

Conciliarity and Consensus: the Anglican Experience

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Abstract

Three recent events in the life of the Church of England have raised questions about conciliarity and consensus, not only for the Church of England, but within the whole Anglican Communion: the rejection by the General Synod of proposals for women bishops that had received overwhelming support at the diocesan level; the rejection by the General Synod of a proposed Anglican Covenant, which has now been accepted by seven other provinces of the Anglican Communion; the implementation of government proposals for 'gay marriage' which make it illegal for the Church of England to perform same-sex wedding ceremonies. The importance of these issues for the Church of England and the Anglican Communion, and the way they are being handled, demonstrate how live are questions of 'conciliarity and consensus'. In this paper, I will try to show how Anglicans approach them, maintaining a special focus on the Church of England. It may be that a major, theologically based-realignment is taking place amongst Anglicans (with 'traditional' Anglicans pulling apart from 'liberals') – or it may be that our practical conciliarity will hold us together to the point where a new consensus can emerge.

Introduction

Three recent events in the life of the Church of England have raised questions about conciliarity and consensus, not only for the Church of England, but within the whole Anglican Communion. Let me begin by sketching them.

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(1) On November 20, 2012, the General Synod of the Church of England voted on draft legislation which would have allowed women to become bishops whilst providing male episcopal oversight for parishes and clergy conscientiously opposed to women bishops. In the Synod there are three houses, which vote separately; the bishops, the clergy and the laity. For a motion of this significance to pass, a two-thirds majority is needed in all three houses. The House of Bishops voted 43-3 in favour; the House of Clergy voted 148-45 in favour; and the House of Laity voted 132-74 in favour. A two-thirds majority was easily achieved amongst the bishops and clergy, but the laity vote was six short. The legislation was rejected.

Many were surprised by the size of the outcry, not just among church people, but amongst observers in the secular press. There was widespread shock and disbelief that the General Synod of the Church of England had voted to continue the exclusion of women from the episcopate. As the Archbishop of Canterbury said in Synod the next morning, 'We have some explaining to do'. What made things worse was that the draft legislation on women bishops had been submitted to diocesan synods, and these were overwhelmingly in favour: 42 out of 44 dioceses, and over three-quarters of the members of diocesan synods, voted in favour. Speaking after the General Synod vote, the Bishop of Norwich said, 'The House of Bishops recognises that the Church of England has expressed its mind that women should be consecrated as bishops. There is now an urgent task to find a fresh way forward.'

There was a further twist to events. Amongst a number of strong reactions from politicians, the Prime Minister suggested the Church should think again about its 'very sad' rejection of women bishops, adding that the Church needed to 'get [on] with the programme' or risk looking dangerously out of touch with modern society. 'I'm very clear', he said, 'the time is right for women bishops, it was right many years ago, they need to get on with it ... , but you do have to respect the individual institutions and the way they work, while giving them a sharp prod.' What he meant by a 'sharp prod' wasn't clear, but his words raised the spectre of the House of Commons passing legislation which the General Synod had rejected – since, by the terms of the establishment of the Church of England, the House of Commons retains ultimate legislative authority over the Church. Not since the late seventeenth century has parliament *imposed* legislation on the Church of England, but in 1928 parliament voted *against* the expressed will of the Church when it refused assent to a revised *Book of Common*

Prayer. Since that time, with the establishment of the General Synod, for all practical purposes legislative authority has been delegated to the Synod, but parliament still has, through its ecclesiastical committee, to approve Synodical measures – something which is normally just a formality. In this case, the veiled threat of parliamentary action was sufficient: it was speedily announced that the question of women bishops would be revisited as soon as possible.

(2) Only the previous day, the General Synod had responded to the voting in diocesan synods on another divisive matter: the acceptance by the Church of England of a proposed Anglican Covenant, which would have had significant implications for the conciliarity of the whole Anglican Communion.¹ The motion that had been put to the *diocesan* synods was, ‘That this Synod approve the draft Act of Synod adopting the Anglican Communion Covenant’. For this motion to pass in a diocesan synod, there had to be a simple majority in all three houses: bishops, clergy and laity. The voting among diocesan houses of bishops was 37 for, 7 against; amongst diocesan houses of clergy, 18 for, 26 against; amongst the diocesan houses of laity, 23 for and 21 against. Thus, the vote of the clergy was decisive: though there was an overwhelming majority for the Covenant amongst the bishops, and a slim majority amongst the houses of laity, the proposal was defeated in the diocesan houses of clergy by 18 to 26. It was clear that the General Synod could proceed no further on the matter. The Church of England had refused a Covenant which a number of other Anglican provinces had already adopted.² I shall have to discuss the Covenant proposal in detail later as it is intended to promote conciliarity and consensus within the whole Anglican Communion, but at this stage it is sufficient to note that it was

