

Patiently Living with Difference: Rowan Williams' Archiepiscopal Ecclesiology and the Proposed Anglican Covenant

Jesse Zink

Emmanuel College, Cambridge CB2 3AP, UK
jz353@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

Rowan Williams, a theologian who has long stressed the importance of ecclesiology, served as Archbishop of Canterbury at a time when the Anglican Communion was consumed by an ecclesiological crisis. This paper explores the ecclesiology Williams has consistently articulated as archbishop and then holds it against Williams' support of the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant and finds a disjuncture. Williams' ecclesiology is rooted in the nature of a globalized world, which tends towards exclusion. In this context, the church is to be the embodiment of God's purpose of 'unrestricted community.' In order to do so, the church must share a common language and be rooted in trust-full relations that can only develop over time. As the Covenant struggles to gain approval among Anglicans, it seems an apt time to return to Williams' ecclesiology and patiently work towards understanding the different Anglican other.

Keywords

Rowan Williams; Anglican Covenant; Archbishop of Canterbury; Anglican Communion; ecclesiology; globalization

Believing in the Church is really believing in the unique gift of the *other* that God has given you to live with.

– Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*¹

¹ *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), p. 106. Williams is not consistent in his writings in distinguishing between 'Church' and 'church.' When I quote him, I have left it as in the original. In my own text, I use 'church.'

Two years before his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams wrote, 'I long for the Church to be more truly itself ... Yet I must also learn to live in and attend to the reality of the Church as it is, to do the prosaic things that can and must be done now and to work at my relations now with the people who will not listen to me or those like me – because what God asks of me is not to live in the ideal future but to live with honesty and attentiveness in the present'.² This could serve as a programmatic statement for his decade as Primate of All England and titular head of the Anglican Communion. It was a tenure marked by controversies over church autonomy, the nature of a world church, and how a formal covenant might promote unity, all questions, in one way or another, about what the church is and is not. At the same time, Williams is well known as a theologian whose work has long stressed the role of the church; even a cursory read of his writing makes it clear that he cannot give a complete theological account without attending in a major way to ecclesiology. The coincidence of the two events – a theologian with a rich version of what the church is leading a global communion in the midst of determining what it is – bears careful study, a task to which this paper is dedicated.

To summarize in a paragraph, Williams came to the See of Canterbury in an increasingly globalized world that is, he believes, less attentive to the concerns of the poor and the dispossessed or, more broadly, the different other. Against this background, Williams sees the church as the potential embodiment of God's purpose of 'unrestricted community' for the world.³ It realizes this by being the body of Christ. To describe this familiar idea, Williams uses the words 'maturity' and 'adulthood' to describe the fullness of relations in the body of Christ. In order to work towards this 'adult' version of what it is to be, the church must share a common language, be rooted in trust-full relations, and find its unity by recognizing that all Christians stand in the place of Christ. At the same time, given the fallibility of humans, the church has a necessary provisional and repentant quality that can only develop over time. The first section of this paper explores this vision of the nature of the church, in large measure by examining at length Williams' writings, speeches, and sermons as Archbishop of Canterbury. His is a theology that does not lend itself to tidy summation, and it is often

²) *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 85–86.

³) Rowan Williams, 'Doing the Works of God,' in *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), pp. 253–266, at p. 254.

only by allowing him to speak for himself that we can understand what he is trying to communicate.

Williams articulated this view of church with a great degree of consistency in his speeches and writings during and before his time as Archbishop of Canterbury. It is an ecclesiology that helpfully challenges tendencies towards division and fracture in the world. Yet this view of the church arguably fails to cohere with the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant, passage of which Williams made a centre-piece of his archiepiscopacy. In the second half of the paper, I contrast the ecclesiology articulated by Williams with the reality of the proposed covenant, particularly its fourth section, and conclude that what is needed is not the covenant, but a return to Williams' original vision.

I An Archiepiscopal Ecclesiology

Williams' ecclesiology begins by looking at the world of the early twenty-first century. It is a world 'scarred by poverty, violence and injustice,'⁴ one 'in which, in practice, it's getting more and more possible for people to say, "I am not affected by the pain of other people; living where I do I am not affected by the poverty of those in another continent."' ⁵ The social structures of the contemporary world – when they do not allow someone to ignore another on a different continent altogether – promote destructive competition between individuals: the 'open rivalry, which in our consumerist world always accompanies plurality.'⁶

Against this stands the church. In a talk given more than a decade before he was translated to Canterbury, Williams defined God's purpose as 'the construction of communities in which diversity serves to nourish, not threaten, and in which behaviour is tested above all by what it contributes to the common life – whose goal is to realise in all the love and boldness, the intimacy and authority which Jesus has in relation to the God he called Abba.'⁷ This is what God wants for God's people and it is what the church is

⁴ 'Archbishop of Canterbury's Pentecost Letter to the Bishops of the Anglican Communion', 12 May 2008. Documents from Williams' tenure as archbishop were retrieved from www.archbishopofcanterbury.org in April 2012. That site has now been moved to <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org>.

