

New Archbishop and old or new Covenant?

The appointment of Church of England bishops follows a convoluted and somewhat clandestine process, formerly through the ecclesiastical machinery associated with the Crown Appointments Commission and now the slightly more transparent Crown Nominations Commission. This Commission also deals with the appointment of the next Archbishop of Canterbury and embarked on its first meeting in May 2012 with a view to an announcement of the name of the new Archbishop sometime during the autumn of this year.

Closely associated with Rowan Williams the outgoing Archbishop has been another rather more visible but no less demanding undertaking namely that of the proposed Anglican Covenant. Strictly speaking, the deliberations and synodical processes associated with the Covenant are not directly subject to the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury and, as they are now in motion, will continue, at least in theory, until all the Provinces of the Anglican Communion have been consulted. This is despite the fact that the rejection of the Covenant by a clear majority of English dioceses has effectively holed the project below the waterline.

Curiously, responses both to the prospect of a new Archbishop of Canterbury and also the Covenantal considerations seem muted, sometimes to the point of disinterest. This may say something subliminally about the ultimately parochial nature of Anglicanism as it is practised.

The oft-quoted phrase 'Anglican Church' is not accurate as the Anglican Communion lacks the characteristics of a world Church with a centralised hierarchy and/or confessional statement. Instead there is a loose bond of fellowship and communion expressed by being 'in communion' with the see of Canterbury. In reality, despite all the claims of 'torn fabric' and threats of exclusion, one of Rowan William's legacies (purchased at a high personal cost) is that the Anglican Communion as expressed through the Provinces and frequently at a diocesan and parish level is still extant and most of us remain more or less in communion.

This is the reality that the next Archbishop will inherit. The Communion is fragile and prone to fissiparous tendencies but it is still functioning. As such, and non English Provinces may in the charity of their hearts forgive this, there is something very C of E about what has happened, for there has been a crisis without any obvious resolution except perhaps to muddle along and leave space for the Holy Spirit.

Dare this editorial comment suggest therefore that the appointment of a new but relatively short-tenure Archbishop might beneficially leave little time for initiatives and an imperative to hasten in the making and renewal of friendships accompanied by a quiet building of bridges? Might he (and gender is the only certainty about the next appointment) also *ex cathedra* as it were exercise one of the few gifts of authority truly in his possession

and delay the next Lambeth Conference by at least five years by which time a new generation of Anglicans could celebrate their unity rather than their divisions.

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