Church, extends through time. According to this statement, what will be presented in the Covenant is not a call to adhere to juridically authoritative structures or to confessional statements. Rather it is a willingness to engage and so be transformed by relationships characterized by discernment of "the word of life" so that all that has been "seen and heard" about the life, death and resurrection of Christ might be declared, in order that all might first come to know God himself and then through this understanding, discern God's purpose for his people.

Section 1 describes the "inheritance of faith" received and asks that each Church signing on to the Covenant be willing to recognize this shared understanding of the faith and the means of sharing it. For example, paragraph 1.1.7 asks that a signatory affirm "the shared patterns of our common prayer and liturgy which form, sustain and nourish our worship of God and our faith and life together." Paragraphs 1.2.1 and 1.2.2 establish Scripture as the subject of the "catholic and apostolic faith, order and tradition, as received by the Churches of the Anglican Communion," as the means of being transformed and so witnessing to God's own life. Paragraph 1.2.1 establishes the first broad call to limitation on this process of discernment asking each Church to be "mindful of the common councils of the Communion and our ecumenical agreements." And paragraphs 1.2.4, 1.2.5 and 1.2.8 characterize the process of discernment, and the requirement to be mindful of our relationships with other Churches in our processes of discernment, as necessitating rigorous study and sacrificial witness in order that the whole body of Christ might be "set free to receive new and abundant life in the Lord Jesus Christ" (1.2.8).

Section 2 identifies the Church's purpose as taking on the shape of Christ's own life and death, in order that the Church, by imitating God's own nature might be "both a sign of God's reign in the Holy Spirit and the first fruits in the world of God's redemption in Christ" (2.1.1). Paragraph 2.2.2 identifies that the Church participates in God's reconciling work by submitting "in humility to constant repentance" for the Church's failures to live according to Christ's own life and death. It is through this 'posture of repentance,' characterized in section 1, that Christ's gathering mission is fulfilled as "each Church [living interdependently] is joined with others in Christ in the work of establishing God's reign" (2.1.4). And it is through living according to the demands required in assuming common life that the Covenant Agreement asks that each Church consider how its understanding of the faith and subsequent decision making affects the Communion's vocation of "common mission ... shared with other Churches and traditions beyond the Covenant" in which Covenanting Churches are called to "embrace opportunities for the discovery of the life of the whole gospel, and for reconciliation and shared mission with the Church throughout the world ... [through affirming] the ecumenical vocation of Anglicanism to the full visible unity of the Church in accordance with Christ's prayer that 'all may be one'" (2.1.5).

Section 3 begins to define more explicitly how communion limits the autonomy of individual Churches to that which preserves the common good (the mind of the whole

Church – implicit in the concerned response of the Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England to the Church of Sweden). This common good rests in God’s order of providing ecclesial structures through which the world might see God’s reconciling work in history. And thus through this order, people might be gathered into Christ and so come to understand their own purpose in his world. The means for strengthening the Communion’s current structures for the purpose described are laid out in Section 3. This section calls each Church to interdependent life in the discernment of Scripture through willing consent to decisions made in councils, study, prayer, charitable discussion and a willingness to enter into and “see through” mediated discussion concerning disputed matters (3.2.1 - 3.2.6).

Section 4 is perhaps the most contentious section for those who would prefer a relationship with stronger sanctions for failures to abide by particular standards of faith, and for those who would prefer a greater degree of autonomy in practicing their faith. This section makes explicit that ‘interdependent’ life requires limitation of a Church’s individual will. Each covenanting Church must be, upon signing the Covenant, willing to subject its decision-making about what constitutes faithful practices to the discernment of the whole Communion and then be willing to live according to that agreement (4.1.1 - 4.1.3).

It is, however, paragraph 4.1.5, that provides the most unique, yet contentious and challenging opportunity for reconciliation with other Christian Churches. *It is thus here that I will ask the reader to engage with me in a hypothetical exercise meant to suggest the value of retaining the present text of section four of the Covenant Agreement.* Section 2 has made repentance and reconciliation between members of the Communion and between the Communion and the wider Christian Church foundational to the communion life framed by the Covenant Agreement. Paragraphs 4.1.4 and 4.1.5 make that potential an explicit reality by articulating the faith and relationships to which a signatory Church would need to agree and then by leaving the term ‘Church’ undefined so as to open this calling to relationship to any Church (not currently on the ACC schedule i.e. some of the Porvoo member Churches) willing to order their structures in accordance with Anglican polity and practices as defined by the Covenant Agreement. This would enable each covenanting Church to participate in the common discernment and decision-making practices of the Communion; but also, would require that each Church share in equal accountability for upholding the decisions of the whole Church. It was in fact precisely this matter of ‘interdependent life’ that was deemed missing from the relationship between the Porvoo Churches – both Churches on the ACC schedule and those not on the schedule. A matter that has led the CoE AC to conclude that, “present developments [authorizing rites for the blessing of same-sex unions] may indicate a real weakness in the Porvoo agreement as it did not involve binding mutual consultation and joint decision-making.” While this structural weakness was exposed in the exchange between two Churches on the ACC schedule (England and Sweden), the Porvoo Statement’s weakness is applicable for maintaining the relationship of all the Churches involved.

