

How to be Anglican: The proposal for an Anglican Covenant

by [John Dart](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

Every ten years bishops of the worldwide Anglican Communion assemble in England for the Lambeth Conference. This summer's meeting is much awaited in light of the 77-million-member communion's highly public wrangling over the issue of homosexuality.

In 2003, the Episcopal Church in the U.S. approved the election of V. Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, as bishop of New Hampshire. That action galvanized many conservatives, who pointed to a 1998 Lambeth Conference resolution that declared homosexual practice "incompatible with scripture" and said that the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of those in homosexual relationships are illegitimate.

As divisions have arisen in the Anglican Communion, some bishops from the global South have sponsored U.S. mission organizations that have taken in disaffected congregations and have ordained American priests as bishops in their own provinces—actions that the Episcopal Church deems highly irregular.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and a special study panel recommended that an Anglican Covenant be drafted to define relationships between Anglican churches and to promote consultations between the 34 provinces of the communion. But framing the covenant has proved difficult. The wording either lacks teeth in the opinion of those seeking to discipline erring church bodies or smacks of excessive judicial authority to those who cherish the nonhierarchical nature of Anglicanism and its tradition of tolerating diverse views.

It became clear at a three-day conference on the covenant proposal last month at New York's General Theological Seminary that no decisive resolution of the problem is on the horizon.

Ian Douglas, an American who is one of the planners of the July 16–August 3 Lambeth Conference in Canterbury, said that Lambeth will provide an opportunity for “deep and honest conversations” on the Anglican Covenant, but “those who are looking to Lambeth as a final decision point will not be pleased.”

Those who hope or fear that the bishops’ meeting will be “some kind of showdown” are “operating from a more juridical understanding of the covenant and of Anglican ecclesiology generally,” said Douglas, who teaches at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. “There will be no large plenary where resolutions are debated and voted upon in parliamentary procedure.”

Rather, opinions on the covenant will be solicited from bishops before they leave as well as from the bishops who will not be in Canterbury. The Covenant Design Group meets two more times, in September and March. Then the proposal moves in June 2009 to the Anglican Consultative Council, whose members include priests and laypeople as well as bishops. If the covenant is approved there, national and regional church bodies would then assess its value.

Some of the 19 speakers at the April 10–12 conference in New York expressed reservations about the covenant draft for varied reasons. But most speakers, who included U.S. and Canadian seminary faculty as well as high-ranking Anglican officials from abroad, suggested that the development of the Anglican Covenant will proceed along a deliberate path—almost as if the slow pace is part of the solution.

Asked when he thought an Anglican Covenant could be finalized, if at all, Titus Presler, subdean and vice president for academic affairs at General Theological Seminary, said perhaps by 2011.

Presler and his conference co-convenor, J. Robert Wright, both favor the idea of a covenant proposal. “A covenant would give us a structure, a process, however painfully arrived at, for determining the limits of our faith that could still contain most of the spectrum of belief that we do tolerate and affirm,” Wright wrote in prepared remarks.

The first of three keynote speakers noted the fears and rumors within the Anglican Communion. “Suspicion is rife, as well as accusations of heresy, bad faith and theological and ecclesiological innovation,” said Drexel Wellington Gomez, the archbishop of the West Indies, who heads the Covenant Design Group. One side fears that a “bold agenda on gay marriage” will be tolerated; others worry that

bishops (called primates) of the global South are plotting a “collective papacy” for Anglicanism.

“In a situation which is becoming increasingly overheated, we need . . . to identify the fundamentals that we share in common,” said Gomez. “An Anglican Covenant is therefore a proposal to rebuild trust—to be able to affirm ‘Yes, we do believe in the same faith, we can live in a trusting communion.’”

Jenny Plane Te Paa, a priest theologian of Maori heritage from New Zealand and a lyrical writer who served on the Lambeth Commission on Communion, urged the communion to hear the input of women, indigenous people, gays and lesbians and young people. She even suggested a moratorium be imposed on the “unjustifiably expensive” series of meetings at which participants labor over proposed drafts of the covenant.

Mocking an ultimatum issued in early 2007 by primates calling on U.S. and Canadian bishops to repent for ordaining a gay bishop and allowing same-sex blessings, Te Paa said, “Aren’t we all lucky that just in time the valiant primates were on hand with the means to save us all from any further unwitting descent into moral decadence?”

“Gay and lesbian people have served dutifully and lived and loved faithfully for hundreds of years and even been ordained as bishops,” she said, and “suddenly in 2003, those with a capacity and thus an agenda for domination began to speak in very different and aggressive ways.”

A few speakers, including Te Paa, referred to Robinson by name in their speeches and nodded to the New Hampshire bishop when they noticed his presence. He said he was at the conference “to listen and learn.”

The closing keynoter was Gregory Cameron, a deep-voiced Welshman who as deputy secretary general at the Anglican Communion Office in London assists the Covenant Design Group and other commissions. “The covenant doesn’t solve all problems,” he said, “but it has the potential of leading to new forms of cooperation.”

Cameron cautioned colleagues not to overstate the power of the prelates who head Anglican provinces. “None of the primates have any authority beyond their own province,” he said. “They can speak collectively in giving common counsel; it can never be more than that. Because communion is voluntary, you can’t force anyone

out.”

In describing the proposed statement as encouraging an “open-ended, ongoing relationship” based on mutual respect, and preferring *covenant* over terms such as contract, confession or code, Cameron reflected views from a chapter he wrote for a newly published book, *The Anglican Covenant* (Mowbray), edited by Mark D. Chapman.

Conflict has been ever-present in church life, and many conference participants noted that it is not likely go away. The signing of a covenant “may—or may not—make managing conflicts less consumptive of energy, resources, time and good will,” observed Ellen K. Wondra, professor of theology and ethics at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, in a paper read at the conference. “In a world and a church that are both fallen and redeemed,” she wrote, “the covenant ought to include, if not an explicit recognition that communion is always imperfect, some explicit principles and procedures for both repentance and amendment of life, and for the fostering of hope.”