

Covenants and Communion: The Church(es) in Europe

By Robert Innes and Mark D.W. Edington

On the threshold of a new church year in November, the two of us — together with our three colleagues who comprise the bishops of the various Anglican jurisdictions in Europe — met at the College of Anglican Bishops in Continental Europe. We gather in this way, under normal circumstances, twice each year; once by ourselves, and once as a meeting on the shoulder of the larger annual gathering of Old Catholic and Anglican bishops in Europe.

This year, our conversation focused on concluding an effort begun in 2006, when some of us — and, in some cases, our predecessors — first took up the task of drafting a covenant to guide our relationships. The result was an agreed version of the “[Porto Covenant](#),” a document signed by all five bishops of our churches.

It might be said that the effort leading to this outcome took root in a moment of disappointment; the need for such a covenant arose from the abandonment of a project of the 1960s and 1970s to form a single Anglican province in Europe, one that would bring together in a single structure churches of the Church of England, the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church, the Lusitanian Catholic Apostolic Evangelical Church, and the Episcopal Church.

That these churches emerged as they did and where they did is something of an anomaly in the story of the Anglican diaspora. Worship provided by the Church of England in Continental Europe predates the Reformation, and overseas Church of England congregations were placed under the jurisdiction of the bishop of London in 1633. (That included, until 1783, responsibility for Church of England parishes in what would become the United States.) “Ambassador’s Chaplains” were often the focal point of these communities, and were often quite distinguished; William Wake, who served from 1682 to 1685 as Ambassador’s Chaplain in Paris, would later become Archbishop of Canterbury.

Americans gathered for worship in Paris as early as 1814, although until the middle of the 19th century many there sought Church of England gatherings if they wished to find familiar patterns of worship. Congregations of Americans began worshiping according to the use of the Episcopal Church in 1855, and the first congregation took shape in August of 1858.

This was a period of difficult, if not strained, relationships between Britain and the United States; and indeed the emergence of an Episcopal congregation in Geneva, is not unconnected from the tribunal held in that city over the *Alabama* Claims in the early 1870s.

The churches of Spain and Portugal emerged under other conditions. The same rejection of the doctrines of the First Vatican Council (of 1868) that brought about the emergence of the Old Catholic Churches elsewhere in Europe can be glimpsed as the organizing principle that brought forth these two distinct churches, Spain in 1868 and Portugal in 1880.

We do not intend here to recite the long and complex history traced by these individual Anglican churches. It will suffice here to say that each emerged to address distinct needs, under unique circumstances. They have evolved into churches that share with each other the common bond of communion with the See of Canterbury, but each has a distinct identity and polity, and all are called by God to distinct work in the same vineyard.

With this in view, we reject the notion that “overlapping” jurisdictions among us in Europe is inherently problematic. For one thing, as Archbishop Justin Welby reminded us when we met together with him in 2019, we have had overlapping jurisdictions with the church of Rome for five centuries. But more to the point, we regard our work together as that of neighbors, not competitors, placing the fact of our common identity in communion with Canterbury as a shared bond within which we have both the chance and the challenge to model new ways for Anglican churches to work together.

Our shared presence in Europe in some ways challenges core assumptions about how the Anglican past might shape our shared Anglican future. We have received a strong tradition that the ministry of bishops in our church is to be understood geographically; and indeed, the canons of the Episcopal Church state this explicitly:

It is hereby declared as the judgment of this church that no two Bishops of Churches in full communion with each other should exercise jurisdiction in the same place, except as may be defined by a concordat adopted jointly by the competent authority of each of the said Churches, after consultation with the appropriate inter-Anglican body. (I.11.4.)

It is the emphasis on *place* here that is, in a word, misplaced. Our churches each emerged in the same place in response to different purposes, called by God to different ministries among different populations. Instead, our relationship is founded on the unique and blessed circumstance of being *in communion in the same place*. It is more helpful to think of our episcopal jurisdictions as *personal* rather than *territorial*. There is some analogy here with the way in which different Orthodox churches are present in different European countries beyond their home country.

The Church of England and the Episcopal Church in Europe are not “churches of the land” in the way that the Roman Catholic Church is in Poland. Our churches took root among diaspora communities, and over many years have evolved and grown to welcome and serve those who are nationals of the nations in which we are planted. And because both the Church of England and The Episcopal Church use the English language, and English is a global language, we attract worshipers from very many different countries who have settled in Europe. (Of course, both of our churches also have congregations offering worship in languages other than English.) All four of our churches have a different polity, different understandings of God’s mission, and different patterns of worship. We acknowledge painful differences in teaching on human sexuality.

Yet as Christians and Anglicans we confront the shared challenge to offer a compassionate, compelling Christian witness on issues like the scourge of racism and the requirement for

reckoning and reconciliation; the damage humans have wrought to God's creation, and the Christian call to act in ways to repair and restore the climate; the plight of refugees and migrants among us, and those who fall prey to the evil of human trafficking; and the need to instill in a rising generation the hope of the gospel's promise. These are priorities we share.

It is important to note that the covenant we have agreed to is between bishops, not churches. It is founded on our shared ministry and our common concern and mutual regard for each other. By accepting commitments to share more information with each other, to rotate among ourselves responsibility for our annual conversations, and to be in conversation with each other about the emergence of new communities and new ministries, we seek to build habits of collaboration aligned with our personal relationships in ministry.

These are times of significant change for the church, and in particular for the presence of both the United States and Britain within Europe. While the challenge of Brexit is much in the headlines, the reality is that the United States has been undergoing its "Amexit" from Europe since the early 1990s; of the more than 350,000 U.S. troops in Europe in the 1980s, only roughly one-tenth remain today, with a consequent reduction in both America's civilian presence and cultural sway. Episcopal churches in Europe, once almost entirely expatriate in membership, now comprise a tremendous diversity of membership from all parts of the Anglican Communion — and from the local community. The same is true of many Church of England chaplaincies here.

In the decades to come, all of our churches in Europe will need to contend with new questions about our identity, our witness, and the mission to which God calls us in the years ahead. We give thanks that closer links between us, and between our colleagues in episcopal ministry in Europe, will be a basis on which we can undertake that work.

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