⁵ 'Lambeth Conference Retreat Address II', 17 July 2008.

⁶ 'One Church, One Hope', 9 August 2006.

⁷ 'Doing the Works of God,' in *Open to Judgement*, p. 254.

meant to be, a community ‘whose rationale is the breaking down of partitions.’⁸

The nature of a globalized world contrasts sharply with the purpose of the church, which means the church is a community that stands opposite to the dominant cultural trends. Asking Church of England General Synod members what it means to truly embody this alternative community, Williams told them, ‘It may be for the Church to take a firm stand against the erosion of objective morality and biblical truth ... It may be for the Church to act courageously on behalf of those who are oppressed or marginalized ... But isn’t the ultimate distinctive counter-cultural fact about the church our capacity to live sacrificially for the sake of each other?’⁹ Such sacrificial relations are not in evidence in the world Williams sees, either domestically or globally. Against this reality stands the Anglican Communion, which, he believes, is ‘being called into a more visible and robust exercise of responsibility for each other ... in the context of global poverty and need.’¹⁰ The Communion needs to hold together precisely because in so doing it would be a witness to the world as ‘a multicultural ... intercultural body.’¹¹

In its being, the church embodies what it means to be a counter-cultural entity in an age of globalization. In one of Williams’ trademark and thought-provoking redefinitions of a familiar word, he argues that the church’s catholicity is ‘a kind of great protest against globalization ... because the catholic is about wholeness, about the wholeness of the person, the wholeness of the local culture and language ... it’s not like the global economy, in which people are drawn into somebody’s story and somebody’s interests which in fact makes others poor and excluded.... the catholic is about everyone’s welfare, everyone’s growth and justice.’¹² The church – at least when it is ‘more truly itself,’ to refer to the quotation in the opening paragraph of this paper – is a counter-cultural witness in the midst of a world sharply divided by poverty and exclusion. Indeed, the church itself becomes the gospel it has to proclaim: ‘by witnessing to the possibility of a common life sustained by God’s creative breaking of existing frontiers ... the Church’s good news is

⁸ ‘Doing the Works of God,’ in *Open to Judgement*, p. 258.

⁹ ‘General Synod: Speech in Debate on the Windsor Report’, 17 February 2005.

¹⁰ ‘One Church, One Hope’, 9 August 2006.

¹¹ ‘The Guardian Interview’, 21 March 2006.

¹² ‘One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church: Archbishop’s Address to the 3rd Global South to South Encounter in Ain al Sukhna, Egypt’, 28 October 2005.

that human community is possible.¹³ The gospel is both a message to be articulated and one that has its roots ‘in the form of shared life and the style of self-awareness which distinguishes a “believing” community, a community which trusts God and itself enough to live in honesty and acceptance.’¹⁴

The model being articulated is that of the Pauline body of Christ and it is one Williams explicitly affirms: ‘the Bible seems fairly clear that we are given to one another as believers so that we may know and experience more of God than we would on our own. Basic New Testament theology, I believe.’¹⁵ We have already seen how Williams takes clearly Paul’s command that we cannot say to one another ‘I have no need of you.’ Inherent in our Christian belief is the need for the other: ‘The slogan of the Church’s life is “not without the other”; no I without you, no I without a we ... a well-functioning Christian community is going to be one in which everyone is working steadily to release the gifts of others.’¹⁶

This understanding of the body of Christ is rooted in a theological anthropology: without others, humans are incomplete. Williams understands this movement towards completeness as a process of growth. That is, in the church we help one another grow into that which God calls us to be. The word Williams uses to describe the end result of this process of growth is ‘maturity’ and, occasionally, ‘adulthood.’ Mature Christian relations are those in which Christians are responsible for one another. It is the central concept in one of Williams’ longest reflections on the church written during his time in Canterbury. He defines maturity as the capacity to have ‘some awareness of what it is that each has to give into the common life of the community of believers ... It is about helping each other become as fully adult in belief and activity as each can be.’¹⁷ Later in the same piece he argues that this mutual responsibility is a unique mark of the church and the mark which sets it apart from the world around it: ‘no-one reaches or enjoys maturity in isolation; to grow up is not to reach independence ... but to arrive at that kind of understanding of yourself and others that

¹³ ‘Incarnation and the Renewal of Community’, in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 225–238, at p. 233.

¹⁴ *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002 [1982]), p. 47.

¹⁵ ‘Presidential Address: Anglican Consultative Council’, 11 May 2009.

