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## **The Notion of Covenant as ecumenical instrument**

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### **Introduction**

Addressing the Lambeth Conference 2008, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observed that ‘A contract is a transaction. A covenant is a relationship. Or to put it slightly differently, a contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an “us”. That is why contracts benefit, but covenants transform’.

Identity and relationship lie at the heart of the notion of covenant in today’s ecumenical scene. While many remain convinced that the ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement is, in the words of the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission, ‘full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life’ (Nairobi Report, 1986, 20), many also have come to believe that there are steps along the way which may serve to bring churches to interim positions which nevertheless have the potential for development into closer relationship. This is made explicit in An Anglican-Methodist Covenant where the parties note that ‘we see the Anglican-Methodist Covenant that we propose as a stepping-stone on the way to further developments in the near future.’ ( An Anglican-Methodist Covenant : Common Statement of the Formal Conversations between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England, 2001 Foreword v.)

### **Background**

The International Missionary Conference at Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910, set in motion a process which led to the creation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. The first Assembly, meeting in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, stated: ‘We have covenanted with one another in constituting the World Council of Churches. We intend to stay together. We call upon Christian congregations everywhere to endorse and fulfil this covenant in their relations one with another’ (Message of First Assembly, WCC 1948). The word ‘covenant’ entered ecumenical discourse.

A further impetus to the development of positive inter-church relationships came from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and resultant bi-lateral theological dialogues. Hopes were high that church unity would and could be achieved perhaps even by the end of the century. This was not to be. Initial optimism has given way to a dogged

perseverance along the road with varying distances among the pilgrims. It became clear that resting places would be required by some; the notion of 'covenant' as commitment between churches which, while binding in very many respects, stops short of full unity, has provided one such.

As Paul Crow puts it, 'In covenanting, each church maintains, for the present and as long as each church shall decide, its ecclesiastical structures, traditions, forms of worship and systems of ministerial placement. Nevertheless, in a solemn act the churches ask God through the Holy Spirit to create out of their separated lives a new ecclesial community committed to common mission in the world' (Crow 2002, p.269).

In a number of countries, the notion of covenanting has been used to draw churches closer to each other in terms of commitment to the goal of visible unity. Different dynamics obtain in different places where circumstances, history, social milieu, may bring non-theological factors into play.

## **'Case Histories'**

### ***Covenant relationships in Britain and Ireland***

The third Assembly of the World Council of Churches at New Delhi, India, in 1961, placed a significant emphasis on local ecumenism. Subsequently, a British Faith and Order Conference, aptly entitled 'Unity Begins at Home,' held at Nottingham, England, in 1964, urged the member churches of the then British Council of Churches (anomalously including the Irish churches) to work together towards union in units such as nations.

**Scotland** Historically, the word 'covenant' has negative connotations in Scotland, harking back to the bloody disputes between the Covenanters (Presbyterians) and their opponents in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Atrocities were committed by both sides in the name of religion. Memories are long and the word 'covenant,' as a term of commitment, is not used by the Scottish churches. However, following the Nottingham Conference, a Multilateral Church Conversation was initiated which fed into the later Scottish Church Initiative for Union (SCIFU). This initiative came to an untimely end in 2003 when the Church of Scotland was unable to agree to the process; the Scottish Episcopal Church followed suit. Currently, the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church (in Scotland) and the United Reformed Church Synod in Scotland have a Statement of Partnership, which operates in a manner similar to a covenant.

**Wales** Post-Nottingham, the Church in Wales (Anglican), the Methodist Church (in Wales), the Presbyterian Church of Wales, the United Reformed Church (in Wales), some congregations of the Baptist Union and the Union of Welsh Independents formed a Joint Covenant Committee. The Committee produced several documents – The Call to Covenant (1966); Covenanting in Wales (1968) and Covenanting for Union in Wales (1971). Early in 1975, the churches, with the exception of the Union of Welsh

Independents, joined to declare that ‘...we enter now into this solemn Covenant before God and with one another, to work and pray in common obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, in order that by the Holy Spirit we may be brought into one visible Church to serve together in mission to the glory of God the Father.’ The following year, the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales was established to move the covenant forward.

