

UNITY—LESSONS TO BE LEARNED; ISSUES TO BE FACED: (2) INTER-CHURCH DISCUSSIONS 1972–1998

An Address given to the Annual Conference of the Ecclesiastical Law Society
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The Bishop of Chichester has spoken about the Anglican-Methodist Unity Scheme. This has been the major unity scheme affecting the Church of England, and also the one that developed most slowly and lasted the longest (if we start from Archbishop Fisher's Cambridge sermon, from 1946 until 1972: twenty-six years).

I have been invited to take up the story from there, focusing particularly on the Proposals for a Covenant, the Ecumenical Canons, and the current Anglican-Methodist Report, *Commitment to Mission and Unity*. The time span (1972 to 1998) is the same, but the developments have been far more complex. I hope, therefore, that you will forgive me if I draw into the story a number of other developments which, though perhaps not directly relevant, have nevertheless affected those three things. Not least of these other developments has been the coming of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales centre stage into our ecumenical story.

COVENANT PROPOSALS

But first let me quote Archbishop Michael Ramsey, from his speech presenting the Anglican-Methodist Unity Scheme to the General Synod in May 1972 (recorded in *Towards a Response to Commitment to Mission and Unity*, GS 1266, p 23):

‘The heart of ecumenism is renewal ... we need to dwell far less upon our ecclesiastical structures and far more upon what we can do together as Christians, learning from one another across the denominational borders, in the deepening of spirituality, in the exploring of theological depth, in evangelism together and in together saying something and doing something towards the secular community beyond the Church's frontier. If we pursue this path it may be that in time free local developments will alter the total scene and one day make structural unity inevitable’.

Those words were, of course, spoken in the hope that the Anglican-Methodist Unity Scheme would succeed. It did not, and so the Churches continued ‘to dwell ... upon our ecclesiastical structures’, but I think it is true that they also tried to do more of the other things the archbishop hoped for as well, not least in ‘free local developments’.

In 1972 the United Reformed Church came into being, and *The Implications of Roman Catholic Membership of the British Council of Churches* was published by the Joint Working Group of the BCC and the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conferences of England and Wales and of Scotland. In 1973 the United Reformed Church, in the full flush of its successful union, invited other Churches to Talks about Talks. These led in 1974 to the Churches' Unity Commission, in 1976 to the Ten Propositions and in 1978 to the Churches' responses to the Ten Propositions. The Roman Catholic Church did not join the BCC but it did become a member of the Churches' Unity Commission.

To help the Church of England formulate its response to the Ten Propositions, Archbishop Donald Coggan gathered a widely representative group of Anglicans at High Leigh in 1977. This meeting tackled the issue that had tripped up the Anglican-Methodist Unity Scheme. It proposed a new approach to the ‘recognition of ministries’:

‘Each Church would “recognise” the other Covenanting Churches *as they are now* (recognition of Churches as Churches, not specifically of their ministries), *but* this recognition would be seen in the light of what all the Churches would *become*. All would be episcopally ordered. Henceforward,

- (a) bishops would be consecrated as each Covenanting Church needed them;
- (b) the different existing presbyteral ministries would be “recognised”.

The future, it was felt, depended on the recognition of ministers *with* their bishops. This new process of recognition of Churches—in the Church of England’s case of relating Free Church ministers to the historic episcopate—could not but be *sui generis*. For so new an event, a new sign rather than a familiar one might be appropriate’.

The General Synod in York in 1978 voted to proceed with formal conversations about Covenanting by a majority of well over two-thirds in each House. It did so, however, with fairly specific guidance about method. It also set a time limit of two years by which it asked for the publication of specific proposals.

The Methodist, Moravian and United Reformed Churches also agreed to proceed; the Baptist Union and the Roman Catholic Church asked to be observers. In eventually agreeing to the proposals the majority of the United Reformed Church Assembly appeared to favour one method (Method (b)) of inaugurating the Covenant. The General Synod specifically asked that the inauguration be based on the terms outlined in Method (a). The Synod asked that specific questions should be put to the Moravian and United Reformed Churches. Because the Anglican-Methodist Unity Scheme had done its work so thoroughly, it had no questions to put to the Methodist Church.

