

Speech by The Rt Revd Harold Miller, Bishop of Down and Dromore, Seconding the motion on the Anglican Covenant

In seconding the Resolution on the Anglican Covenant, I find myself yet again in agreement with Bishop Michael Burrows about many things, but from quite different starting points. Let me emphasise two places of agreement.

First of all, I come to this with a sense of *rightness rather than enthusiasm*. I could push it even farther, and say that I have no real sense that the Covenant is going to find wide enough agreement within the Anglican Communion to be a meaningful instrument of unity. The signs are that the more liberal voices in our communion, which have been speaking very vociferously against the Covenant of late; and the more conservative voices, especially in the Global South, which represent the vast majority of our members - are unlikely to sign up to the Anglican Covenant. On one side this is because it is seen as too restrictive and (that amazingly emotive word!) 'punitive', and on the other side it is simply that there is no longer any belief that it will achieve anything in terms of discipline.

Secondly, I have come to the conviction that we are *using the right verb* in relation to this motion. We are to 'subscribe' the Covenant rather than 'adopt' it. Verbs are vitally important. On May day, I 'took part in' the Belfast Marathon. When interviewed for the radio, the interviewer said 'I gather you are running in the Marathon'. My response was 'Everything you say is true except for the verb! So 'subscribe' is used in its old fashioned legal Anglican way to mean 'sign up to'. It was thought that 'adopt' meant making the Covenant part of us in our very being.

All of that may seem a matter of semantics, but it is probably this particular verb which has enabled us to deal with the Covenant by means of a one year motion rather than a two-year bill. What is made clear by this process is that 'subscribing' the Covenant *cannot* mean any change in our doctrine. The Covenant sits under the Preamble and Declaration and cannot challenge it.

This is vitally important, because it is the Preamble and Declaration which declares our essential and foundational principles for determining those with whom we are in communion. The Church of Ireland maintains (with the essential meaning: holds our hands out in) communion with our sister Church of England as a given, and with all other Christian Churches agreeing in the principles of this Declaration; and will set forward, so far as in it lieth, quietness, peace and love, among all Christian people'.

That means that we are *de facto* by our title deeds in communion with others who may not be in the *Anglican* Communion, but who agree in these things: essentially- the canonical scriptures, the threefold ministry, reformed and protestant principles, the 39 Articles, the Book of Common Prayer. Our communion is *not finally determined by the Anglican Covenant*, important though it may be, but by the Preamble and Declaration on p.776 of the Book of Common Prayer. And it probably also means the contrary: that we would not be in communion with a church which no longer agreed with these principles set out in our Preamble and Declaration. So 'subscribe' is, I have become convinced, the correct word for what I hope we will do today, even though the hoped

for word in the actual covenant is 'adopt'.

But,

Thirdly, I want to make a local point. Bishop Michael Burrows has shared that he would have greater problems with lay presidency than with issues of human sexuality. I cannot understand that, because the scriptures are, in my view, entirely silent about the issue of Eucharistic presidency. I often wonder if St Paul even understood the concept! On human sexuality, however, the Bible says a great deal! But, for the sake of peace and unity, I certainly would not wish to push the area of lay presidency which seems to me to be *adiaphora*, even if I believed it was a good idea, because it would divide the church. I expect the same, and the Covenant expects the same, in areas of human sexuality, which is clearly and verifiably church-dividing. The reason why I say that this point is 'local' is that there is the potential for the divisive issues of the Communion to be played out very damagingly in a few key provinces of the Anglican world, *and we are one of them*. The reason is quite simply this. Most of the Provinces of the Communion are vastly conservative or vastly liberal. The Church of Ireland is a wide range, and may well divide half and half in some divisive issues. And sadly, the division could be largely North/South. That would be devastating to a church which has held together throughout the political upheavals of this land, and not least the recent Troubles. It would be undermining of the Gospel we proclaim, and of the high-priestly prayer of the Lord Jesus: *that they may all be one. As you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me*. John 17:21

With everything I have said about 'subscribing', I would wish to affirm that what we are doing today is a very important things. I cannot put my signature to or underwrite something unless I am in agreement with it and prepared to put myself behind it.

The last paragraph of the Covenant applies whether we subscribe or adopt:

‘ With joy and with firm resolve, we declare our Churches to be partners in this Anglican Communion Covenant, offering ourselves for faithful service and binding ourselves more closely in the truth and love of Christ.’