

COMMUNION IN CHRIST

A Liturgical—Theological Reflection

We must speak out of love of the Anglican Communion and its tradition. For the last sixty years, The Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission (APLM), a group of liturgists, musicians, pastors, theologians, and educators from the Anglican Church of Canada and The Episcopal Church have explored, supported, and worked for the renewal of the worship and mission of the Church. Soon after the Covenant Design Committee of the Anglican Communion published a draft Covenant for the consideration of the Provinces, the APLM Council met in Montreal from April 25 to April 30, 2007.

We gathered in deep concern for the tenor of current conversations taking place in the Communion regarding church unity. In true Anglican fashion, recognizing that “Praying Shapes Believing”, we have explored the matters at hand by basing our theological insights upon our experience of worship, seeking to answer the question: “*Who are we as the People of God together at prayer?*”.

The Gift of Unity

Common prayer and the life of loving discipleship are the ways through which we enter into the living gift of the Gospel. Faithful liturgical renewal always places the call of the living Gospel at the center. In the liturgical renewal of the Church, especially over the past one hundred years, we have learned again how God makes us one in the person of Jesus Christ, his death, and his resurrection. All members of the Church, which is his Body, participate in Christ’s mission and authority through our incorporation in Christ in Baptism and in the Eucharist, thus sharing in God’s mission to the world.

The unity of the Church is a gift of God, born of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is not a human project to be managed and achieved by our own efforts.

Jesus Christ is one—one in himself and one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Church is made one by his reconciling death on the cross, joining all humanity to the life of the Triune God. As the unity of the Triune God is enhanced rather than impaired by the diversity of three distinct persons, so is the oneness of the Body of Christ enhanced by the diversity of its members. As St. Paul writes to the Church in Corinth:

Just as the Church is one and has many members, and all the members of the Church, though many, are one Church, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

Thus the Church is already one because it is one with the Lord, belonging to Christ and participating in Christ’s ministry and mission in the world. For St. Paul, this oneness is an accomplished fact, not a hoped for reality. As St. Paul says, “...this is a great mystery—I speak of Christ and his Church.”

God reveals this unity in the Church’s sacraments making present at all times and places the saving and unifying work of Christ on the cross, reconciling human beings with each other and with God. This is expressed in the letter to the Ephesians:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to those who were far off, and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but also citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the

foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2:13-22)

Brother and sister Anglicans throughout the world, we call us together to return to a traditional Anglican vision of church unity. This vision is centered in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, mediated through the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist.

Baptism and Eucharist

In Baptism we are revealed as children of God and members of Christ's one Body.

In the Eucharist, we are revealed as members of Christ's one Body, "that he may be in us and we in him".

Paul's words to the community at Corinth challenged them for not sharing the Body of Christ unreservedly with all in the assembly saying:

Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves. (I Corinthians 11:28-29)

By sharing the broken bread, we encounter the "other" at the table, and are able to discern Christ in one another. Knowing the whole to be Christ through our many differences enables us to see differences and diversity as gifts, rather than as threats to our unity.

As the Body of Christ formed by Baptism and Eucharist, the Church becomes a sign to the world of the unity of all humanity—indeed, all creation—with each other and with God. We are one because Christ died and rose, and we share in that unity through a "...washing with a formula of words" in Baptism in the name of the Triune God, and a shared meal, "the bread of blessing which we break... a communion in the Body of Christ". In these practices, we find our communion with each other and with God.

This is in keeping with the New Testament Church where N.T. scholar Raymond Brown (*The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*) identified seven ways of being a Christian church, all existing alongside one another so, for example, the Jewish church of Jerusalem benefited from the gifts of the Gentile churches Paul established. All these patterns of being the Body of Christ found their unity in their common Baptism and in the risen Lord known to them through the breaking of the bread in Eucharist.

As St. Paul knows well and the Book of Acts describes at the Council of Jerusalem, the Church lives into God's vision and work. God is binding us together and revealing God's reconciling work even when we are still experiencing conflict and deep division.

Our communion does not depend upon either juridical structures or doctrinal agreements. These, at best, may *reflect* our unity in Christ, but they do not *effect* it. Furthermore, they can sometimes become signs of disunity, rather than expressions of that unity which we have in the Lord. We are in communion with all with whom our Lord is in communion by virtue of our faith in one Lord, whether or not we live into and express that unity we have in Christ. Orthodox catholic tradition insists that the effectiveness of the sacraments does not stem from the doctrinal or moral correctness of the ministers of the sacrament.

