

Patterns of Anglican Ecclesiology: Does the Anglican Covenant Fit?

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This paper was written at the request on the College for Bishops for the spring meeting of the House of Bishops at Kanuga in March 2011. It is not intended to be a position paper, but as a resource to stimulate conversation.

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What I have been asked to do launch this morning's conversation on the Anglican Covenant and to do so by making some connections between the Covenant and the broad sweep of Anglican ecclesiology (-ies).

Let me begin by inviting you to imagine a mobile, perhaps hanging over the crib of your child or, for many of us, over the crib of a grandchild. Imagine that of the many small dangles that fall from it, there are four prominent ones, each with a name: ecclesiology, baptism, holy orders, and eucharist. Watching the mobile, you soon discover that if you yank on one of the dangles, the others immediately begin to dance as well. They always move together and any shifting of one, however gently, creates discernible movement in all the others. You discover that movement begets movement; change causes change.

The mobile is an important image for church because it reminds us that the life of the church is richly organic and that any theology that makes sense to us, any apologia for our life together that we are likely to find persuasive and satisfying, will be internally generative and will be endlessly interconnected. Hold that image and perhaps it will become more useful as we go along.

Second, it is important to consider how ecclesiology and polity relate to each other. In everyday discourse, it seems that we use the two terms nearly synonymously. I believe we should distinguish between them. Ecclesiology is the

theological framework that contains those things – in the scriptures, in the tradition, and in the experience of the church, about which the church is persuaded. In the Anglican tradition, for example, we are persuaded that bishops are essential. At the same time we recognize that some aspects of episcopal ministry, known to the great tradition, are not persuasive to us. In contrast, we find comparatively little in the scriptures, almost nothing in the tradition, and from the standpoint of experience mostly painful laments, about the role of the laity in the leadership and governance of the body for most of church history. But as Episcopalians we have long been persuaded that hearing the voices of the whole church, and giving those voices the gift of authority, are hallmarks of our ecclesial identity. It seems good to recall that since the middle of the 16th century, the supreme governor of the Church of England has been a layperson.

Ecclesiology, then, concerns those things regarding the church about which we are persuaded. Polity, by contrast, is the practical embodiment of that ecclesiology; the working out formally in constitutions, canons, and policies, and informally, in customs, practices, and ethos, those things of which we are persuaded. What that means, of course, is that every change we make to our churchwide or diocesan canons, every time we enact a new policy, every time we subscribe to a formulation like the quadrilateral, every time we enter into an official ecumenical agreement, or consider signing on to a covenant, we are setting the mobile in motion. However gently we push the mobile of our polity, we nuance, if not downright change, our ecclesiology, together with all of the other things that dance in its orbit. I say that without judgment. It is neither a good nor a bad thing; it just is. I do not believe ecclesiology and polity are quite

the same thing, but they are organically related and to change one is to almost surely change the other.

Let me hasten to say that I do not intend that point to be an argument in favor of a static understanding of ecclesiology that must be protected from the relentless encroachments of the canonists. Quite the contrary. Some of us, I suspect, would argue for a hierarchy of sorts between our received ecclesiology and how it gets embodied in polity. I would argue that the relationship between the two is non-hierarchical and organic. What we need to remind ourselves of is not that one – ecclesiology -- comes first as the judge of the other -- polity, but rather that while different, the two are inextricably related and interactive. While I have a native prejudice in favor of getting theory sorted out in advance of practical application, there are times, as counterintuitive as this sounds, that it is impossible to know what the questions are until such time as the answers begin to come into focus. Sometimes, quite simply, we must act -- to solve a problem, redress an injustice, or to venture boldly where we have not gone before, animated by the Spirit's leading, because we are persuaded that it is the right thing to do, possessed with inherent dignity. Only after taking such an action, and often beyond the lifespan of those who acted, will we know whether it is ultimately persuasive.

Third, I want to remind us of the deeply rooted tendency in Anglicanism to hold steadfast to *what we know here and now* and be suspicious, at least initially, of pretty much anything that comes from somewhere else. I say it that way to indicate that in my reading of our history it is a bit more complicated than to say simply that we prefer the bottom up to the top down. That's way too

simplistic. To say, for example, that we are bottom-up not top-down implies that we are anti- or at least non-hierarchical. That suggests that authority resides at the bottom of the hierarchy and that the higher one moves the more marginalized one becomes; perhaps true enough in our daily life as bishops but not really reflective of our ecclesiology. Such thinking teases us to consider the impossibility of being a democratically organized and governed church while being episcopally led at one and the same time, when, in fact, it is precisely what we do everyday.