It is, of course, well known that the Methodist, Moravian and United Reformed Churches voted in favour of the Proposals. The General Synod obtained the necessary two-thirds majorities in the Houses of Bishops and Laity, but not in the House of Clergy, and so the Proposals did not go forward.

It is also well known that shortly before the Proposals were to be finalised three members of the Church of England delegation asked permission to put in a dissenting report. That Memorandum of Dissent focused on two major issues. One was how the United Reformed Church was interpreting the recognition of ministries in the proposed Covenanting Service. The other was the rights of conscience, particularly of Anglicans who could not accept the ministrations of Free Church women ministers.

The first was probably the more important. The United Reformed Church delegation indicated that probably only one person would be put forward for ordination as a URC bishop at the service for the making of the Covenant. The other Provincial Moderators would probably continue to exercise their ministry of comparable oversight without episcopal ordination (as Anglicans understand it) for up to seven years (that is, until their terms of office came up for renewal). As the recognition of URC ministers depended on their link with the bishops, this suggested to the three Anglicans who signed the Memorandum of Dissent that the URC had not deeply enough understood and accepted the historic episcopate.

The second point in the Memorandum of Dissent was the unwillingness of the majority to make clear in the body of the report the reservations many Anglicans had on the ordination of women. The dissentients were happy to recognise the ministries of the Free Churches as whole ministries, but they wanted some acknowledgement in the main text, and not just in a small chapter at the end entitled ‘Conscientious Reservations’, that many Anglicans could not accept the ministrations of women.

Clearly the whole question of the ordination or non-ordination of women remains an issue to be faced by the Churches as they seek visible unity. It will recur when we examine the current Anglican-Methodist proposal. I personally also believe that

both the Anglican-Methodist Unity Scheme and the Proposals for a Covenant did not give enough attention to what we understand by episcopal oversight, who should exercise it, and at what level. More of that later.

What I particularly want to draw attention to now is the time scale. Two years was quite insufficient to draw up Proposals for a Covenant that would satisfy all four Churches. It is recorded that the United Reformed Church approved the Proposals, and that is true, but it was approved with further questions they wanted to explore, and some of those might later have stalled the Proposals. The Memorandum of Dissent came too late in the process to alter the main body of the Proposals and still keep to the required timetable. That is not a complaint about the dissentients, but about the restrictions on time. Bishop David Brown and I went to see Derek Pattison and Brian Hanson, the Secretary-General and Legal Adviser of the General Synod, to see if changes could be made which might go some way at least to meeting the objections of the dissentients, but by then the Synod had given its Provisional Approval, and it was pointed out that there was no way that Final Approval could vary the terms of Provisional Approval, which had already been sent down to the dioceses. We should have to abort the process and start all over again, something which Bishop David Brown was unwilling to consider.

If some people felt that the Anglican-Methodist Scheme had taken too long to come to a final decision, the Covenant Proposals had been rushed through too fast because of the time limit set by the General Synod itself.

Bishop Kenneth Woolcombe and Mr Philip Capper, the Chairman and Secretary respectively of the Churches' Council for Covenanting, produced a very valuable book afterwards entitled *The Failure of the Covenant*, in which they set out lessons to be learned for the future. They pointed to the inadequate time limit. They also pointed to the inflexibility and mutual incompatibility of the different procedures of decision-making in the various Churches. They affirm specifically:

1. If another Council formulates unity proposals, it will have to insist that the Churches agree in advance to a harmonised procedure for approving them. The Methodist Conference took its definite decision in July 1981, before there had really been time to discuss the issues carefully. The procedural confirmation required of the Conference in July 1982 would clearly have to make a more substantive decision. The United Reformed Church took a definitive decision in May 1982, but referred a number of substantive issues for further consideration by the Council for Covenanting. In effect that decision was more like the Provisional Approval taken by the General Synod in 1981. The Moravians were able to consider the Proposals only after the Church of England had rejected them.
2. What was needed was for all the Churches to give the Proposals very serious consideration at an early stage without formal procedures, so that questions for further consideration could come to the Council from all the Churches at the same time, and the Proposals could be refined before going back to the Churches for formal approval. Special majorities required should perhaps have been higher at an earlier stage.
3. Less than a third of the Council's members had been members of the Churches' Unity Commission which had prepared the ground for it; and not one of the former Anglican-Methodist Commission was a member. Obviously there is a need for new blood, but surely more continuity would have been helpful.
4. *The Failure of the Covenant* also points to at least two other lessons to be learned. Insufficient consideration was given to the nature of the ultimate goal — was it to be 'organic union', or (to use a later phrase) 'unity in reconciled diversity'? In the General Synod debate in 1982 the Archdeacon of Leicester criticised the Proposals as being a kind of Union Scheme. He would have preferred an enabling Measure.

