

Koinonia and the Covenant Process Reflections on the New Testament

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We gather at a critical moment in the life of the Anglican Communion. On the one hand, there are tensions and struggles provoked by actions of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of New Westminster in the Anglican Church of Canada. But just in the last few days, actions of separating dioceses in the Episcopal Church and among of those who denominate themselves as "Continuing Anglicans" proposing a new Province, to be known as The Anglican Church in North America, pour more energy into the midst of this turmoil and exert even more tension on the bonds of our common life.

In the midst of this tension for the last five, almost six years, has been the efforts of the Communion as a whole — especially the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Meeting of Primates, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the most recent Lambeth Conference — to think through the dimensions of the turmoil and to find a way forward with integrity and renewed confidence in our mission as a significant branch of Christianity.

This Conference presents an opportunity for those of you gathered to do some of this thinking, as well. Occasions of crisis can cause us to dig deeper, think more clearly, plan more carefully and act in concert. Or they can drive us to throw all caution to the wind and react as we have done in the past, hoping that, something we might do will work. It is my hope for this conference — and for others yet to come — that the former, rather than the latter, will take place.

Of course, digging deeper and thinking harder has its own liability — namely navel-gazing. In the face of crisis, we might prefer to withdraw and "get in touch" with who we are until the whole problem that faces us just blows over. Needless to say, that would not be helpful.

My own contribution to this conference will be rather modest. I have been asked to set the scene for this engagement. And I propose to do so in three parts. First, I will offer some of my reflections as the chief pastor of this diocese on our Anglican/Episcopal ethos in the present. Next, I will reflect on the concept of *koinonia* in the New Testament. Third, I will attempt to find the crossing point between how we see ourselves and how the Scripture calls us to see our mission, raising some obstacles I think need to be addressed as we turn to the task of being a Communion in the future. I would call this a report from the front line in the struggle for a Communion Covenant.

ETHOS

Ethos has the sense of character, of an air, and of comportment or placement. As we think of the "Anglican ethos," many will want to emphasize different characteristics. There are differing ways to express what is essential.

Following the 2006 General Convention, and in the face of threats that so-called "large numbers" in this diocese were ready to leave the Episcopal Church, I travelled, with a varied and skilled team, to meet with the leadership — the clergy and vestries, and occasionally other key leaders — in each of our 77 congregations. I asked a standard series of questions to help me better grasp who we are, what causes us concern, and what makes us a Church. And we listened. What I discovered was in various ways humbling, interesting, inspiring, and perplexing.

A few Episcopalians are, as they describe themselves, "cradle born." They have never known another church. I will leave these aside for now.

The vast majority of our members came to this church from other traditions or from none at all. Some came by way of "conversion" — either as young people, or from some critical life experience. Their choice of the Episcopal Church had to do with its worship. They were "arrested" by the sense both of mystery and beauty in worship and its impact on their spiritual lives. There was a sense of solidity to this worship — that

here, indeed, God was encountered in a personal and yet objective/transcendent way: there was something appropriate in the dignity of worship, and yet warm and inviting, as well.

For many who came by way of "church shopping," or perhaps to find a "middle ground" between married couples, or for the sake of "the children," they found something surprising. Many found a community of believers with whom they were comfortable — a "fit" as many describe it. Many found the worship to challenge them, and later to inspire them. Many found sermons that made them think, or classes that engaged their attention. Almost all found that they were attracted to a congregation that was engaged in some kind of outreach, either to the local community — especially the poor and homeless — or to a broader sense of the mission field,

Some came from what they would describe as "authoritarian" religious backgrounds. Many were educated in church schools of one variety or another. These would say that they were never allowed to "think for themselves" or to "ask questions," or to "explore their faith." Of these, some came from Protestant churches they would describe as "fundamentalist." Some came from Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches. In the latter case, many found a "meeting ground" between themselves and a Protestant spouse. But what they warmed to was a church environment that was "different" in the degree to which that environment encouraged them to process their religious experience and to integrate it with their everyday life.

Some, as I said above, were "cradle born" Episcopalians. Most of them would say that they took for granted the size and character of their church, at least until adulthood. In many cases, as adults, these life-long Episcopalians came to appreciate the uniqueness of the experience, their "ethos," only as they got to know other Christians and "compared notes." Many of these are less likely to speak of a "middle ground" and instead think of their church as "the way it ought to be."