The sacraments bring about our union with each other and with Christ by making ordinary people, actions and things into outward and visible signs of inner grace. These signs constitute and bring about our participation in a new humanity, the Body of Christ, a sign to the world showing forth the holiness of creation in all its diversity.

For this reason the Church has increasingly recognized the importance of keeping its sacramental actions close to the people involved and their cultural expressions, as different Provinces develop Prayer Books and sacramental practices that bring the Paschal Mystery into the present, and form the Body of Christ in local, contextual ways. Nevertheless, this variety of practice does not make the Church any less one with

the Lord, but rather enriches our unity in Christ. Indeed, our increased awareness of global differences demands a vision of church unity as unity-in-diversity.

Thus in Baptism and Eucharist, God both brings about and reveals our participation in Christ.

In Baptism and Eucharist, we freely respond to God's call to make us one in Christ. Whether ourselves or through sponsors, we enter freely into the One Body. We are not born into the Body at our natural births or by our citizenship status, but rather we respond in faith to the call to enter the church community, a sign of the Reign of God among us. We are confronted by the death and resurrection of Jesus and choose not to turn away, but rather enter into its life-giving mystery.

Finally, the liturgical renewal of the last eighty years has given rise to a deeper ecclesial understanding of the intimate connection between Baptism, Eucharist, and the ordination of bishops, deacons and priests, and we have increasingly concluded as a Church that baptized divorced persons, gay men and lesbians, as well as women in general may not be excluded as a class from any of the sacraments of the Church, for they are full members of Christ.

As Rowan Williams wrote:

“We have had a number of possible definitions of the word ‘Catholic’... but I should like to pick up on something I have said in other contexts about the way in which ‘Catholic’, at least in part, has the sense of ‘telling the whole truth’. I should like to think of Catholic spirituality as having to do with the way in which the wholeness, the fullness of Jesus Christ’s story is made real in us. To struggle with the idea of Catholic holiness is to try to wrestle with the ways in which the whole story of Jesus Christ takes flesh, if you like, in me and you and in the infinite range of particular human identities that there are in the world. How does the story of becoming flesh, of announcing and being a sign of God’s kingdom, of giving yourself into the hands of God, of bearing the cross, and living through the resurrection become particular here? ... Two sorts of wholeness, then: the whole of that pattern of Christ’s story, the Son’s course; and the whole of me.” (from *Living the Mystery: Affirming Catholicism and the Future of Anglicanism*, ed. Jeffrey John, DLT 1994, pp. 76-77)

The Charisms of Anglicanism

We are concerned that misplaced anxiety about unity may drive us to forced uniformity, as though we had to fear communion in diversity. In our anxiety over the variety of practices in the Anglican Communion, some have suggested that there is a need for new mechanisms to ensure our unity.

We appeal to our Church to address our present divisions, drawing on the charisms that have shaped who we are:

1. Anglican comprehensiveness

If the Anglican Communion reduces its traditional broad comprehensiveness it will not be the same Church, and will have relinquished the *Via Media*. Anglicanism was propelled by Elizabeth I’s genius for bringing about a religious peace based on common prayer. In the Elizabethan settlement, we discovered that we could live a common faith by praying together, and that attempts to define our unity confessionally were neither honest nor effective. Our praying together bound us together more deeply and effectively than any brief or extended definition of faith in a confession. St. Paul dares to say ‘No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Spirit’. Anglicanism grounds that speaking in liturgical *practice*. When God draws us together in prayer and thanksgiving acknowledging the Lord we all serve, his Spirit moves among us and makes us One Body.

2. The authority of Scripture, Reason, and Tradition

The draft Covenant lists only Scripture and Tradition as sources of the Church’s authority, leaving out Reason. The genius of the Elizabethan theologians lay in their insistence that Scripture must be interpreted in a dynamic dialogue with tradition and reason. Hooker declared

this clearly, and our four hundred-year tradition has continued to find fresh riches and new insights. Reading scripture in conformity to a single interpretation, without regard for critical scholarship, is not true to who we are as Anglicans. We have learned that scripture itself demands of us a critical reading, drawing upon our experience as a faith community and all of our learning of God's work in creation.