5. The debates in the General Synod also showed up what had become clear in the Anglican-Methodist debate: that the comprehensiveness of the Church of England, far from making union with other Churches easier, actually makes it far more difficult. A distinguished friend of mine, though he personally had no quarrel with the Proposals, voted against them because he felt that too many other members of the Synod were against them. I understood what he meant, but it still seems to me an odd thing about our majority voting system that it encourages people to vote against their personal beliefs in order to preserve the unity of the Church of England. There must be a better way.

After listing these five lessons to be learned and several more, *The Failure of the Covenant* points to what the authors consider the major reason for the failure:

‘In the end, in all the Churches, even amongst those who voted in favour, there was a general lack of the enthusiastic heart and will to make the Covenant happen: and so it died’.

To me that came as a surprising conclusion, but I think it was a very true one. Perhaps Archbishop Robert Runcie had caught the mood in a speech which listed all the difficulties, and then somewhat reluctantly he said he would vote in favour. Earlier, in February 1981, he had warned the Synod of ‘an energy-consuming bureaucratic quagmire’. Many saw the Proposals as requiring substantial energy and change, but not achieving very much immediately in the way of deeper and wider unity. Remember that 1982 saw the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* by the World Council of Churches and the *Final Report* of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. People were beginning to raise their sights higher and wider, and it was not only Anglo-Catholics who were beginning to hope that the Roman Catholic Church might be included in later plans. It was only two months before the Synod’s final vote that Pope John Paul II had been in Canterbury Cathedral.

THE ECUMENICAL CANONS

However, immediately after the Synod’s vote, action had to be taken quickly to avoid the risk of further damage to the ecumenical scene in England. Many people were prophesying the disappearance of all those Local Ecumenical Projects that had developed over the previous ten years in anticipation of a national Covenant. They had gone well beyond existing canon law, and that had been tolerated for a time but could not be tolerated for ever, certainly not now that the Covenant had failed. However lukewarm the Archbishop of Canterbury may have been about the Covenant Proposals, he was not lukewarm about the best of Local Ecumenical Projects. With remarkable speed he announced the establishment of a Working Party on Local Ecumenical Development under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Derby, charged with finding a solution to the problem. The Archbishop and I were in favour of giving local bishops much greater freedom and authority to make exceptions to canon law for Local Ecumenical Projects, but only one member of the Working Party agreed with this. All the others said we had to change canon law. The Synod agreed with this, and so established the procedures for promulgating Canons B 43 and B 44, and introducing a Measure.

The Derby Working Party report had established some guidelines for this, and one short paragraph was crucial:

‘We recommend that the reality of shared ministry that is already exercised in local situations ought to be affirmed in canon law. The changes suggested in what follows are an attempt to make legal a degree of shared ministry between the Churches without as yet implying full interchangeability of ministries. Full reconciliation of ministries and thus complete interchangeability between the ministries

of hitherto separated denominations can only be reached within the context of the reconciliation of Churches and within a commitment to ministerial and conciliar forms which express unity wider than the local level. The visible expression of ministry at the local level is inextricably bound to its expression in the wider Church. Already the existence of Sponsoring Bodies in which the local Bishop shares together with the other Church leaders points to the need for local unity to be related to wider structures and to the exercise of wider episcopal oversight⁷.