All of this was encouraging. What was perplexing is that most Episcopalians, cradle-born or not, have little or no real knowledge about their church's structures, chain of command, history, or conflicts (other than what they occasionally read in the newspapers). The limit of their horizon, at least until recent years, has been what is going on in their parish and, perhaps, diocese. Most are at a loss to explain to themselves how the Episcopal Church as a whole has gotten, to its recent divisions. Most feel alienated from the direction they perceive the Church overall to be going in. The majority — and I think it is quite large — are content with their local parish and its work, primarily because they feel involved, challenged, and productive in carrying forward their "mission."

At the same time, many of these interviewed have come to find renewed interest in being "catholic" in the sense of belonging to a worldwide communion larger than their parish, diocese, or even denominational affiliation. I find this profoundly interesting. Many will say that, before the recent crisis, they had little knowledge or awareness of the Anglican Communion. It went along with being an Episcopalian. A very large number — clearly a majority — now say that they count being part of the Communion an essential part of their religious identity. "If I have to choose between being Episcopalian or being Anglican, I will choose Anglican." This was a refrain heard often. Behind this, I think, is an intuitive sense that being Christian is not possible in isolation. Belief in the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" is connecting in many souls in a way that goes beyond a mere recital of words."

With 30 years of pastoral experience, I would go on to say that most Episcopalians are devout, in the sense both that they are observant of their religious obligations and sincere in doing so. There is settledness about what Church means to them, and their role in it. For very many, worship is what they seek and what they primarily do in the church. The Prayer Book structures these expectations and is stable and reliable. For a large number, additional programs and events provide additional opportunities for engagement and personal growth. Many laity in the Episcopal Church have found renewed commitment through specific experiences, whether that be *Cursillo* or Marriage Encounter; educational programs like Education for Mission, the Bethel Series, or programs for licensing for lay ministries; and many have deepened their spiritual life through sodalities like the Order of St. Luke (healing), Daughters of the King (women in intercessory prayer), or the Brotherhood of St. Andrew (evangelism for men); or in being tertiary members of religious orders,

So then, to sum up, what makes an Anglican or Episcopalian is that configuration of elements we have called an "ethos." And this ethos is characterized primarily by the stability of worship offered in the *Book of Common Prayer* and leading to various forms of expression of Christian faith in daily life that can be lumped together under the categories of "engagement" and "mission." Together, worship, engagement, and mission define the local congregation, and provide the working definition for most of what being an Episcopalian is. Though there is an intuition that the local must be connected with the larger Christian enterprise, there is little specific knowledge of structures in that larger enterprise. And there is only the vaguest sense of why that connectedness might be important.

KOINONIA

It is my belief that the key to opening up why this connectedness is important, indeed vital, to the Church today is to be found in reflection on the concept of *koinonia* in the New Testament. *The Virginia Report* issued in 1997 contains the following observation: "in the Anglican Communion today the structures of unity and communion at a world level are still developing. This development needs now to be inspired by a renewed understanding of the Church as *koinonia*" I agree with that observation and turn now to an all too brief survey of the concept of *koinonia* in the New Testament.

This word group in the New Testament is very dynamic. By this, I mean that the words can be translated by very different words on the one hand; and on the other that, in every instance, the word group implies a deeply interactive, relational pattern of behaviors, obligations, and expectations. This is, I would say, a very rich word group that has been much underrated. And perhaps the least helpful translation is the one that is most common when the word-group is talked about, namely "fellowship."

Right at the beginning of the book of Acts, the Church, described for the first time, is depicted as a community "devoted to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers." The picture may be said to be conventional in that it describes the community in terms of what it does — it gathers around the apostles' teaching, shares fellowship, takes a common meal together, and prays. It confirms rather than disturbs our sense of what the Church is, which is an association of people who share a common interest in teaching, community, and worship. But the presence of the word *koinonia* here, behind the word "fellowship," I would suggest, is far more important than that.

The *koinonia* group is pervasive through the New Testament — and occurs in the apostolic literature, although this fact is hidden from view by the various ways the word group is translated. A review demonstrates that the word-group can be translated as not only fellowship, but also participation, partaking, sharing, partnering, distributing, contributing and contribution — and even communication. In some cases, we encounter the noun form, and in many the verb. In all cases, however, the form is dynamic and must be translated in ways that do justice to this dynamism.

One scholar observes that "ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ expresses a mutual relationship ... As with ΚΟΙΝΩΝΕΟ either the giving or receiving side of the relationship can stand in the foreground" at any given instance. (Hauck, in Hainz p. 304)

The range of meanings is nothing less than breathtaking. In the letter to the Hebrews, for example, the writer describes Jesus as "partaking" in human nature, by which he means — for he says — that Jesus entered fully into "flesh and blood" and immersed himself in that same nature, that "through his death he might destroy the works of the devil" (Heb. 2:14).