Consider this. Long before the 16th century and the Church of England's separation from the power and primacy of the pope, there was a distinctively English way of being a Catholic Christian even while being in communion with and under the authority of the Roman Church. Its uniqueness can already be seen in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* way back in the 8th century. From at least then, we can observe a decidedly English enculturation of the great tradition that was sensitive to the geography, the weather, the Celtic heritage, the pagan history, the political context, the threat of invasion, and all those other things that make England England.

One manifestation of this close to my heart is the variety of English "uses" of the Roman liturgy in the middle ages – English adaptations of the received tradition that gave the English faithful of the Catholic Church access to the great tradition, but localized it in ways important to them, and in ways the pope may not have found seemly. Participating in these English adaptations of the Roman Rite were laypersons, bishops, priests, and deacons, faithful to the church's life as it had taken root in their soil as part of the daily fabric of their lives. What they

most clearly held in common was each other, and the hierarchies they received were to be lived out, and quite frankly locally adapted, for the benefit of the catholic locality they shared. *Their bishop belonged to them.* Yes, he lived in a big house at the top of the hill in the shadow of the cathedral. Yes, he had servants to take care of his laundry and probably ate better than the average working family in town. And yes, he was known to do some strange things and could sometimes be said to have abused his power and wealth. *But he was their bishop.* He belonged to them. And they were naturally suspicious of some prelate from across the waters having too much to say about how things were going to be in their locality. Centuries before the Reformation, and as outwardly loyal to their communion with Rome as they tried to be, there was a decidedly national character to being a bishop of the Catholic Church in England. There is no time to rally lots of examples, but it seems clear that the English Church from its beginning was shaped by a dynamic tension between its connection with the Roman pontiff and the challenges of faithful Christian believing in a very specific place with its own unique culture and distinctive character.

Against this background, it is not so difficult to see how the separation of the church in England from the primacy of the pope was not nearly the huge jump that it is often made out to be. English Catholics had lived in the tension between their Englishness and their Catholicism for a very long time, for centuries, and their separation from the pope was less a radically new idea, but was simply a part of the natural development of who they were as *Ecclesia Anglicana*, the Church of England, devoted Catholics though they be.

I remind you of this little bit of our history because I believe it can help us understand the rub we experience in our own day. Deeply rooted in the Anglican consciousness, and in ours as Episcopalians by inheritance and temperament, is a strong sense of locality. The locus of our sense of hierarchy is likewise embodied in locality. And here, by local, I do not mean congregational or even diocesan, I mean national, or more accurately provincial, for those parts of the Anglican Communion that, like us, are international in scope. It is important to note, I believe, that our natural tendency as Anglicans is to see the great tradition embodied in its full catholicity in very specific localities, was blurred by the romanticism of much 19th theologizing about the episcopate and its universality. But the long arc of the catholic tradition has emphasized the locality of both the ministry of the baptized and the holy orders of their servants. That is to say that in whatever sense I may be said to be a bishop of the whole church, that is only because I am the Bishop of Atlanta first – the bishop of a very specific, incarnate, definable, locality of the Risen One. Later doctrinal developments like indelible character, or changes in polity that made possible the movement of clergy from one cure to another (a relatively recent phenomenon actually), arose in response to particular and in most cases very practical concerns. Such developments were not intended to dilute the essential sense of locality that is at the heart of all ministry although watering down the catholicity of locality might well have been an unintended consequence. And, I am willing to stretch where others might fear to tread in saying that even the universal fellowship of all the baptized is made up of saints who made their confession of faith and were immersed into the

covenant of grace, one at a time, in the profound locality of a very specific puddle of water.

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With that as background, I am about to turn more directly to the Anglican Covenant and try to imagine with you how it might “fit” into the patterns of Anglican ecclesiology.

Before doing so, let me suggest to you two sources, that you might find particularly helpful. One is Bruce Kaye’s *Conflict and the Practice of Christian Faith: The Anglican Experiment*. Dr. Kaye is the former General Secretary of the Anglican Church of Australia and the author of a number of fine works on Anglicanism. It is a very balanced read and very timely as we consider the Anglican Covenant. Secondly, and a bit closer to home, there are rich implications for us in Bishop Paul Marshall’s thoughtful volume, *One, Catholic, and Apostolic: Samuel Seabury and the Early Episcopal Church*. Reading either one or both and holding in mind the implications of them for our upcoming decision on the Anglican Covenant will be well worth your time and effort.

