

CHAPTER VIII

Signing on to unity: Creating and living into a covenant

What happens when Christians get together and ask, ‘What binds us together in Christ? What could and should we be doing together?’ A friendly and growing relationship that began in the early 1960’s led a small group of Anglicans and Roman Catholics in Regina to start asking those questions in 2009. With the permission of their bishops, this small group set out to draft a covenant between their dioceses. They tell this story:

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*We researched Anglican–Roman Catholic covenants in different parts of the world and decided on a covenant that would have three parts. In the first part, we mapped out briefly the Trinitarian faith and life in Christ that we share. Taking note of the consensus and convergences of the ARCIC dialogue and national ARC conversations, our covenant noted that we have come a long way in our relations, but that our churches had really only just begun to give tangible expression to all that we hold in common.*

*The second part of the covenant aimed to change that,*

*by moving forward together in joint mission in specific ways: holding an annual prayer service for reconciliation; praying for each other regularly; working on justice issues together, including meetings with Indigenous elders to seek healing; and communicating regularly with each other as dioceses. The covenant also listed a whole series of things that our parishes could do together in the areas of common prayer, witness, study and mission. Finally, the covenant expressed the hope that it would eventually include local Lutheran and Ukrainian Catholic churches in the region, and work towards an ever-widening covenantal relationship among Christian communities.*



*Bishop Gregory Kerr–Wilson (left) and Archbishop Daniel Bohan (right) sign the covenant in 2011 / Credit: Frank Flegel, The Prairie Messenger*

The covenant was signed in January 2011, and a covenant implementation committee meets regularly, and proposes initiatives encouraging our churches to continue to grow together. Seven years in, most of those commitments have been kept: prayer services have been held, workshops on various lay ministries have been organized, and in 2017, the staff members of the two diocesan offices shared a day of retreat. In

May of 2018, the two dioceses undertook their biggest joint initiative yet, an international conference on the diaconate, as diaconal ministry is a major focus within both local churches. Meanwhile, conversations are well underway to extend the covenant to include local Lutheran and Ukrainian Catholic churches.

Efforts continue to assist local parishes to discern what they can do together, and how they can be of support to each other. One moving example of such support came when the Roman Catholic parish in Qu'Appelle, a small town outside Regina, learned that its beautiful church, now over 100 years old, needed major renovations to the structure, which would be very costly. As they deliberated (in the middle of winter) how to proceed, the boiler gave out. It was a sign that they needed to make the painful decision to let go of their church building. The Anglican parish in the town quickly extended a generous hand, and with the approval of both bishops, the two congregations now both hold their services in the Anglican church. There is an opportunity for the diocesan covenant to take on a special character in that small town.

The Regina-Qu'Appelle covenant is an effort to grow into the space opened by the dialogue between our churches. *The Church as Communion* is ARCIC II's most comprehensive treatment of the nature and mission of the Church, and in quite specific ways lays the foundation for covenants such as that signed in Regina. In its reflection on the Scriptures, it noted that God "wants his people to be in communion with him and with each other" (CC, 7). This addresses the heart of human need, our deepest longing "for true community in freedom, justice and peace" (CC, 3). The communion for which we yearn would not stifle or destroy the God-given diversity of individual human beings and

of human cultures; rather, it would reveal a mutually enriching and life-giving diversity held together in God (CC, 35-36). This is the Church's calling.

In Ephesians 4:4-6 Paul writes that "there is one body and one Spirit..., one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." The Church cannot fully be what it is called to be when it is divided. "Human sinfulness and Christian division obscure this sign" (CC, 20), obscure "God's invitation to communion for all humankind," making the Gospel we proclaim "harder to hear" (CC, 4).

*The Church as Communion* also introduces language, taken from the Second Vatican Council, which is very helpful to understand our current relationship as Anglicans and Roman Catholics. It speaks of our relationship as being one of real but imperfect or incomplete communion. And to explain what this phrase 'real but incomplete communion' means, it speaks of the inter-related and essential elements which we jointly agree need to be a part of the Church. These elements express the Church's apostolic faith, revealed in the Scriptures and grounded in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, and include: baptism and eucharist; a sharing in Christ's mission; a shared vision of humanity "created in the image of God and recreated in Christ"; apostolic ministry led by bishops, with both collegial and primatial dimensions, including a universal primacy; the same basic moral values; a common hope in the coming of God's Kingdom (cf. CC, 43-45).

As Roman Catholics and Anglicans, we have come to an extraordinarily rich common understanding of what the Church is called to be (cf. CC, 56). We don't fully agree on how those elements, most notably a

universal primacy or papacy, are to be exercised in the Church. And we still have a significant way to go until we recognize these elements to be fully at work in each other's communities; hence our communion, though real, is not complete. But we are committed to continue to dialogue, to work towards a more complete common understanding, and towards a more complete communion.

*The Church as Communion* ends with a strong word of encouragement to recognize and not to neglect or undervalue “the extent of the communion already existing between our two churches,” and “locally to search for further steps by which concrete expression can be given to this communion which we share” (CC, 58; cf. 50). The account of the still rather new experiment of the Regina-Qu'Appelle covenant invites others to ask what we might do to open ourselves more fully to the Holy Spirit which is at work in us reconciling the world to Christ.

*How does it help to think of our churches as being in a communion which is real and tangible, even though it isn't yet complete?*

*In what ways can we live more fully into that relationship, taking practical steps that give visible expression, in our daily ecclesial lives, of our commitment to full communion with each other and with God?*