3. The baptismal and eucharistic mediation of Christian unity

The Covenant envisions an Anglican Communion in which some Provinces might no longer be in communion with it. We believe that the Eucharistic table is not ours, but Christ's, and as members of his body, if we refuse to share the table, we are denying the unity Jesus has accomplished for us in his death and resurrection.

Further, we have said above, Baptism and Eucharist make us one within the Body in Christ. If the proposed Covenant is interpreted as allowing Christians to establish two levels of church membership—the baptized and the ordained, opening the first to all, but limiting the second to a narrower class of persons—we will have left behind the baptismal basis of our membership in the Church and the very basis upon which ordinations take place. It is not of the Spirit to hold that in the Body of Christ a particular class of people may not participate in a sacrament by virtue of belonging to that class. In the same way, as Christ makes each Church and Province one, so we find our unity worldwide in him. However, if the proposed Covenant is interpreted as allowing some Christians to refuse to worship and share communion with fellow baptized Christians, including collegial bishops, we will no longer be true Anglicans.

4. The diocese as the basic unit of the Church

The diocese, as the People of God gathered around a bishop, is the core unit of Anglicanism. These dioceses freely constitute themselves into national Churches or Provinces. The Provinces have elected to bind themselves together in mutual responsibility and interdependence into an Anglican Communion of Church.

5. Episcopal oversight

In his or her *episcopate* (oversight), a bishop serves the unity, mission, and apostolic teaching that Christ has entrusted to the Church. Following Jesus' commandment that we all be one, he or she shares in a wider episcopal ministry. However, this collegiality ought always first to nurture the humility that the gift of episcopate is a gift of God. To share in a wider episcopate means to share in Christ's care for the Church, and is entrusted to a bishop for particular exercise within his or her local diocese. It does not give rights to exercise that ministry in another's jurisdiction. The draft Covenant seems to encourage the creation of cross-provincial and cross-diocesan jurisdictions based upon doctrinal conformity, dividing the Church along lines of disagreement. This effectively makes the episcopal office a symbol of disunity, by ignoring the synodality through which a bishop shares his or her ministry, encouraging a narrow and authoritarian episcopate foreign to Anglican tradition.

6. Provincial integrity

For centuries, Anglican Provinces have discerned the Lord's will in their own local contexts. We have encouraged and respected this integrity of the Anglican Provinces. The Spirit reveals mission locally in our several churches; and the respect our worldwide Anglican institutions have afforded Provinces has been an acknowledgement that, even as we disagree and seek our way forward, our churches "have the mind of Christ".

When we centralize or globalize the mission of the Church it loses local aspect, and becomes imposed from outside, reshaping our Church in the model of the Roman and succeeding empires.

Yet current debates pit the categories of "Provincial autonomy" and "Communion belonging" against each other, as though they were antithetical, or at best, paradoxical. One of the illusions is that Provinces are more or less homogenous in values, culture, and practice, and that the challenges of diversity are only encountered globally. This is patently not the case. "Provincial

autonomy” refers to the ordering of the ministry and mission of a local church and derives from the concept of the diocese as the basic ecclesial unit (as described above). It ought not to be seen as a retreat into “parochial provincialism” or uncultural security, shutting out “others”. The Canadian and United States contexts witness real, lived multiple diversities within our Provinces and dioceses, and a heightened sensitivity to the dynamics of dominant and marginal voices. All local churches need the rights of autonomy given in classical ecclesiology, in order that we might have local, diocesan, and provincial integrity in discerning God’s guiding presence and our responsibilities in Christ’s mission, amongst all the diversities within the Church and without, of who we are.

7. The mission of the Church, and the work of justice

The unity of the Church, grounded in Christ, manifests itself in the Church’s whole life—service to the poor, work on behalf of justice, respect for all creation, peacemaking—and not only in doctrine. Christian orthodoxy and Christian practice are one. The proposed Covenant dangerously separates confessional and doctrinal matters from the work of justice. A Church restructured as the current proposals would have it would have been unable to end slavery. The Episcopal Church, which was complicit in the slave trade, and among the last to oppose it, is grateful that other Provinces were free to lead the Church in responding to the Spirit’s call for justice before the American Episcopal Church was ready to acknowledge God’s gift of freedom to all human beings.