We all know the history of the Anglican Covenant and how we got to this place. Because we have all lived through it, I am not going to review any of that except to remind us of one particular historical note that seems to me to be of great importance. *The Virginia Report* of the Inter-Anglican Doctrinal and Theological Commission was completed in 1997 and presented to Lambeth 98. It failed to get any serious attention at that conference due to, shall we say, “other matters.” It was sent to the provinces of the Communion for response, but was not “commended” as would have been the normal process if the bishops at

Lambeth 98 had been able to discuss and debate it fully and find some measure of agreement around it. Neither this House of Bishops nor The General Convention has “received” the report or commended it to our church. So far as I can tell, only two provinces of the Communion ever responded, and those responses are not particularly positive. The Anglican Consultative Council took up *The Virginia Report* in 1999 and the minutes of that meeting show a very contentious series of conversations around it and the resolutions coming out of that meeting of the ACC indicate a significant level of anxiety about some aspects of the report, strongly implying that some of its positions depart from normative, historical Anglicanism.

I note this only because it is a Communion-wide report that never seems to have had a thorough vetting and review process among the member churches. Nor does the report seem ever to have undergone rigorous review by the Instruments of Communion, although that may be a forgivable omission since it is *The Virginia Report* that provides us with the very formulation of the Instruments of Communion. So without any meaningful process of review, reception, acceptance, or whatever, *The Virginia Report* of 1997 has become an authoritative text among us with wide-reaching influence because it is the report upon which the Windsor Report and, subsequently, the Anglican Covenant are based. I would guess that the great majority of bishops of the Communion, not to mention priests and laity who share leadership with us, have not read it.

One reason this is important is because *The Virginia Report* flip-flops the general sense of movement in Anglican ecclesiology. It shifts the weight from a strong sense of locality *within which* (not over which, but within which) the

bishops exercise their apostolic ministry, shifting toward a much stronger sense of universality and centralization than is almost entirely episcopally defined and embodied.

And just for the record, it is *The Virginia Report* that first borrowed the Roman Catholic concept of subsidiarity, an idea largely developed by French theologians in the decades leading up to the Second Vatican Council. Subsidiarity was conceptualized toward the decentralization of the Roman Church, with a view toward pushing control in an outward direction toward the various national conferences of bishops that were imbedded within the localities they governed. By contrast, *The Virginia Report* and subsequently *The Windsor Report* flip-flop subsidiarity in the direction of centralization, essentially arguing that provinces are free to be self-governing in matters of *adiaphora*, but important things come from above.

The sweet irony in all of this, of course, is the title *The Virginia Report*, so named only because the commission that created it enjoyed the customary hospitality of The Virginia Seminary. The contents of the report stand as a rather dramatic contrast to the distinguished Anglican theological heritage of that noble institution.

So what observations might be made that inform our consideration of the Anglican Covenant? The first is this: will signing on to the Anglican Covenant change our ecclesiology? If you read the first three sections of the Covenant you might be inclined to believe that most things won't change very much. That wasn't quite as clear when some propositions that are now in the footnotes were in the main text. The insertion of a summary of the quadrilateral certainly helps.

Generally speaking it is a fair summary of the shape of our heritage. I suspect most of us could live reasonably comfortably with the contents of much of the first three sections, however differently we would like some of it to be expressed.

Section Four is more directly about polity and governance. The Covenant pleads the case that all provinces will continue to be self-governing, but does lay out a procedure for consultation, the mediation of disagreement, and the possible consequences at the Communion level for non-compliance. Agreeing to Section Four, by adopting the whole of the Covenant, will change us. That's neither an argument for or against. It's just a fact. Remember the mobile. Changes in the way we do business – adjustments in polity – will modify our ecclesiology. That's no reason not to do it. Ecclesiology is a living theology because it is the reasoned persuasion of a living body working out its life. We've modified and changed our ecclesiology before. We will again. Perhaps this is the time. Perhaps adopting the Anglican Covenant is the means. But change us it will.