1. Key documents relating to the Covenant proposal (‘The Windsor Process’), together with ‘Questions and Answers’, are available on the Anglican Communion Office website: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant>. Speaking in the Synod debate, the Archbishop of Canterbury asked ‘whether there is any role for an agreed process of conflict resolution within the Communion’. He went on, ‘I think that is still on the table. I think it still needs to be addressed.’ The need for a process of conflict-resolution within the Church goes to the very heart of the question of conciliarity.

2. As of April 2013, 5 Provinces had voted to ‘adopt’ the covenant (Burma/Myanmar, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Southern Cone [South America] and the West Indies); 2 had accepted it in other words (Ireland, South East Asia); 3 had rejected it (England, Scotland, New Zealand); six were in various stages of consideration (Australia, Canada, Japan, South Africa, United States, Wales). See <http://noanglican covenant.org/index.html>, accessed May 1, 2013.

through a synodical – or conciliar – process that it was rejected by the Church of England.

(3) A third event of conciliar import followed shortly after: in early December 2012, the Government announced that it would be bringing in legislation to permit same-sex marriage. During the consultation period on this proposal, the Church of England had made its opposition clear.³ When the Government nevertheless declared its intention to proceed, Maria Miller, the Equalities Minister, gave more detail of their response to the Church of England's objections, and specifically to the fear that clergy will, because of their status as registrars for marriages, be required by European equality legislation to officiate at 'gay weddings'. The Government announced that there would be a 'quadruple lock': the planned legislation would state explicitly that no religious organisation – or minister – could be forced to marry same-sex couples; it would make it unlawful for ceremonies to be staged unless the faith groups conducting them had expressly chosen to do so; the Equality Act would be amended to ensure discrimination claims cannot be brought against individuals or organisations that will not marry homosexuals; the legislation would make it clear that it will, without a further change in the law, be *illegal* for the Church of England or Church in Wales to stage same-sex wedding ceremonies. A new law will have to be passed if the Church of England changes its position on 'gay marriage'.⁴

These proposals will now become law.⁵ They assume that the official position of the Church of England represents the consensus amongst its members. If that proves not to be the case, or the consensus shifts, it will now be doubly difficult for the Church of England to change its position.

Conciliarity, Synodality and Synods

All of this shows what a live question that of 'conciliarity and consensus' is for the Church of England and for the Anglican Communion. In the remainder

3. For the Church of England's position, see <http://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/marriage,-family-and-sexuality-issues/same-sex-marriage.aspx>, accessed May 3, 2013.

4. The Independent, December 11, 2012.

5. The Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act received the Royal Assent and so became UK law on July 17, 2013.

of this paper, I will try to show how Anglicans approach these issues, maintaining a special focus on the Church of England. I cannot go into the history of the Anglican Communion, for which the question of practical conciliarity is now such an urgent issue, but we should note that the origins of what is now a worldwide Communion lie in the Church of England and that positions taken by the Church of England on contested issues have historically been of great influence within the Communion as a whole.⁶ Communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury is crucial for Anglicans throughout the world: despite the current tensions within the Anglican Communion, all the primates (metropolitans) who were fit to travel attended the consecration of Justin Welby as Archbishop of Canterbury in March 2013.

The word ‘conciliarity’ refers to a property of the Church according to which the Church has the potential to decide issues in a *conciliar* way: by identifying a *consensus*, rather than by the ‘fiat’ of an individual or a minority, or by a simple majority. This is based on the conviction that the Holy Spirit is given equally to all baptized members of the Church and that all members of the Church participate equally in the eucharist. Not all members of the Church, however, have the same role in the determining of a consensus: the Church operates as a body in which the different parts have different roles to play and different gifts to bring, but there is an ‘organic’ unity about the whole. It is to the *whole* body of Christ that the faith is entrusted, so any decision-making on questions of faith must take account of the insights and understanding of the whole body, and as far as possible represent the faith of the whole body. This is not a simple matter as it has often not been clear what is the faith of the ‘whole’ Church – for example in the very fundamental disputes about Christology that divided the early Church. What is needed within the conciliar process is ‘judgment’ or ‘discernment’ to make sure the Church remains true to the witness of the apostles – ‘apostolic’ – as well as open to the insights of all – ‘catholic’. To be effective, conciliar judgments have to be accepted: they have to be *received*, recognized as in some sense expressing the faith of the whole body. ‘Conciliarity’ is an aspect of catholicity.⁷