¹⁶ *Tokens of Trust*, pp. 106, 108.

¹⁷ ‘One Church, One Hope’, 9 August 2006.

enables you to direct your resource ... to the other ... So to be in Christ is to be committed to this action for the sake of each other and the world.¹⁸ The key thing, then, that makes the church the church, and not just another social organization, is that its members are committed to one another because they need one another to realize their full humanity. Closely related to the idea of maturity and adulthood is the idea of responsibility: 'the life of any particular Church becomes recognisably and distinctively Christian when it is marked by this taking of responsibility for each other.'¹⁹ These three related concepts – maturity, adulthood, and responsibility – form the grounds of the church's critique of society, a point Williams made when he was still a university professor: 'the question the Church is authorized to ask of any human association is whether it is making it more or less difficult for people to grow into a maturity in which they are free to give to one another and nourish one another.'²⁰

Achieving the wholeness of mature relations is what it means to be the church. A first step towards this goal is to encounter the Christian other in conversation, a word with deep meaning for Williams. Conversation helps a person de-center him- or herself 'by deliberately putting in question [his or her] own stance.'²¹ Questioning one's own stance is important because it may be an obstacle to one's further growth to maturity. Williams is particularly attuned to the way in which the failure to engage in conversation and honest encounter with the other erects obstacles to movement towards maturity. Humans have a tendency to obscure the humanity of the other, turning 'living realities ... into symbols, and the symbolic values are used to imprison reality. At its extreme pitch, people simply relate to symbols. It is too hard to look past them, to look into the complex humanity of a real other.'²²

Meaningful and honest conversation among different people requires a common language for members of the body of Christ. This does not mean that everyone speak English or some other spoken language. For Williams, language is akin to a 'grammar of obedience: we watch to see if our partners take the same kind of time, sense that they are under the same sort of judgement or scrutiny, approach the issue with the same attempt to be

¹⁸⁾ Ibid.

¹⁹⁾ Ibid.

²⁰⁾ 'Incarnation and the Renewal of Community,' in *On Christian Theology*, p. 236.

²¹⁾ *Christ on Trial*, p. 108.

²²⁾ *Writing in the Dust: After September 11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 65.

dispossessed by the truth they are engaging with.²³ A common language is, in one sense, a commitment to a similar process of growing towards maturity and a similar understanding of what that maturity looks like. For Williams, the absence of a common language is a major part of his diagnosis of the problems facing the Anglican Communion in recent years: ‘people are no longer confident that we are speaking the same language, appealing to the same criteria in our theological debates.’²⁴ Not only are people measuring what it means to be Anglican by different yardsticks, they have promoted this with actual language that constitutes a ‘ceaseless rhetoric of fear and competition.’²⁵ Williams is particularly attuned to the way in which Anglican partisans have used the Internet in such a way that ‘controversies, slogans, misrepresentations and caricatures abound. And they need to be challenged in the name of the respect we owe to each other in Jesus Christ.’²⁶ Without a common language, whether of agreement on process or the actual language that people use to communicate verbally with one another – neither of which Anglicans manifestly possess – progress towards the mature relations of the body of Christ is impossible.

Williams’ major apologetic work as archbishop of Canterbury is rooted, as its title, *Tokens of Trust*, makes clear, in the idea of trust: we can believe in God because God is a trustworthy God. This theme of trust is central to his ecclesiology as well. Once Christians have a common language, they need to be able to trust not only God but also one another and believe that the other person is a credible partner for growth in maturity. Yet this is precisely what Williams finds missing in relations in the Anglican Communion. Again and again in his public letters to Anglican primates and others, he laments how actions by Anglicans around the world have deepened mistrust. At the same time he holds up the possibility of restored trust. For instance, the effects of ignoring repeated requests for moratoria on certain controversial actions ‘are often to deepen mutual mistrust, and this must surely be bad for our mission together as Anglicans.’²⁷ One result of these actions has been to build up ‘mutual mistrust’ in the Communion: ‘for us to

²³ ‘Making moral decisions’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 3–15, at p. 11. Originally delivered at the Lambeth Conference 1998 on 22 July.

²⁴ ‘General Synod: Speech in Debate on the Windsor Report’, 17 February 2005.

²⁵ ‘Presidential Address: Anglican Consultative Council’, 11 May 2009.

²⁶ ‘Archbishop responds to GAFCON statement’, 30 June 2008.