Partaking here means far more than dabbling in a sort of existential smorgasbord. The Lord enters into the *koinonia* of flesh and blood, which carries with it certain obligations and consequences, not the least of which is suffering death.

This *koinonia* into which Jesus enters is very much akin to the *kenosis* — the self-emptying — of the pre-existent Christ, which is perhaps the most exalted Christological statement of the earliest Christian writings, found, of course, in Paul's letter to the Philippians. It is this initiative on the part of God that makes possible another form of *koinonia* — namely, the *koinonia* we have through Christ with God. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the *koinonia* of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord"

(1 Cor. 1:9). This usage seems to be common among the earliest Christians, since John reflects in his first letter on precisely this fellowship — a *koinonia* in light, joining us to Jesus and through him to the Father (1 John 1:3-7). It is, furthermore, significant that this word group is never used in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament to refer to the divine-human relationship. For Christians, this whole concept of *koinonia* comes very close to being the substance of the gospel itself — Good News indeed! In fact I would say that the *euangelion* IS the announcement of God's *koinonia* — the *koinonia* that God brings about in and through Jesus.

We have noted that *koinonia* applies to the suffering of Christ, a sort of shorthand for his whole redemptive action. "The notion of suffering is also picked up elsewhere for the Christian *koinonia*. Paul says of himself in the Phillippian letter that his sole aim in life is "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to *koinonia* (translated "share") in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:10). To be a Christian is to be made one with Christ in his death and so entails suffering as well. And it is the character of the Christian *koinonia* to share in the sufferings of each other — "for we know that as you share (*koinonia*) in our sufferings, you will also share (*koinonia*) in our comfort," Paul says to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:7). The first letter of Peter calls on Christians to rejoice as they have *koinonia* with Christ's sufferings (1 Pet. 4:13).

The gospel, then, tells us of Christ's *koinonia* with flesh and blood, his entering upon suffering and death so that both may be overcome and a way to God opened. But all this has consequences for the call and the shaping of the Christian life. As the little letter of Barnabas puts it, "You shall permit your neighbor to share in all things and not claim anything as your own. For if you have *koinonia* in that which is imperishable, how much more shall you have it in things which are perishable" (*Barnabas* 19.8). This sort of thought — the need to care, share, and give — is typical of several passages in the New Testament in which the *koinonia* group is translated either as share/sharing, partake/partaking, or partner/partnering.

There is a practical and even monetary aspect to *koinonia*. So Paul thanks the Christians at Philippi for their partnership of support in the work of the gospel, even as he exhorts the Romans to "contribute to the needs of the saints" and the Corinthians to be generous in giving to the church in Jerusalem: all verses in which the verb **koinonew** is present (Phil. 1:5, 4:15; Rom. 12:13; 2 Cor. 9:13). This sense of obligation that takes practical shape in the community of believers is so rich that we cannot spend the time to explore it fully. Suffice it to say that the notion of *koinonia* in and through Christ leads inexorably to this demonstration of concrete care for one another at every level of corporate life, and is present by implication even where the *koinonia* word group is absent.

Beyond this level of care, however, Paul especially draws out the further implications of *koinonia* care. "If there is any *koinonia* in the Holy Spirit," he writes to the Philippians, "complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Then he adds, "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:1-3). Part of the obligation to care (works of charity) involves also the obligation of humility and self-surrender. It is a brief step from this sense of oneness of mind to having the mind of Christ — which Paul explicates in terms of his emptying and entrance into human life and into servant ministry. It is often said today that the center of Christian life is love. But I wonder if it is not truer to say that love is displayed for Christians by the powerful and central reality of *koinonia* — that this peculiar view of *agape*, sacrificial love, is fleshed out in fact by the drama and the implications of *koinonia* as understood by the earliest Christians.