6. William B. Sachs provides a good introduction in *The Transformation of Anglicanism, From State Church to Global Communion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

7. A useful general study is Paul Valliere, *Conciliarism, A History of Decision-Making in the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Contained within the claim to ‘conciliarity’ is a conviction about the importance of the laity for the life of the Church. Bishops have a ministry of ‘oversight’ and of teaching but neither they nor clergy as a whole have a monopoly of insight about the content of the faith. The clergy, however educated, must recognise the importance of the experience of the laity for the life of the whole body. For Anglicans, an important tag has been *lex orandi, lex credendi*:⁸ the way the whole Church – including the laity – prays is determinative for what the whole Church believes. It was the consensus within the early Church about the full deity as well as the full humanity of Christ (and the deity of the Holy Spirit), a consensus expressed in worship, that shaped the Trinitarian faith of the early ecumenical Councils.

The word ‘conciliarity’ has a Latin root. Its Greek equivalent is ‘synodality’, derived from the Greek ‘sun-hodos’, meaning ‘a common way’.⁹ The use of the term ‘synodality’ is a salutary reminder that in defining doctrine, the Church is not identifying objects, but determining the boundaries of a common way along which Christians travel together. All of this provides important background for understanding the synodal structures in Anglicanism today.¹⁰ In the Church of England, there is a hierarchy of deanery synods, diocesan synods and the General Synod. These were instituted in 1970 to replace a Church Assembly, which had existed since 1919, and which itself replaced the clerical Convocations of Canterbury and York that originated before the Reformation. Until shortly before the introduction of the Church Assembly, the laity had been excluded from the regular deliberations of the Church,¹¹ and until the introduction of deanery and diocesan synods, there was no consultative mechanism for the church at the local level. However, the laity were not completely excluded from decision making: from the time of the Reformation, legislative power over the Church rest-

8. See the article, ‘Lex Orandi – Lex Credendi’ in Stephen Sykes and John Booty ed., *The Study of Anglicanism* (London: SPCK/Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 174-88.

9. See the important collection of essays, A. Melloni and S. Scatena eds, *Synods and Synodality* (Münster: LIT, 2005).

10. See the article by C. Podmore on ‘The History and Principles of Synodical Government in the Church of England’ in Melloni and Scatena, pp. 213-36.

11. In 1886 an advisory House of Laymen (sic) was instituted alongside the (clerical) Convocation of Canterbury and in 1892 for York. From 1898 these met together and in 1903 there was formed a Representative Church Council, which included both clergy and laity. In 1919, this became the Church Assembly. See Podmore, p. 220.

ed with parliament, which consisted of laity and bishops. At the time of the Reformation, the key to the break with Rome was the rejection of the jurisdiction of the Pope. This was achieved by the Act of Supremacy (1534), which was passed by parliament on the initiative of the King. Other major Acts, such as the Act of Uniformity (1559), which introduced a revised form of *The Book of Common Prayer* at the beginning of the reign of Elizabeth, were vital for the formation of the nascent Church of England. The key is that these and other Acts, which engineered the severance of the Church of England from the jurisdiction of Rome, the establishment of the monarch as 'supreme governor' of the Church of England and the *Book of Common Prayer* as a doctrinal standard for the Church, were all introduced by Act of Parliament. The balance of power between the monarch and parliament had not yet swung decisively towards parliament, but when it did so in the mid-seventeenth century, it became even clearer that the Church of England was *by law established*, the monarch was its 'supreme governor', and that major changes in the life and doctrine of the Church have to have the authority of parliament.

As has been correctly observed, the Church of England is a 'Constantinian church writ small'. The legal basis of the Church of England was made even clearer at the time of the Restoration of the monarchy after the Civil War and the Commonwealth. It was parliament that in 1660 invited Charles II to assume the throne as a constitutional monarch and parliament that passed a new Act of Uniformity, enshrining in law the place of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* within the Church of England. The place of the laity in determining the mind of the Church of England was, until the beginning of the twentieth century, thought to be assured through the participation of the laity in the national legislative assembly – parliament – despite the fact that increasing numbers of members of parliament, whether of the House of Commons or of the House of Lords, were not members of the Church of England. If the voice of the laity was to be adequately expressed in the counsels of the Church of England, something had to be done. This is why, when in 1919 the Church Assembly was created alongside the clerical Convocations of Canterbury and York, it included amongst its members both clergy and laity.