The Proposed Covenant

We believe that the proposed Covenant is deeply flawed, as it attempts to bring about unity through enforced conformity. The unity of the Church cannot be *enforced*, as it is already given in Jesus Christ: unity is one of the marks of the Church and an article of faith. The proposed Covenant is a worse choice than a confessional document, which can, at the very least, be referred to in the future as a source of agreement. Instead, the Covenant places certain persons in the role of being the ultimate arbiters of what is Anglican and what is not.

The genius of Anglicanism throughout history, however, has been the avoidance of a juridical structure that would force us all to march in lockstep. We have insisted, instead, that God makes us one, by our recognizing Christ in each other as we worship together.

The concept of “instruments of unity” is only as old as the Virginia Report (Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission) of 1988, and fails to provide an accurate account of church unity. Subsequent documents, such as Windsor and the Covenant, have taken up these notions as though they had been formally received by the Provinces of the Anglican Communion. They have not.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to move beyond finding group identity by excluding the richness and variety of humanity, and beyond defining ourselves over and against those whom we exclude.

The Anglican Understanding of Church Unity

Theologically speaking, the *sources* of the Church’s unity have traditionally been understood as being:

- The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- The two dominical sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist
- Ongoing participation in Christ by these sacraments constituting our communion with a bishop, who is in turn in communion with the see of Canterbury.
- A common liturgical source tradition (see IALC* Prague Statement)

The *doctrinal expression* of our unity is contained in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, inasmuch as it describes the essential points of agreement for union with other churches.

From our first Reformers onward, Anglicans developed an appeal to the practice of the undivided church. This appeal to the undivided church is a typically Anglican gesture, and presents a typically Anglican resistance to insist on a specifically Anglican uniqueness or distinctiveness. Instead, Anglicans have usually claimed our Church's (and any church's) share in the heritage of the whole Church. We have not claimed to be the one and only true Church, but we are making the simpler, humbler claim that we are church within a whole that is also church, and belongs to all Christians.

As part of that wider church, Anglicans understand the Church's catholicity—its wholeness and universality—as manifested in the eucharistic gathering of the local community. Furthermore, our sense of catholicity is compatible with contextual diversity. The Church is one, not because it is the same everywhere, but because its varieties of worship, governance, and theology are necessary expressions of its particularity in specific times and places. Any one church in any time and place is, at best, a broken sign of the true catholicity God seeks to express through Christ's Body, the Church. Yet in all times and all places, we seek to incarnate the fullness of the Gospel. We do this by telling the whole truth as we have received it in a way which will break forth anew into the lives of those encountering the power of Jesus' death and resurrection in a given place. We are at once both catholic and incarnate in local contexts.

Conclusion

The gift of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the healing of the divisions among us. The Gospel holds up the hope that our identity and oneness as members of Christ is strong enough, calling us to drop those defenses by which we define ourselves against others. Instead, we are called to the risk of bringing all of humanity into the Reign of God—especially those who are most unlike ourselves. In the world of the Gospel, the only true outsiders are those who, by their own choice, refuse to enter into this ever-wider healing of humanity and creation.

To try to effect an artificial unity of the Body of Christ through doctrinal enforcement will only lead to yet another scandalous division in the Body of the Lord. It is also idolatrous, substituting a written agreement for the saving work of Christ on the cross, and the living, catholic call of the Gospel to incarnate Christ's ministry in all places and in all times.

We therefore ask our Anglican brothers and sisters to be steadfast in bearing witness to our faith and to resist the temptation to define our unity through the signing of the proposed Covenant. Instead, let us ponder God's promise, spoken through Isaiah, the promise that God has already given us as a covenant, a living promise to all people:

In the time of favor I have answered you and on a delay of salvation I have helped you. I have kept you and given you as a Covenant to the peoples to establish the land, to apportion desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, "come out!" to those who are in darkness, "show yourselves!" (Isaiah 49:8-9).

Through our Baptism and Eucharist we will find unity, beyond any enforced conformity, which is the real basis for our Communion and our common life in Christ. May we who have been entrusted with Christ's mission live out with integrity what it means to embody God's promise, face to face, person to person, that all might share in God's life, and have that life abundantly.

*The IALC (International Anglican Liturgical Consultation) is the official network on liturgical matters for the Anglican Communion.