Take one small example. In anticipation of the election of the first woman to the episcopate, long before we knew that mantle would fall upon our dear sister Barbara, Presiding Bishop Browning consulted widely with our communion partners and showed strong leadership in anticipation of the day when a diocese would elect and ordain a woman bishop. Of course, had Bishop Browning known he was preparing the way for Barbara, he might well have redoubled his efforts! Some of his work fell on deaf ears and some of his efforts were not graciously received, but no one could argue that Bishop Browning did not anticipate the future and try to prepare people for it both within our church and in the Communion.

There is a sense in which the Covenant is asking the provinces to do what Bishop Browning did naturally. The difference is that Ed did it because of his devotion to the highest degree of communion possible, and to mutual responsibility and interdependence in the body of Christ, not as a policy, not even as a covenant, but as a virtue of his pastoral life. *Having to will change us*. Now that may be a very good thing. We will all have different viewpoints on that. My only point is that having to, rather than doing so as the free expression of our deepest convictions about communion, will change us. Whether that's for better or worse, we'll have to wait and see.

Secondly, does the Anglican Covenant change the essential "direction," the natural movement of Anglican ecclesiology? I think it does. Again, the Covenant insists that we will all remain self-governing provinces with our full autonomy and I do not doubt for a moment that the framers of the Covenant actually believe that. But the Anglican Covenant is a child of *The Windsor Report* that, in turn, is an heir of *The Virginia Report*. There is embedded in those documents, in my reading at least, a shift in emphasis from a strong sense of provincial locality, fully catholic in all its aspects, to communion-level centrality with emerging new interprovincial structures to manage it. That's a change. I am certain there are those who would find such a change welcome, a timely corrective to Anglican tendencies that get us into trouble. Others will resist it because it seems contrary to the natural movements of how we Anglicans relate to others. My argument here is not for or against; only that whatever decision we make will change us and shape the continuing development of our ecclesiology.

I am aware that there are among us those who have not yet decided how they want us to respond to the Anglican Covenant, and they are worried about unintended consequences. Any such decision, any binding agreement is going to come with unintended consequences, but not all such consequences are necessarily negative. One brief example, again from English history: At the end of the Commonwealth, when Charles II was restored to the English throne, the King initially indicated his desire to find a middle way between the concerns of the Puritan supporters of Cromwell and the restored and triumphant Episcopalians. Both camps were deeply entrenched and despite some fine diplomatic attempts by Richard Baxter and Bishops John Cosin and Matthew Wren, among others, the final result was the 1662 Act of Uniformity that with the power of the state imposed precisely that: uniformity. Charles' desire to find a compromise between warring factions failed miserably so the result was to extinguish diversity of opinion, suppress alternative practices, and force, from the top down, uniformity on all.

As you remember, that action had some fairly significant unintended consequences. It resulted in the Act of Great Ejection when thousands of non-conformist ministers were expelled from the church, it set up an irreconcilable breach between [parties] Puritans and Episcopalians, it kick-started the oppressive reforms of the Clarendon Code, it launched yet another new wave of emigration to the new world to escape persecution, it created the environment out of which would spring the Glorious Revolution, and if you squint just right you can see in it the reactivity that sets the table for the reform movements of the 18th century. Few, if any, of these consequences could have been predicted and

whether they are positive or negative depends largely on your vantage point. The same is true, I believe, of the Anglican Covenant. It will generate unintended consequences, mostly unpredictable, but some of which could turn out to be quite positive.

I believe that the gift of our ecclesiology and its embodiment in our polity must ultimately be put in the service of God's mission. That means what we do must imbibe the deep catholicity of our common life, celebrated in incarnate localities wherein all of God's people – laypersons, bishops, priests, and deacons – share together in the mystery of Christ and do so for the life of the world. Catholicity can be, perhaps should be, expressed beyond locality, but it can only be lived within the very specific constraints of time and place: real bodies, in real space, doing real things, together, for the glory of God. If the Anglican Covenant helps us do these things more fully, and it just might, let's adopt it and live into it joyfully knowing that it will change us for the good. If it hinders the full expression of our catholicity, locally, i.e. provincially embodied, let's think and pray very hard before adopting it because it will change us in ways that may cost us our ecclesiological soul. Don't forget the mobile.

Many of you know how wonderful it was for me to have our Moravian brothers and sister with us on Sunday night, all of whom I grew up with in Winston-Salem. The Moravians have a motto, not original to them, but close to their hearts, a formulation that I learned as a child. It seems like an appropriate way to end these musings: "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty, in all things, love."