The synodical system in the Church of England, which succeeded the Church Assembly, is intended to make the Church both representative and, to all intents and purposes, self-governing (though under parliament). Legislative pro-

posals must be submitted to the Ecclesiastical Committee of the Parliament, whose role is essential advisory. The committee only has the power to recommend acceptance or not to recommend acceptance by parliament. This is light-touch sovereignty, but it is sovereignty. The synods themselves are intended to give representative voice to laity and clergy at the sub-diocesan, diocesan and national level. Dissatisfaction with the system is often expressed because in practice it can be unrepresentative. General Synod meets on weekdays, when many people of working age cannot be present. Though discussions are held ‘in the round’, it operates like parliament: there are parties and there is politicking. On major issues concerning doctrine and the sacraments a two-thirds majority is required in all three houses, but this gesture towards consensus can in practice prove frustrating, because it makes it relatively easy to block measures which have the support of a majority. The frustration over the vote against women bishops came precisely because there was evidence from diocesan synods that the Church as a whole was overwhelmingly supportive. The vote in the General Synod did not represent the mind of the Church.

Lambeth Conferences and the Covenant

If the General Synod is a major instrument of conciliarity for the Church of England, now imitated throughout the Anglican Communion, the major instrument of conciliarity for the whole Anglican Communion are the regular Lambeth Conferences. (A minor instrument of conciliarity, which includes lay representation, is the Anglican Consultative Council, founded after the 1968 Lambeth Conference as a subsidiary ‘instrument of unity’.) Lambeth Conferences to which the Archbishop of Canterbury invites all Anglican bishops worldwide, together with bishops of the wider Anglican Communion,¹² have been held about every ten years since 1867. The name ‘Conference’ is carefully chosen: these are not councils or synods, because, although their purpose is mutual consultation, they have no legislative power. Most have produced a series of resolutions,

12. That is to say bishops of the united churches of South India, North India and Pakistan and bishops of other churches, such as the Lusitanian Church in Portugal, which have opted to join the Anglican Communion.

which have advisory force, but there is no mechanism to compel their implementation. The 1998 Conference proved particularly divisive, especially on questions of homosexual relations – so much so that Archbishop Rowan Williams decided that at the 2008 Conference votes would not be taken and there would be no resolutions.

One defining event in the interim between the 1998 and 2008 Lambeth Conferences was the episcopal ordination in 2003 of Gene Robinson, an openly gay man in a committed relationship. The bishops at the 1998 Conference had resolved that they could not ‘advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions’.¹³ Robinson’s ordination, which was in accord with the canons of the American Episcopal Church, directly contradicted this. The stark question it raised was one which had been brewing for forty years: that of mutual responsibility and accountability within the churches of the Anglican Communion. Here was an action which, it was known, would give deep offence in various parts of the Anglican Communion. This was not only the ordination of an active homosexual – such ordinations had doubtless taken place before – but the ordination of a *bishop* who was completely open about his homosexuality. Against the background of the Lambeth Resolution, for which the American bishops had been present, this looked, in various other parts of the Anglican Communion, like a distinctly provocative act. The situation we now have within the Anglican Communion, and have had since 2004, is one of deep disagreement, principally on gender and sexuality, but increasingly also, in response to this conflict, on the exercise of episcopal authority across diocesan and provincial boundaries. This was why the Lambeth Conference of 2008 gave most of its time to small group meetings in which bishops of differing views could listen to one another. Three weeks were spent in Bible Study, prayer and mutual listening in a process called ‘Indaba’ – the aim of which was precisely to promote consensus. There was a conciliar *process*, without any attempt at conciliar resolution of issues.¹⁴

The response on the part of the Archbishop of Canterbury to the ordination of Gene Robinson had been to ask a Commission to consider its implications

13. Resolution 1.10 on Human Sexuality.

14. Sadly, about 20 per cent of the bishops within the Anglican Communion absented themselves from the Lambeth Conference, meeting a little earlier in Jerusalem. Only a few bishops participated in both events.

for the Anglican Communion and to suggest possible ways forward. The report of the Lambeth Commission on Communion ('The Windsor Commission'), published in late 2004,¹⁵ included a proposal for an Anglican Covenant which would spell out the demands of mutual accountability within the Anglican Communion. It sketched a procedure for dealing in the future with divisive issues.¹⁶ This Covenant went through four drafts and was then put out for consideration by all the provinces of the Communion.¹⁷ It spells out the basis of Anglican self-understanding and the obligation provinces take on in committing themselves to the Anglican Communion. Acceptance of the Covenant by individual provinces would represent a recognition of the conciliar nature of Anglicanism (including the place of laity in decision-making), of the consultative nature of Anglican authority, and of the responsibilities of each member province towards the worldwide communion. This is the Covenant which the Church of England has now rejected.