Of course, I have not even touched on the ecclesiological dimensions of *koinonia* — what we understand by the word communion. Here, too, Paul uses the *koinonia* group. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not *koinonia* in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not *koinonia* in the body of Christ?" If the fundamental *koinonia* is that of Christ entering flesh and blood to redeem and restore it, then the remembrance and thanksgiving for that primordial gift among those incorporated in him is the true expression of Christian *koinonia*. It is not an addition to it, but the appropriation of it. In Johannine language, Christ is both the door to the sheepfold, and the sheepfold itself — the way to *koinonia* that comprises the *koinonia* itself

We are all used to the language that is thrown around in our part of the Church these days — going back to Acts 2:42 where we began. That language says, "As long as we can all gather around the same table, it does not matter where or how we differ." But this reads the text in a way that undercuts its very assumptions. Luke, in the Acts, lays out a very specific order: they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinonia*, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. The worship offered to God by the Church is itself grounded upon the apostolic *koinonia* — the understanding and appropriation of the whole action of Christ which makes this *koinonia* possible. And that, of course, is the sum and substance of the apostles' teaching. Being of one mind with Christ does not signal some sort of spiritual exploration of what the eternal may or may not think, subject to change as our exploration continues — it entails self-emptying as we have seen. In short, *koinonia* rests squarely on our reception and appropriation of the Christ displayed in the apostolic preaching and our response in loyalty and obedience. The apostles' teaching is less a list of things to do than a pattern presented to us of what has been done and what consequences and obligations this pattern entails.

Manifestly, if the *koinonia* of God through Christ — his entering into flesh and blood — is intended to redeem and restore fallen, broken humanity, then unity, community will be the result. We do not build it, however — we receive it. But by the same token, our life in *koinonia* will lead in its own way to greater unity, community, as we leave our own agendas and ideals behind and surrender to the apostles' teaching and seek the good of each other. As St. Augustine said, "You are what you have received" (*Easter Homily*, 227).

I said earlier that the least helpful translation of the *koinonia* group is "fellowship." Here, I think, is the crossroads I spoke of at the outset between our Episcopalian/Anglican ethos and the Scripture: Many of our churches have committees as we administer our church programs. There may be a worship committee, a stewardship committee, an outreach committee, and a fellowship committee. From this perspective, fellowship is one of many things we do — and truth be told, while interesting to some, probably not the most important thing we do.

So when our people look out at the Anglican Communion, they may be forgiven for thinking that fellowship beyond the local congregation is "a nice thing if you can get it" — something I have heard so often — but when push comes to shove, this is far from being an imperative, let alone central aspect of the life of the Church.

My all too brief survey of the concept of *koinonia*, however, teaches me something very different. *Koinonia* is not just one thing among many that describes the Church — it is fundamental to the Church and to being the Church. It represents the saving event of Christ's entry into our world and his submission to the saving will of the Father. It is the new reality that Christ inaugurates in his ministry and seals with his blood. It is the sum and substance of the apostle's teaching and mission. It is the dynamic drive that forms and informs the Church. It is the pattern of how we live together and what we do together. It is the hope toward which we are drawn and for which we strive in faith.

And, I believe, it is this *koinonia* in all its richness that calls us here and engages our efforts not merely to preserve what we are or have been as an Anglican Communion, but to press on toward ever deeper levels of realizing, by God's grace, what we are called to be.

OBSTACLES

There are many obstacles to be encountered as we press on. Some of those I hope will be addressed here. And if not here, at some point as we think together.

1. The first on my agenda is education. Can we educate our people about *koinonia*?

As I see it, this is the critical issue. All the work that has been and will yet be done with respect to a covenant for communion will be largely wasted if it provides yet another document and more structures, but fails to connect viscerally with the People of God. We need to grow deeper into the understanding of what *koinonia* is all about — and more especially into a deeper appropriation of God's initiative in Jesus Christ.

In his first presidential address at the Lambeth Conference, Archbishop Rowan raised a haunting question: "in our time together [God] is asking us, more sharply than ever before, perhaps, what we want to make of [Communion] — how we use the legacy we have been given for his glory and for the sake of the

good news of Jesus Christ." This raised for me not just the prospect of God watching us to see how we handle the Anglican Communion — but how we understand and live out the place we have been given in God's whole project of *koinonia*.

In a series of meetings across the diocese, where Bishop Lambert, Dr. Wells, and I shared the work of Lambeth and the Windsor Process, I made an effort to do something like this: What is the point of Communion — why is this business of a Covenant important? Because it has to do with our faithfulness to God Himself — to our rightly receiving and handing on the gift of God, that the whole world might come within His saving embrace. It was a beginning. But I am convinced that the power of knowing that we are accountable to God, and of putting this whole notion of *koinonia* back into the prominence it rightly and richly deserves is critical if we are to motivate our people to care, let alone preserve the Anglican Communion.