The text of the Welsh Covenant presents seven pairs of ‘recognitions’ and consequent ‘intentions’ concerning (i) faith, (ii) calling, (iii) membership of the one church of Jesus Christ, (iv) common baptism, (v) ordained ministry, (vi) worship and sacramental life and (vii) concern for good governance. The signatories acknowledged that they did not know what form union will take, but that they held themselves open to the Spirit. This openness has not been without testing: several initiatives, including the discussion document, ‘Ministry in a Uniting Church’ (1986), and the process for appointing an Ecumenical Bishop have been shelved without being presented for decision. While disappointing, this tactic avoids polarisation and leaves contentious issues open for further debate at a more opportune time.

In 2005, the Covenanting churches signed the Trefeca Declaration, committing them to another five years of covenant relationship. In 2010, the Commission requested the churches to renew that commitment for a further period of five years from 2011, to be further reviewed in 2016. The agenda of the Commission includes further work on a mode of governance and a model of pastoral oversight or *episcope* acceptable to all the churches.

**Ireland** The 1964 Nottingham Conference gave impetus to the renewal of union conversations among the Protestant Churches in Ireland. The Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist Churches entered into unity discussions. With the inclusion of the Church of Ireland, this fragmented into several bilateral discussions and the eventual withdrawal of the Congregationalists. In 1968, the remaining talks merged to form a Tripartite Consultation including the Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The Consultation worked speedily to publish a Declaration of Intent, committing to the search for unity and acknowledging that each church would need to change. A major report, Towards a United Church, was produced in 1973.

However, after this promising start, the Consultation gradually ground to a halt with the withdrawal of the Presbyterian Church from any further form of theological dialogue in 1989. Contributory factors included the political situation in Ireland at the time, perceptions concerning the World Council of Churches’ Program to Combat Racism and theological issues with the historic episcopate. Thus the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland found themselves in bi-lateral relationship. The ensuing Joint Theological Working Party (JTWP) spent time establishing this new relationship while maintaining a door open to the Presbyterian Church. Included in its terms of reference was the brief to relate to the recently established Methodist-Anglican International Commission (now the Anglican-Methodist International Commission for Unity and Mission).

In 1999, the General Synod of the Church of Ireland and the Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland (the governing bodies) urged the JTWP to 'hasten on with its work.' Archbishop Robin Eames noted the relationship between the two churches 'could be further developed with a formal mutual recognition of both Churches' ministries and a covenant to work and witness together where possible allowing interchange of ministries and the ensuing growth of fellowship' (Presidential Address, General Synod of the Church of Ireland, 1999). The following year, a draft covenant document was presented to the governing bodies and passed to circuits and parishes for comment. A final version of the Covenant was put to the governing bodies in 2002; it passed unanimously at the Church of Ireland General Synod and with an overwhelming majority at the Conference of the Methodist Church. The Covenant was formally signed on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2002. A Covenant Council was appointed to further the relationship between the two churches.

The Covenant affirms what each church can say about the other in terms of unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity; the dominical sacraments; the common faith; a common inheritance; acceptable diversity; ministry and oversight. Further affirming that the churches are being called to share a common life and mission, ten steps are proposed relating variously to work in local circuits and parishes, at national level and for ongoing theological dialogue and exploration. The theme of mission has been fundamental in both the documentation and debate surrounding this Covenant.

Theological discussion has focused on the issue of interchangeability of ministries. A significant breakthrough was achieved when, in 2010, the governing bodies overwhelmingly agreed with the report of the Covenant Council that 'we have discerned consonance between the office and function of the Presidents and Past Presidents of the Methodist Church in Ireland and the office and function of Bishops in the Church of Ireland based on the current doctrinal understanding and ecclesiology of both churches.' Work is in progress on the legislation necessary in each church for interchangeability of ministries to proceed.