²⁷ Advent Letter to Primates of Anglican Communion, 29 November 2011.

break apart in an atmosphere of deep mistrust, fierce recrimination and mutual misunderstanding is really not going to be in anybody's good in the long run. So I'd rather try and see what can be done to recreate or reinforce trust.²⁸ At the 2008 Lambeth Conference, Williams repeatedly upheld trust – and its restoration – as an ideal and purpose of the conference and its innovative design.²⁹ The same is true for meetings of the Communion's primates. He sees them as an 'effort to define what could restore trust.'³⁰ Trust belongs in the church because of the kind of community the church is. Just as we trust God because 'he has no agenda that is not for our good, so we can trust the Church because it is the sort of community it is, a community of active peacemaking and peacekeeping where no one exists in isolation or grows up in isolation or suffers in isolation.'³¹ The church, when it is 'more truly itself,' is this community which we trust and which allows us to trust one another and so grow into a maturity shaped by a common language.

The end result of these mature relations in the body of Christ is that church members come to live in unity. Unity, for Williams, is manifestly not a unity of thought or belief. Rather, it is the recognition that the other Christian is standing in the same place as oneself, that is, in the place of Christ relative to the Father: 'Christians are called and enabled by the Holy Spirit to say "Our Father" because they stand in the one Christ ... So our unity is, at its deepest, the unity which the spirit gives in enabling us to call God "Father."³² Christian unity, then, has little to do with developing warm feelings towards one another – indeed, given the difficult issues that divide Christians this is unlikely to be the case – but is about our common 'union with the one Christ [in which we] stand in his unique place ... Our unity is not mutual forbearance but [a] being summoned and drawn into the same place before the Father's throne. That unity is pure gift.'³³ This understanding of unity helps make sense of why language and trust are so important: they are what help us 'see the one Christ reflected in

²⁸ 'The Guardian Interview', 21 March 2006.

²⁹ 'Lambeth Conference Retreat Address IV', 17 July 2008; also 'Archbishop's First Presidential Address at Lambeth Conference', 20 July 2008.

³⁰ 'Why the Anglican Communion Matters' first appeared in *Daily Telegraph*, 23 February 2007; also 'Archbishop's Lent Letter', 12 March 2011.

³¹ *Tokens of Trust*, p. 106

³² 'One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church', 28 October 2005.

³³ 'Concluding Presidential Address to the Lambeth Conference', 29 July 2008.

countless ways'³⁴ in the other. Indeed, we must search out Christ in countless variations. If we fail to do so, 'we risk trying to create a church of the "perfect" – people like us.'³⁵

This vision of church that Williams has consistently articulated during his time in Canterbury is, frankly, inspiring: I share his diagnosis of a world that is impoverished relationally and in which people evince a particular difficulty in engaging with people who are different to themselves. For the church to be a counter-cultural model of mature relations across lines of difference is not only Biblically sound but an imperative in a divided world. But it is also fair to say that there is no church, let alone world Communion, that embodies Williams' vision. Yet his ecclesiology does not end here.

For Williams, the church can fail to be the church: 'you couldn't necessarily work out what the Church was meant to be from telling the Church's story.'³⁶ The church can fail to be the church because its members lack the mutual recognition and trust-full relationships that constitute it. One need look no further than the divided one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church to see this failure. Williams has touched on this theme in relation to his obvious commitment to ecumenism. At a major address in Rome in 2009, he argued that there could be a "diversity of types of communion" brought about by the imperfect recognition Roman Catholics and Anglicans had for one another.³⁷ These communions would nonetheless share something of what could be called a church-like relationship, and this relationship could provide the grounds for progress towards ecumenical reunion.

But the fact that the church can fail to be the church means it must be marked by repentance, a theme that has been clear from some of his earliest writings: the church, 'if it is to be itself, has no option but to live in penitence, in critical self-awareness and acknowledgement of our failure. It must recognize constantly its failing as a community to be a community of gift and mutuality, and warn itself of the possibility of failure.'³⁸ He goes so far as to make it a fifth mark of the church – one, holy, catholic, apostolic, and repentant.³⁹ When the Windsor Report was released, much attention

³⁴) *Tokens of Trust*, p. 126.

³⁵) 'Renewal in the Spirit: The Archbishop of Canterbury's Pentecost Letter to the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful of the Anglican Communion', 28 May 2010.

³⁶) *Tokens of Trust*, pp. 110–111.

³⁷) 'Address at Willebrands Symposium in Rome', 19 November 2009.

³⁸) *Resurrection*, p. 49.

