

## **Diocese of Newcastle Rejects Anglican Covenant**

By a decisive majority the Synod of the Diocese of Newcastle, meeting in Maitland on 22 October affirmed that it did not support the adoption of the Anglican Covenant. The Dean of Newcastle, Fr James Rigney introduces the debate and comments on its outcome.

The Anglican Covenant sought to create a means by which all Anglican churches committed to a new common statement of belief and a mechanism for dealing with conflict and dispute within the communion.

The Anglican Communion is a worldwide fellowship of forty-four autonomous churches in communion with the See of Canterbury. This is a fellowship of autonomous churches without a global body competent to make decisions binding on all the churches. It is a fellowship bound by bonds of affection and a network of informal ties. However the bonds of affection are unenforceable; and the bonds of affection are currently under strain.

There is no agreement among Anglicans that states the rights and responsibilities of communion membership and provides a mechanism for their enforcement. Every province has a mechanism for dealing with conflict, it is the communion as a whole that does not have one.

The election of Bishop Gene Robinson, a partnered gay man, as Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003 and the decision of the Diocese of New Westminster in the same year to authorise liturgies for same sex blessings brought to the forefront conflicts over scripture, human sexuality and church discipline to which the proposed Anglican Covenant is a response.

A covenant is a voluntary relationship entered into without duress or coercion A covenant provides a framework of relationship not an instrument of control

Anglicans have been coping with this conflict with new and slight global institutional arrangements: such as the Primate's meeting and the Anglican Consultative Council. Anglicanism has a long-standing discomfort with the idea of a global body that acts in a judicial way.

Synod was concerned that extra-provincial institutions were being created to contain conflict. The new arrangements proposed were to have some coercive and disciplinary power over provinces. Synod agreed with the view expressed by the Reverend Dr Bruce Kaye, former General Secretary of the Anglican Church of Australia that 'The resources in the Anglican theological tradition for such arrangements are meagre in the extreme.'

Covenant is a term with rhetorically useful biblical resonances. Covenant is an agreement but it is a particular type of agreement if, for no other reason, than that it is a biblical model and therefore it bases our relationship within the church on God's relationship with us. Synod affirmed those aspects of the Covenant document which called us to mutual attention, a focus on mission and a constant renewal of our biblical understanding and witness but, in its final vote, expressed its reservation over the appropriateness of the proposed covenant to express an Anglican understanding of our common life.

*Dean James Rigney*