**England** Following the Second World War, a number of inter-church initiatives evolved. The only one to achieve lasting success was the merging of the Congregational Church in England and Wales and the Presbyterian Church in England in 1972 to form the United Reformed Church (URC). The Churches of Christ joined in 1981 and the Congregational Church in Scotland in 2000.

In 1982 the United Reformed Church voted in favour of a covenant with the Church of England, the Methodist Church and the Moravian Church, an arrangement which would have involved remodelling its elders and moderators as bishops and incorporating its ministry into the apostolic succession. The Church of England rejected this covenant.

On the invitation of the Methodist Church, informal conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church were initiated in 1994. Having experienced the disappointment of rejection in 1972 when proposals for Anglican/Methodist unity failed

to reach the required majority at the Church of England General Synod, approaches were cautious: ‘We cannot afford to fail again’. The parties had been set a goal which they believed to be ‘realistic and deliverable.’<sup>1</sup>

Since the signing of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant in England in November 2003, the Joint Implementation Commission (JIC) has produced a number of reports, interim and quinquennial. The Methodist Church in Britain covers the three nations of Great Britain while the Church of England resides in England; the Church in Wales and the Scottish Episcopal Church are now represented on JIC and there are ongoing conversations as to whether these churches might become formal signatories to the Covenant while maintaining current ecumenical relationships within their respective nations. The 2011 report, *Moving Forward in Covenant*, regrets that progress remains ‘patchy’ and that there are major issues in the area of *episcopate* and episcopacy. Voicing disappointment at the failure of the General Synod of the Church of England to move forward on the matter of women bishops (November 2012), the co-Chairs of JIC nevertheless expressed the hope that the churches would continue ‘to work tirelessly with renewed determination for the unity of the whole Church.’

### Germany<sup>2</sup>

In Germany, the concept of Covenant as a form of committed ecumenical relationship is well known, at least in principle. There are, however, aspects of this concept which may be peculiar to the German situation.

- (1) Language: the German equivalent for Covenant is *Bund*. The word is used in biblical and theological language, but only when speaking of God’s covenant with Israel or humankind. It is almost never used when it comes to the establishment of a special committed relationship between different churches. The German equivalent is *Ökumenische Partnerschaft*.
- (2) *Ecumenical Partnerships* are forged mostly between local parishes, normally Catholic and Lutheran or United Churches. They commit themselves to live the unity in Christ in their village or neighborhood by praying for one another, being in regular contact with one another, worshipping from time to time (but on a regular base) together, working together for the well being of the people in their area and striving for complete unity in the future. There is only one Ecumenical Partnership on a regional basis, namely between the Catholic Archdiocese of Freiburg and the Evangelische Landeskirche von Baden (Protestant Church of Baden). Although in principle these partnerships could be open to different partner churches, in practice they are almost exclusively bilateral and restricted to churches which have a parish system (that means Roman Catholic or Lutheran/United).

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<sup>1</sup> Phrases from *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant* : Common Statement of the Formal Conversations between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England, 2001 Foreword v

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Methodist bishop, Walter Klaiber, for these details.

### *Continental Europe (general)*

In Europe more generally, the Leuenberger Kirchengemeinschaft should be noted as perhaps the closest arrangement to a covenanting procedure. It may be briefly described as follows:

‘The Leuenberg Church Fellowship (LCF) comprises over 100 churches – Lutheran, Reformed, United, Hussite, Waldensian, and Czech Brethren - which have by now endorsed the original Leuenberg Agreement [LA] of 1973 or, as with the Methodists, signed a "joint declaration of church fellowship". Located principally in Europe (though including some South American churches earlier founded by German immigrants), these "churches with different confessional positions accord each other fellowship in word and sacrament and strive for the fullest possible cooperation in witness and service to the world" (LA 29). The relationship includes mutual recognition of ordination and the practice of reciprocal presidency at the Lord's table’ (Wainwright 2002, p.679).