³⁹) *Tokens of Trust*, p. 152.

was paid to its call for provinces of the Anglican Communion to repent for actions that had broken communion. Though Williams was not an author of the Windsor Report, this call coheres with his theology. As he told primates soon after it was released: ‘Do not think that repentance is always something others are called to, but acknowledge the failings we all share, sinful and struggling disciples as we are.’⁴⁰ Williams had made this a repeated theme of his speeches in various places around the world. At the 2009 General Convention of The Episcopal Church, he told delegates: ‘Life is proclaimed not in our achievement, our splendid record of witness to God, but in our admission of helplessness and of the continuing presence and lure of death in our lives. To be able to speak this, and not to retreat in fear or throw up defences is part of true life.’⁴¹ In 2009, he had a similar message for delegates to the Anglican Consultative Council: ‘the Gospel seems to be saying to us: first face your failure; your failure, not your neighbour’s; your failure, your turning away; not theirs, not his, not hers ... They’re going to love you for this, if you go back to your Province and say, ‘What we really need to be talking about is our failures in this Province.’ You will be so popular – they’ll never send you to a meeting again!’⁴²

The combination of the ideal Williams sets out for the church and the awareness of our inability to meet that ideal produces a church for Williams that is marked by uncertainty, vulnerability, and provisionality. This is the nature of a faith shaped by the cross. As church members march forth into the world, they do so with ‘an extraordinary missionary commission’: not “rally around me and your problems will be solved”; but to say “rally around Jesus Christ and your boundaries will be open, your defences will be down, and your loss will be the loss of all because your life is bound up with the life of all.”⁴³ Church members need to honestly acknowledge their own weakness, and that of others. It is only when we do this that we understand God’s revelation: ‘St Paul says, “to be a faithful apostle is to be invaded by the weakness and failure of others.”... God’s Son is revealed in our vulnerability, not the toughness of our defences, the fluency of our solutions or the success of our schemes but in our freedom ... to let the grief and struggle of

⁴⁰ ‘Archbishop’s Advent Pastoral Letter to Primates and Moderators of the United Churches’, 27 November 2004.

⁴¹ ‘Sermon preached during a Eucharist at the General Convention’, 9 July 2009.

⁴² ‘Presidential Address: Anglican Consultative Council’, 11 May 2009.

⁴³ ‘Lambeth Conference Retreat Address II’, 17 July 2008.

others come in to us.’⁴⁴ There is no church triumphant for Williams; rather, it is church vulnerable, open, and penitent.

A discussion of Williams’ ecclesiology is incomplete without one final consideration: time. Time is central to Williams’ entire theology and a complete exploration of it is beyond the scope of this paper. In brief, however, Williams takes an expansive view of time that is connected to an apophatic theology that stresses the importance of contemplation and prayer. It is a theme he highlights in his book of essays on Anglican theologians, when he identifies as a commonality ‘a theologically informed and spiritually sustained patience. They do not expect human words to solve their problems rapidly, they do not expect the Bible to yield up its treasures overnight, they do not look for the triumphant march of an ecclesiastical institution ... [They have a] “passionate patience.”’⁴⁵ Given that his ecclesiology is about process – the process of growing into mature, trust-full relations through conversation – the long view of time is significant in the way it allows these relationships to develop. To this end, then, Williams the archbishop mentioned time less frequently in relation to the Anglican Communion but it undergirded his thoughts on what needed to happen, as when he told a group of mission executives, ‘Mission always requires an almost superhuman level of patience ... the Christian committed to patience is a very counter-cultural person and all the more important because of it.’⁴⁶ If only, Williams seemed to be saying, Anglicans can give themselves the time to develop these mature relationships, then they will be headed in the right direction.

Very early in his academic career, Williams expressed, briefly and eloquently, many of the themes we have been considering: ‘If we had to choose between a Church tolerably confident of what it has to say and seeking only for effective means of saying it, and a Church constantly engaged in an internal dialogue and critique of itself, an exploration to discover what is central to its being, I should say that it is the latter which is more authentic – a Church which understands that part of what it is *offering* to humanity is the possibility of living in such a mode.’⁴⁷ The trouble for Williams the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *Anglican Identities* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 2004), pp. 7, 8. Whether this is an accurate characterization of Anglican identity, particularly in its non-English forms, is a question best left for another time.

⁴⁶ ‘God’s Mission and Ours in the 21st Century’, 9 June 2009.

⁴⁷ ‘Women and Ministry: A Case for Theological Seriousness,’ in *Feminine in the Church*, ed. Monica Furlong (London: SPCK, 1984), pp. 11–27, at p. 12.

archbishop is that so few partisans in the deeply entrenched Anglican warfare – more than ‘tolerably confident’ of what they want to say – share his view. For them, there have always been theological concerns that supersede ecclesiology; it is the insistence on these concerns that has sparked the threat of schism in the Anglican Communion. This conflict was at the centre of Williams’ tenure as archbishop and it is that we now engage directly.

II The Proposed Anglican Communion Covenant

A major aspect of debate during Williams’ tenure as archbishop was the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant. The idea, suggested in the Windsor Report in 2004, is for provinces of the Communion to agree to a covenant that articulates what it means to be Anglican and identifies procedures for resolving disputes. After working through multiple drafts, the covenant was sent to provinces for approval at the end of 2009. At the time of this writing, a handful of provinces have approved it and at least one has rejected it. Moreover, a majority of English dioceses have not approved it and The Episcopal Church has declined to take a position.