It is clear that unless Anglicans find stronger means of mutual accountability, the Anglican Communion will continue to fragment. Supporters of the Covenant proposal argue that we have to spell out much more clearly what it means to be a church or a Christian in the Anglican tradition and the ways in which we are mutually accountable. Much of the text of the Covenant is taken up, therefore, with describing what it means to be Anglican. Only towards the end does it suggest what to do if conflict arises: if a change is proposed in one church, which members of other Anglican churches see as contrary to the Covenant, the matter can be referred to the Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion. The Standing Committee may take advice from bodies representing the whole Communion – the Anglican Consultative Council or the Primates' Meeting. If in the judgement of these bodies the proposed change is 'incompatible with the Covenant' to which the church has given assent, the Standing Committee may ask the church to defer the action. If the church refuses, the Standing Committee may then recommend to the representative bodies of the Communion 'relational consequences' that will follow should the proposed ac-

15. See, The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report 2004* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2004).

16. For the details of the Covenant proposal, cf. note 1.

17. Provinces were asked to report progress towards a decision to the meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council in late 2012.

tion go ahead. The Standing Committee will have no legal powers of compulsion, but it will have the power to recommend to the churches of the Communion how in a situation of conflict they should respond.

The Covenant text demonstrates very clearly that the Anglican Communion is a communion of churches who are committed to one another in faithfulness to the Gospel. It sketches a new role for the Standing Committee that is intended to be in some ways both magisterial (it will participate in judging whether new proposals contradict the Covenant) and subsidiary (it will help to sustain communion by pointing out the 'relational consequences' of proposed courses of action). The Covenant would not, however, bring into being a new, centralised disciplinary authority for the Anglican Communion. There would be no Anglican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. For those Anglican provinces that opt into it, it will become an instrument of conciliarity. For those churches that do not, there may well be a continuing consultative conciliarity, but there will be no mechanism of restraint in place to ensure adequate space and time in which consensus can emerge. What is more likely is that on conflicted issues provinces of the Anglican Communion (who would probably, of course, have some level of internal conflict) would agree to differ – regarding differing approaches to issues as within the range of tolerable Christian diversity, even if they had not been thought to be so to that point.

This of course raises the question of conciliarity and non-Anglican churches. Anglicans have never regarded Anglicanism as co-extensive with the catholic (or universal) Church. The Preface to the Declaration of Assent, which is read every time there is an appointment to a new post of liturgical responsibility in the Church of England begins by stating that the Church of England is '*part of the one, holy catholic and apostolic church*'.¹⁸ This is why Anglicans have from the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement played a prominent part in its life, and especially in the – significantly named – World *Council of Churches*. Anglicans have recognised in the WCC an instrument of the conciliarity of all the churches, and have played a full part in the generation of consensus texts like *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*¹⁹ and *The Church: Towards a Common Vi-*

18. The Preface begins: 'The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'

19. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

sion.²⁰ The position of Anglicans with regard to the conciliarity of other churches has been clarified by the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888.²¹ As the preamble to the proposed Covenant makes clear, Anglicans seek full and visible unity with churches that adhere to the Scriptures, the sacraments, the creeds and the ‘historic episcopate, locally adapted’. According to the bishops assembled at the Lambeth Conference in 1888, and reaffirmed in 1930, this is the Anglican ‘*satis est*’ for unity. What is now being tested is whether ‘locally adapted’ with respect to the episcopate can extend to women (this has indeed been accepted virtually throughout the Anglican Communion) and, since 2003, whether it can be extended to partnered gay people. One important question that remains is how, then, change on such matters can come about with due respect to the conciliarity of the Anglican Communion. For some churches, pressure for change will come from the need for mission and ministry in changing societies; for others the experienced need will be precisely *not* to capitulate to social change. In all churches, questions of sex and gender will for the foreseeable future continue to provoke lively internal debate. It is clear that at local and at international levels judgments have to be made about the level of unanimity requisite for change – or for resistance to change. As recent events in the General Synod of the Church of England have shown, it is not only the substantive questions that are difficult for churches – there are also questions about the procedural mechanisms necessary to express conciliarity and identify consensus.