### *The Anglican-Methodist Covenant in New Zealand*

Following an invitation from the 2002 General Synod of the Anglican Church in New Zealand to the Methodist Church to embark on conversations, representatives from each church undertook discussions which culminated in the drawing up and signing of a Covenant. The two churches had been among those which had experienced the disappointment of a failed Plan for Union in the early 1970's; however, being at a new place in their relationship, they believed that entering a covenant would enable a deepening of that relationship. The proposal presented to the governing bodies concluded with the words:

‘as we have reflected on the biblical understanding of covenant it has come alive for us. We have become excited by the possibilities it opens up. For in covenant we are provided with a sacred space that is filled with trust and loyalty. In covenant relationship questions can be explored in the context of a commitment to one another. Commitment to the relationship makes possible consideration of deep issues that are not easily resolved, without fear of abandonment or betrayal. In the Christian tradition it has been appreciated that covenant creates a robust environment where honesty is valued and where the relationship survives disappointments and moments of pain. Given that how each partner acts affects the other, covenant relationship requires mutual accountability.’

Endorsed by the governing bodies in 2008, the Covenant was signed on Wesley Day, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009. The Covenant affirms that the churches entered this covenant relationship: ‘on the basis of our shared history, our agreement on the apostolic faith, our shared theological understandings of the nature and mission of the church and of its ministry and oversight, and our agreed vision of a greater practical expression of the unity in Christ of our two churches.’

A third phase of the New Zealand conversations began in 2011 with a view to exploring questions related to recognition and interchangeability of ministries, noting the work done in this respect in Ireland.

### **Multi-lateral proposals in Australia**

The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) came into being in 1994. Ten years later, in 2004, the fifteen member churches, believing that their initial coming together was an implicit expression of covenanting, recommitted themselves to each other in a further and explicit act of covenanting. The nature of this covenant is multi-dimensional and it includes a number of levels of commitment, from the simple sharing of a building through to theological dialogue. As they are able, the churches have signed up to different aspects of the agreement, with a number of other churches signing on in subsequent years.

The Anglican Church of Australia and the Uniting Church in Australia have been involved in many years of dialogue and have produced several reports on issues relating to baptism and ministry. Following the 2001 report, For the Sake of the Gospel: Mutual Recognition of Ordained Ministries in the Anglican and Uniting Churches, a Covenant of Association and Communion was proposed. However, the General Synod of the Anglican Church opted to drop the phrase ‘and Communion’; the resulting Covenant of Association lacked definition. Further clarity is being sought on the way forward.

### **South Africa**

In 1968, a number of churches in South Africa – the Church of the Province of South Africa (Anglican), the United Congregational Church of South Africa, the Methodist Church of South Africa and three Presbyterian churches – came together to form the Church Unity Commission (CUC) with a view to engage in the search for unity. Following the formulation of a Declaration of Intention to Seek Union, adopted and celebrated by the churches on 24 November 1974, the Commission worked on a Covenant which would have led to the mutual recognition of members and ministers and other steps related to mission. These proposals fell when the Church of the Province found itself unable to accept them. In the context of the struggle against apartheid and working with the South African Council of Churches, church unity talks inevitably took a secondary place in the work of the member churches. Since the 1990s, however, work has focused on issues related to the reconciliation of ministries. Agreement has been reached on matters pertaining to sacrament and ministry and to the ordination of women. Work is in progress on ecclesial governance and *episcopate*. It should be said, however, that, though the word ‘Covenant’ is key to the whole process in terms of documentation and thinking, there has not been any formal ceremonial act of covenanting.