Williams was one of the covenant’s chief boosters, promoting it as a way for Anglicans to hold together in the face of controversies over sexuality, jurisdiction, and power. In this section, I first articulate the primary reasons Williams has given for his support of the covenant, many of which are directly related to the ecclesiology developed in the previous section. I then argue that the covenant as it has been presented to Anglicans – particularly in its much-debated Section Four – does not cohere with this ecclesiology.

Williams framed his support of the covenant in Biblical terms: ‘Covenant is about the self-giving, the absolute self-giving of God, which calls out a self-giving on the part of human beings to whom God’s love is given ... you can say that a covenant relationship between Christians is a promise to be willing to be converted by each other.’⁴⁸ The important thing about making a covenant with other Anglicans, Williams argued, is that by demonstrating a willingness to be open to one another, Anglicans might begin to see their

⁴⁸ ‘General Synod Debate on a Covenant for the Anglican Communion,’ 13 Feb. 2008.

‘relationships within the communion not as a constant struggle of power and leverage but something deeper.’⁴⁹

Many of Williams’ ecclesiological themes were present in his defense of the covenant. For instance, a major aspect of Williams’ support of the covenant was his argument that it could be a tool to establish a common language among Anglicans. In his second presidential address at the 2008 Lambeth Conference, Williams called the covenant an expression of ‘mutual generosity’ to one another. Part of what mutual generosity means is ‘finding out what the other person or group really means and really needs ... so that when we *do* address divisive issues, we have created enough of a community for an intelligent generosity to be born ... [It] will, I hope, have strengthened the sense that we have at least a common language, born out of the conviction that Jesus Christ remains the one unique centre.’⁵⁰ Language, as we have seen, is a prior necessity for the church to begin to grow into the fullness of its relations.

Having established the common language, Williams clearly hoped the covenant would (re-)establish the relationships of trust that are at the heart of his understanding of the church. In the message he shared with Anglicans when the covenant was sent to provinces for ratification, he said that Anglicans have discovered ‘we haven’t learned to trust one another as perhaps we should, that we really need to build relationships, and we need to have a sense that we are responsible to one another and responsible for each other ... what we need is something that will help us ... intensify our fellowship and trust.’⁵¹ In talking about the need for ‘restraint’ in the Communion, he encouraged bishops at Lambeth not to think of restraint as burdensome; rather, he encouraged them to recognize that ‘to embrace deeper and more solid ways of recognizing and trusting each other can be a grace and not a burden.’⁵²

The result of the covenant, Williams clearly hoped, would be a deepening of relationship within the body of Christ and a greater recognition of

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ ‘Second Presidential Address at Lambeth Conference’, 29 July 2008; common language is a theme that Williams also highlights in ‘Unity and Universality, Locality and Diversity in Anglicanism: A Contribution to the Second Receptive Ecumenism Conference’, 11 January 2009.

⁵¹ ‘A message from the Archbishop of Canterbury on the Anglican Communion Covenant’, 17 December 2009.

⁵² ‘Concluding Presidential Address to the Lambeth Conference’, 3 August 2008.

the church's oneness by virtue of standing in the same place as Christ. He called the covenant a tool not 'for excluding the difficult or rebellious but as an intensification ... of relations that already exist.'⁵³ The text of the covenant, he said, 'has a relational basis and tone. It is about an invitation ... to lead to the deepening of our *koinonia* in Christ.'⁵⁴ The upshot of such deepening of relations is that we 'discover more fully who I am in Christ by inviting others who share my life in Christ into the process of making a decision.'⁵⁵ The sum of it all would be – and this should not come as a surprise – 'an adult, sensible, workable way of handling the conflicts'.⁵⁶

It is clear that Williams saw the intended fruit of the covenant in deeper and more honest conversation across boundaries of difference in the Communion. This is what the church is: the group that learns to encounter the other by asking what it is that each can receive from the other as a member of the one body of Christ. It is in the nature of a schism that different members of the one body cease communicating with one another out of a conviction of their own absolute rightness and the other's incorrigible wrongness. One can almost interpret Williams' emphasis on maturity and adulthood to be a plea to Anglicans to 'Grow up!' and start actually talking to one another. Given Williams' view of time, this conversation could take as much time as it needs, and one could be confident that the process of conversation, when done in the power of the Spirit, will bind up the wounds of the world church.