20. *The Church – Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Commission (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2012).

21. The text can be found at <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1888/>. Resolution 11 states:

That, in the opinion of this Conference, the following articles supply a basis on which approach may be by God’s blessing made towards home reunion:

a. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as “containing all things necessary to salvation,” and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.

b. The Apostles’ Creed, as the baptismal symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.

c. The two sacraments ordained by Christ himself - Baptism and the Supper of the Lord - ministered with unfailing use of Christ’s words of institution, and of the elements ordained by him.

d. The historic episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of his Church.

Same-sex marriage

The initiative taken by the government – taken, it must be said with surprising speed – to introduce same-sex marriage, has challenged the Church of England to re-examine its attitude to marriage. The preface to the Marriage Service in both the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) and in *Common Worship* (2000), hugely different though they are in general approach, are both written on the unquestioned presupposition that marriage is a union for life between one man and one woman.²² I have already explained that the Government, by its ‘quadruple lock’, sought to protect the official position of the Church of England by making it *illegal* for clergy to marry same-sex couples (though no rite currently exists which would have made possible the ‘marriage’ of a same-sex couple).²³ The state has, however, made a serious challenge to the Church by using the term ‘marriage’ for such unions. The Church has been forced to recognize that it cannot ‘patent’ Christian language. The Church of England must concede that until fairly recently the term ‘priest’ and still more ‘bishop’ indicated the gender of the minister. Give the changes in secular law round the world to permit ‘gay marriage’, the gendered implications of the word ‘marriage’ are also changing. Only where there is an adjective such as ‘traditional’ or ‘christian’ will ‘marriage’ in the future be generally understood to be between a man and a woman. Of course, it would be possible for the Church of England to respond to the pressure of the state on this issue by seeking to be disestablished, a response some on both sides of this debate would welcome. The Church of England would then be free, if it so wished, to provide a service of commitment for gay people on its own terms - but it would rest with the state as to whether this was publicly recognized as marriage, or whether there needed in addition, for legal purposes, to be a civil ceremony. The government has acted as though there were a consensus both in the Church (against ‘gay marriage’), and in society at large (for ‘gay

22. This has recently been reaffirmed in a document published by the Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, ‘Men and Women in Marriage’. See: <http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1715479/marriagetextbrochureprint.pdf>.

23. This cannot, of course, preclude the possibility that the Church might in the future wish to introduce a right of blessing for same-sex couples, probably to be used after celebration of a civil partnership – a direct analogy to the way that ‘christian marriage’ began in the Roman Empire.

marriage’). The extent to which either is true is not at all clear. The continuing problem for the Church of England is that there appears to be a diminishing consensus on such issues and little agreement about the instruments of conciliarity that should be used both nationally and internationally to seek and to identify a consensus.

Conclusion

It is, I believe, one of the strengths of Anglicanism in general and the Church of England in particular that we are deeply committed to conciliarity.²⁴ This has come about almost by an accident of history: it took the force of lay people assembled in parliament, using secular law, at the behest of a (lay) monarch to prise England free from the jurisdiction of Rome and to establish the Church of England as a national church. From England, the practices of Anglicanism, with the exception of establishment, spread all round the world, producing a communion of independent churches who have no formal means of mutual accountability but value their communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury and with each other. Not so much from theological conviction,²⁵ but from experience and from practical necessity, conciliarity and consensus are carried in the DNA of Anglicanism. This, though, may be breaking down – or at least mutating – in the face of current conflicts over sex and gender. It may be that a major, theologically based-realignment is taking place amongst Anglicans (with ‘traditional’ Anglicans pulling apart from ‘liberals’) – or it may be that our practical conciliarity will hold us together to the point where a new consensus can emerge. The danger of the former – a re-alignment – is that it will represent a retreat from catholicity; the danger of the latter – the search for consensus – is that it will represent a retreat from apostolicity. The challenge Anglicans now face is indeed one of conciliarity: can we maintain conciliar unity, both at the national and global levels, despite the tensions that threaten to pull us apart?

24. This is evident in The Kuala Lumpur Report of the third Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, *Conflict, Communion and Hope* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2008).

25. Paul Avis demonstrates the extent to which Anglicanism is indebted to the conciliarist tradition in his important study, *Beyond the Reformation, Authority, Primacy and Unity in the Conciliar Tradition* (London/New York: T and T Clark, 2006), especially pp. 134-55, 164-78.