

WHY WE ARE WRITING TO THE BISHOPS

This week the Modern Churchpeople's Union (MCU) took what is, as far as I know, an unprecedented step in its 108-year history. It wrote – or I wrote, on its behalf – to all the Church of England's diocesan bishops.

It was not a characteristic move. We are not a campaigning body. It is difficult for us even to speak with one voice, because our members have so many different opinions. The one thing that binds us is the traditional Anglican method, which accepts a balance of authorities, recognizes that we don't have certainty, is willing to learn and is open to the future.

In all the disputes and divisions that have dogged the Anglican Communion over the years, we have rarely felt the need to lobby, cajole, or persuade. Instead we've taken what we might loftily call the scholarly route: thinking through the theological and social issues which our commitment to Christ and his teachings force upon us, and disseminating them through our publications and our annual conferences.

But this time is different. This time, we feel the Anglican church in which we have our roots, is facing a threat unlike any that has gone before. And that threat has come in the guise of what looks on the face of it like a most modest and entirely reasonable proposal.

'Towards an Anglican Covenant,' the paper produced earlier this year by the Anglican Consultative Council following the Windsor Report's recommendations, states that such a covenant would, among other things, seek to rebuild 'trust and co-operation' between churches of the Communion in the wake of 'recent tensions' – for which read the ongoing row over gay clergy.

However, it is not our support for fair treatment of gay people in the church, clergy or lay, which moves us to voice our opposition to the covenant – important an issue though that is – but because we feel so strongly that a covenant is not the way forward for Anglicanism.

We believe a covenant would make theological change and development more difficult. Instead of its stated purpose of creating unity, it would tend to make the Communion more rigid and liable to fracture

History tells the story: the Tudor and Stuart monarchs sought to unite the nation under a common religion. Most of them aimed for a religious settlement which allowed a wide range of belief in order to include as many people as possible. Contrast this with the majority Calvinist tradition, with its stronger commitment to purity in doctrine and lifestyle. Where unanimity of opinion is expected, those who in all conscience cannot agree are obliged to leave.

Thus Calvinism has suffered many sectarian splits and competing congregations. Anglicanism, by allowing differences of opinion to be expressed *within* the church, has been better able to retain its unity.

These two ways of handling disagreement reflect contrasting views. Medieval theologians responded in two ways to the fact that human reason cannot produce knowledge with certainty. One, characterized by Aquinas, Hooker and the Anglican tradition, accepted that our sources of information vary, but none produces certainty. Hooker's view was that we are guided not just by Scripture but by reason and tradition.

Even if, as some have recently argued, Hooker's real views have been misinterpreted, it remains the case that his influence has been valued throughout the bulk of Anglican history, as promoting an inclusive Church, willing to accept uncertainty and live with difference.

The other view, characterized by William of Ockham and popular during the Reformation, denied that reason and tradition have any part to play in matters of faith, and argued instead that divine revelation should be accepted without question. By repudiating reason, they claimed that the truths of revelation are known with greater certainty than human reason can achieve.

The MCU believes that religious truth comes from many sources, including Scripture, but that no single source of knowledge bears the stamp of certainty. The role for human reason is wide. Rational deduction, empirical observation, critical analysis, intuition, the emotions and creative leaps of the imagination all play their part in learning about our relationship with God, as they do about other matters.

We understand that one stated purpose of the covenant would be to protect the Anglican Communion against threats of division like the one currently focused on homosexuality and the interpretation of Scripture. Anglican provinces would commit themselves to consultation with the Communion as a whole before introducing significant innovations. But the covenant would surely have the reverse effect: by replacing the informal, gradual and consensual method of doctrinal change with a formal and centralized method, it would make changes more difficult and more divisive.

At one place the Windsor Report, arguing that not all differences of opinion can be tolerated within the Church, offers a telling example: "We would not say "some of us are racists, some of us are not, so let's celebrate our diversity"" (89). Yet at the end of the nineteenth century, racist theory was widely accepted, especially in England. It was propounded by the leading scientists of the day, and was used to justify imperialist aggression. The fact that Anglicans are today so overwhelmingly opposed to racism that the Windsor Report can cite it for this purpose, indicates not that opposition to racism is a permanent feature of Anglicanism – clearly it isn't – but that the majority view can change without any formal structure for permitting that change, and without the Church's hierarchy in any sense supervising it. A covenant would not have made it easier for English Anglicanism to renounce its racism, but it may well have made it harder.

A covenant would give too much power to the opponents of change. Much would depend on which issues would require Communion-wide consultation, but we anticipate that if it were to make any difference at all, it would give encouragement to single-issue campaigning groups determined to block innovations.

We would like to see the Church move in the opposite direction: to become more egalitarian, democratic and decentralized, and more willing to accept diversity and change. Innovations should characteristically be local and reversible, not centralized and immutable.

Rather than establishing a covenant which would hinder innovation, we should seek a different vision for the Church, with a more creative account of the relationship between tradition and innovation.

In other aspects of life Christians are familiar with creative tension between tradition and innovation, and we believe there is no difficulty in principle with accepting it in the case of religion too. It may also help the Church to rediscover the Apostles' excitement with the newness of God's activity in the world.

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