The covenant, for Williams, was the tool to promote exactly this conversation. As the covenant was approaching its final draft, he told members of the Anglican Consultative Council that he was promoting the covenant because he 'hoped that through all these procedures, Christian people would be able to recognise each other a bit more fully, a bit more generously, and a bit more hopefully. So as we try and bracket, just for a moment, the idea that we're bound to be betraying something central by even trying to find where these encounters can happen ... that challenge remains ... good listening is a listening that really allows the other person to speak.'⁵⁷ What the covenant allows for is 'the careful listening to one another's needs,

⁵³ 'Archbishop's First Presidential Address at Lambeth Conference', 20 July 2008.

⁵⁴ 'Deeper Communion, Gracious Restraint: A Letter from Alexandria to the Churches to the Anglican Communion', 5 February 2009.

⁵⁵ 'Archbishop: What kind of global communion do we want to be?', 12 February 2009.

⁵⁶ 'Archbishop: why the covenant matters', 5 March 2012.

⁵⁷ 'Presidential Address: Anglican Consultative Council', 11 May 2009.

and discernment of what we can say together, that is part ... of the Church from time immemorial.⁵⁸ The result? ‘Durable and adult bonds of fellowship.’⁵⁹

The trouble with this line of thinking is two-fold. First, as demonstrated by the boycott of the 2008 Lambeth Conference by some Anglican bishops, it is impossible for some Anglicans to ‘bracket’ the idea that talking with someone with whom they disagree is a betrayal of what they stand for. Second, few people at the centre of debates about the future of the Communion appear to have as expansive a notion of time as Williams. The pressure has been for solutions, and the sooner the better. For Williams to call for extended conversation strikes many as wrong-headed. Minds have already been made up; there is no use in prolonging the disagreement.

Williams, it seems, saw the covenant as a *tool* for the Anglican Communion in that it would have created the space for the process of trust-full and mature conversations rooted in a common language that is in the nature of what it means to be the church. Seen in this light – and we shall soon address whether this is the proper light in which to see it – the covenant is a fulfillment of Williams’ understanding of the church and a natural outgrowth of his theology. Yet across the Communion the covenant has widely been seen as a *resolution* of the Communion’s difficulties, the end of the agony of the last decade. This creates a clear distance between Williams’ understanding of what the covenant is for and what many others seem to think it is for.

Much of the debate about the covenant has focused on its Section Four, particularly 4.2, titled ‘The Maintenance of the Covenant and Dispute Resolution’. This is the section that promises unspecified ‘relational consequences’ for actions ‘incompatible with the Covenant’ which ‘impairs or limits the communion’ between various provinces (4.2.7).⁶⁰ Williams has defended Section Four, arguing that it ‘is not a disciplinary system. It’s about a process of discernment and discussion. Nobody has the power to do anything but recommend courses of action. Nobody is forced by that into doing anything.’⁶¹ The fact that he had to state that so explicitly – and

⁵⁸ ‘There are no quick solutions for the wounds of the body of Christ: Address to the Fourth Global South to South Encounter’, 20 April 2010.

⁵⁹ ‘Archbishop’s Presidential Address: General Synod November 2010’, 23 November 2010.

⁶⁰ The complete text of the *Proposed Anglican Communion Covenant* is available at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/final/text.cfm>.

⁶¹ ‘Archbishop: why the covenant matters’, 5 March 2012.

on the eve of its apparent rejection in the Church of England – is a good indication that Section Four has been interpreted in precisely the opposite manner. Perhaps because of their vagueness, ‘relational consequences’ have been a significant cause of concern in the way they raise the possibility that the covenant could be used to reify divisions between parts of the church, the opposite of what Williams hoped the covenant would do. Moreover, the possibility of relational consequences can only serve to undermine the very trust Williams so prizes. What motivation do Anglicans have to work towards trust, if they know that a misstep can lead to punishment? In the understanding of relational consequences, Williams’ approach to the covenant has been distant from the way in which it has widely been interpreted.

From the standpoint of his ecclesiology, the most significant implication of Williams’ support for the covenant has been his suggestion that it could create a divided church. Following The Episcopal Church’s 2009 General Convention, which gave indication that the covenant might not pass muster in that body, Williams wrote an extended letter to Anglicans. He mused that the actions of General Convention meant that

there is at least the possibility of a twofold ecclesial reality in the middle distance: that is, a ‘covenanted’ Anglican global body, fully sharing certain aspects of a vision of how the Church should be and behave, able to take part as a body in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue; and, related to this body, but in less formal ways with fewer formal expectations, there may be associated local churches in various kinds of mutual partnership and solidarity with one another and with ‘covenanted’ provinces ... a ‘two-track’ model, two ways of witnessing to the Anglican heritage.⁶²

On the surface, it is hard to see how a ‘two-track’ church can do other than undo the unity of the church, for it must surely mean that Christians in the two tracks no longer recognize one another as standing in the same place as Christ in relation to the Father. If that is impossible, the church itself becomes impossible because the members of the body no longer recognize one another as members of the same body. Without this recognition, there is no need or effort to begin the patient work towards mature relationships.

