

# 'Covenant' to bind Anglicans appears dead

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LONDON (RNS) With the Anglican Covenant aimed at ensuring its unity now apparently in ashes and the archbishop of Canterbury who backed it on his way out, the 77 million-strong Anglican Communion faces an uncertain future and the danger of fragmentation.

The covenant, born of an idea in 2004 to try to retain the Christian alliance's union, now appears buried in the decision of its mother church, the Church of England, by a majority "no" vote in its 44 dioceses to ditch it.

With results still being counted, Covenant supporters effectively lost their battle when the Diocese of Lincoln cast the 23rd vote against it last week.

The Lincoln vote meant that more than half of the Church of England dioceses had turned thumbs down on the Anglican Covenant, which apparently also means it will not go back to the General Synod for reconsideration, diocese officials said.

Reaction was swift. "The covenant is either buried or disabled," said Simon Barrow, co-director of the religious think tank Ekklesia, in the aftermath of the decision.

Diarmaid MacCulloch, professor of the history of the Church at Oxford University, said: "It seems to me the scheme is dead in the water throughout the Anglican Communion. "There really would be no point in other provinces signing up to it, since already some are most reluctant to do so."

The Anglican Covenant had been billed widely as a way to heal the growing splits in the Anglican Church over a range of issues that center on same-sex unions and homosexual bishops.

One of its firmest supporters was Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, who backed the covenant's call to members of the Anglican Communion to guard against acting in a fashion that could antagonize Anglicans in other countries.

But Williams himself has now announced he will step down from the Canterbury archbishopric at the end of December, to return to the presumably more peaceful world of academia -- thus depriving the pro-Covenanters of a powerful voice, should their campaign continue.

In fact, Williams had little more than the force of his own personality to bring to the fray. The archbishop of Canterbury has no power directly over Anglican churches. But the fact that he is leaving and the mother church has cast its own "no" vote makes the prospect of resurrecting the covenant seemingly a difficult one.

What the Anglican Communion may now face is what Rowan Williams himself has predicted in the lack of something of a substance of an Anglican Covenant -- the dangerous prospect of a "piece-by-piece dissolution of the Communion."

The covenant, in fact, was born in 2004 in the wake of a huge battle between the Church's conservative and liberal wings after the consecration of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire, Gene Robinson, by the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Church's U.S. wing.

Since then, as the Reuters news agency described it, the covenant "tried to bring liberal and conservative wings of the Communion together, (but) ended up facing opposition from both sides."

"Liberal Anglicans," the report added, "fear the covenant will impose centralizing control on the Communion's family of autonomous churches, while conservatives and evangelicals complain it does not go far enough to discipline churches that step out of line."

The battle to get the covenant approved has also split Anglican Churches around the world. At a count this weekend, of the Communion's 38 "provinces,"

or churches, only seven -- The Anglican churches of Ireland, Mexico, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, South East Asia, Southern Cone of America, and the West Indies -- had "approved or subscribed" to it.

But the Rev. Lesley Fellows, moderator of the "No Anglican Covenant Coalition," on Sunday (March 25) dismissed the covenant as a "proposal to centralize communion-wide authority in the hands of a small, self-selecting group."

She added: "We hope that the Church of England will now look to bring reconciliation within the Anglican Communion by means of strengthening relationships rather than punitive legislation."