This paragraph marked in a particularly sharp way one of the developments that had been occurring in the ecumenical movement since the 1940s. In the Church of South India, and even more clearly in the Churches of North India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, there had been one-stage union schemes. To put it rather too crudely: one day the Churches were out of communion with one another and their ministries were totally unrecognised; the next day they were in full communion with mutually-reconciled ministries. The Anglican-Methodist Scheme was for a two-stage union. In 1964 the Second Vatican Council spoke of other Churches and ecclesial communities being in partial but incomplete communion with the Roman Catholic Church. The Malta Report, which paved the way for the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, in 1968 recommended unity by stages between the two communions. The Covenant Proposals seemed to envisage a gradual movement towards full visible unity, whatever that might prove to be.

The Derby Report and the Ecumenical Canons enshrined this gradualism in canon law and added a new dimension to it. The new dimension was to add local unity to national. Where there was a local commitment to closer unity, churches might do more things together than in places where that commitment was not formally expressed. Not everyone everywhere had to move towards closer unity at the same pace. This was perhaps what Archdeacon David Silk was asking for as an enabling Measure. No one had to move closer to unity, but those who wished to might. It added to the comprehensiveness of the Church of England.

It could also, of course, lead to a loss of cohesion. That is why the short paragraph quoted above from the Derby Working Party Report was so important. It tried to give a sound theological basis for what it was enabling. The Church of England already widely accepted the preaching and, to some extent, the pastoral ministry of Free Church ministers. This could and should be recognised in law. To the surprise of all of us it had not been so enshrined, even for preaching. Section 15 of the Act of Uniformity 1662, which effectively forbade Free Church ministers to preach in Church of England churches, was still on the statute book, and had to be excluded by section 7 of the Church of England (Ecumenical Relations) Measure 1988.

On the other hand, the link between eucharistic communion and ecclesial communion had to be retained. Until we were to be reconciled in one ecclesial communion we could not permit Free Church ministers to preside at Church of England eucharistic communion services. It was very difficult to express this theological principle in canon law in a way intelligible to the man and woman in the pew. The language of theology and of canon law are different, and there were endless misunderstandings between the theologians and the canon lawyers as we prepared the Ecumenical Canons. One major problem was how one defined a Church of England service. I am sure that up and down the country in Local Ecumenical Projects there remains great confusion over this. I expect the average man and woman in the pew interprets it as a service that is in the Book of Common Prayer or the Alternative Service Book. Perhaps the *avant-garde* interpret it as a service that takes place in a Church of England building — even if it is wildly experimental. I understand that it is a service authorised for use in the Church of England and presided over by someone authorised so to preside. I do not think we have succeeded in getting across to the man and woman in the pew what this means and why we consider it so important.

We have considered two dimensions of work for Christian unity — the national dimension, expressed in union schemes and covenant proposals, and the local dimension, expressed in local ecumenical work together, especially in projects or partnerships. These two dimensions need to be held together in the middle by ecumenical oversight by bishops and their equivalents in other Churches working together. This is a third, intermediate dimension.

Local Ecumenical Projects, I believe, work well where there is proper ecumenical episcopal oversight. Where there is not, there is a danger of these projects hiving off to become almost independent congregations, losing contact with their denominations at national level.

COMMITMENT TO MISSION AND UNITY

This thought leads me straight into the current Anglican-Methodist Proposals, *Commitment to Mission and Unity*. I was privileged, as Secretary to Churches Together in England, to be an observer at all but the final meeting of the group that prepared this. Two things struck me immediately and forcefully: one was the importance given to Anglican-Methodist Local Ecumenical Projects as pointing to the need for further formal conversations. The other was the recognition that strengthening existing ecumenical planning and oversight at the intermediate dimension or level (that is, between bishops and chairmen of districts, dioceses and districts, deaneries and circuits) was essential for progress.

These two points are related to the lack of heart and will noted after the failure of the Covenant Proposals. Local Ecumenical Projects did not fade away. They have increased and been nurtured, and they have become a powerful incentive for growth into closer unity at national level. They are not perfect, and they do not exist in every area, but alongside the mutual commitment required of Local Churches Together (and, may I add in passing, the higher profile of interchurch families), they are strengthening the will of those pressing for further movement towards unity.

Why Anglican-Methodist talks now?

