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Unity in Diversity

“The luxurious expense of well-practised Christian division is no longer affordable. My simple challenge to all of us today, is to re-find the spiritual passion of the past for ecumenism; theologically, in solidarity with the suffering, in love that covers a multitude of sins. To do that we must face our fears of each other and of the world together, we must love one another, we must give common witness, and work towards a more visible unity that we reimagine in the grace of God.”

*Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby,
speaking at the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches,
meeting in Karlsruhe, Germany September 2022*

On 3 November 2003 the Anglican-Methodist Covenant was signed, representing a new relationship and new hope for transformation as the British Methodist Church and the Church of England committed themselves to work together for the sake of Christ's mission. As we approach the twentieth anniversary of that optimistic and momentous occasion, we are called to reflect on what has been achieved and what there is still to do. In his address to the World Council of Churches, Justin Welby reminded those gathered that at Pentecost, God created a single new people and that when Christ comes as judge the Church will have to answer for her divisions.

“We will have no answer to his judgement if we permit such a failure in this age of our divisions, such a failure in this age of climate change which threatens literally billions of our fellow human beings, of war and possible nuclear war.”

He went on in a spirit of humility to confess his own sense of ‘failure and shame’ regarding his efforts in terms of ecumenical effort. And concluded,

“I want to commit myself now and, with you, I pray and hope to seek afresh the future unity to which we are all called, not a unity of identity but a unity of diversity in the richness of God's creation and in that, towards that and with that, may God give us courage, joy, love and peace.”

When meeting with the President and Vice President of the Conference, both the Archbishops of Canterbury and York spoke warmly and with commitment of the need for the covenant relationship between our churches to continue and to be deepened.

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It is in this context that the new Life in Covenant Group has met to continue the work of advocating for and supporting the Covenant – with a realism that many in both churches do not know of its existence, or understand its meaning for local mission and ministry. The Methodist Anglican Panel for Mission and Unity (MAPUM) continues to work towards fostering excellent relationships and shared mission in local contexts and reported to the Council in March. In the spirit of ‘working towards a visible unity that is reimagined in the grace of God’, and recognising that the context for both churches has changed since it considered the work on the Mission and Ministry in Covenant proposals in October 2019,

the Council directed the Faith and Order Committee to explore with the Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England the most suitable next steps in considering Mission and Ministry in Covenant and to work with that Commission to draft such liturgical, legislative and other texts as may be needed.

Reconciliation and Unity

The World Council of Churches theme for its Assembly in 2022 was, “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity”. Through many wonderful acts of worship, plenary debates, key note addresses and workshops, Christians from across the world explored the theme. Through the work of its various commissions a number of statements were issued, commented on, redrafted and finally agreed by the 800 delegates to the Assembly. These included, among others:

Statement on Confronting Racism and Xenophobia – Overcoming Discrimination, Ensuring Belonging.

Statement on the War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region.

Statement on Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.

Statement: Seeking Justice and Peace for All in the Middle East

The representatives of the British Methodist Church to the Assembly were able to engage in the drafting of the statement ‘Seeking Justice and Peace for All in the Middle East’ and were pleased that the final language was strengthened, following a sensitive and thoughtful debate in the Assembly Plenary.

All the statements and many other papers relating to the WCC Assembly can be found on the WCC website at Documents | World Council of Churches (oikoumene.org) pages 4 and 5.

God in Christ Reconciling

The Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission has reached the end of its eleventh round of dialogue and has published *God in Christ Reconciling: On the Way to Full Communion in Faith, Sacraments and Mission*. The report comments on the parable of the two sons (Luke 15:11-32), the text chosen by the Commission for its scriptural reflection. When the report was presented to Pope Francis, he noted that both Catholics and Methodists need to repent and return to the Father in order for unity to come about, because, through their divisions, both have sinned and strayed from God.

The Co-Chairs of the Commission, Bishop John Sherrington and the Revd Dr David Chapman will be discussing the report at a Fringe event at this year's Conference, and members of the British Methodist Roman Catholic Dialogue will be present to host the event. The Faith and Order Committee will bring a response to 'God in Christ Reconciling' to next year's Conference. It is encouraging to see a deepening and extending of our relationship with our Roman Catholic siblings.

A number of Methodist representatives have, in the run up to this Conference, met at Durham University as part of an ecumenical symposium responding to and engaging with the Synodal process instigated by the Pope, encouraging a new way of conferring and engaging within the Roman Catholic Church, between it and other denominations and between the Church and the world. The Secretary of the Conference will be leading a group of young adults to an international event taking place in Rome in September, celebrating in prayer and fellowship, the end of the first stage of the Synodal process. If you are aware of 18-35 year olds who might be interested please get in touch with TGRome@methodistchurch.org.uk. Bursaries are available toward the cost of the visit.

Churches Together

The various national and pan-national ecumenical bodies continue to work together, producing resources, encouraging shared mission and ministry, and learning from one another as we all work out what it means to be the Body of Christ in this challenging world.

The Methodist Church continues to be committed to working with ecumenical partners from a wide variety of Christian traditions. We continue to encourage flexible ways of working together wherever possible as we engage in God's mission. The call to unity is a gospel imperative and a mission imperative and we continue to be challenged by the

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“Lund Principle”¹ that we should “act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.” The challenge is not only to seek to act together but to articulate, understand and seek ultimately to resolve or to hold together those deep differences which divide us.

The Concordat between the United Methodist Church and the British Methodist Church has been supported by a small group of officers, who at their meeting in December 2022 agreed that the focus of the relationship would continue to be mutual support, shared learning and a deepening of relationships. This would in practice be expressed through occasional, possibly annual, events online, focussing on a particular aspect of mission. The officers will meet shortly after this Conference to firm up proposals for the first of these international online events.

Engagement with our Methodist and Uniting Church partners in Europe continues through the work of the European Methodist Council (EMC) which continues to meet online and in person. The EMC heard, at its meeting in September 2022, from members based in Ukraine and Russia and continues to hold in prayer all affected by the horrendous conflict unfolding. The EMC is a critical place for us walking with UMC Conferences as they make decisions about their future and we pray for all those impacted by decisions currently being made. .

We also continue in our work with the Churches’ Commission on Migration in Europe (CCME) as well as our support of the Methodist Ecumenical Office in Rome (a partnership with EMC and the World Methodist Council) and Mediterranean Hope (a partnership project based in Lampedusa working with refugees).

The Connexional Ecumenical Officer and Assistant Ecumenical Officer continue to support churches as they explore new and long-established ways of working in partnership and to resource and support district and regional ecumenical officers. They can be contacted at EO@methodistchurch.org.uk

***RESOLUTION

36/1. The Conference receives the Report.

1 The Lund principle is derived from a question raised by the 1952 Faith and Order Conference of the World Council of Churches, held at Lund, Sweden. “Should not our Churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other Churches, and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?”