## United States of America

In 1962, four major American churches came together to constitute the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). By 1967, there were ten members with others having enjoyed observer status at meetings. Over the period 1968-70, a Plan of Union was drawn up, but failed to achieve agreement primarily over issues relating to ministry. In the ensuing years, the language of covenant entered the discourse as a new way of relating which would not involve the individual churches losing their denominational identity and autonomy. A series of documents, The COCU Consensus (1984), Covenanting Towards Community (1985) and Churches in Covenant Communion (1989) developed this concept. Most of the constituent churches were able to accept the proposals outlined; however the Presbyterian Church USA and the Episcopal Church found themselves unable to do so.

In 1999, COCU voted to dissolve itself and re-constitute in 2002 as Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC). CUIC brings together denominations from across a wide spectrum of American church life. CUIC defines itself as ‘a covenant relationship among eleven Christian communions that have pledged to live more closely together in expressing their unity in Christ and combating racism together’. Within both COCU and CUIC, the language of covenant has been freely used: however, there has not been any ceremonial and public entering of the churches into covenant relationship with each other.

Among the Marks of Commitment which CUIC asks of its members is that they support ongoing theological dialogue. The United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church, noting a number of Anglican/Methodist initiatives at various levels, including that of the Anglican-Methodist International Commission and Anglican/Methodist Conversations in England, met for a first bi-lateral dialogue in 2002. Following the Report, Make Us One with Christ (2006), a major document, A Theological Foundation for Full Communion between The Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church, was produced in 2010. The next step is the formulation of a series of proposed agreements, including enabling legislation based on the theological statement.

There has been informal discussion as to the language of covenant being helpful to this dialogue. The definition of ‘full communion’ in each of the documents to date is clearly a definition also of a covenant relationship in all but name: ‘a relationship between two distinct ecclesiastical bodies in which each maintains its own autonomy while recognizing the catholicity and apostolicity of the other, and believing the other to hold the essentials of the Christian faith. In such a relationship, communicant members of each would be able freely to communicate at the altar of the other, and ordained ministers may officiate sacramentally in either church’ (Make Us One with Christ p.6)

## Conclusion

Covenant as an ecumenical instrument varies from place to place and according to circumstances. Clearly multi-lateral Covenant arrangements, such as those in Australia, South Africa and the United States, are much looser than bi-lateral covenants as found in England, Ireland and New Zealand. Multi-laterals present many variable factors, whereas, with bi-laterals, partner churches can focus on each other without needing to consider whether what they agree between themselves is going to have an adverse effect on other partners.

However, covenant agreements which may appear very similar may have different factors, theological and otherwise, in operation. The Irish and English Covenants are a case in point: the Church of England is an established church; the Church of Ireland was disestablished in 1869. The legislation for the consecration of women as bishops is in place in Ireland, it is notably not so in the Church of England. In England, the Anglican Church is a majority church in the land; in Ireland, both Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church are very much minority churches.

It is evident that covenants involving episcopal churches run into difficulties with regard to *episcopate* and episcopacy. A number of covenant proposals have ground to a halt, at least temporarily, on this issue. It may be that the solution found in Ireland can set an example. Disparity of size may prove problematic, and in particular, when it comes to the larger church taking account - or failing so to do - of the smaller partner when making decisions, taking stands and so forth. Hence the significance of the New Zealand Covenant's declared seeking to hold 'an awareness of the other in everything (we) do'.

An important motif running through all covenant agreements is that of mission. It is clear that, explicitly or implicitly, the churches are committed to being one that the world may believe (John 17:21). The Foreword to the Covenant document presented to the General Synod of the Church of Ireland and to the Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland in 2001 summarises admirably all that is intended by a Covenant relationship: 'we stand poised to take the next step in our relationship. The agenda at this point is not one of institutional or organic union, and certainly not one of assimilation. Rather it is an agenda of unity in ministry and mission. This vision is not *our* vision; it the commission of Jesus Christ. We have been called to make visible that unity which has already been given to us by Christ himself.'

## REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

Crow, Paul (2002), 'Covenanting' in NAMES OF EDITORS?, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2002), pp.269-271.  
Wainwright, Geoffrey (2002), 'Leuenberg Church Fellowship' *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, p.679.