Some people have rejoiced at multilateral conversations such as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and *Called To Be One*, and have seen them as superseding merely bilateral conversations. The origins of *Commitment to Mission and Unity* can easily be explained. The 1988 Lambeth Conference considered the many bilateral conversations in which the Anglican Communion had been engaged (ARCIC, Anglican/Orthodox, Anglican/Lutheran, Anglican/Reformed), and noted that there had never been an international Anglican/Methodist dialogue, and asked for one. The World Methodist Council agreed, and an interim report was produced. The Church of England and the Methodist Church in this country responded jointly to this interim report; and then the Methodist General Purposes Committee wrote to the Council for Christian Unity of General Synod suggesting preliminary talks. The Council for Christian Unity and the General Synod Standing Committee responded positively. Those preliminary talks have taken place and produced *Commitment to Mission and Unity*, which proposes new formal talks.

What would be the aims of the formal talks?

The aims of the formal talks would be the preparation of a Common Statement including:

- an agreement on the goal of visible unity;
- agreements on faith, including apostolicity and succession;
- a description of shared life;
- a realistic assessment of areas where there is as yet no agreement, and a commitment to face them.

This might lead to a Declaration of mutual acknowledgement and commitment to further specific steps towards visible unity. This is the same pattern as the Meisson Agreement with the Protestant Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the Porvoo Agreement with the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches and the Fetter Lane Agreement with the Moravian Church.

Commitment to Mission and Unity spells out significant areas of common agreement, and goes on to list Issues To Be Resolved before there can be visible unity between our two Churches. There are ten. I list them very briefly.

- 1 Differences over **initiation and church membership**—can we agree on confirmation and church membership?
- 2 In Methodism Probationer Ministers are normally authorised to **preside at the Eucharist** before ordination. In special circumstances lay people can also preside.
- 3 At present Methodism does not have a **threefold ministry**. What form should such a ministry take?
- 4 What kind of **diaconate** do we want?
- 5 The nature and style of the office of **bishop**. This should be a question for Anglicans as well as Methodists. Have we got the right model?
- 6 **Women bishops**. The Methodist Church has a woman Chairman [*sic*] of a District, and has no intention of going back on that. The Church of England specifically excludes women from the episcopate.

It was, I think, this issue above all others that persuaded the authors of *Commitment to Mission and Unity* that the time was not right to try to proceed immediately to full visible unity. I have had the privilege of being present at a meeting of Methodist Chairmen; and I have to say that they find it extremely difficult to conceive of belonging to a Church trying to protect what we in the Church of England are calling ‘the two integrities’. The Methodist Conference might (in fact did) delay a decision on women’s ordination, but when the decision was made, it was assumed by all that everyone would abide by it. This is, of course, an example of how our comprehensiveness makes it very difficult to unite with other Churches.

- 7 The **reconciliation of ordained ministries**. Since the Anglican/Methodist Unity Scheme and the Covenant Proposals, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and the Porvoo Agreement have provided new insight into this, and the Methodists want to explore them with us. However, we need to note that some in the Roman Catholic Church are asking us questions about the theology underlying the Porvoo Agreement: ‘Is the laying on of hands in ordination only a profound expression of apostolic continuity, or is it a necessary instrument or vehicle of that continuity?’ At present this is a genuine question, not a criticism of Porvoo, but we need to think it through together.
- 8 **Structures of authority, oversight and government**. Pace Archbishop Ramsey, this question has to be faced.
- 9 **The relationship of Church and state**.
- 10 **Continuing relationship with our world communions**. This last reminds us that in addition to the national, local and intermediate dimensions of unity, we have also to care for the international dimension.

If our two Churches were able to make an agreement on a number of these issues (I have already noted that at present at least one seems insoluble), the report envisages five possible further steps:

- i the mutual recognition of baptised and communicant members;
- ii the gradual development of joint oversight (e.g. between Bishops and Chairmen, possibly the creation of combined deaneries and circuits) to enable more effective mission;
- iii the gradual development of joint decision-making;

- iv growth in co-operation and fellowship in more and more aspects of church life;
- v the gradual integration of ministries.

When this report was presented to the General Synod in November, this fifth proposal was withdrawn as probably impracticable at this moment. Two of the main issues that were raised in the debate were: (1) whether now was the right time for such a bilateral; (2) what about the United Reformed Church, who would like to participate? The advice of the Council for Christian Unity, which the Synod accepted, was that such a formal bilateral should go forward, with observers from other Churches; but that there should be an informal trilateral including the United Reformed Church — to keep that possibility open.