In view of this structural weakness, some potential strengths of the current text of the Covenant Agreement are brought to light that are also pertinent for reconciliatory efforts with our ecumenical partners. If we assume the Covenant Agreement had been in place at the beginning of the Porvoo discussions, then the Covenant text’s use of the term

‘Churches,’ would have enabled each Porvoo Church not on the ACC schedule, to request membership with all covenanting Churches of the Anglican Communion. Given the agreements in ministry, sacraments and polity presented in the Porvoo documents, these Churches would most likely have been strong candidates for membership. The Covenant would have made clear with whom the Churches were in relationship, it would have clarified the expectations and responsibilities of maintaining those relationships, and it would have provided the moral and spiritual authority to take concrete actions in maintaining those relationships.

Indeed the Covenant Agreement would have offered an opportunity for all Churches, including our ecumenical partners, to willingly enter into a relationship that has proved in hindsight, necessary for true reconciliation and I would posit, for deeper transformation and conversion of both Churches. Optimally, given that Churches would have willingly entered into an agreed upon means of ordering their lives for the common good, Section four could have provided strong incentive for the Church of Sweden to refrain from making a decision contrary to that of the Anglican Communion; as it stands however, the Church of Sweden can arguably claim that the Communion’s decisions have no binding authority on its practices (as have the Episcopal Church and several dioceses within the Anglican Church of Canada). Even were the Church of Sweden – as a hypothetical signatory Church having willingly chosen to enter into known covenant with other covenanting Churches of the Communion – to have made such a contrary decision, section four would have provided the practical means and moral and spiritual authority of implementing a response through direction and discipline.

I would further suggest that the relationship offered by the Covenant Agreement – of reconciliation and witness – differs from that presented by current ecumenical statements and particularly the Porvoo statement in two ways. 1) The articulation of agreement is not an ‘ideal’ based on a false concept of *koinonia* (one in which Churches do not come together in a council with the authority – albeit moral and spiritual in the case of Anglicanism – to make decisions to which they willingly consent); rather it is a concrete reality and it is – once members begin to sign on – a reality of practices to which those signatories to the Covenant shall willingly agree. 2) The Covenant Agreement necessitates a ‘posture of repentance’ (Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, Eerdmans, 1998) by limiting the expression of individual will in Scriptural discernment, decision-making and ecclesial practices as they pertain both to Covenanting Churches and to Churches of the wider Christian community, for the purpose of witnessing to Christ’s own work and understanding how the Church is called to respond to God’s purpose for it.

I believe the Covenant Agreement could have offered the Porvoo Churches the opportunity to enter into relationships that would have proved transformative by drawing all the Churches into a constant common discernment of Scripture wherein consent to decisions made by the whole covenanting body of Churches would submit the life of those Churches to the Holy Spirit’s quickening as Christ’s own body extends through time. I would suggest that the Covenant would have been a more effective means of achieving deeper unity thereby enabling more effective mission. Finally, I posit that the Covenant Agreement is a gift (as other Churches have their own gifts), that *today* offers the possibility for a more faithful and fruitful response to Jesus’ prayer for our reconciliation with one another and with the wider Christian Church. I would exhort us to

heed the implications of the case laid out in this paper and so to begin, as Churches of the Communion, and as those with whom we are closely tied, to sign onto the Covenant Agreement. While sections 1-3 have already been agreed to by Churches of the Communion, I would suggest, as articulated by Dr. Ephraim Radner (<http://www.anglicancommunioninstitute.com/2009/05/the-wisdom-of-the-cross-some-reflections-on-acc-14-and-the-anglican-covenant/>), that Churches also sign on to an “in principle acceptance of section four” which would allow Churches to retain the potential of the current Covenant, but also to make amendments if suggestions are made over the coming year that are deemed mutually acceptable to Churches that have already signed onto the Covenant.

The Covenant in its current text offers the hope and practical means by which, should other Churches recognize Jesus Christ in the midst of the covenanted body of Churches, they too might engage in such a communion. And if they do not recognize Christ amongst these covenanting Churches, perhaps they might provoke these Churches to examine whether their practices have truly been shaped by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Although not explicitly stated in the Covenant Agreement text, the life to which covenanting Churches are called is one that necessitates the virtues of patience, humility, endurance, perseverance, charity, and self sacrifice (love). It is through this reality of concrete relationships – both internal and external – that the Covenant Agreement provides a transformative reality to the wider Christian Church. And this transformative reality is one around and through which Churches might become an anticipatory sign of God’s reconciling work in history.

Most gracious God, we humbly beseech thee for thy holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth; in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where any thing is amiss, reform it; where it is right, strengthen and confirm it; where it is in want, furnish it; where it is divided and rent asunder, make it whole again; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In Christ,

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