⁶² ‘Communion, Covenant, and our Anglican Future’, 27 July 2009.

What this comment highlights, however, is that the mutual recognition Williams prizes is not an all-or-nothing affair, but itself a relative process. Mutual recognition varies throughout the church – for example, between Roman Catholics and Anglicans, as we have seen – and the church's penitential nature acknowledges this. What is significant is that while Williams' defence of the covenant has been primarily in terms of the vision of the church described in the first part of this paper, he has not frequently mentioned this penitential character in relation to the covenant. But this is the key disjuncture. Arguably, the failing of the covenant is the way it responds to the reality of impaired relations by injecting the threat of punishment. While much of his defence of the covenant did not address this explicitly, in the light of the first section of this paper, it seems that Williams would rather the reality of impaired relationships be frankly acknowledged and the relation maintained in a penitent spirit. At his final presidential address to the Anglican Consultative Council in November 2012 – a point at which the covenant seemed so comatose that the ACC barely addressed it – Williams noted, 'it does seem to me that every attempt we've made to pin down exactly how reactive or corrective authority works in our Anglican family has run into the sand in one way or another.'⁶³ While the address was set in the larger context of a reflection on the nature of authority, an important theme beyond the scope of this paper, it was perhaps an implicit acknowledgement of the failure of the covenant's 'relational consequences.' The disjuncture between the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant – particularly its fourth section – and Williams' own vision of the church is clear.

Given the centrality of ecclesiology to Williams' theology and archiepiscopate, the lack of coherence between the fourth section of proposed Anglican Communion Covenant and his ecclesiological vision makes his defence of the covenant noteworthy and seemingly inconsistent. I attribute the inconsistency not to confusion on Williams' part but as a response to the sheer pressure he came under during his time as archbishop. At times, his case for the covenant seemed to depend on the bare fact that it was the only apparent option for addressing divisions in the Communion. As debate over the final draft began, he told the Church of England's General Synod that 'the covenant proposals are the only sign at the moment of the

⁶³ 'Final Presidential Address', 4 November 2012.

kind of work that has to be done.’⁶⁴ A year later, he asked primates ‘what alternatives there are if we want to agree on ways of limiting damage.’⁶⁵ A hostile and divisive rhetorical environment demanded of him, more than anything, that he be seen to ‘do something’ to ‘fix’ the problems facing Anglicans worldwide. Seeing the covenant, he grasped on to it as the ‘solution.’ Even as he did so, many other Anglicans moved away.

III Reclaiming Williams’ Ecclesiology

Williams’ tenure as Archbishop of Canterbury came to an end as the possibilities of enacting the covenant began to fade. The covenant’s demise appears to be little lamented. But the challenges facing the Anglican Communion have not dissipated. Anglicans still lack a vision for what it means to be an authentically global communion in the twenty-first century. I believe an answer is found in Williams’ ecclesiology articulated in the first section of this paper. The intensely globalized world of this generation has demonstrated both that people everywhere are deeply and inextricably related to one another and that people everywhere are different to one another. These facts are obvious, and yet the world seems unable to deal with them in a way that is healthy and non-destructive. Rather, there is, as Williams has noted, a tendency to deny one’s relatedness and adopt a posture of hostility towards those who are different. The Anglican Communion is beset by this as much as any other part of the world, making a mockery of the church’s claim to be a counter-cultural society.

It in this context that we have reviewed Williams’ goal of mature, trust-full relationships in which people recognize that they must receive from those who are different to them even as they acknowledge their inability to do so. This is a compelling vision for the world of the twenty-first century, and a deeply prophetic one that deserves to be preached and made the basis of the church’s existence. The way to do so is not, I think, to insist upon adoption of a particular document and limited set of principles. Rather, the solution seems to be to articulate this vision while patiently honoring its process, a Williamsian solution if there ever was one. This will not please all Anglicans nor will it necessarily diminish the damaging

⁶⁴) ‘Archbishop’s Presidential Address: General Synod November 2010’, 23 November 2010.

⁶⁵) ‘Advent Letter to Primates of Anglican Communion’, 29 November 2011.

rhetoric that abounds on all sides. But Williams' own words seem pertinent here: 'Even in local and prosaic settings, how very tempting it is to say that we want our results now, before the end of the year. We have to justify what we're doing in the shortest of short terms and that is a curse for churches, universities, charities, community regeneration projects, all sorts of things in our society. And we need deep breaths and long views again.'⁶⁶ Ultimately, perhaps, as the covenant dies, the Communion can take a few deep breaths and return to the long view embodied most compellingly in Williams' own work.

⁶⁶ 'God's Mission and Ours in the 21st century', 9 June 2009.