The report comes to the Methodist Conference in June. I think that the Methodist authorities are also likely to seek to keep the formal conversations bilateral — because Methodism has no real hesitations about episcopacy, whereas some members of the United Reformed Church still do.

However, everyone is now agreed that any bilateral conversations should have observers from the Churches with whom both communions have other conversations, to ensure that neither of us is saying things to the other Church which differ from what we are saying to our other partners.

Two Comments

First, there have been, and still are, people in our Churches who are saying that organic unity is no longer the goal: that we should settle for unity in reconciled diversity; that is to say continuing denominations working more and more closely together, but still remaining distinct. I believe *Called To Be One* showed that that was not the view of the Methodist and United Reformed Churches. Unity in reconciled diversity may be all that can be achieved in the short term; but the ultimate goal should be visible unity. We are now talking about ‘visible’ unity rather than ‘organic’ unity because, try as we may to contradict it, ‘organic’ is interpreted as ‘organisational’ unity by most people. The United Reformed Church Ecumenical Committee put a very good paper on unity to its Assembly a couple of years ago but carefully avoided stating that visible unity was the goal, for fear it would be voted out. The opposite happened. Members of the Assembly — particularly younger members — complained and insisted in reinstating the goal clearly as visible unity — and the Assembly affirmed that by a substantial majority.

Secondly, through *Called To Be One* the Churches were asked whether bilaterals still had a place alongside our much more open multilateral approach to unity today. They affirmed that it still had an important place since some Churches might be able to move more quickly to visible unity than others; but they insisted on keeping everyone informed.

CONCLUSION

I hope I have at least tried to tackle the issues raised by the Covenant Proposals, the Ecumenical Canons and *Commitment to Mission and Unity*. Before I close I want to put to you one more point on which I think you can help the unity scene today, as people concerned with canon law. I am concerned at the way most Anglo-Saxons (not only Anglicans) look at canon law. To make my point I quote William Temple:

‘I think one of the greatest calamities which has befallen the Church is the assimilation of Canon Law to Statute Law. Strictly speaking a Canon is not a law at all. It is a rule expressing the general mind of the Church for the guidance of its officers and members. Accordingly it is not to be regarded as operative until repeated; it may be re-affirmed, as often happened in the early Councils; and it may fall into desuetude. It is not in its essential nature something to be obeyed with mechanical uniformity until it is modified by the authority which promulgated it. It is to be

obeyed with reverent regard, and followed with that freedom of spontaneity which belongs to the spiritual life for the regulation of which it is drawn up. Nothing could more conduce to the true welfare of our Church than a recovery of the original sense of canonical authority, as something which claims not detailed conformity, but reverent loyalty. We need, not only a revision of the Canons but a recovery of the true nature of spiritual authority' (from William Temple's Preface to Bullard's treatise on the Standing Orders of the Church of England).

To put this another way, I think the Mediterranean mentality (and after all they invented canon law) is to say 'Here is the canon: apply it pastorally for the benefit of persons!' The Anglo-Saxon mentality is to say 'Here is the canon: obey it literally!' The problem with the Anglo-Saxon mentality is that it stifles pastoral sensitivity and enables local clergy to blame some distant faceless authority which they claim they are powerless to challenge.

That fifth dimension of ecumenism, the interchurch family, suffers very much from that mentality at present.

Of course in the Church of England this mentality often has exactly the opposite effect, which is just as disastrous. Too many of our clergy seem to take the view that 'all these canons are nonsense, and I'll exercise my own judgment without reference to them'.

I trust that members of this august Society agree with William Temple, and are trying to restore a true evaluation and use of canon law, for that would in itself be a major contribution to Christian unity.

LYNDWOOD LECTURE 1998

This will be held on **Saturday, 7th November 1998**
at St Paul's Cathedral

The title will be

**The Principles of Canon Law – a focus of legal unity in
Anglican/Roman Catholic relations**

and the lecturer will be **Dr Norman Doe** of the Cardiff Law School,
University of Wales

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