2. The second is memory. We seem to have no corporate memory, which makes covenanting very difficult.

In my first meeting of the House of Bishops back in March of 1993, my table group was talking about how we interpret the scriptures as a Church. Someone suggested that we should produce a teaching or statement on how we deal with the scriptures. I blurted out, "But you already did that!" Several colleagues then began asking about that. I walked over to the secretariat and asked if they could access the paper I had in mind. Within a few minutes, we had copies for everyone around the table. The paper had been produced in 1991!

I was amazed that no one had a memory of what we had already done! I have written on two occasions about the 1991 General Convention resolution — BO2O — which mandated the Presiding Bishop to begin a pan-Anglican and ecumenical conversation on issues of human sexuality, because, we said, the Episcopal Church should not decide these issues "on our own." Yet, while ostensibly that resolution is still in effect, no one ever acted on it and no one has held the office of the Presiding Bishop to account for it.

How can a Covenant bind us if we do not even remember what we have said to ourselves? This is a very serious problem, one for which I have no answer, but one that must be answered.

3. The third obstacle has to do with our understanding of the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

We need to be able to articulate in a compelling way why the office and person of the Archbishop is critical to our continuing Communion. Archbishop Rowan at the Lambeth Conference said, "God does not hand out general prescriptions and inspirations: God works through the specifics of the community that is called in Christ's name — the Church." Surely, this is right:

I have always seen the centrality of the Archbishop's role in similar terms. This office is not just a symbol, or instrument of unity, but an Instance of the work of the Holy Spirit growing the Church and connecting us with the larger apostolic *koinonia*. Some attention has been given to the "key role" of the Archbishop in *The Virginia Report*, and this is a matter of reflection in the ARCIC document, *The Gift of Authority*. In the latter document, the notion of the transmission of the sacred tradition synchronically — *i.e.*, over time — is one aspect of *episkope*, and especially of primatial authority. But in all of this, there is a kind of vagueness, which it would be helpful to address.

This is especially acute in our present circumstance. With the announcement of a new Province, the question is whether and to what extent recognition by the Archbishop of Canterbury is necessary. Some have seemed to suggest that this body would be recognizably Anglican even without connection to or recognition by the Archbishop.

I think it will be increasingly necessary to be able to explicate just why our *koinonia* with the Archbishop of Canterbury is as important as we sense it to be. And my sense is that will have to be grounded in an understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit, so readily claimed these days by those on both the innovating and the conserving side!

4. The final obstacle I will identify is perseverance or patience. Can we inspire our people and ourselves to stand firm in this critical moment?

There is one instance of *koinonia* language that I did not mention earlier — that found at 2 Cor. 6:14. Here Paul says, “Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what *koinonia* has righteousness and iniquity? Or what *koinonia* has light with darkness?”

I have heard this verse quoted over and over again — and Paul's exhortation that follows, “Come out of them.” This seems to be a clarion call to those who would leave.

It does not matter, apparently, that the best exegesis of this passage shows that Paul was addressing Christian relations at Corinth, not with what might be called “false believers” — Christians who were muddled in their thinking or commitments — but “unbelievers,” Gentile non-Christians engaged in the cults that abounded in Corinth (Paul Barnett, 344ff.).

What should matter, however, is Paul's own demonstrable care and commitment to restoring the life of the Corinthian church to its proper and authentic *koinonia*. Ironically, if Paul had been addressing relationships between orthodox and unorthodox Christians, sound believers and unsound, he would likely have had to follow his own advice and get out of Corinth altogether. But by his determination, teach, witness, and pray for the healing and reconciliation of that Church, he worked through the turmoil toward a greater renewal.

When I am asked why we should stay in the Episcopal Church, I point to the sacraments. As you will know, *sacramentum* was the pledge that Roman soldiers took when they entered the service of the emperor. It is a commitment to *koinonia*, in short. And it belongs to *koinonia* to endure sacrifice and suffering until the battle is through.

CONCLUSION

There are, doubtless, many other obstacles and problems that need to be addressed. This is my simple report from the frontlines of the crisis, and the issues I see to be important.

I am grateful for those of you who have come to share in this day of discussion and reflection. It is encouraging to know that there are many others who, out of love and gratitude for what God has given us in Jesus Christ, are pulling together and giving serious thought to the plight we are in and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the way ahead.

I want especially to thank the organizers of this conference, and Dr. Ephraim Radner who has been a shining light, not only to the Covenant Design Group of which he is a part, but also to all of us on the frontlines. My task has been small. His and yours is much larger, and I ask God's blessing on you all as you begin.